

**THE LUTHERAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC  
JOINT DECLARATION ON  
THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION, 1999**

**1. The “ministry of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:14-21)**

- Peace and forgiveness
- Unity of the church (I Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians)
- The ultimate witness (John 17:21-23)

**2. Justification**

- Meaning in English: righteous/righteousness; just/justice; faithful/faithfulness
- Term figures prominently in the letters of St. Paul
- For Paul, “justice of God” = both a gift that comes from God and the divine saving power present in that gift to sinful humanity.
- For centuries the term “justification” fell within a developing doctrine and theology of grace, rather than a subject in its own right.
- In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century this changed.
- Martin Luther was convinced that people were being encouraged to expect to become acceptable to God by fasting, performing other works of mortification, going on pilgrimages, entering religious orders, becoming priests, confessing all their sins and receiving absolution, having the sacrifice of the Mass offered for themselves or others, and gaining indulgences.
- All this leads to is spiritual disaster because the way in which human life comes to be meaningful, valuable and acceptable in God’s eyes is by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Jesus Christ alone. Further, this truth comes to us not through human traditions, but through Scripture alone.
- 1530, the Augsburg Confession
- The Council of Trent: painfully slow in coming, the Catholic response to Luther and the other Reformers met at various times between 1545-1563.
- Schism and impasse; polemical theology (not listening to each other)

**3. Overcoming the Impasse and Polemical Theology**

- Catholic/Lutheran Commission: “Martin Luther – Witness to Jesus Christ”, May, 1983.
- Pope John Paul II, “On the Coming of the Third Millennium,” par. 34: “The Approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an examination of conscience and the promotion of fitting ecumenical initiatives so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium.
- The “Joint Declaration on Justification” = a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification, September, 1999.

**4. Summary of the Joint Declaration**

- “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works” [15].

- Human powerlessness to attain justification: "It tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way" [17].
- Justification as both forgiveness of sins and being made righteous before God.
- Justification by faith and through grace: "Justification means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father" [15]. "When Catholics say that persons cooperate in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities" [20]. "When Lutherans emphasize that a person can only receive (mere passive) justification, they mean thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one's own justification, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God's Word" [21].
- The justified person as still affected by sin: "Lutherans understand the condition of the Christian as being 'at the same time righteous and sinner.' Believers are totally righteous, in that God forgives their sins through word and sacrament and grants the righteousness of Christ, which they appropriate in faith. In Christ they are made just before God. Looking at themselves through the law, however, they recognize that they remain also totally sinners. Sin still lives in them..." [29]. "Catholics hold that the grace of Jesus Christ imparted in baptism takes away all that is sin 'in the proper sense' and that is 'worthy of damnation'... There does, however, remain an inclination (concupiscence) which comes from sin and presses toward sin..."[30].
- The value of good works in justified persons: "We confess together that good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love – follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms good fruit..."[37]. "When Catholics affirm the meritorious character of good works, they wish to say that, according to the biblical witness a reward in heaven is promised these works. Their intention is to emphasize the responsibility of persons for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts or far less to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace" [38].
- "The teaching of the Lutheran Churches presented in this declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this declaration" [41].



# Lutherans and Catholics agree to statement on salvation

NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

In a decision designed to resolve an issue that split the Western Christian world nearly 500 years ago, the Vatican said yesterday that it will sign a joint declaration with the world's Lutherans affirming that Catholics and Lutherans share a basic understanding of how human beings receive God's forgiveness and salvation.

The document, approved last week by the Lutheran World Federation, declares that Catholics and Lutherans have found an essential common ground on the issue of "justification," the action by which a human being is made worthy of salvation.

The Reformation leader, Martin Luther, held that justification comes solely through faith in God, while the Catholic Church taught that a person's good works play a role.

Now, through the declaration, Catholics and Lutherans agree that divine forgiveness and salvation come only through God's grace and that good works flow from that.

The consensus, while acknowledging that serious differences remain between the two churches on the issue, represents a new appreciation for basic elements in each other's teachings along with recognition of beliefs they share. The declaration is a result of years of biblical scholarship, interchurch dialogue and a renunciation of age-old stereotypes.

Catholics and Lutherans remain divided by major issues of faith, such as the infallibility of the pope and the ordination of women.

Although the debate on justification might seem rarefied to people outside these churches, it has historically been heated and regarded by Lutherans and other Protestants as crucial to their religious identity.

Although Catholics and Lutherans have been increasingly working together in this country and in Germany in recent years, the legacy of the Reformation has kept tensions alive between the two groups in some other parts of the world.

In accepting the document, called "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," Catholics and Lutherans agreed that the condemnations they hurled at each other in the 16th century, as Europe slid into a devastating period of religious warfare, no longer apply.

Announcing the Vatican position in Rome, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said, "I wish to stress that the consensus reached on the doctrine of justification, despite its limitations, virtually resolves a long-disputed question at the close of the 20th century, on the eve of the new millennium."

But both Cassidy and the Vatican, in its statement, said that areas of considerable disagreement required further discussion. The cardinal also said the declaration "has limits," in that it does not address major differences between Catholics and Lutherans on such issues as authority in the church.

But the cardinal said a signing would take place in the fall, with "a celebration of the consensus."

The declaration is a carefully nuanced document based on 30 years of discussions between Catholic and Lutheran theologians.