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This year we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the symbolic beginning of the Protestant Reformation when, according to popular legend, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar, posted 95 Theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, questioning the popular practice of selling indulgences to help pay for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The year-long commemoration has provided both Catholics and Protestants with an opportunity to reflect on the divisive sins of the past as well as current possibilities of reconciliation. Pope Francis helped set a positive tone for the commemoration when on October 31 last year in Lund, Sweden, he shared in a prayer service with Catholic and Lutheran leaders and issued a joint statement with Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), confessing: “Lutherans and Catholics have wounded the visible unity of the Church,” and pledging: “We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ.”

Over the last 50 years, Catholics and Lutherans have made significant progress in meeting this spiritual desire and heeding the prayer of Christ that his followers remain united (Jn 17:11). Ever since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) promoted ecumenical dialogue and collaboration, Catholic and Lutheran scholars have been meeting locally and internationally to discuss ways to overcome disputed issues, periodically publishing reports on their progress. By far the most important achievement of this effort is the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) signed on October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, Germany by Vatican officials, Cardinal Edward Cassidy and Bishop Walter Kasper, and by Bishop Christian Krause and Rev. Ishmael Noka, of the Lutheran World Federation, which represents the vast majority of Lutherans.

The theologians who produced the declaration followed a new method which first developed current consensus points of agreement and then examined remaining differences of emphasis and explication to see if they undercut the consensus or are serious enough to divide the churches.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) made justification the key doctrine of his scripture-based theology. From his youth, he suffered from anxiety, shame and doubts about the salvation of his soul. His imagination was filled with images of a harsh God and Christ as a severe judge. During his first Mass after ordination, he was overwhelmed by feelings of unworthiness. In his own words, he felt like a “miserable pygmy” before “the living eternal and true God” at whose “nod the earth trembles.” As an Augustinian friar, he tried to quiet his troubled conscience by scrupulously keeping all the rules and going to confession frequently – all to no avail. Somewhere along the line, as he recorded late in his life, he came to a radically different understanding of justification. We are justified not by good works but by faith alone. We cannot earn heaven by our own merits but receive it as a gift of grace alone. He came to this radical reinterpretation of the Gospel while meditating on Romans 1:17: “The righteous will live by faith.” When he realized that the righteousness of God does not refer to a just judge who punishes sinners but to a merciful God who justifies believers, he felt “born again,” as though he “had entered paradise itself through open gates.” By sticking to Scripture alone, it seemed clear to him that believers are justified, aquited of the guilt and penalty of sin, by faith in Christ and his saving grace.

This fundamental insight on justification enabled Luther to manage his recurring anxiety and served as his central interpretive key for refocusing and reinterpreting all other Christian doctrines. Explained in simple terms, as Luther did so effectively, this doctrine of justification touched the hearts of many clergy and lay people, fueling the spread of the Protestant Reformation.

In January of 1547, just months after Luther’s death, the Council of Trent, called by Pope Paul III, issued a decree on “a true and sound doctrine of justification” as a response to the heretical views of the Protestant reformers. Justification is not merely the remission of sins but also “the sanctification and renewal of the inner man.” Believers are not merely “reputed” to be just but truly are just by the merits of Christ. The decree quotes the letter of James: “Faith without works is dead” (2:17). It indicates that we must cooperate with God’s free gift of justifying grace. We must keep the commandments and work out our salvation in fear and trembling because we are threatened by mortal sin.

After outlining the major themes of an orthodox doctrine of justification, the decree adds a list of 33 Canons condemning particular heretical views. For example: that we are justified by faith alone in the sense that we do not have to cooperate in any way (9); that we are justified by confidence alone in divine mercy (12); that we are absolved of our sins because we believe we are absolved (14); that justified believers can sin no more (23); that justification is not preserved and increased through good works (24); that the justified have no debt of temporal punishment for sin (30).

For almost five centuries those condemnations framed the dispute over justification between Catholics and Protestants. The discussions among theologians were predominantly polemical, with the emphasis on proving the other side wrong. At a popular level, there was an assumed stand-off between the Protestant’s faith alone position and the Catholic notion of faith and works.

This contentious history highlights the significance of the 1999 Joint Declaration. By reframing the issue, it arrived at a mutually agreed consensus point: “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” (n15). We are justified through Christ by faith which is a free gift and cannot be merited in any way. This leads us to “renewal of life” which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

The Declaration goes on to examine the most significant remaining differences. The doctrine of justification is “an indispensable criterion” which orients “all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ.” When Lutherans emphasize the unique role of this doctrine, they do not deny “the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith.” When Catholics stress other doctrines, they do not deny “the special function of the message of justification” (n18).

We cannot attain salvation by our own efforts. When Catholics speak of “cooperating” in preparation and acceptance of justification, they recognize that this effort is an effect of grace. When Lutherans say humans are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, they do not deny that we can reject the call of justification nor that humans are involved personally in their faith (n21).

For those who believe in Christ, God forgives their sins and “through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love.” When Lutherans stress God’s forgiving love, they do not deny “the renewal of the Christian life.” When Catholics stress “active love,” they do not deny that justification is given apart from human cooperation (n22-24).

Christians “cannot and should not remain without works” but these cannot merit justification. For Lutherans, “justification and renewal are joined in Christ who is present in faith.” Catholic emphasis on the life of active love does not deny we are totally dependent on God’s grace (25-27).

Christians are justified and truly renewed by baptism but must struggle against sin throughout life. When Lutherans say we are both justified and sinners, they do not deny that Christians remain united to Christ. When Catholics talk of an “inclination to sin” (concupiscence), which is not itself sinful, they do not deny that we are in a lifelong struggle against sin (n28-30).

Christ has overcome the law as the way to salvation, but God’s commandments retain their validity and Christ’s teaching and example provide us with a standard of conduct. Lutherans see the law as revealing our sins so we will turn to the mercy of God in Christ. When Catholics insist we must obey God’s commandments, they do not deny that God in Christ has promised us eternal life (n31-33).

We can rely on God’s promise of eternal salvation. Lutherans teach that we are never secure looking just at ourselves but are assured of salvation by looking solely to Christ and trusting him. Catholics say we may be concerned about our salvation but share the conviction that by trusting in Christ we can be certain that God intends our salvation (n34-36).

Good works (“a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love”) are the fruit of justification. Jesus and the Scriptures admonish us to “bring forth the works of love.” When Catholics speak of the “meritorious” effects of good works, they mean that God promises a reward in heaven for them and that we are responsible for our actions, but they do not deny that justification is always an unmerited gift of grace. Lutherans also affirm that there can be growth in Christian living but always as the fruit of unmerited justification (n37-39).

In summary, the Declaration established these crucial points: Catholics and Lutherans share a common teaching on justification; the remaining differences in language, theological elaboration and emphasis are acceptable and do not destroy the consensus; and the teachings of Lutherans today do not fall under the condemnations of Trent nor do the condemnations in Lutheran Confessions apply to current Catholic teaching.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification has earned the support of other Protestant churches. In 2006, the World Methodist Council affirmed its fundamental agreement with JDDJ; in 2016, the Anglican Consultative Council accepted the substance of JDDJ; and in 2017, the World Communion of Reformed Churches “associated” itself with JDDJ. On the other hand, the Declaration has drawn some harsh criticism: for example, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod published a couple of scholarly articles attacking the consensus claimed by JDDJ and arguing that it does not really have consistent mutual agreement on key terms, such as faith, grace, sin, and even justification itself.

Nevertheless, the Joint Declaration is a remarkable ecumenical achievement. Theologically, it provides a solution to a long doctrinal dispute that is acceptable to Catholic and Lutheran leaders at the highest level. At a popular level, it opens up the possibility of spiritual growth for separated brothers and sisters in Christ. Catholics, for example, could appropriate, in a deeper way, the fundamental truth that divine grace and ultimate salvation are free gifts that cannot be earned by meritorious actions. Protestants could become more comfortable with the idea that Christians justified by faith have a responsibility to live a life of active charity. Ecumenically, the success of the Joint Declaration has spurred continuing efforts to find consensus on other disputed issues, especially the church, ministry and the Eucharist as a means of moving toward the goal of visible unity and full communion in accord with the will of Christ.