



## **RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO THE JOINT DECLARATION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION**

### **DECLARATION**

The "Joint Declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on the Doctrine of Justification" represents a significant progress in mutual understanding and in the coming together in dialogue of the parties concerned; it shows that there are many points of convergence between the Catholic position and the Lutheran position on a question that has been for centuries so controversial. It can certainly be affirmed that a high degree of agreement has been reached, as regards both the approach to the question and the judgement it merits (1). It is rightly stated that there is "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification" (2).

The Catholic Church is, however, of the opinion that we cannot yet speak of a consensus such as would eliminate every difference between Catholics and Lutherans in the understanding of justification. The Joint Declaration itself refers to certain of these differences. On some points the positions are, in fact, still divergent. So, on the basis of the agreement already reached on many aspects, the Catholic Church intends to contribute towards overcoming the divergencies that still exist by suggesting, below, in order of importance, a list of points that constitute still an obstacle to agreement between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on all the fundamental truths concerning justification. The Catholic Church hopes that the following indications may be an encouragement to continue study of these questions in the same fraternal spirit that, in recent times, has characterized the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

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### **CLARIFICATIONS**

1. The major difficulties preventing an affirmation of total consensus between the parties on the theme of Justification arise in paragraph 4.4 *The Justified as Sinner* (nn. 28-1,0 ). Even taking into account the differences, legitimate in themselves, that come from different theological approaches to the content of faith, from a Catholic point of view the title is already a cause of perplexity. According, indeed, to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, in baptism everything that is really sin is taken away, and so, in those who are born anew there is nothing that is hateful to God (3). It follows that the concupiscence that remains in the baptised is not, properly speaking, sin. For Catholics, therefore, the formula "*at the same time righteous and sinner*", as it is explained at the beginning of n. 29 ("*Believers are totally righteous, in that God forgives their sins through Word and Sacrament ... Looking at themselves ... however, they recognize that they remain also totally sinners. Sin still lives in them...*"), is not acceptable.

This statement does not, in fact, seem compatible with the renewal and sanctification of the interior man of which the Council of Trent speaks (4). The expression "Opposition to God" (*Gottwidrigkeit*) that is used in nn. 28-30 is understood differently by Lutherans and by Catholics, and so becomes, in fact, equivocal. In this same sense, there can be ambiguity for a Catholic in the sentence of n. 22, "... *God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love*", because man's interior transformation is not clearly seen. So, for all these reasons, it remains difficult to see how, in the current state of the presentation, given in the Joint Declaration, we can say that this doctrine on "*simul iustus et peccator*" is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification.

2. Another difficulty arises in n.18 of the Joint Declaration, where a clear difference appears in the importance, for Catholics and for Lutherans, of the doctrine of justification as criterion for the life and practice of the Church.

Whereas for Lutherans this doctrine has taken on an altogether particular significance, for the Catholic Church the message of justification, according to Scripture and already from the time of the Fathers, has to be organically integrated into the fundamental criterion of the "*regula fidei*", that is, the confession of the one God in three persons, christologically centred and rooted in the living Church and its sacramental life.

3. As stated in n. 17 of the Joint Declaration, Lutherans and Catholics share the common conviction that the new life comes from divine mercy and not from any merit of ours. It must, however, be remembered - as stated in 2 Cor 5:17 - that this divine mercy brings about a new creation and so makes man capable of responding to God's gift , of cooperating with grace. In this regard, the Catholic Church notes with satisfaction that n. 21, in conformity with can. 4 of the Decree on Justification of the Council of Trent ( DS 1554) states that man can refuse grace; but it must also be affirmed that, with this freedom to refuse, there is also a new capacity to adhere to the divine will, a capacity rightly called "*cooperatio*". This new capacity given in the new creation, does not allow us to use in this context the expression "mere passive" ( n. 21). On the other hand, the fact that this capacity has the character of a gift is well expressed in cap. 5 (DS 1525) of the Tridentine Decree when it says: "*ita ut tangente Deo cor hominis per Spiritus Sancti illuminationem, neque homo ipse nihil omnino agat, inspirationem*

*illam recipiens, quippe qui illam et abicere potest, neque tamen sine gratia Dei movere se ad iustitiam coram illo libera sua voluntate possit".*

In reality, also on the Lutheran side, there is the affirmation, in n. 21, of a full personal involvement in faith ("*believers are fully involved personally in their faith*").

A clarification would, however, be necessary as to the compatibility of this involvement with the reception "*mere passive*" of justification, in order to determine more exactly the degree of consensus with the Catholic doctrine. As for the final sentence of n. 24: "*God's gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation*", this must be understood in the sense that the gifts of God's grace do not depend on the works of man, but not in the sense that justification can take place without human cooperation. The sentence of n. 19 according to which man's freedom "*is no freedom in relation to salvation*" must, similarly, be related to the impossibility for man to reach justification by his own efforts.

The Catholic Church maintains, moreover, that the good works of the justified are always the fruit of grace. But at the same time, and without in any way diminishing the totally divine initiative (5), they are also the fruit of man, justified and interiorly transformed. We can therefore say that eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits (6). This doctrine results from the interior transformation of man to which we referred in n.1 of this "Note". These clarifications are a help for a right understanding, from the Catholic point of view, of paragraph 4.7 (nn. 37-39 ) on the good works of the justified.

4. In pursuing this study further, it will be necessary to treat also the sacrament of penance, which is mentioned in n. 30 of the Joint Declaration. According to the Council of Trent, in fact (7), through this sacrament the sinner can be justified anew ( *rursus iustificari* ): this implies the possibility, by means of this sacrament, as distinct from that of baptism, to recover lost justice (8). These aspects are not all sufficiently noted in the above-mentioned n. 30.

5. These remarks are intended as a more precise explanation of the teaching of the Catholic Church with regard to the points on which complete agreement has not been reached; they are also meant to complete some of the paragraphs explaining Catholic doctrine, in order to bring out more clearly the degree of consensus that has been reached. The level of agreement is high, but it does not yet allow us to affirm that all the differences separating Catholics and Lutherans in the doctrine concerning justification are simply a question of emphasis or language. Some of these differences concern aspects of substance and are therefore not all mutually compatible, as affirmed on the contrary in n. 40.

If, moreover, it is true that in those truths on which a consensus has been reached the condemnations of the Council of Trent non longer apply, the divergencies on other points

must, on the contrary, be overcome before we can affirm, as is done generically in n.41, that these points no longer incur the condemnations of the Council of Trent. That applies in the first place to the doctrine on "*simul iustus et peccator*" (cf. n. 1, above).

6. We need finally to note, from the point of view of their representative quality, the different character of the two signatories of this Joint Declaration. The Catholic Church recognises the great effort made by the Lutheran World Federation in order to arrive, through consultation of the Synods, at a "*magnus consensus*", and so to give a true ecclesial value to its signature; there remains, however, the question of the real authority of such a synodal consensus, today and also tomorrow, in the life and doctrine of the Lutheran community.

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## PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE WORK

7. The Catholic Church wishes to reiterate its hope that this important step forward towards agreement in doctrine on justification may be followed by further studies that will make possible a satisfactory clarification of the divergencies that still exist. Particularly desirable would be a deeper reflection on the biblical foundation that is the common basis of the doctrine on justification both for Catholics and for Lutherans. This reflection should be extended to the New Testament as a whole and not only to the Pauline writings. If it is true, indeed, that St. Paul is the New Testament author who has had most to say on this subject, and this fact calls for a certain preferential attention, substantial references to this theme are not lacking also in the other New Testament writings. As for the various ways in which Paul describes man's new condition, as mentioned in the Joint Declaration, we could add the categories of sonship and of heirs. (Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8: 14-17). Consideration of all these elements will be a great help for mutual understanding and will make it possible to resolve the divergences that still exist in the doctrine on justification.

8. Finally, it should be a common concern of Lutherans and Catholics to find a language which can make the doctrine on justification more intelligible also for men and women of our day. The fundamental truths of the salvation given by Christ and received in faith, of the primacy of grace over every human initiative, of the gift of the Holy Spirit which makes us capable of living according to our condition as children of God, and so on. These are essential aspects of the Christian message that should be a light for the believers of all times.

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(1) cfr. "Joint Declaration ", n. 4: "ein hohes Mass an gemeinsamer Ausrichtung und

gemeinsamem Urteil".

(2) *ibid.* n-5 : "einen Konsens in Grundwahrheiten der Rechtfertigungslehre" (cf. n. 13;40; 43 ).

(3) cf. Council of Trent, Decree on original sin ( DS 1515 ).

(4) cf. Council of Trent, Decree on justification, cap. 8: "... iustificatio... quae non est sola peccatorum remissio, sed et sanctificatio et renovatio interioris hominis" ( DS 1528 ); cf. also can.11 ( DS 15619 ).

(5) cf. Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, cap.16 (DS 1546 ), which quotes Jn 15,5: the vine and the branches.

(6) cf. *ibid.* DS 1545; and can.26 (DS 1576)

(7) *ibid.* cap.14 (cf.DS 1542)

(8) cf. *ibid.* can.29 (DS 1579); Decree on the sacrament of Penance, cap.2 (DS 1671); can.2 ( DS 1702 ).

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*This Note, which constitutes the official Catholic Response to the text of the Joint Declaration, has been prepared by common agreement between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. It is signed by the President of the same Pontifical Council, which is directly responsible for the ecumenical dialogue.*

