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What Would Catholic Recognition of the *Confessio Augustana* Mean?

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As a result of the discussion which has taken place concerning the CA, one can today affirm two things:

(1) The CA, according to its own statement, is intended to be understood as a Catholic confession; as such it has never been rejected by an official Catholic decision.

(2) The studies of Vinzenz Pfnür, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans Jorissen, and others have convincingly shown that the CA can be interpreted in a fundamentally Catholic way, at least in the light of the post-Vatican II self-understanding of Catholic theology, and, to that extent, can be received as Catholic. This is a most gratifying result, and it justifies greater hope for the further progress of ecumenical efforts. The fundamental Lutheran confession need not be the basis for the separation of the churches; it could also bring about their unity!

In light of this positive result, the question arises: What does this theological reception of the CA imply, and what would an official recognition based on it mean? Harding Meyer has shown how unclear and ambiguous, but at the same time how open, this call for catholic recognition of the CA still is. Does it mean recognition/reception/acceptance by the Catholic Church, and would it be as Catholic, as a Roman Catholic confession, as a legitimate definition of Christian truth, as an independent expression of Catholic faith, or as a witness to the faith of all Christians? The differences between these abundant possibilities imply fundamental theological distinctions in which, finally, the goal of the ecumenical effort as such is at stake.

In what follows, an attempt will be made to clarify what recognition means in this context, or at least what it can mean. Perhaps the

position taken here will disappoint many high expectations. Nevertheless the ecumenical discussion of the past years has shown that nothing is more detrimental to ecumenical progress than inflated and premature expectations which sooner or later have to be abandoned and which then produce a kind of ecumenical paralysis. If the discussion—progressing positively up to this point—of a Catholic recognition of the CA is not to lead into a blind alley but to a common future of the separated churches, then it is helpful to make the concept of recognition more precise in three ways.

1. Recognition belongs first and foremost to the sphere of interpersonal relationships. The consciousness of man's personal worth is awakened any time when the person experiences himself as recognized and accepted as a person by another. The human freedom awakened to consciousness in this way can become concretely actualized only when a space for freedom is guaranteed by all others and when one's freedom is thus commonly recognized. Interpersonal recognition is therefore a basic anthropological datum and at the same time the foundation of the public order of law. It prescribes the recognition of common personal worth and therein, at the same time, recognition of the other as other. Recognition therefore implies commonality amid persisting diversity—a diversity which can only be maintained in the recognition of commonality. In this sense H. Fries, when discussing the memorandum on ministries put out by the ecumenical institutes at universities, has rightly emphasized that recognition means neither the resignation of one's own standpoint nor the pluralism of unconnected and perhaps contradictory standpoints. Recognition does not mean to reduce to the lowest common denominator but rather to heighten one's own standpoint. But this heightening does not lead to separatism; rather it recognizes a legitimate pluralism in expressing "that which is held in common."

In this sense Catholic recognition of the CA would be more than merely a theological reception; it would be an official act. On the other hand, such a recognition would not mean that the Catholic Church takes this confession as its own Roman Catholic confession; instead, on the basis of such an act, the CA would be allowed as *one* legitimate expression of the common catholic faith so that the ecclesi-

astical community which appeals to it would be given room within the unity of the Catholic Church. Nothing more, but also nothing less than this was intended by its presentation to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530.

2. The concept of recognition is necessarily carried over from the interpersonal sphere into other kinds of relationships. Interpersonal relationships, and even the highest and most sublime form of interpersonal recognition—personal love, express themselves necessarily in words, gestures, gifts, and actions of this kind. Without such concrete symbolic expression, they would be neither serious nor real. The same goes for mutual recognition among the churches. It happens in a concrete way through the mutual recognition of confessions (symbols of faith), through eucharistic fellowship, through mutual recognition of ministries, and through common witness and common service. Such mutual recognition of "relationships" has meaning, of course, only as a symbolic expression for mutual personal recognition. Recognition of the CA ought not therefore to be considered as an isolated act. The text of the CA cannot be separated from the context of the CA's call for church unity; Lutheran theologians involved in the discussion have again and again pointed this out. For this reason J. Ratzinger has from the outset made it clear that such recognition involves neither a primarily historical question, nor a purely theoretical-theological question, nor is it entirely a matter to be handled through church politics, but rather it involves a spiritual-eclesial process.

On this point there are, to be sure, very serious difficulties on the Catholic side as well as on the Lutheran side. On the Lutheran side, the CA cannot be separated from other confessional writings, such as the *Smalcald Articles*. Unlike the CA, the *Smalcald Articles* partially exclude expressly defined Catholic truths of faith and were partially placed under anathema by the Council of Trent. More important, according to Lutheran understanding, the CA must be regarded as the interpretation of Scripture; the binding force of the CA is thereby ultimately based on the binding force of Scripture as it is interpreted here. But who would dispute the fact that since 1530 very important changes have taken place in the understanding of Scripture through

the rise of the historical-critical method in interpretation, and these changes raise the question of how the Lutheran churches first of all themselves stand today in relation to the CA. In any case, the CA cannot be the primary basis for the unification of the churches. Rather it must be the writings of the Old and New Testaments recognized by both churches as *norma normans non normata* ("the norm which norms but is not normed").

The difficulties on the Catholic side are no less important. Catholic recognition of the CA cannot be separated from the fact that the church carrying out this act is at the same time the church which appeals to the Council of Trent and the church which has created new dogmatic "facts" through Vatican I and through the mariological dogmas of 1854 and 1950, but it is also the church which, at Vatican II, placed these facts within a more inclusive perspective and to this extent reinterpreted them. An official recognition of the CA would once again put the above-mentioned dogmatic facts in a new light and thus reinterpret them anew. This would be the case above all because the Catholic Church would thereby recognize the "Reformation" impulse expressed in the CA as fundamentally legitimate today. On the other hand, the Lutheran churches' acceptance of such a recognition (for recognition is a two-sided phenomenon) would mean that these churches would, on the basis of the changed ecclesiastical and theological situation, assign a very precise meaning to the Reformation impulse, for it can be interpreted in numerous ways historically. They would interpret it as a corrective over against the concrete historical reality of what is Catholic, but they would not understand it as being intrinsically schismatic—an interpretation which fully and completely conforms to the original intentions of the Reformers.

The discussions concerning the recognition of the CA as well as the bilateral dialogues which have taken place in the meantime, plus the most recent talks on the Petrine ministry, have shown that possibilities for such reinterpretations on both sides exist. To be sure, it is impossible to say that theological agreement has already been achieved on all points, but there is no longer any question that at least the direction can be seen in which unity is possible. The joint

commentary on the CA proposed by Heinz Schütte could clarify this situation and thus fulfill *one* prerequisite for recognition of the CA.¹

Recognition of the CA, in view of all that has been said up to this point, would be quite different from simply a facile recognition of the status quo in both churches. It need not signify that today, after four hundred years of baneful doctrinal controversy, we have become "more sensible" and "more liberal" and can simply bury past controversies. It is neither a matter of giving up the Reformation concerns in the CA nor of giving up the question of truth; on the contrary, it is a matter of energetically taking up the question of truth once again in order to come to a renewed and deepened common spiritual understanding of one's own as well as a previously alien tradition and thereby to be authentic churches of Jesus Christ. Recognition of the CA would be an end and a beginning at the same time.

3. The mutual recognition of ecclesiastical communions by way of the recognition of confessions, sacraments, and ministers cannot and dare not be the final goal of ecumenical efforts. In contemporary ecumenical usage, recognition is understood as a very specific model of the visible unity to be striven for. This model goes beyond mere communal action and a mere federation of churches in which each retains its independence. When using recognition as a model, the partners, while remaining different, mutually understand each other without reservation as legitimate churches of Jesus Christ. They can celebrate the Eucharist with one another, and the ministers of both churches can also carry out their functions in both churches. The churches, while retaining their independence, would thereby constitute member churches of the one Church of Jesus Christ, whose unity, however, according to this model, takes on no structural form. Unlike this, the model of organic unity establishes a community with its own identity, and this leads to institutional structure, so that the Church can speak and act as the one Church. Such visible church unity is today no longer the desire of the Catholic side alone; since the last general assembly of the World Council of Churches at Nairobi (1975), it is the explicit constitutional goal of the entire ecumenical movement. Such organic union also implies oneness in pluriformity.

Nairobi speaks therefore of the unity of the Church in the sense of a conciliar community. This concept can be interpreted in various ways. In his book *Morgen wird Einheit sein*,² H. Mühlen has shown, in the most detailed way yet for the German world, how it could be taken up and realized on the Catholic side. The advocates of a Catholic recognition of the CA obviously also tend in this direction when they speak of a future corporate unity of the churches (thus J. Ratzinger).

Talk of recognizing the CA remains misleading unless it is expressly stated that such a recognition refers to a conciliar understanding of church community or to a corporate understanding of church unity. This means that the discussion of Catholic recognition of the CA must therefore clearly be placed within the total context of ecumenical efforts. Recognition would be an important step on the way to the ecumenical goal but not the attainment of the goal itself. In order to avoid such misunderstandings, it would probably suffice in the present situation—and correspond most nearly to the present state of ecumenical efforts—if the Catholic Church to begin with did not directly recognize the CA but rather officially recognized the way the CA has been theologially received up to this point, that is, if the Catholic Church would officially declare that the CA can be interpreted and received in a Catholic sense. Such an official step—perhaps at the occasion of the 450th anniversary of the CA in 1980—would lead beyond a purely theological reception of the CA and could signify an important turning point in the relationship between the Catholic and Lutheran churches.

As far as the real goal implied in such a step is concerned, there still remains a host of problems which have hardly been dealt with adequately. How is this corporate unity to be understood in the concrete? What does it mean for unity in the faith? Does it require the recognition of all the other church's articles of faith or only certain fundamental articles (practically speaking, the creeds of the ancient Church) together with an implied affirmation of, or perhaps only an agreement not to dispute, the remaining articles of faith? What does such a corporate unity mean on the institutional level? Concretely, what does it mean for the understanding and practice of the Petrine ministry as the servant of unity? These questions, which could easily be multiplied, can only be asked at this point. The answers, however,

must be clear at least in outline form before a full recognition of the other church community as the Church of Jesus Christ is possible. The theological discussion of models for unity is still in its early stages. Its conclusion, according to Catholic understanding, could only occur at an ecumenical council. It would have to be ecumenical in both senses of the term: in the traditional Catholic sense of a gathering called and led by the pope and including all the bishops of the world (*oikumene*), and in the more recent sense of the word *ecumenical*, that is, as a council in which the leaders of other churches also took an active part in order in this way to reconcile all churches in one conciliar community. Such an ecumenical council is the great hope of the ecumenical movement; to work towards this is its explicit goal. It is to be hoped and desired that the discussion of a Catholic recognition of the CA can be an important step in this direction and that this discussion, and the theological reception of the CA which it has led to, can soon receive official recognition.

NOTES

1. See above, p. 63.
2. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1974.