

Remarks – Celebration of 200th Meeting of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia  
25 October 2024  
Stephen Hultgren

Most of you I know, but a few of you precede my time on the dialogue. I am Stephen Hultgren, Senior Lecturer in New Testament at Australian Lutheran College, and I have been Lutheran co-chair of the dialogue since 2017 (though I began serving on the dialogue in 2015). I first would like to recognize current Lutheran members (Dale Gosden, Fraser Pearce, Tom Pietsch, Chelsea Pietsch, Bishop Paul Smith, Mervyn Wagner, Roger Whittall), as well as past Lutheran members (Stephen Haar, Bishop emeritus John Henderson, Christine Lockwood, Wendy Mayer, Andrew Pfeiffer, Maurice Schild [original member, since 1975], and Dean Zweck). We have received apologies from two past Lutheran members, Margaret Hunt and Mark Worthing. We also remember tonight past Lutheran members who have entered eternal glory: Les Grope, Siegfried Hebart, Daniel Overduin, Erich Renner, Noel Weiss, Mike Hassold, Lance Steicke, Joe Strelan, Hermann Sasse. There are a few others who could be mentioned, but since they only attended an occasional meeting here and there, we are not naming them as standing members. I also greet the present and past Roman Catholic members of the dialogue, whom Gerard will introduce. I thank the Archdiocese of Adelaide and archbishop Patrick O'Regan and the staff here at Archbishop's House for hosting and preparing this dinner, and James McEvoy and Tom Pietsch for organizing it. I thank the office of bishop of the LCA for contributing funds to help cover the expenses of the evening.

I now want to offer just a few reflections on Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. I will offer both some *personal* reflections, from my own experiences in dialogue, and some reflections on dialogue more generally. So, first some personal reflections.

I count it an honor to have been involved in Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue for more than 15 years. I was on the national dialogue in the USA for six or seven years, from about 2005 until we moved to Australia in 2012. During that time I got to be involved in one

complete round, the 11th round. I had barely begun involvement in the 12th round before being called to Australia.

I have always considered ecumenical dialogue one of the more satisfying and enjoyable aspects of my work, despite the fact that I am not a professional ecumenist. Or perhaps *because* I am not a professional ecumenist. As a New Testament scholar, I attend a fair number of professional, academic conferences. Upon attending such conferences, I sometimes wonder about their purpose. Now don't get me wrong. I do learn things from attending academic conferences, and it is enjoyable to see old friends and to make new ones. But too often one can get the impression that academic conferences exist in large part for the sake of self-promotion. Too often the question can seem to be, who can best whom in academic debate, who can best promote their own academic agendas, or even who is best at paving the path of their own career advancement?

Not so with ecumenical dialogue. Ecumenical dialogue requires, but also instils, a different set of values, and different virtues. Ecumenical dialogue requires, but also instils, humility; also the discipline of listening patiently to the voice of another; it prompts one to self-reflection and even to self-criticism; and at its best, it draws one more deeply into truth, both the truth that one already knows, but also, and sometimes surprisingly, into truth that has so far lain hidden to one's eyes, even in those texts or traditions that one most cherishes. These are Christian values and virtues; dare I say, I believe that they should also be the values and virtues of genuine academic work, although I fear these values and virtues are being lost in the increasingly corporate and pragmatic ways of "doing business" in today's academia. But I digress. This is simply to say that I have always found the meetings of ecumenical dialogues among the most satisfying meetings that I attend.

Let me now offer just a few reflections on ecumenical dialogue more generally, specifically where we have come from, and where – perhaps – we are going. Tonight we

celebrate the 200th meeting of this dialogue, which is approximately the 50th anniversary of the first meeting (April 1975). We're jumping the gun just a bit, but that's alright. The hour is coming and now is when we will celebrate the 50th anniversary! That's a remarkable milestone. The dialogue has covered some great topics – baptism, Eucharist, the ministry, bishops and oversight, Scripture and tradition, the papacy. A major achievement was the agreement on justification (1998). In that connection, we should also note that next week (31 October) will mark the 25th anniversary of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed in 1999 by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. The work we are doing now, on possible recognition of the Augsburg Confession by the Roman Catholic Church as a legitimate confession of faith for Christians in communion with Rome, might not even be possible without that milestone agreement on justification. Another important anniversary approaches—the 500th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 2030. Let's hope we're done with this round by then! Yes, this round has been a longer journey than most, but then the issues requiring discussion are much more numerous: 28 articles, not just one or two topics. We make slow but steady progress. But I get the sense, from reports that I hear, that the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue has the reputation for being about the best ecumenical thing going in Australia, and we should rejoice in the work that this dialogue has done and continues to do.

To be sure, difficult ecumenical issues remain, and the path ahead is uncertain. Some have spoken in recent years of the onset of an “ecumenical winter” (e.g., Michael Root). Will we continue to reap the fruits of ecumenical dialogue, or are we reaching the end of the harvest, at least for a season? It seems that especially difficult issues remain in the areas of church and ministry. Nonetheless, there is reason for hope. Perhaps ecumenism in the future will not be exactly as it has been in the past. Are we entering a period where Lutherans and Catholics will not face each other as opponents, but will view each other as allies in common

struggles—engaged together, as our colleague Tom Pietsch has recently put it, in an “ecumenism of the trenches”? As Lutherans and Catholics, we face new challenges together in an increasingly secular Australia. Long-standing disagreements such as whether one stands right before God by faith in Christ or by works, for example—as important as they certainly are—can seem quaint in a world where belief in the very existence of God may be the bigger challenge, or where the question why one should believe in Jesus Christ at all may seem to be the more pressing question.

It seems to me that some of the biggest questions facing us today are around anthropology: what does it mean to be human? It is a question that touches on many aspects of life, not least matters relating to gender ideology, ideologies around human sexuality, respect for human life from conception to natural death, how we relate to the rest of creation (the environment), how or even whether humans can sustain free and prosperous societies, what we as humans have to hope for. I would suggest, however, that even here our agreement on justification is important; for the doctrine of justification has to do not only with the abstract question of how we, as human beings, stand right before a God who is both just and merciful, but also with the question of what human life lived before such a God looks like. I note that the Official Common Statement from the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church appended to the JDDJ hints in this direction: “Lutherans and Catholics will continue their efforts ecumenically in their common witness to interpret the message of justification in language relevant for human beings today, and with reference both to individual and social concerns of our times.”

Of course, in all this, full communion between our churches also remains a hope. That is a level of unity that only God can give. So I will close with a striking image that I heard from Michael Root on the American dialogue. (I cite Michael from memory, and so you should not take this as a definite quote, but it was to the following effect.) Speaking at a

forum with lay Lutherans one Sunday morning, at a congregation that we visited during one of our meetings, he described the work of ecumenical dialogue this way: Ecumenical dialogue is like digging channels in the desert. We cannot force the Holy Spirit to bring about unity. But we can help make our churches ready for it, so that when God sends forth the Holy Spirit like water in the desert, the water will flow through all the right channels to reach its goal and to renew our life together in Christ. May God grant us this gift! Thank you to you all.