

Twenty-five Years of Lutheran and Roman Catholic Dialogue

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A review of dialogue is obviously fraught with difficulties. Dialogue is about conversations; in this instance it involves conversations between two ecclesial bodies which for many years were not in a position to speak officially with one another. To report on the important factors that eventually led to a fruitful and enriching dialogue, and to attempt to summarise and evaluate the many discussions that began on an official level in 1975, is to undertake a difficult task. No matter how objective a writer may intend to be, the element of subjectivity cannot be avoided.

However, a brief survey of this dialogue may be able to convey to readers in both churches some of the enthusiasm for and benefits of this dialogue. If this is the case, it will have accomplished some of the goals set by the present dialoguing teams at a full meeting midway through 1998.

As the foreword to each of the four printed reports of this dialogue (*Sacrament and Sacrifice, Pastor and Priest, Communion and Mission, Justification*) clearly indicates, the combined dialogue committee is humbly thankful to God for the blessings showered on the many meetings held, all of which began with prayer and meditation.

The beginnings

Though reporting on national discussions, it would be remiss not to refer to the strong impetus for dialogue that emanated from the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II, which in many ways marked the watershed for Roman Catholics in ecumenism. This decree called on baptised Christians to employ their energies for the restoration of Christian unity, which is the will of Christ himself who prayed: 'May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me' (John 17:21).

This decree also showed that no-one is without fault for the many disputes and divisions which have occurred in the history of Christianity. This recognition of guilt and the need for repentance was then also taken up by other ecclesial bodies that also longed and prayed for the unity that would help to overcome the scandal of division. Hence, on the European as well as the North American scene, discussions between Roman Catholics and Protestants were initiated and the results publicised in church magazines for praying Christians to read and digest (eg *The Malta Document*).

It is against the background of the

above decree that the Australian ecumenical endeavors, represented by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, are to be viewed. We must also, in particular, recall the fruitful negotiations of overseas bodies on, for example, the vast subject 'the gospel and the church', and the exploration of such subjects as the status of the Nicene Creed, and baptism. Anyone who is acquainted with these documents from overseas will easily recognise that some of the theological material on which unanimity was discovered abroad was then employed on the national level in Australia. As a result, the work of the dialogue here was expedited.

The Australian Lutheran—Roman Catholic discussions were authorised by the General Church Council of the Lutheran Church in Australia and the Australian Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church. A letter written by Archbishop Young, archbishop of Hobart and chairman of the Episcopal Committee for Ecumenism, to the secretary of the Commission on Theological and Inter-Church Relationships of the LCA was the ecclesiastical trigger that set the dialogue into action.

As a result of this letter and the subsequent agreement by the Lutheran Church of Australia to take up conversations, a combined dialogue committee convened for the first time in April 1975. Prior to that a Lutheran group had been meeting since 1971 in preparation for eventual discussions with the Roman Catholic Church.

It was important that members of the two churches who could contribute

the most be chosen for the discussions. With members carefully hand-picked by the respective leaders, Archbishop Gleeson of the Roman Catholic Church and Dr M.E. Schild and Dr L.B. Grope of the Lutheran Church (the latter the president of the LCA), the committees comprised parish priests and pastors, seminary lecturers, and church leaders. They decided to meet for one day four times a year, alternating at the two Adelaide seminaries, where a common luncheon could be shared. In latter years meetings were held at the Lutheran Laypeople's League in Archer Street, North Adelaide, and at 'Ennis', the home of Archbishop Gleeson. The shared midday meals have contributed to a congenial atmosphere, characteristic of the dialogue. The fact that South Australia was chosen as the venue for the conversations was largely due to the gracious recognition by the Roman Catholics that that city was the home of the only Lutheran seminary in Australia, from which its lecturers would be drawn for this ecumenical work. The following personnel were present at the first meeting on 5 April 1975:

Roman Catholics

Archbishop J.W. Gleeson
 Rev Fr John O'Rourke C.M.
 Rev Fr Kevin Condon C.M.
 Rev Fr Brian Jackson C.M.
 Rev Fr Brian Jordan
 Rev Fr James O'Loughlin P.P.

Lutherans

Dr L.B. Grope, president of
 the LCA
 Dr H. Sasse
 Dr J.T.E. Renner
 Dr M. Schild
 Pastor D.C. Overduin

(Pastor N. Weiss of NSW was selected to join the dialogue but could not be present at the initial meeting.)

The names of subsequent participants are appended to the four statements produced by the dialogue. Fortunately, the membership remained fairly constant during the early period (1975-77), so that personal relationships could begin to develop and be established. Resulting from the joint meetings and meals, an excellent bond of fellowship was formed, as respect for one another and the overcoming of misconceptions about each other became evident. Thereby the trusting working relationship necessary for any successful negotiations was established.

At the first meetings it was only natural that questions concerning the purpose of dialogue should be examined and answered. Directives from both churches were provided. The agreed purpose of dialogue was:

- (a) to search mutually for expressions of faith which are held in common in the two traditions;
- (b) to strive for common statements of faith acceptable to both traditions, without minimising real differences;
- (c) to seek a deeper understanding of the faith and theological tradition of the dialoguing partner;
- (d) to ask whether and to what degree existing differences may be viewed as church divisive;
- (e) to provide information on the purpose, nature, and content of the dialogue to members of both churches, especially via the

respective bodies to which the dialogue teams are responsible.

Later, in February 1977, the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the LCA produced guidelines for dialogue committees. These, also employed by other ecumenical committees, stated:

1. By dialogue the Lutheran Church of Australia understands official and authorised conversations by the church on matters of faith, doctrine and practice with churches with which it has no altar and pulpit fellowship.

2. The purpose of such dialogues may vary from time to time. Basically, the aim of such is to bring to bear the truth as confessed and practised by the Lutheran Church of Australia on matters of faith and practice...

3. It is incumbent on the dialogue committees of the church to conduct these

- (a) in the light of the authoritative witness of the Holy Scriptures;
- (b) with the testimony of the historical confessions of the church constantly in mind;
- (c) taking into account the development of tradition within the dialoguing churches;
- (d) with the current pastoral directives pertaining in the church always before them.

4. All genuine dialogue between churches will be conducted in view of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*, Book of Concord) and with the firm belief that in such conversations the truth will prevail for the welfare of the church and the glory of the

Lord of the one holy catholic church.

Baptism (1975-1977)

The dialoguing teams began their work buoyed by the hope and faith that they were supported by the prayers and encouragement of their two communities, and grateful to God that they had been given the opportunity and responsibility of conversing with one another on theological issues that had continued to cause division. The two committees set to work to discuss the doctrine and practice of baptism in their respective churches. They soon discovered that there were wide areas of agreement on the fundamentals of this article of faith, especially in the light of a shared emphasis on baptism as a *sacramentum initiationis* into the church as the body of Christ. Further, the baptismal formula, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit', is employed by both churches. In obedience to the command of Christ, the child or adult to be baptised is immersed or sprinkled with water which, with the word, makes it a washing of regeneration. Other subjects, such as the nature of faith, original sin, and baptism of desire, needed study and discussion if complete unanimity was to be reached.

As a result of the above discussions, deeper questions about the sources of authority in both churches resurfaced. For example, attention was given to the canon of the Holy Scriptures, the relationship between Scripture and tradition, the Apocrypha, the authority of

confessional writings, decrees and encyclicals, infallibility, the magisterium, and the meaning of the *consensus fidelium* (consensus of the faithful). Papers were written on some of these subjects and then discussed. By agreement they were to be used as background material and kept in mind when other subjects of theological significance came on the agenda.

When the conversation finally returned to baptism, a highlight was the discovery that the two churches expressed a strong preference that all baptisms should, as far as possible, be conducted in the presence of a worshipping congregation. Through this practice the two churches express the belief that baptism is indeed a sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the church, the body of Christ. It is not a private rite.

It was with much joy that the group could on 19 March 1976 recommend to their respective church authorities that formal and mutual recognition be accorded to baptism in both churches. Henceforth, either church should not entertain 're-baptism' when members leaving one church sought to join the other.

In the next year (1977), both churches officially accepted this recommendation and formally recognised baptism administered by the other church as being indeed the sacrament of God's grace as instituted by the Son of God (Matt 28:19). This was a landmark in the history of the two churches, for at no time before had there been a common expression of baptismal recognition.

At the same time, a common statement on the doctrine of baptism agreed that there were still remaining differences that needed further consideration. These included (as mentioned above) such matters as baptism of desire, original sin, and the faith of the infant in baptism. The churches did not officially issue this additional statement (apart from the recognition document referred to above), but it was published in the *Southern Cross*, the official paper of the Roman Catholic Church in South Australia. This document included also the recognition of mutually acceptable baptismal practices (sponsors and instruction) in each communion.

The eucharist (1978–1985)

After such a promising start to the dialogue, the joint committee decided in 1978 to embark on the doctrine of the eucharist, little realising that the second major period would last eight years and involve over thirty meetings. It may be asked why so much valuable time and attention was given to this doctrine, especially since the baptismal debate had engendered enthusiasm for ecumenical action on at least a limited scale. Such action included praying together for unity, cooperating in Christian care on the local congregation level, and caring for the sick, the aged and the lonely.

There are probably several reasons that can be adduced for this slow progress. As already indicated, a healthy collegiality had developed in the first period among the dialogians; now there was a large number of changes in the Roman Catholic

personnel. Each time a new member came into the team a somewhat different strategy towards the formulation of a document had to be taken. It meant, too, that doctrinal material that had been discussed and almost finalised sometimes had to be covered again for the sake of the newcomers, who were unaware of the debates that had already taken place. Guest participants, helpful as they were, could only contribute for short periods, and so the constancy and continuity of discussions was on occasions slowed down. It must also be added that the theological issues surrounding the subject were extremely difficult, since they involved a wide range of tenets essential for both churches. The protracted discussion had a number of spin-offs – for example, the final statement could become somewhat heavy and laboured in style, lacking the precision in expression so necessary for reader comprehension. However, intensive and thoroughgoing work did strengthen and enhance the healthy relationships among the participants as ‘ecclesiastical chauvinism’ lessened on both sides, listening skills were developed, and the ecumenical vocabulary was widened.

In spite of the above problems and difficulties, this period was also characterised by highly important discoveries that helped the process of convergence. One of these was that both churches held firmly to the belief in the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the eucharist. How they were present was the subject of much debate. Terminology such as transubstantiation, transfinalisation, and transsignification was examined, and attempts were made to define

these expressions. It was decided that, at least in the case of the first term, a definition should be included in the appendix to the statement so that it might be made clear that for many Roman Catholics the philosophical connotations associated with it had been largely overcome. The concept was shown to have been employed in past eucharistic teaching to safeguard the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. The question of perdurance of the sacramental gifts after the celebration of the eucharist was also carefully discussed, but it was not given final formulation, since Lutherans were somewhat flexible on this matter.

The knotty and divisive element in past eucharistic doctrine was its nature as sacrifice. After much biblical study and debate among themselves, the Lutherans, traditionally strong on the sacrament as gift 'for the forgiveness of sins', were finally willing to concede that there is a sacrificial ingredient in the celebration. In their circles, also, the sacrament of the altar can be called eucharist, meaning 'thanksgiving'. However, they were still not convinced, or prepared to teach and confess, that it is a sacrifice in the Roman Catholic sense of the *offerimus* ('we offer'), although they affirmed the anamnestic character of the sacrament as the representation of Christ's unique sacrifice on Golgotha. Some time was also spent on the efficacy of the sacrament *ex opere operato* ('by virtue of mere performance'). The major distortions connected with this concept (eg viewing the eucharist as a magical rite) were countered by stressing 'the

unity between faith and the sacrament' (see Appendix 2 of the statement *Sacrament and Sacrifice*).

When at length the above statement saw the light of day, it was generally well received by the two communities and reaped the following commendation by the Roman Catholic bishop of Sale in Victoria, who wrote as follows:

Sacrament and Sacrifice provides us all with a model of the most fruitful kind of dialogue. Too often, the model appears to be that of diplomats engaged in negotiation, looking for some sort of formula vague enough for both parties to be able to sign. This report, however, reads like that of a number of Christians to whom the truths of the Christian faith are of primary importance.

These remarks were thankfully received and, as can be expected, helped to stimulate participants who had laboured hard at the issues associated with the teachings concerning the eucharist. Indeed, Archbishop Gleeson arranged a celebration on 12 July 1985 at 'Ennis' in Adelaide to mark the tenth anniversary of the dialogue.

Pastor and priest (1986–1990)

In this period the dialogians produced a document that was only half as long as that dealing with the eucharistic, but it also took only half the time to produce. Why was this possible? Some of the basic issues to be addressed when dealing with the doctrine of the ordained ministry had partly been covered in the debate on the eucharist. So a change of

leadership in both churches at this time in no way affected the progress. *Pastor and Priest*, as the new document eventually came to be titled, showed what great importance was attached to the office of the ordained ministry.

Significantly, in an age when democratisation and individualisation is the order of the day in churches, the dialogue partners upheld the traditional importance of the ministry as of the essence of the church. They affirmed that it was instituted by Christ himself, and that it had its beginnings in him alone, the heart of the church. The relationship between the ordained ministry and the laity was often in the forefront of discussions, and successful attempts were made to find a healthy balance between the two. The document demonstrated that the ordained ministry is a gift from the Lord of the church for the establishment of his church and for the edification and encouragement of all service and ministry within the church.

There were also times when the dialogue almost stalled over matters connected with this study. There were painful moments, especially when the authenticity of the Lutheran ordained ministry was discussed. On the other hand, the document pointed to ways in which some of the remaining difficulties could be faced. Naturally, apostolic succession was a problem area for Lutherans. These and other matters forced the dialogue to address the important question of each church's teaching on ecclesiology.

A close study was undertaken of the

historical process in the course of the first centuries that led to the threefold office of bishop, presbyter and deacon. As a result, the Lutheran team agreed to examine this matter more thoroughly within their own circles to see whether the LCA could adopt this structure, even if only for the *bene esse* of that ecclesial community. As a further result of these discussions, it was unanimously agreed that ecclesiology should be the next topic on the agenda.

Ecclesiology (1990–1996)

In order to get this vital subject under way, the usual raft of papers was prepared by members and then discussed. Though members of the dialogue suffered occasional bouts of impatience, it is worth noting that at no time was a resolution put forward to put the stopwatch on these discussions. This refusal to impose a time limit (*terminus ad quem*) on the discussions had applied to the earlier phases of the dialogue. It proved to be a wise approach, since it gave the participants both scope and freedom to express their views in papers and to respond to carefully formulated questions put by both sides.

In this case questions centered on the relationship between nature and grace in Augustine, Pelagius and, more recently, in the thought of Karl Rahner. Crucial was the Roman Catholic question: Is it possible to speak of grace at work in the hearts of all (not limited to the visible church) who sincerely follow the dictates of their conscience, even if they are not explicit believers (see *Lumen Gentium* 15-16)? Some convergence was clearly found when answering

the salient questions of the relationship of the church to other religions, and of the possibility of salvation outside of the church. Nevertheless, differing theological emphases emerged which demonstrated a more exclusivist approach on the part of Lutherans in contrast to the inclusivism of Roman Catholic teaching.

Considerations emanating from the overseas theologian K. Lehman's study on *Church as Sacrament and Justification* (Roman Catholic—Lutheran Joint Commission, March 10-14, 1986) led to questions about the biblical basis of the expression 'church as sacrament'. The Lutherans had reservations about using such terminology for the church, since the definition of what constitutes a sacrament was not yet agreed upon. Yet they again conceded that if the church is the sign and instrument of salvation in this world, it could be referred to as 'the sacrament in the sacraments', the latter being 'the operational form of the church as sacrament'. Lutherans found it easier to refer to the sacramentality of the church and preferred to reserve the word sacrament for the means of grace.

The doctrine of the church, with its many theological ramifications, was addressed from the perspective of the church's mission in the world and with the concept of 'communion' in mind. This concept was seen as helpful, since it was both biblical and traditional, although the one church usually tended to refer to the eucharist as 'communion'. It was felt that it would be helpful to view the church from this perspective and thus

widen the horizons of congregations. It became apparent that this approach was most profitable; it helped to anchor the subsequent statement in the Trinity and the communion enjoyed by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, from which all true communion emanates. Strong emphasis was placed on the constitutive power of the gospel (as well as of the eucharist, the centre of the church's life in Christ) in the formation and preservation of the church as communion.

Towards the end of the completed document ecumenical relationships and the mission of the church are given prominence. The statement issues a call to repentance for divisions of the past and a plea to pledge 'fidelity to the truth' as full reconciliation and visible communion are sought (23-24).

A concluding section of the statement made concrete suggestions as to how greater cooperation between the churches could be established. These included the areas of social concern, shared witness, theological education, and study programs. The dialoguing partners undertook to encourage their 'respective churches to explore avenues for further and deeper cooperation'. At the same time they reiterated the goal of dialogue as being full reconciliation and communion, so that there might be the experience of joyfully proclaiming the word of God and celebrating the sacraments together.

Justification (1995-1998)

The doctrine of justification, which had surfaced frequently in the

discussions on the eucharist and on ecclesiology, became the next focus of the two teams. On the international level this tenet had already come under close scrutiny in North America, where the US Lutheran – Roman Catholic Dialogue produced a thorough statement, *Justification by Faith*, in 1983. The biblical basis included in this massive document of some 24 000 words was employed as a launching pad for the Australian dialogue discussions. This doctrine, which was extremely prominent in the development of the Reformation in Luther's day, occupied the attention of the Australian dialogue from October 1996 to August 1998.

At the same time, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity were busy preparing a *Joint Declaration* on this very subject. It has now been completed, after much thought and examination by member churches of the LWF and the Vatican, and has been signed by representatives of both ecclesial communities at Augsburg on 31 October 1999.

A visit by the general secretary of the LWF, Dr I. Noko, to the dialogue's plenum in 1997 helped the members of that group to become acquainted with the processes and developments leading to the production of the *Joint Declaration*. It also helped to stimulate the Australian dialogue to finalise its own statement on this doctrine, *Justification: A Common Statement of the Australian Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue*. Substantial agreement was reached in the understanding of the emphasis on *sola gratia* and *solus Christus* in both

churches in respect to this doctrine. As a result of much convergence (not necessarily consensus) in the discussions, it was agreed that the status of the condemnations with respect to the doctrine of justification issued at Trent approximately 450 years ago and those contained in the Lutheran Confessions had to be re-evaluated. Having done that, it was resolved that the condemnations do not apply to the teachings as expressed in the *Joint Declaration*.

It was, however, readily acknowledged that there are still issues in the teaching on justification which need further investigation and elucidation. Among these it would appear that the understanding of *concupiscentia* and the classical Lutheran contention that the Christian is *simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time justified and sinner) need further special attention.

A series of questions for reflection and study were produced in Appendix 1 of the statement. They have been formulated to help Lutheran and Roman Catholic groups to reflect on and share their faith, to promote an understanding of justification, and to lead to an expression of faith in action. Only as a statement of this kind reaches the so-called grass roots of the church, namely the laity, can it truly become an expression of the common faith shared in our churches.

Biblical anthropology (1999 to the present)

Following the debates on the status of the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator*, members agreed to deal with the scriptural understanding of

human beings. Almost immediately questions about the fall of Adam and Eve, the image of God, and original sin had to be confronted and attempts made to reach a common solution. Whereas Lutherans tended towards a more paradoxical expression of faith in these matters, it became clear that Roman Catholics inclined towards a logical approach when defining these vital teachings. The discussions are continuing on the basis of papers being prepared on these matters, before a statement can be produced.

Extra-mural events

In keeping with the goal to bring the successful work done by the joint committee to the attention of both clergy and laity, a number of functions have been held involving representatives of both churches. Already in 1981 a Luther celebration brought clergy from both churches together at a symposium arranged at Luther Seminary. It was voted a success by all present.

Combined gatherings of clergy were held in Adelaide to allow pastors and priests to get to know one another – two at the Lithuanian Catholic Centre, St Peters, as well as one at Luther Seminary and another at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. The dialogue committee also arranged for meetings in country centres where there was a strong presence of both Lutheran and Roman Catholic laity.

There was healthy participation by both especially at Nuriootpa in the Barossa, where approximately one hundred and fifty people gathered. According to reports from lay people, this evening meeting was extremely

well received. A similar meeting was conducted at Clare, South Australia, in the following year. The dialogue met in the morning in the facilities of the Seven Hills Monastery, also famous for its wines; the afternoon was devoted to a bus tour of significant Roman Catholic venues in the Clare district.

On 26 February 1992 a well-attended meeting of clergy took place in Brisbane, Queensland, at which four Roman Catholic bishops were present. In all, five successful meetings and services have been held there. At some of the gatherings in South Australia the dialogue's statements have been launched, allowing for subsequent discussion.

The committee is convinced that much hard work remains to be done in the future to bring the results of these discussions into the mainstream and life-blood of both churches. A high point in these ecumenical attempts occurred on 5 November 1999 at St Francis Xavier Cathedral in Adelaide. A very large crowd witnessed the signing of the Australian document, *Justification: A Common Statement*, by the two church leaders, Archbishop Faulkner and Dr Lance Steicke. The well-prepared and moving service also celebrated the signing of the overseas *Joint Declaration* (referred to earlier) at Augsburg, Germany, on the same date.

Well-attended services marking these historic events were also conducted in cathedrals in Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Palmerston North, at the Catholic seminary in Brisbane, as well as in local churches. These

services gave thanks to a merciful God who had brought about the convergence and consensus expressed in these documents.

Conclusion

This brief survey indicates the wide range of vital areas in theology and church practice that has been studied. It also shows how much valuable convergence on controverted matters has been thankfully and joyfully attained.

The many participants in this dialogue have worked and prayed assiduously over the twenty-five years of its existence. Often enough it seemed that a theological impasse had been reached; fatigue in ecumenical dialogue was sometimes experienced as impatience for results and concrete expression of agreement was felt. Nevertheless, the work under God went on in faith and hope. In God's good time and plan, which are not always as human beings would program things, a harvest of unity will be reaped. It is his will that all be one, even as he and his Son are one, so that the one saving truth of the gospel may be proclaimed in undivided voice.

Reconciliation and union are ultimately not human productions; they transcend human energies and gifts. We can work and toil together, debate with one another, learn from and teach one another, admonish and correct one another, but it is the head of his body, the church, who grants the Holy Spirit when and where he wills. The Spirit is the unifier and sanctifier of God's people. In an address of welcome to one hundred Lutheran and Catholic clergy, meeting on 13 November 1985, Emeritus Archbishop Gleeson spoke these telling and inspiring words:

We have a long journey in faith ahead of us, but it is a most important one. The division among us Christians openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalises the world and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature . . . Humbly let us ask for the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit because we believe that the eventual outcome of our dialogue does not lie in our hands, it is the prerogative of the Lord of the Church. (reported in *The Lutheran*, 2 December 1985)