

the event of justification are related in the Lutheran case to the act of faith itself, in the case of Trent to the reception of baptism as climax of a process of preparation. The German Lutheran synod said with reference to canon 4 that all depends on whether the preparing grace and the justifying grace of Trent are to be understood as aspects of one and the same divine grace upon which the justification of the sinner completely depends.

The entire controversy on justification centered in the concept of faith, because the papists of the sixteenth century did not grasp the point of Luther's exegetical discovery that faith is complete trust in God and in his promise. As long as faith only means assent to a doctrine of the church, it remains absurd to ascribe justification to the act of faith alone. This ambiguity in the word "faith" also underlies the third issue, which is emphasized by Avery Dulles: the question of whether the gift of faith can remain in an unrepentant sinner, as Trent's canon 28 teaches. Formal assent to the doctrine of the church may certainly continue in the unrepentant sinner, but complete trust in God is not possible without repentance of one's sins. Accordingly, the ecumenical agreement on the concept of faith—as expressed in the document on the condemnations, pp. 49-51—also removes the problem of canon 28.

The final difficulty Avery Dulles raises is the notion of "merit." The issue has been dealt with in several of the dialogues, and Dulles himself agrees that "significant convergence has been achieved." He rightly suspects, however, that many Lutherans continue to feel the language of "merit" to be reprehensible. That is quite correct, but if we are assured that the notion of merit only expresses the biblical idea of "reward" that will be assigned to each person in the eschatological judgment, then the dispute on "merit" becomes an issue of language only, and—as the German Lutheran synod said—the use of that language can be tolerated though it is felt to be misleading.

The four points mentioned by Avery Dulles, then, do not constitute unresolved obstacles for a fundamental

agreement on justification as granted by the grace of God alone to those who believe in his saving action in Jesus Christ. Different languages will continue in the church, even different schools of thought and explanation. But they need no longer jeopardize substantial unity in the faith itself.

The agreement on justification needs to be broadened in the years ahead. It is already possible to bring about a similar agreement on the eucharist, and even in the issues of the ministry and of the general concept of sacraments it seems to be now within reach. There is still a way to go, as Avery Dulles so aptly reminds us. But there is hope, and condemnations are no longer inevitable.

Conference has no official standing, it is hard to imagine that, when the official response by the Vatican is given, it will be more open than what the German Catholic bishops have already said.³

*Justification as "the" Criterion:
What Happened to It?*

In the final report by the study process on "The Condemnations," the final paragraph on justification affirms:

The doctrine of justification therefore becomes the touchstone for testing at all times whether a particular interpretation of our relationship to God can claim the name of "Christian." At the same time, it becomes the touchstone for the church, for testing at all times whether its proclamation and

¹Lutheran World Information 14/96 (July 18, 1996) 4.

²Stellungnahme der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz zur Studie "Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend?" (Die deutschen Bischöfe 52; Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, June 21, 1994) 10-12. Cf. the official response of the General Synod of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany on October 18, 1994: We agree "only in part," for "differences remain," namely, whether grace is *extra nos* or a *qualitas in nobis*, whether faith is trust or an "assent of the understanding to the revealed word of God," merit, and law and gospel (Lutheran Quarterly 9 [1995] 360-62). With such "open questions" on both sides, the same "open questions" that have been at stake from the very beginning, one has to ask how much has really changed except the ecumenical climate.

³A further indication of how the Vatican tends to respond can be seen in its protracted negotiations over the *Final Report* (1982) of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC-I). On March 11, 1994, Cardinal Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), responding to the "Clarifications" submitted on September 4, 1993, by ARCIC-II, wrote: "The agreement reached on Eucharist and Ministry by ARCIC-I is thus greatly strengthened and no further study would seem to be required *at this stage*" [emphasis added; what lies behind the phrase "at this stage" is first of all the question of the ordination of women]; he then added that further clarification is needed on the question of the Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament. For the Cardinal's letter, an irenic history of the negotiations, and the "Clarifications," see *Information Service*, PCPCU, N. 87 (1994/IV) 237-42.

ON LIFTING THE
CONDEMNATIONS

By Joseph A. Burgess

What Will the Roman Catholic
Response Be?

We already can tell. On June 22, 1996, during an ecumenical prayer service at the Roman Catholic cathedral in Paderborn, Germany, Pope John Paul II stated: "Fundamental problems about Luther's views on faith, scriptures, tradition, and the church have not yet been sufficiently clarified."¹ And the German Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference, in its response to lifting the condemnations on justification, while agreeing that a "basic consensus" on justification now exists, goes on to say that "open questions still" remain: how the sinner is prepared for justification, the place of good works, the role of the church, and the necessity of the sacrament of penance for the baptized. Thus a consensus exists, "but the open questions listed above show in which direction the dialogue has to be continued."² Although the report of a Roman Catholic Bishops'

Joseph A. Burgess is pastor of Faith and Zion Lutheran Churches, Regent, North Dakota, and an editor of *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Augsburg, 1985) and other works.

its praxis correspond to what has been given to it by its Lord.⁴

The official response of the General Synod of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany welcomes this agreement:

We have recognized the following agreements:

4.1.1. An agreement that the doctrine of justification is significant not only as a special partial doctrine within the whole doctrine of the church's faith, but that beyond that, is the critical measure for all the doctrine and practice of the church. From the Evangelical standpoint (this) is a fundamental

step forward in ecumenical dialogue between our churches which cannot be overestimated.⁵

But no official Roman Catholic response refers to the doctrine of justification as "the" criterion. To be sure, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) in 1992 asked an independent committee to produce an "Evaluation for the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Study *Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend?*" and this evaluation does affirm the doctrine of justification as "the" criterion, using the final paragraph on justification cited above from the final report by the study process on "The Condemnations."⁶ But the PCPCU "Evaluation" is clearly labeled "Study Document" and cannot be cited as if it were an official response by the PCPCU.

As a consequence, it is misleading for the fledgling ecumenist when the study process that produced "The Condemnations," in its volume analyzing responses from the churches, cites the PCPCU "Evaluation" as (the only) Roman Catholic support for the criteriological function of the doctrine of justification.⁷ It is equally confusing when the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church" in Appendix 1 lists the PCPCU "Evaluation" without indicating that it is not an official response but a study document from an independent committee⁸ and goes on to use it, in a listing of supporting material, as the Roman Catholic basis for affirming the doctrine of justification as "the" criterion.⁹

Notable is the fact that the response to "The Condemnations" by the German Catholic Bishops' Conference (while unofficial) clearly does not say that the doctrine of justification is "the" criterion even though, as they point out, they were able to make use of the PCPCU "Evaluation."¹⁰ More importantly, the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church," which asks for official Roman Catholic approval, only states that the doctrine is "a" criterion

(par. 17) and that, in light of the basic consensus on the "faith content" of the doctrine of justification, remaining differences, such as "what relative weight is assigned to the doctrine of justification," are "compatible with each other" (par. 42).

If It Does Not Walk like a Duck...

The final report of the study process on "The Condemnations" raised Lutheran hopes when it concluded that the doctrine of justification is "the touchstone."¹¹ As the Ecumenical Study Group has continued, taking up the combined theme of canon, scripture, and tradition, how has "the touchstone" functioned? One searches in vain, particularly in certain obvious places in their common statement, for indications that the doctrine of justification has been "the" criterion used to determine how agreement is reached.¹² In a similar fashion the proposed LWF/Vatican "Joint Statement" has affirmed that the doctrine of justification is to be applied to ecclesiology and has noted how the LWF/Vatican bilateral report, "Church and Justification," is a "significant step" in such a process, but that this report "has also drawn attention to questions such as how authority is exercised in the church which need further dialogue" (par. 45). Yet in what sense can any "significant" progress be claimed when "how authority is exercised in the church" has not been solved? After all, the only real question when applying the doctrine of justification to ecclesiology is "how authority is exercised in the church."¹³

What's the Hurry!

Ecumenical bureaucrats naturally want immediate results, but in light of what is at stake for Lutherans and what is still a very preliminary stage of agreement on the doctrine of justification, hard work remains. Further, as Günther Gassmann has pointed out, in a sense the majority of leaders and church members "are not at all conscious of the weight, significance, and implications of the proposals before them in 1997."¹⁴ What is needed is study material suitable for general use and then widespread use of these materials.

⁴*The Condemnations of the Reformation Era. Do They Still Divide?* ed. K. Lehmann and W. Pannenberg, tr. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 69.

⁵*Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995) 361.

⁶Par. 3.11, p. 96. The "Evaluation" contains 115 double-spaced typewritten pages.

⁷*Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend? IV Antworten auf kirchliche Stellungnahmen*, ed. W. Pannenberg and T. Schneider (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; and Freiburg: Herder, 1994) 126.

⁸Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church," 1995 (ecumenical proposal for 1997), Appendix 1, p. 11.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 12, citing the same material referred to in n. 6 above.

¹⁰*Stellungnahme*, 4.

¹¹Note 4 above.

¹²*Verbindliches Zeugnis I. Kanon - Schrift - Tradition*, ed. W. Pannenberg and T. Schneider (Freiburg: Herder; and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992) especially pp. 388-89, 392.

¹³A quick look at the table of contents for *Church and Justification. Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification* [Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission; Geneva: LWF, 1994] 5, confirms this point. Under the heading: "4.5 The Significance of the Doctrine of Justification for the Understanding of the Church," is a list of "The Areas of Controversy"; (1) "Institutional Continuity of the Church"; (2) "Ordained Ministry as Institution in the Church"; (3) "Binding Church Doctrine and the Teaching Function of the Ministry"; (4) "Church Jurisdiction and the Jurisdictional Function of the Ministry." When such "areas" remain controversial, what is basic has not been resolved, and it is evident that the doctrine of justification has been at best "a" criterion, but clearly not "the" criterion.

¹⁴Günther Gassmann, "The 1997 Ecumenical Decisions of the ELCA: Their Wider Ecumenical Context," *dialog* 35/2 (1996) 143.