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Theological Observer

L'osservatore Romano

A complimentary copy of the weekly edition of the Vatican newspaper arrived on September 27, the day before the Public Broadcasting System offered a documentary on Pope John Paul II. Public television may be free, but the asking price for *L'osservatore Romano* is \$109 a year. This comes to slightly more than \$2.00 a copy, a price that may have forever prevented this newspaper from finding its way into the seminary library. With the Lutheran World Federation, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), making an accommodation with Rome on the doctrine of justification, curiosity about any real changes in the theology of either signatory to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is piqued. The word on the street is that Rome took the *Declaration* a little less seriously than their newly adopted Lutheran half-brothers have. In the thoroughly Roman Catholic countries like Italy, Spain and Ireland, the odds are that the resident population have little idea who Lutherans are and have not added the word "justification" either by works or faith to their vocabularies.

Many Christians, regardless of their denominational or confessional allegiance, would be hard pressed on their own to articulate a coherent doctrine of justification. Proof of this are the surveys sponsored by the fraternal insurance companies. Somehow a large number of Lutherans answer that they will be saved by leading good lives, which, considering the moral morass of the world at the turn of the millennium, is not without merit. Add to the mix the second last line of the Athanasian Creed, "And they that have done good shall go to life everlasting," and you have the recipe for confusion. Luther ejected James from the canon before he had time to consider that James, like the Athanasian Creed, was speaking in terms of the final judgment (one may compare Matthew 25) and not how we know ourselves now to be accepted by Christ, which can only be by faith. Anyone who trusts in Christ alone is justified, even if he does not use the word "justification" or misspeaks in defining it. Surveys on whether Lutherans really understand justification have value because they can evoke righteous indignation over these predictably wrong answers. These wrong answers sometimes find their way into sermons to show why Lutherans are not really Lutherans any more. But they prove little more than showing some of us are simply not at home with theological terminology. The fraternal insurance companies can release their pollsters with thanks. Those Lutherans who reached an accord with Rome on justification need not be concerned with

definitions, since they have already given their *imprimatur* to Rome's position, regardless of its current articulation.

Some ELCA theologians objected to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* because, apart from the inadequacy of its wording, Rome did not come clean on the role the saints, and especially Mary, play in salvation. This was hardly nitpicking, since a year or two ago the pope backed away from conferring on her the honorific title of co-redemptrix, which would have brought disaster to Rome's ecumenical plans. But it was on his mind. Rome has not hesitated to assign Mary redemptive-like acts that the New Testament assigns to Jesus and the Holy Spirit. She serves as co-redemptrix *de facto* in every way except name. Official Rome cannot be held responsible for each act of that common Marian devotion which seems structured on native goddess worship of primitive cultures, but the problem is also current in modern countries. Upon returning from a sabbatical leave in Spain, the late Professor Otto Stahlke reported that an invocation was pronounced for a televised Mass "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Virgin Mary." More recently it came to light at a festive reception following a consecration for a Nebraskan that he received an emergency baptism in the name of "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." Rome is not alone in misuse of the baptismal formula. *Forum Letter* reports that in the ELCA, occasional baptisms are administered "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit—the Mother of us all." Choose your poison. Stressful situations may create forgivable aberrations, but the newly consecrated bishop was found not to be consecrated at all and had to receive all the appropriate sacraments again, beginning with a properly worded baptism. Anecdotal evidence can hardly be used to evaluate another church. We all live in glass houses. While Marian pollution of the trinitarian name may pop up here and there, we can be absolutely certain that such substitution formulas are never used in any of the baptistries within the walls of the Vatican. No aberrant formulae would ever find its way on to pages of official Vatican missals and printed liturgies. Would that the matter were closed, but it is not.

A letter from John Paul II printed in the September 1, 1999 edition of *L'osservatore Romano* attributes to the Virgin Mary qualities reserved in the Bible for the Holy Spirit. Under the title "Mary is Mother to all, Mother forever," the Roman Pontiff's open letter to the bishop of Susa (Italy), says that "the goal of [Mary's] mission is to produce in believers the features of her first-born Son, . . . bringing them at the

same time to recover ever more clearly that image and likeness of God in which they were created (cf. Genesis 1:26)." We further learn that "the faithful know they can count on the heavenly Mother's concern: Mary will never abandon them." Just how are we to react? While her concern is appreciated, it would be better to hold with the New Testament that the Holy Spirit is God's renewing agent and power to renew God's image in us by bringing it in conformity with Christ. Christ promises that He, with the Father and the Holy Spirit dwells in believers and they will never desert us. We believe that we are surrounded by saints who experienced the same trials we do and they pray to God for us, but what counts are merits of Christ, who, with the Holy Spirit, is living in us.

The same issue of the Vatican newspaper contains prayers to the Virgin Mary, asking her help in facing life's tribulations. She also is held responsible for the success of the evangelism mission in Sussa, Italy. Interested parties can locate the English edition of *L'osservatore Romano* in the library of the local Roman parish or diocesan office for additional references to Mary's other accomplishments. Disturbing is that this Marian devotion is not simply of an ill-formed species of common piety, but comes from the pope's pen. Lutheran signatories to the *Joint Declaration* must come to terms with the reality that Rome has not in any sense accommodated herself to Lutheran teaching on justification. Life goes on in Rome as if the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* had never been signed. It can be assumed that Rome signed simply to avoid tarnishing her ecumenical image in her attempt to bring Christian churches together.

Vatican II was ecumenically sanative by providing biblical arguments (whether we agree with them is another matter) and subordinating her role to that of her Son. Statues of her in newly constructed churches occupied a less prominent place. Enter John Paul II. Emblazoned on the Papal coat of arms in the lower right quadrant of the cross is a prominent "M," symbolizing the theme of his papacy "*ad Jesum per Mariam*," to Jesus through Mary. Granted, that God did come to the world through Mary, *incarnatus de spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine*, but the pope has conversion and regeneration and not incarnation in mind. The role assigned by the New Testament to the Spirit is given to Mary. It hardly squares with "the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel . . . and keeps all Christians in the one true faith." Now comes the PBS documentary on John Paul II, which is appropriately complimentary, as well it should be, and critical in an analytical sense. We hope that we do no less and recognize him as an

ally in insisting on an all male clergy and admire his courage in going to his native Soviet-dominated Poland. This led to the demise of its Communist regime and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its hegemony over eastern Europe. We owe him something. Of concern is his devotion to Mary, especially when it appeared that Catholicism, especially in its American form, was backing away from it.

Psychological studies, especially the Freudian types, including what Erik Erikson did to Luther, are suspect and now outmoded. The whole matter, however, was opened up again by the PBS documentary on the present pontiff who is Polish, a country of profound devotion to Mary. Here was a link between the pope's devotion to his mother, who died when he was four months, and the woman he would later call "the mother of us all." Though he did not know his mother in any real sense, he kept a photograph of her holding him and one of him reading his poems at her grave when he was a teenager. Mary may have become the heavenly surrogate for the earthly mother he never knew. Psychological conclusions may never be completely convincing, but this one explains why the leader of an increasingly ecumenically sensitive church is willing to sacrifice that image for his devotion to Mary. Similarities between revering Mary as "Mother" and the "Mother" goddess imagery of the feminist movement are obvious even to some Roman Catholic scholars, who are willing to take advantage of a shared terminology. Traditional trinitarian worship of the Father and the Son may make any real accommodation impossible for Rome; however, the verbal equipment is in place.

Confessional Lutherans with a deep sense of incarnation have revived honoring Mary, at least through the three days set aside for this purpose in the church calendar. They see the real danger in church worship life not in an excessive awareness of the presence of the saints, including Mary, but in the transcendence of Reformed theology (*finitum non capax infiniti*). Still, the pope's devotion to Mary is minimally an embarrassment to us, not unlike Luther's own dilemma. His early devotion to her was tempered by her being revered as if she were a goddess, but what he experienced must have been mild in comparison to the excesses which the current pontiff has allowed for himself and encouraged among his flock. When he was wounded in Saint Peter's Square, he cried out "*Totus Maria ego sum*" — "Mary, I am all yours." As a model of faith who committed herself fully to God in becoming the mother of His Son, she occupies the place of honor among the saints. We Lutherans have no other choice but to join her in singing the *Magnificat* in making her faith our

own. To say anything less than she is *Theotokos* and *Mater Dei* is to fall into the error of ancient Nestorianism and its modern form in Reformed theology. To give her such deserved honor is even more necessary in the face of that destructive biblical criticism that challenges any idea that Jesus thought of Himself as anything special, including the Son of God. Ascribing her a role in our justification is an entirely different matter and something which the Lutheran signatories to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* should have thought about before they put their John Hancock to the paper. Perhaps the next occupant in Peter's chair may be more circumspect in Marian language and devotion.

David P. Scaer

Regensburg Redivivus?

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* has been hailed by prominent Lutheran leaders as a "theological breakthrough." The maker of this statement goes on to claim that the *Joint Declaration* has "bridged a theological divide that has separated us for nearly 500 years."¹ A press release from the Lutheran World Federation asserts that the "document ends [the] 400-year dispute on doctrine of justification."² Other Lutherans have described the *Joint Declaration* as a "betrayal of the Gospel" and have said that it "represents a clear, stunning departure from the Reformation and thus is contrary to what it means to be a Lutheran Christian."³ The Roman Catholic Church has been able to add another feather in its ecumenical cap without backing away one inch from the Canons of the Council of Trent, which are as normative as ever for the Roman Catholic Church.

It serves the purpose of those who are advocates of this document to neglect history in their effort to "interpret" this event to their church. But history, as usual, cuts through the "spin" used by various church press agencies. It reveals the truth of what the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is. The *Joint Declaration* is really not as

¹Bishop H. George Anderson as quoted in "Lutherans, Roman Catholics Prepare to Sign Historic Agreement," ELCA News Service Press Release, October 6, 1999.

²"LWF Council Unanimously Approves Joint Declaration with Roman Catholics: Document Ends 400-Year Dispute on Doctrine of Justification," Lutheran World Federation Press Release, June 16, 1998.

³President A. L. Barry as quoted in "A Betrayal of the Gospel," LC-MS News Service Press Release, October 18, 1999.

new as some would claim. Long ago, certain Lutherans and Roman Catholics came together to work out their differences. They produced and discussed a document. But at this time Lutherans were not quite so eager to settle for the ambiguity and sophistry that one finds in the *Joint Declaration*. This is a brief summary of the story of the Regensburg Colloquy.

In the late 1530s, at the height of the Reformation, Emperor Charles V attempted to bring the feuding religious parties together. From January 14-18, 1541, Philip Melanchthon met with Luther's old nemesis, Johann Eck, and discussed the Augsburg Confession. Following this meeting, unknown to the Lutherans, an agreement was developed at secret meetings held in the city of Worms. A draft of the agreement was drawn up and became known as the Regensburg Book. Martin Bucer sent the draft to Elector Joachim II and asked that he share it with Martin Luther, soliciting his opinion. Luther did not approve. Even Melanchthon referred to it as: "A Platonic republic."⁴

At the beginning of April, 1541, Luther heard the rumor that he supported the Regensburg Book. He responded with an angry denial, insisting that the Smalcald Articles must be the basis for any theological agreement. He asserted that unity in justification must precede any discussion of other issues. Luther said that if this was not how agreement was achieved, anything else would be patchwork. He further observed that there was really no large dispute anyway over matters of adiaphora, such as worship, since "a visitor from the Romance lands did not even notice that he was not in a Catholic church" when visiting the congregation in Wittenberg.⁵ It was therefore not of concern that such matters be discussed. What really mattered was the doctrine of justification.

The Diet of Regensburg began on April 27, 1541 and was based on the Regensburg Book. Melanchthon attended. Luther did not, for he had not been invited to participate. After much discussion, a provisional agreement was reached on May 2. The agreement stated that faith depends entirely on the imputed righteousness of Christ. The agreement went on to state that faith was active in love. The compromise put imputed righteousness first, but it did not clarify the relationship between faith and works in the process of justification. It used the essential Reformation phrase "through faith alone" only with

⁴Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, translated by James Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 219.

⁵Brecht, *Luther*, 223.

careful qualification by the Roman side. Contarini sent the compromise document to Rome, where it was rejected.

Elector John Frederick immediately forwarded the formula of compromise to Luther and Bugenhagen for their opinions. He expressed his concerns that the compromise seemed to admit of error by the Evangelicals. The elector wisely noted that the qualification of the phrase "justification through faith alone" was a negative development. Luther's response to the Regensburg compromise formula was not surprising. He viewed it as a collection of different points of view. He also observed that with the compromise both sides could claim that their concerns had been met. He asserted that the agreement would come apart over the doctrine of justification. For Luther the best way to express the doctrine of justification was by using Romans 3:24, 28: "They are justified by his grace as a gift. . . . For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. . . . Let the devil, Eck, Mainz, Heinz, and anyone else rage against this. We shall see what they win." Luther maintained that clear distinctions had to be made "between the cause of justification and its evidence in life, that is, good works. Before God only Christ's righteousness was valid, not the righteousness within a person. God regards works as holy only for Christ's sake."⁶

The discussions continued. Melancthon refused to compromise. On May 22, the discussions fell apart. The news of the collapse greatly relieved Luther, as did the good news that armed force was not going to be used against the Evangelicals. In a final effort to achieve agreement, the emperor ordered a delegation to go to visit Luther in Wittenberg to seek his support for the four articles on original sin, justification, free will, and faith and good works that had been discussed at Regensburg. They were told to obtain assurance from Luther that he would tolerate the Roman position in regard to the other articles not yet discussed. It is clear that the emperor and others had a mistaken opinion about Luther's willingness to compromise. When Luther learned of the delegation that had been appointed to visit him, he said that it reminded him of his experience at the Diet of Worms in 1521 where he had been commanded to recant his position on the gospel.

The discussions between Luther and the Imperial delegation took place on June 10, 1541 in Wittenberg. Luther prepared a written response. Though he was highly skeptical, he was not opposed to

⁶Brecht, *Luther*, 225.

trying to work toward an agreement. He insisted, however, that the article of justification demanded careful scrutiny and genuine agreement prior to any other discussions. Finally, at the end of June, 1541, Elector John Frederick of Saxony asked both Luther and Bugenhagen for a specific statement on the Regensburg Book. Their response left no doubt in anyone's mind where they stood.

Luther insisted that before there could be agreement with Rome, the pope would have to admit that he had deceived many and led them astray. He said that the elector had to insist on the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. Luther said that making clear and careful distinctions is part of confessing the truth. He went on to assert that a true agreement between the two parties would require the Roman Catholics to "retract, condemn, and curse all their theology, their sentences, decretals, all the summists, bulls, letters, all foundations' and monasteries' doctrine and life, all popes', cardinals', and bishops' offices and character, along with everything that they have gained with this error, idolatry, blasphemy, and lies." Without this, said Luther, the agreement would only be a deception.⁷ Luther said that condemning the devil went along with faith and confessing one's sins. On July 12, the Lutheran representatives at the Diet of Regensburg submitted their formal response to the Regensburg Book. It was written by Melanchthon (and was more mild than what Luther had written in his response). The Lutherans indicated that clarifications were still needed. They held to their position and did not yield, and forced the Roman representatives to speak with absolute clarity in regard to the issue of the relationship of faith and good works in the doctrine of justification.

What we have with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is a revival of the proposed compromise of Regensburg. The *Joint Declaration* is not an agreement, but a carefully worded document that permits both sides to maintain their respective positions. The key issue remains: is salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, totally on account of Christ alone, or is it a combination of faith and works. Rome has not changed. It insists that "eternal life is at the same time both a gift and a reward for merit and works."⁸ The difference

⁷Brecht, *Luther*, 227.

⁸Response of the Catholic Church to the Joint Declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on the Doctrine of Justification, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents.

between Regensburg and the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is that then the Lutherans rejected Roman error and ambiguity. This time they have permitted, welcomed, encouraged, and now have celebrated and hailed it as a breakthrough.

Writing to the Elector John Frederick, Luther noted how serious a matter the proposed compromise agreement was with Rome and why it was such an evil. "Whether those who issued it meant well in their conceited ignorance in doing so or not . . . nothing more injurious has been undertaken against us since our gospel began to spread."⁹

Luther is still right.

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On Being "Catholic" – Nothing New

Recent seminary graduates will often put into practice in their first congregations the things they learned at the seminary. At least we hope so. When these things have to do with liturgics, the all too frequent response is that these adjustments are "too Catholic." Standard seminary chapel services – what flew in Fort Wayne – won't play in Peoria, so it is said. For the record, seminary instructors often and severely admonish the students to respect the liturgical practices and standard operating procedures of the congregations that they are called to serve. These congregations will long outlast their pastors. Patience is perhaps the most difficult virtue for new pastors to learn. Avoiding confrontation will make it easier for the shepherd to care for his sheep. Problems will inevitably arise, however, if the sheep think that they are the shepherd in the form of a board or a committee, but that's another issue. It is the charge that this or that pastor is "too Catholic" that needs to be investigated, even though the absence of hard statistics suggests that these kinds of cases are isolated. We have never heard of a congregation raising a complaint because their pastor is "too Baptist" or "too Methodist." Generally American Protestants, including Lutherans, prefer that their pastors err on the anti-Catholic side of things. All this is a matter for another day.

Much of what is dismissed today as "too Catholic" is, in fact, good, historic Missouri practice. For example in the mid-1860s being

⁹Martin Luther, "Letter to the Elector John Frederick, August 4, 1541," *The Letters of Martin Luther*, selected and translated by Margaret A. Currie (London: Macmillan, 1908), 403.

"somewhat allied to popery" was a burning issue in American Lutheranism. The General Synod, founded in 1820 and generally given over to a lax form of Lutheranism in doctrine and practice, accused the "Old Lutherans," namely, the Missouri Synod, of being "too Catholic." The June 8, 1866 edition of the *Lutheran Observer* took note of the activities of the Rev. Dr. Wilhelm Sihler, a former president of the Fort Wayne Seminary (previous to its removal to Saint Louis in 1861) and still at that time pastor of Saint Paul Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne. He was described as "one of the most bigoted and exclusive of the 'Alte Lutheraner' Missouri Synod faction. He carries his narrow-minded, extreme symbolism to the farthest point." Pastor Sihler was found guilty of two sins. First, he had bound himself unconditionally to the Book of Concord (1580) in its entirety because it is a faithful exposition of God's word. (Horrors!) Secondly, he had placed a crucifix and statues of the evangelists in Saint Paul's sanctuary and used candles during the services. (More horrors!) The *Observer* took note of these tendencies and proudly proclaimed that "the churches of the General Synod do not burn wax candles, and erect crucifixes in their altars, and introduce other ceremonies somewhat allied to popery."

Sihler was not the only Missouri pastor "somewhat allied to popery," because candles, crucifixes, and statuary were commonly found in the Synod's churches at that time. The empty cross syndrome that was said to signify the resurrection had not caught on in the mid-1800s. Perhaps in one sense such items as crucifixes and statues are adiaphora where there are neither the artists nor the funds to produce them. But in the face of the Protestantism that had infected the American home-grown type of Lutheranism of the General Synod, they had become matters of confession. Sihler, Saint Paul congregation, and the other pastors and congregations of the Missouri Synod did not take the ax to what the *Observer* fondly called "popery" — they steadfastly retained such items and practices.

The Synod's first constitution spoke at some length on the issue of worship practice, seeing it as a significant element in the church's life together. In order to qualify for membership in the Synod, a congregation had to affirm "The exclusive use of doctrinally pure church books and schoolbooks (Agenda, hymnals, readers, etc.)."¹ Thus, the business of Synod was, in part, "to strive after the greatest

¹"Our First Synodical Constitution," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16 (April 1943): 3. References in the text in parentheses are to this article.

possible uniformity in ceremonies" (5). Noting, however, that differing practices did exist, the constitution went on to state: "If it is impossible in some congregations to replace immediately the unorthodox hymnals and the like with orthodox ones, then the pastor of such a congregation can become a member of Synod only if he promises to use the unorthodox hymnal only under open protest and to strive in all seriousness for the introduction of an orthodox hymnal" (3). The Synod literally required its pastors formally and openly to protest the erroneous practices of their congregations as a condition of membership! *Adiaphora* was not a good enough reason for not conforming.

Today the likes of *Forward!* and *Jesus First Leadership* (www.jesusfirst.net) frequently cite the Synod's affirmation that liturgical practice does not have to be uniform across the Synod. "Synod holds in accordance with the 7th article of the Augsburg Confession that uniformity in ceremonies is not essential; . . ." Selective quoting, however, misses the Synod's ultimate point; the constitution goes on to detail the nature and usefulness of uniformity in practice. "Yet on the other hand Synod deems such a uniformity wholesome and useful for the following reasons: because a total difference in outward ceremonies would cause those who are weak in the unity of doctrine to stumble; because in dropping heretofore preserved usages the Church is to avoid the appearance of and desire for innovations" (11-12).

We should recall the context of Lutheranism at the time of Missouri's founding. Much of American Lutheranism's practice mirrored that of Methodism, rather than historic Lutheranism. Thus, the constitution noted that

Synod deems it necessary for the purification of the Lutheran Church in America, that the emptiness and the poverty in the externals of the service be opposed, which, having been introduced here by the false spirit of the Reformed, is now rampant. All pastors and congregations that wish to be recognized as orthodox by the Synod are prohibited from adopting or retaining any ceremony which might weaken the confession of the truth or condone or strengthen a heresy, especially if heretics insist upon the continuation or the abolishment of such ceremonies.

Further, it takes up what was seen by many Americans as the symbol of popery, private confession and absolution. Its conclusions

might surprise some today: "Where private confession is in use, it is to be kept according to Article 11 of the Augsburg Confession. Where it is not in use, the pastor is to strive through teaching and instruction to introduce it" (12).

That Synod's congregations should be unified in their form of worship is assumed in the first constitution. Lutheran practice, historic and distinctive, is to characterize that worship – not the innovations of American religious culture. Further, it places the responsibility for correcting aberrant practice with the pastor. Yet it notes that proper practice can only be achieved through patient catechesis. "The desired uniformity in the ceremonies is to be brought about especially by the adoption of sound Lutheran agendas (church books)" (12).

When one couples our time's advocacy of a distinction between substance and style and telling the "other story of Lutherans at worship" with an inborn American distrust of Roman Catholicism, the consistent Lutheran pastor may find himself between a rock and a hard place. One temptation is to "pope" as one critic of the General Synod recently did.² That is no solution. A better approach is to affirm the "common consent of the pure Lutheran liturgies of the sixteenth century," and to link that with the patient catechization of our people in a distinctively Lutheran cultus. True Lutheranism will always be accused of being "somewhat allied to popery," but only in so far as popery affirms the catholic heritage of the church.

For the record, above the altar at Pastor Sihler's church today stands a statue of Saint Paul with a sword and another one of Saint Peter holding the keys. In the middle is a statue of Jesus with hands extended inviting believers to Him. On the front of the altar is a carving of Christ instituting the Lord's Supper and on the altar proper is a crucifix. Where are the four Evangelists? Their statues are on the sides of the pulpit.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

²David Gustavson, *Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).