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STATEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL ON THE DOCUMENT

“FROM CONFLICT TO COMMUNION:” LUTHERAN—CATHOLIC COMMON COMMEMORATION OF THE REFORMATION 2017

IN PREPARATION OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE REFORMATION IN 2017, the Lutheran — Roman Catholic Commission on Unity has elaborated the document “From Conflict to Communion” on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The International Lutheran Council (ILC), in contact with the LWF through annual meetings of their executive committees and in consultation with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) by an informal dialogue of three years duration, on the occasion of its conference taking place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on Sept. 24–27, 2015, has commented on this document as follows:

1. Basic assumptions

- We acknowledge that in the face of the divisions within Christianity and in the light of the Lord’s declared intention “that they may all be one” (John 17:21), there is no alternative to sound and solid theological endeavors, based on the authoritative function of Holy Scripture for all the Church’s doctrine and life, to overcome those disruptions.
- We embrace the historical research exerted concerning the 16th-century schism within Western Christianity (35–90). We approve the result that, due to contributions of medieval scholarship and Roman Catholic Luther studies, many traditional prejudices on both sides could be dispelled.
- We appreciate the position that the RCC wants the history and the legacy of the split of Western Christianity to

be “viewed through the lens of the actions of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)” (90).

2. Particular observations

- We observe that the theological scholarship is focused on the theology of Martin Luther (chapter IV).
- We acknowledge that the issues of “justification, eucharist, ministry, and Scripture and tradition” are indeed areas of eminent importance in the realm of Luther’s theology.
- Nevertheless, we wish to indicate that the Lutheran churches are less obligated to Martin Luther’s theology as such, than they are bound to the doctrinal decisions taken in the Book of Concord.

2.1 JUSTIFICATION

- For the major part, we agree with the predications on “Luther’s understanding of justification (102–118), particularly on the “Word of God as promise” (103–106), on the “*extra nos*” of salvation in Christ (107, 108) and on the forensic character of justification (115).
- We wish to point out, however, that righteousness attributed to the sinner for Christ’s sake, must be understood forensically, (i.e., as God’s judgement, which does not change even the believer ontologically) (108). We wish to emphasize, in addition, that within the undeniable connection between “becoming righteous and being renewed” (113), the renewal of Christian life has to be considered strictly as a consequence to justification.
- In the conversations on justification that led to the Joint

We acknowledge that the issues of “justification, eucharist, ministry, and Scripture and tradition” are indeed areas of eminent importance in the realm of Luther’s theology.

Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) of Oct. 31, 1999, signed by the LWF and the RCC, we see an important element in the bilateral relations between Lutherans and Catholics (122–139). Statements have already been issued from the ranks of the ILC member churches. (The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*, St. Louis, MO, 1999; Werner Klän: Einig in der Rechtfertigungslehre? Anfragen an die „Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre“ aus konkordienlutherischer Sicht, in: Uwe Swarat, Johannes Oeldemann, Dagmar Heller [Hg.]: Von Gott angenommen — in Christus verwandelt. Die Rechtfertigungslehre im multilateralen ökumenischen Dialog, Frankfurt /M., 2006, 95–124).

– We cannot, however, assent to the result that JDDJ has reached a “consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification,” although we recognize valuable rapprochements between the two parties involved.

– Major reasons for this evaluation from a confessional Lutheran perspective are these: The topic of Law and Gospel is not represented in JDDJ. On the other hand, Lutheran positions in the doctrine of justification are sketched within the framework of the process-related and personal scheme of the Christian walk of life as formulated in the decisions of Council of Trent.

– The eschatological dimension of justification is obviously underexposed; God’s twofold action in Law and Gospel does not aim, in the first place, at the empowerment of the sinner to act responsibly, rather it confirms the sinner’s salvation from the Last Judgment here and now and grants to him participation in the resurrection of the dead.

2.2 EUCHARIST

– We endorse the expositions of “Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper” (141–148), particularly in terms of accentuating the real presence of Christ’s body and blood “in, with and under” the elements of bread and wine and of underscoring the *unio sacramentalis* along the lines of the *unio personalis* in the person of Christ (143), as well as the description of Luther’s position in criticizing the sacrifice of the Mass (146–148).

– We regret, however, that the chapters, “Catholic concerns regarding the eucharist” (149–152) and “Common understanding of the real presence of Christ” (154–156),

do not speak about the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in a more precise manner but are content with expressions of personal presence. Here Lutherans and Catholics ought to have much more in common and may easily express convergence, e.g., along the lines of the Formula of Concord (Ep VII, 6): “We believe, teach, and confess that in the Holy Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and essentially present, truly distributed and received with the bread and wine. / *Credimus, docemus et confitemur, quod in Coena Domini corpus et sanguis Christi vere et substantialiter sint praesentia et quod una cum pane et vino distribuantur atque sumantur.*”

– We consider it approvable that in the celebration of the Eucharist according to Christ’s institution, the Lord’s self-sacrifice is rendered effective. We may even agree that in such a celebration according to Christ’s institution the once-for-all (*eph hapax*) event of the Crucifixion is present “in a sacramental modality” (159).

– We object, however, that in any case the crucified and risen Lord is and remains exclusively the only subject of this representation, performing it by His Word.

– We support the position “that the celebration of the Eucharist involves the leadership of a minister appointed by the church” (161).

– We thereby adhere to the position that such an appointment is conferred by ordination including a lifelong obligation and reemphasize that a mere commission on behalf of the Church is not sufficient (cf. 181).

2.3 MINISTRY

– We regard the chapter, “Luther’s understanding of the common priesthood of the baptized and ordained office” (162–172), to be delineated in widely appropriate fashion. In this realm we count the differentiation between “priest” and “pastor” (163), the accentuation of the Office of the Ministry as being related to the service towards the whole Church (165), the divine institution of the ordained ministry (166), God’s activity in bringing a person into the Office of the Ministry (168), the openness to claim a sacramental dimension in the Office of the Ministry (169) and the oneness of the ordained ministry (172).

– We acknowledge the valuation attributed to the Church as God’s people by the Second Vatican Council and see ourselves in the position of comprehending the convergences between Lutherans and Catholics resulting from this perception of the office of the ministry.

- We consider the remaining “Differences in understanding the ministry” to be depicted correctly.
- At the same time, we regret that the verdict made by the Second Vatican Council that the Lutheran churches are subject to “*defectus sacramenti ordinis*” could not be overcome by now.

2.4 SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

- We approve the exposure of “Luther’s understanding of Scripture, its interpretation, and human traditions” (195–200).
- We deny, however, that Holy Scripture be just “the witness to God’s revelation” (198). Rather it is in itself, being God’s Word, God’s revelation, albeit in human words.
- We share the opinion that the “*sola scriptura*” principle does not invalidate the binding character of the ancient Church’s creeds and dogmas, nor of the Lutheran Confessions as laid down in the Book of Concord (1580/1584). In this regard, the Lutheran Church may also accept some kind of a “structure of norms.”

We affirm that especially confessional Lutherans are obligated to cooperate in overcoming the divisions within Christianity in the spirit of biblical truth and Christian love.

- We maintain, nevertheless, the Holy Scripture is “the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged” (FC, Ep, Summary 1). The Confessions, as adopted by the Church, thus do hold derivative authority but do so because (*quia*) they align with the Scriptures. In this respect, the Confessions may be regarded as “legitimate tradition” in the Lutheran Church.
- Explicitly we endorse the affirmation made by the Second Vatican Council, “that the teaching office of the church is not above the Word of God but stands at its service” (203).
- We question, however, whether or not the structure of decision-making in the Roman Catholic Church does sufficiently protect and preserve the prevalence of Holy Scripture as ultimate standard, even over against the Church (201–207).
- That is why we ask whether or not “an extensive agreement” can be maintained in this issue between Lutherans and Catholics (209–210)

2.5 THE GOSPEL AND THE CHURCH

- We consent to the proposition that between Lutherans and Catholics, major differences still exist regarding ecclesiology and the theology of the ministry; therefore we see an urgent demand for dialogue (218).

3. Consequences

With regard to our ecumenical partners on the world level we assert:

- In Holy Baptism, we acknowledge the Sacrament of Christian unity (cf. 219–222)
- We consider it a valuable fact that Lutheran and Catholics regard it necessary to come to terms with the history of their division; in the same way, we appreciate that at the beginning of the 21st century the commemoration of the Reformation is realized in ecumenical responsibility (223–224).
- We affirm that especially confessional Lutherans are obligated to cooperate in overcoming the divisions within Christianity in the spirit of biblical truth and Christian love (225–227).

- It is only with sorrow that — in addition to competing for the biblical truth of the Gospel — we see multiple non-theological factors to have contributed to separations among Christians. We confess that on the side of the Lutheran Reformation unjustified judgements were rendered as well (233).

- We are well aware that particularly in those parts of the world where Christians form a minority only, a witness of Christian churches, as common as possible, is required.

Therefore, we ask the ILC executive committee:

- to yield this statement on “From Conflict to Communion” into the ongoing consultations with the LWF executive committee,
- to search for ways of applying apt measures to the treatment of issues still under dispute between the ILC and the LWF and
- to authorize the ILC representatives in the informal dialogue with the PCPCU to introduce this statement into the upcoming conversations.