

“ALL UNDER ONE CHRIST”

ROMAN CATHOLIC/LUTHERAN JOINT COMMISSION STATEMENT ON THE
AUGSBURG CONFESSION

Preface

The Joint Roman Catholic/Lutheran Commission of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation has produced a statement on the Confessio Augustana (CA-Augsburg Confession.) This statement was unanimously approved by the members of the Commission. It is our hope that the unanimity expressed in it may hasten the hoped-for unity of our churches.

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I.

- (1) When Catholics and Lutherans look back to the Augsburg Confession today, we do so from a situation which differs considerably from that in 1530.
- (2) Though seriously threatened at that time, the unity of the Western Church had not yet been shattered. In spite of conflict and differences of conviction between them, the “religious parties” at that time still felt themselves to be “under one Christ” and committed to that church unity⁽¹⁾.
- (3) But with the subsequent course of events not only did an increasingly bitter note creep into their dealings with one another but the differences between them sharpened, in doctrine, in religious practices, in church structures, and in the ways in which they sought to obey the mandate of the Crucified and risen Lord and to testify to his gospel among people. Non-church factors also helped to bring about this growing estrangement and to accentuate the differences. In the centuries since, these tensions and differences have been carried to other countries and other continents by the missionary work of our churches.
- (4) We recognize our own responsibility for the fact that these differences have divided our

churches from one another and that this division has weakened our witness to Christ and brought suffering to individuals and nations.

- (5) It is with thankfulness, then, that we see how the Holy Spirit is leading us ever more deeply today into the unity of the Son with the Father (Jn. 17.-21ff.) and helping us to achieve a new community with one another.
- (6) Since the Second Vatican Council especially, our churches have been in dialogue in many countries and in many places. Striking convergences have been achieved and agreements reached on important controversial questions. The mutual bonds between congregations and members of our churches have led to cooperation and practical fellowship in a variety of forms. There are differences between us which are also beginning to lose their divisive edge. Even when we must wrestle with each other for the truth, we recognize and experience many of the remaining differences as a source of mutual enrichment and correction. After centuries, of deepening estrangement, there is a new sense among us that we are “all under one Christ.”
- (7) The dialogue of recent years, the theological common understanding reached as a result of this dialogue, and the climate of real fellow-

(1) This is stressed in the Emperor’s invitation to the Diet of Augsburg (1530) and taken up in the Preface to the Confessio Augustana (*The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, and Arthur C. Piepkorn, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959, pp. 24f.).

ship lead us back to Augsburg and to the Augsburg Confession. For, in content and structure, this confession, which is the basis and point of reference for other Lutheran confessional documents, reflects as no other confession does the ecumenical purpose and catholic intention of the Reformation.

- (8) Very important, too, is the fact that this ecumenical purpose and catholic intent find expression in a confessional document which, subject to and together with Holy Scripture, is still the doctrinal basis of the Lutheran churches and still has binding authority for them even today. In the stage now reached in the understanding and convergence between our churches, this is a particularly important factor. For the character of the post-conciliar dialogue, as conducted for example in our Roman Catholic/Lutheran joint Commission since 1967, is no longer that of private and unofficial meetings. On the contrary, it is conducted on the official instructions of our churches. Inasmuch as this dialogue has succeeded in arriving at convergences and agreements on fundamental issues,² it puts pressure on our churches to accept its findings officially and poses the question of the realization of church community.
- (9) It is in profound accord with this dynamic of a dialogue officially sponsored by our churches which now presses us in the direction of the realization of church fellowship that the confession which is binding for the life, doctrine and community of the church should become the special focus of our common attention and study.

II.

- (10) The *express purpose of the Augsburg Confession* is to bear witness to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Its

concern is not with peculiar doctrines nor indeed with the establishment of a new Church (CA 7,1), but with the preservation and renewal of the Christian faith in its purity in harmony with the Ancient Church, and “the Church of Rome,” and in agreement with the witness of Holy Scripture.³ This explicit intention of the *Confessio Augustana* is also still important for our understanding of the later Lutheran confessional documents.

- (11) Joint studies, by Catholic and Lutheran theologians⁴ have shown that *the contents of the statements of the Augsburg Confession* in large measure fulfill this intention and to this extent can be regarded as an expression of the common faith.
- (12) This conclusion is reinforced by a whole series of recent studies and researches in a wide variety of disciplines, including a number of joint studies:
- Biblical and patristic studies have made us aware of the richness of our common Christian heritage; we are now better placed to judge the extent to which the arguments adduced from Scripture and tradition in the controversies of the 16th century were valid or are now in need of correction.
 - Historical studies have thrown new light on conditions in church, society and economics at the time of the Reformation, showing us the extent to which political and economic factors also contributed to estrangement and division.
 - Research into doctrinal history in the Middle Ages, the Reformation and, above all, the *Confutatio* — a refutation of the *Confessio Augustana*, composed at the Emperor’s request — and the Augsburg union negotiations of 1530, has produced insights favorable to a more objective view of earlier controversies, to a defusing of mutual condemnations, and to a new evaluation of unions already achieved at that time.
- (13) Against the background of these studies and

² The official Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue in the U.S.A.: *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue I-III*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965; *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV: Eucharist and Ministry*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, Washington, D.C., and the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and interreligious Affairs, New York, 1970; *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V: Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974; *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI: Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*, ed. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, 1980. The official world level Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue: Report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission: “The Gospel and the Church” (Malta Report), *Lutheran World*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, 1972; Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission: *The Eucharist*, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1980.

³ Cf. the conclusion of Part I of the *Confessio Augustana*, Book of Concord, p. 47.

⁴ Cf. *Confessio Augustana — Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens. Gemeinsame Untersuchung katholischer und lutherischer Theologen*, ed. H. Meyer and H. Schutte in collaboration with E. Iserloh, W. Kasper, G. Kretschmar, W. Lohff, G. W. Forell, J. McCue, Frankfurt/Paderborn, 1980.

researches, we are able to appeal to the Augsburg Confession when we say:

- Together we confess the faith in the Triune God and the saving work of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, which binds all Christendom together. (CA 1&3.) Through all the disputes and differences of the 16th century, Lutheran and Catholic Christians remained one in this central and most important truth of the Christian faith.
- (14) — A broad consensus emerges in the doctrine of justification, which was decisively important for the Reformation (CA 4): it is solely by grace and by faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit in us that we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit who renews our hearts and equips us for and calls us to good works.
- (15) — Together we testify that the salvation accomplished by Christ in his death and resurrection is bestowed on and effectively appropriated by humanity in the proclamation of the gospel and in the holy sacraments through the Holy Spirit (CA 5)
- (16) — A basic if still incomplete accord is also registered today even in our understanding of the church, where *there were serious controversies between us in the past*. By church we mean the community of those whom God gathers together through Christ in the Holy Spirit, by the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments, and the ministry instituted by him for this purpose. Though it always includes sinners, yet in virtue of the promise and fidelity of God it is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church which is to continue forever (CA 7&8.)
- (17) Reflecting on the Augsburg Confession, therefore, Catholics and Lutherans have discovered that they have a common mind on basic doctrinal truths which points to Jesus Christ, the living center of our faith.
- (18) This basic consensus also comes out in and is confirmed by the documents of the official Catholic/Lutheran dialogue today:
 - the joint statements on the relation between gospel and church;^{5 6}
 - a broad common understanding of the Eucharist;⁷
 - the agreement that a special ministerial office conferred by ordination is constitutive for the church and does not belong to those elements which the Augsburg Confession denotes as “not necessary.”⁸
- (19) Of the *second part of the Augsburg Confession* in which a sometimes severe polemical position was adopted in opposition to contemporary abuses in the church, it must be said that changes have come about in the life and judgment of our churches that essentially remove the grounds for the sharp criticism expressed in the Augsburg Confession. Important doctrinal questions are also touched on in this second part. Although certain problems still require to be clarified, a broad consensus has also been achieved even in doctrines broached in this second part.
- (20) — In respect of the Mass (CA 22&24), this transformation in doctrine and practice has been demonstrated above all by our dialogue on the Lord's Supper. We still have different emphases, questions to put to one another, and common tasks.⁹ But all these are encompassed by a profound accord in our witness to the Lord's Supper and to a large extent also in respect to its liturgical celebration.¹⁰
- (21) — As far as monasticism and the life of the religious orders are concerned, in view of the now prevailing understanding and practice of the monastic life in the Roman Catholic Church, it is impossible to continue to maintain the severe condemnation of them in the Augsburg Confession.¹¹ Both theologically and practically,¹² monastic forms of common life are a legitimate option for Catholics and Lutherans wishing to commit themselves to practicing the Gospel in this dedicated form, even though, at the present stage in the dialogue, certain details of interpretation still remain open, even within Lutheranism.
- (22) — As far as the question of the episcopal office is concerned, here again it has to be noted that, in accord with the historic church, the *Confessio Augustana* specifically affirms

⁵ CA 4,6 and 20; cf. Malta Report, Nos. 26 and 48.

⁶ Cf. Malta Report, Nos. 18ff. and 47ff.

⁷ Cf. *The Eucharist*.

⁸ CA 7; cf. Malta Report, Nos. 47ff.

⁹ Cf. *The Eucharist*, Nos. 46-76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Nos. 1-45; cf. the appendix on “The Liturgical Celebration of the Eucharist.”

¹¹ Cf. above all Vatican II, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life (“*Perfectae caritatis*”).

¹² Cf. the phenomenon of Protestant communes and communities resembling monastic orders.

its desire to maintain the episcopal structure. The assumption here was that the true proclamation of the gospel is helped and not hindered by this office. The *Confessio Augustana* affirms a ministry of unity and leadership — set over the local ministers — (CA 28), as *essential for the church*, therefore, even if the actual form to be given to this ministerial office remains open.

- (23) Honesty in our dialogue on the Augsburg Confession also compels us to admit that there are still *open questions and unresolved problems*, among them the following:

— The *Confessio Augustana* does not adopt a position on the number of the sacraments, the papacy, or on certain aspects of the episcopal order and the church's teaching office.

— The *Confessio Augustana* naturally makes no mention of dogmas which have only been promulgated since 1530: the primacy of jurisdiction and the infallibility of the Pope (1870); the gracious preservation of the Virgin Mary from original sin (1854) and her bodily assumption into heaven (1950).

- (24) These questions will have to be considered in the future dialogue. We shall also have to examine the question of the weight to be given to the differences and open questions which still remain even as our churches move closer to one another, as well as the further question of the significance of the fact that some of these differences only acquired their sharpened contemporary form in recent centuries.

- (25) Our newly discovered agreement in central Christian truths gives good ground for the hope that in the light of this basic consensus answers will also be forthcoming to the still unsettled questions and problems, answers which will achieve the degree of unanimity

required if our churches are to make a decisive advance from their present state of division to that of sister churches.

- (26) The Second Vatican Council summoned Catholics to “joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage” which are found among Christians of other churches.¹³ That both Catholics and Lutherans have made a considerable advance along this road by their joint study of the Augsburg Confession is ground for *joy and thanksgiving*.

III.

- (27) The common faith which we have discovered in the Augsburg Confession can also help us to confess this faith anew in our own times. This is the commission laid upon our churches by the ascended Lord and it is what we owe to the world and to humanity. This is also in harmony with the intention of the Augsburg Confession, concerned as it was in its time not only to maintain the unity of the church but also at the same time to witness to the truth of the gospel in its own time and its own world.

- (28) Faced as we are with new questions, challenges and opportunities in our world today, we cannot rest content with simply repeating and referring back to the confession of 1530. What we have rediscovered as an expression of our common faith cries out for fresh articulation. It points the way to a confession of our faith here and now, with Catholics and Lutherans no longer divided and in opposition to each other but bearing witness together to the message of the world's salvation in Jesus Christ and proclaiming this message as a renewed offer of the divine grace today.

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¹³ Cf. Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism (“*Unitatis redintegratio*”), No. 4.