

Response of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
Commission on Theology and Church Relations to
*Final Report of the Theological Conversations between the Churches Associated with the
International Lutheran Council and the Roman Catholic Church*
(International Lutheran Council and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity [2021]).

Introduction

A bilateral working group of representatives from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the International Lutheran Council (ILC) met four times in conversations over a span of five years (2014-2019). The genesis of these conversations, or this “informal dialogue,” lies in the recognition that because prior Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues had involved interactions only between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), significant Lutheran voices were thereby excluded from those earlier conversations. That is, most of the more theologically traditional Lutheran church bodies do not hold membership in LWF and even those that were members had no significant role to play in LWF—RCC discussions. Most of the theologically conservative Lutheran churches are, however, members of the International Lutheran Council. The ILC is a worldwide association of churches that maintain a high view of Scripture as inspired and infallible and hold strictly to the entire *Book of Concord* as an authoritative exposition of the teachings of Holy Scripture. In order to gain an appreciation of the teaching and priorities of these churches, discussions between the PCPCU and ILC began.

The group’s *Final Report of the Theological Conversations between the Churches Associated with the International Lutheran Council and the Roman Catholic Church (Final Report or Report)* included two Addenda clarifying the position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) on ordination.¹ Subsequent to the publication of the *Final Report*, the churches of the ILC were invited to submit responses. The LCMS was among the churches invited to respond. The request for a response was unfortunately unnoticed during the pressures and confusion brought on by COVID-19 and only recently recalled to the attention of LCMS leadership. President Matthew C. Harrison then asked the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations to prepare the response that follows.²

I. *Preamble*

a. Review and questions

The *Final Report* frames the conversations around a concept of catholicity. The first “ecumenical task” is “to determine (more) precisely the intersection between a Concordia-Lutheran and a Reform-Catholic catholicity.” That is, “the Lutheran documents” are to be re-examined in light of “their original intention to confess the Catholic faith and the history of their reception in

¹ The LCMS is the single largest member of the ILC.

² President Harrison promised a CTCR response on behalf of the LCMS in a February 25, 2024 email to Bishop Juhana Pohjola, Chairman of the International Lutheran Council. In the same email Dr. Harrison expressed his thankfulness for the conversations and his support for the efforts of the participants.

the era of confessionalisation.”³ The intention of the Augsburg Confession (AC) is understood to be both an explanation of Wittenberg reforms and also a confirmation of “the foundational Catholic consensus” present in its opening articles. Thus the AC is viewed first in an “inner-Catholic context.”⁴

We note here that “Catholic” in these first paragraphs of the Preamble is exclusively upper-case. We are not certain about the significance of the capitalization, but assume that the upper case usage indicates the papal Roman Catholic Church and not what Lutherans would understand as “the church catholic.” If that is the case, then some of the initial claims of the Preamble may be questioned. Is it true that the first goal of the AC is to claim alignment of the Wittenberg reforms with the teachings of the Roman Church? On the contrary, we would hold that the claims of the AC are broader from the outset. The AC is setting forth the truth of Scripture above all else. And, with regard to catholicity, the view of catholic goes beyond the Roman church. After all, Melancthon buttresses the AC claims based on Nicaea (AC I), rejection of Pelagius (AC II), affirmation of the Apostles’ Creed (AC III), and calls on the Fathers to support teachings on faith (AC IV, V, VI). This is not to say that the Augustana sees itself as confessing something contrary to Rome, but its chief concerns are to be faithful to Scripture and to the universal (catholic) church. Therefore Melancthon writes: “Since, then, this teaching is clearly grounded in Holy Scripture and is, moreover, neither against nor contrary to the universal Christian church—or even the Roman church—so far as can be observed in the writings of the Fathers, we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above.”⁵

Clarification of this matter would be helpful since it is obviously germane to the stated “ecumenical task” as defined in the first sentence of the Preamble. An assumption that the first goal of the Confessors at Augsburg was an alignment with Roman *teaching* as the ongoing standard of catholicity is simply incorrect. At the same time, the desire for maintaining unity in the whole church is explicit: “Inasmuch as we are all enlisted under one Christ, we are all to live together in one communion and one church.”⁶

b. Affirmation

Our question about the term “Catholic” (or “catholic”) should not be misunderstood as anything other than an encouragement to continue the kinds of discussion as reported in this document. As the CTCR stated in a 2011 statement:

The first objective of the LCMS in our Constitution is to “work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism, and heresy.” This objective points in two directions—“toward fellowship” and away from “schism, sectarianism, and heresy.”

³ *Final Report* coins the terms “Reform-Catholic” and “Concordia-Lutheran” to describe respectively “the early and late 16th-century forms of the Lutheran movement.”

⁴ *Final Report*, Preamble, 1.2, p. 1.

⁵ AC [Conclusion of Part One], 1, KW, 58.

⁶ AC, Preface, 4, German, KW, 30.

While conversations with a non-Lutheran church body are less likely to result in altar and pulpit fellowship than those with a like-minded Lutheran church body, they may nevertheless help to provide a defense against sectarianism since the talks can reveal and emphasize areas that the LCMS and that church body hold in common. A shared confession of the creeds, for example, stands as an important testimony against many forms of heresy, even if it does not result in the full agreement necessary for altar and pulpit fellowship.⁷

We appreciate the changing circumstances of the reformers in the period after Augsburg. We therefore find helpful the distinction between “confessorial” and “confessional” catholicity.⁸ It is important that the *Final Report* traces the increasing reality of disjunction between the theology and practice of Wittenberg and “those theologians faithful to Rome and the Pope, but also in contrast to the movements on the ‘left wing’ of the Reformation.”⁹ The *Report* helpfully summarizes the theological movement from the earliest context of the AC to the later historical period in which the *Book of Concord* (1580) is published.¹⁰

Of similar value is the discussion of the distinctive “normative structures” of Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Here the claims of catholicity that are replete in the theology of the *Book of Concord* must be recognized.¹¹ Thus the Preamble concludes by emphasizing the “enduring theological significance [of] the intentional catholicity implicit in the normative structure that is decisive for both Lutherans and Catholics.”¹²

Consequently, we rejoice in the conversations between representatives of the ILC and the Roman Catholic Church. Even as President Harrison expressed his desire “to further the relationship between the ILC and the PCPCU,”¹³ we too strongly affirm the importance of the ecumenical work represented by the *Final Report* and urge continuing conversations between both groups.

II. *Mass as Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet*

a. Review and questions

In the section titled **1. What We Perceive**, the ILC-PCPCU representatives affirm certain conclusions of previous Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues, even though ILC member churches played no role in those dialogues. These positive acknowledgements include the joint recognition that the sacrifice of Jesus is once-for-all “and can be neither continued, nor repeated, nor

⁷ “Theological Dialogue with Other Christian Church Bodies,” September 17, 2011, document link is at <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/F44DF93E-1ADB-45DB-ABDC-D128581EEA15>.

⁸ See *Final Report*, Preamble, 1.3 and accompanying footnote on p. 1. The footnote indicates that “confessorial” is a translation of the German *konfessorisch* and reflects “a strong profession of faith within the bounds of churchly communion, by way of contrast with *konfessionell*” “confessional,” which carries with it the sense of a profession of faith that results from or issues in a breach of church fellowship.” Since the AC was drafted prior to Roman condemnations of Wittenberg’s theology and the subsequent excommunications, the *Final Report* applies “confessorial” to the AC.

⁹ *Final Report*, Preamble, 2.4, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Final Report*, Preamble, 2.2-2.7, pp. 2-5.

¹¹ See especially *Final Report*, Preamble, 3.1-3.4, pp. 5-7.

¹² *Final Report*, Preamble, 4., p. 9.

¹³ See letter from Matthew C. Harrison, in Appendix I of the *Final Report*, p. 23.

replaced, nor complemented.” However, the sacrifice “should become effective ever anew.” In addition, “the real and essential presence of Christ’s body and blood in the consecrated elements” is confessed together with some common understandings of the vocabulary of the Lord’s Supper. Also, a *synergeia* (intertwining of human and divine action) is affirmed as a way to express “God’s action” “through created means” namely, “men who proclaim his gospel and administer his sacraments.” However, given the long history of Lutheran opposition to all theological synergism,¹⁴ we would like to see further discussion of this particular topic in future meetings. Lastly, “the central importance of the Words of Institution” is affirmed.¹⁵

Section 2. is titled **What Is Important**. One may summarize the view therein in this statement from the *Final Report*:

The interrelation between theological reflection and liturgical action helps to explain why central points of controversy were especially connected with the doctrine and the celebration of this sacrament. Conversely, this connection can lead to a resolution of the fundamental differences related to it by articulating common grounds and commonalities.¹⁶

The identification of the relationship between doctrine and liturgy is both important and necessary. And we note with appreciation that the report’s discussion of The Mass as Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet speaks of a “relecture” or re-examination of both the Lutheran confessions *and* the decisions of Trent.¹⁷ But we question § 2.2.2’s framing of the unresolved relationship between Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass on page 10 as a simply disingenuous claim. Moreover, while we agree with the stress on responsible liturgical language, we are not entirely comfortable with the statement: “Dogmatic language in the abstraction of its way of speaking must not prevent legitimate varieties of liturgical expression.”¹⁸ The concern would be in the question of “legitimate varieties of liturgical expression.” How does one define a legitimate versus an illegitimate expression? It seems to us that dogma is the critical—and indeed, the only— authoritative arbiter for such a question. We do not understand how dogmatic and liturgical language can really be equivalent. Dogma—doctrine—a church’s confession of faith—stands above liturgical expression.

Given this concern, we appreciate the move of the *Final Report* from **2. What Is Important** to a consideration of **3.1 Systematic-Theological Affirmations** as it begins section 3. **Commonalities**.¹⁹ We also appreciate the quotation from the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration that is added to § 3.1.1 and its emphasis on the “entire action” of the Sacrament from the consecration of the elements by the Word through distribution and reception. And we welcome the joint affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s work in and through “created, earthly means”

¹⁴ One might argue that confessional Lutherans have represented a decidedly intentional “one-sided” view, in contrast with the statement in the *Final Report* that “the concrete liturgical action must guard the theological thinking from becoming one-sided.” “Mass as Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 1.4, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Final Report*, Mass as Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 1.1-1.6, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 2.1, p. 10.

¹⁷ The two previous references to the re-examination or relecture referred only to re-examination of Lutheran positions (Preamble, 1.1, p. 1; Preamble, 1.4, p. 2).

¹⁸ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 2.3.2, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.1, p. 10.

in 3.1.2 as well as the connective unity between Christ's sacrificial death and the Sacrament of the Altar (3.1.3).

However, some terminology and emphases in section **3. Commonalities** give pause. Here we mention the *Final Report*'s rather nebulous claim that there is a "way of proclaiming the unity of the sacrifice on the cross and the Eucharistic sacrifice."²⁰ Perhaps a more accurate description might indicate that both sides find *ways* to proclaim both the sacrifice on the cross and a Eucharistic sacrifice. Even that more modest claim, however, should acknowledge the fact that the term sacrifice in the context of the Lord's Supper is jealously restricted in the Lutheran confessions.²¹ This restriction is, of course, for the sake of opposing the teaching of the sacrifice of the Mass and the view that the Lord's Supper itself is an atoning sacrifice in any sense whatsoever. As a result, Melancthon refers only to the reality that a sacrifice of *praise* occurs as one rejoices in the gift of Christ in the Lord's Supper. And the Apology uses the term "eucharistic sacrifice" for practices that have no direct connection to the Sacrament of the Altar.²² So, the claim that both sides link the cross of Christ with his holy Supper is valid, but is it not also necessary to acknowledge more openly the fact that each side links them in significantly different ways?²³ The matter of the unity between the cross and the Sacrament deserves continuing conversation, as the *Final Report* indicates in **4. Open Questions**.

We can affirm the important "commonalities" identified in 3.1.4 through 3.1.6, but we would like there to be further clarification. The discussion of remembrance is helpful, but there is a question of order: that is, does our remembrance come in response to the gift of Christ's body and blood for us to eat and drink? Or, does our act of remembrance make Christ's body and blood present to be distributed and received?²⁴

The brief characterization of *ex opere operato* again gives pause (§ 3.1.7). The conditional characterization of that controversial term to mean only that there is an objective reality in the Sacrament, while unobjectionable, does not deal adequately (in our view) with the reality of the concerns raised by Reformers.²⁵

Our consideration of **3.2 Liturgical-Theological Affirmation** is colored by the concerns expressed in our comments on the preceding **Systematic-Theological Affirmations**. The affirmation here appears in great measure to be a defense for the notion that, in some sense, the priest offers an atoning sacrifice to God. However, the claim is carefully stated and underpinned by saying that "divine action is theologically primary and the human action is secondary."²⁶ Moreover, the *Report* adds that the Epiclesis for Rome understands that the Church's action depends on the Spirit's action.

²⁰ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.1.3, p. 11.

²¹ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.1.3, p. 11. AC XXIV, 25, 30, KW 70 and Ap XXIV, 22, KW 261. See also SA II, 2., 1, KW 301; FC SD VII. 83, KW 607.

²² Ap, XXIV, 25, KW 262.

²³ We note the language of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) at §1367, which says "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*," affirming the doctrine of Trent. CCC, 2nd ed. §1367 (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), p. 344.

²⁴ The *Final Report*, seems to imply the latter view. Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.1.5, p. 11.

²⁵ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.1.7, p. 11. See e.g. AC XXIV, 29, KW 70; 259, 11-12.

²⁶ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.2.4, p. 12.

As the *Report* moves on to section **3.3 The Sacramental Presence of Christ's Sacrifice in the Eucharist**, we are especially grateful for the note in § 3.3.2 about the absence of any language in the Lutheran Confessions "about a presence of the sacrifice of Christ in the Lord's Supper." It is true that some liturgies used in some confessional Lutheran churches have indicated something along these lines.²⁷ At the same time, as confessional Lutherans, we dispute that such language adequately represents Lutheran theology. This matter is therefore of vital importance to us and we hope it is explored more fully as part of the discussion of representation as one of the open questions.²⁸

With regard to section **4. Open Questions**, we believe the points are generally well-stated and identify many of the uncertainties and clarifications noted in our comments in this section. They are well-balanced and inclusive of both Roman Catholic and confessional Lutheran concerns.²⁹

Section **5. Intermediary Results: We have discovered**, helpfully distinguishes the terms "consensus" and "convergences."

b. Affirmation

Our preceding "Review and Questions" should indicate two things. First, we recognize the value of the work of the ILC and PCPCU participants and give thanks to God for the many important points of agreement the discussions uncovered. Second, precisely because of the importance of such conversations, we pray that there will be continued discussion of the theology and practice of the Sacrament of the Altar between confessional Lutheran and Roman Catholic representatives.

LCMS teaching on the Lord's Supper is, in some ways, rather simple. For example, the LCMS CTCR published a report titled *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (1983) that briefly emphasizes the central teachings of Holy Scripture on the Sacrament as those teachings are explained in the *Book of Concord*. (1) "The Lord's Supper offers and conveys forgiveness of sins." (2) "The Lord's Supper offers the truly present body and blood of Christ." (3) "The Lord's Supper strengthens faith." (4) "The Lord's Supper imparts power for Christian living." (5) "The Lord's Supper is an act of thankful adoration." And (6) "The Lord's Supper is a celebration of Christian fellowship."³⁰

Given such a simple characterization, one can see why we appreciate the work encapsulated in the *Final Report*. The "Commonalities" identified in the report are substantial and they indicate important elements of agreement. At the same time, there is more work to be done with regard to the Sacrament and the CTCR strongly encourages continuing discussions.

III. Justification by Faith

²⁷ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 3.3.2, p. 12.

²⁸ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 4.8, p. 14.

²⁹ *Final Report*, Eucharistic Sacrificial Banquet, 4.1 to 4.8, pp. 13-14.

³⁰ The report is available for download at <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/716DCFC2-0F4B-45C5-A250-065A446F3E83>.

a. Review and Questions

In section three of the *Final Report* the representatives share the results of their discussions concerning the doctrine of justification by faith alone. *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ), issued by LWF and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999, plays a pivotal role in the conclusions of the participants. The *Final Report* acknowledges “statements” and “reservations” from ILC churches,³¹ but declares that there have been “valuable rapprochements between the two parties involved.”³²

We are unclear about the point of reference intended by the term “valuable rapprochements.” Does this mean that the *Final Report* authors have fewer reservations about JDDJ than the ILC churches had earlier identified in their past reactions to JDDJ? The ensuing paragraphs in the *Final Report* seem to suggest such a perspective.

Rome is said to have adopted a different “orientation” regarding justification in Vatican II.³³ So, for Vatican II, “Obedience and faith are parallel, not prior to the message of faith, but to faith’s enactment.”³⁴ The authors note that the “*sola gratia* is supplemented by the *sola fide*” for the first time in Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues.³⁵ They add that “the critical function of the doctrine of justification is upheld.”³⁶

These points, in paragraphs 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5 raise questions for us. Is the changed orientation as described anything more than an increasing inclusion of faith terminology with regard to justification? Is not the connection of obedience and faith continued evidence of a transformative rather than a declarative understanding of justification? If so, to what degree is that a rapprochement? Does *sola fide* merely supplement a right understanding of *sola gratia*, or is it in fact absolutely necessary for a right view? Lastly, while we welcome language about “the critical function of justification” for all doctrine, we also find the language to be less than precise. We recall the textual change in justification as “criterion” between the 1996 draft of JDDJ and the final draft—a change from justification as the paramount criterion to justification as “an indispensable criterion.” In light of that, what does it mean to speak of “the critical function of justification”?³⁷

Regarding section 1.6, we are also pleased that the matter of “reward is being dealt with.” The bullet points are, in our judgment, examples of JDDJ’s achievements, especially since the *Final Report* modestly refers only to “a certain consensus.” We too see movement toward a greater understanding of the differing historic teachings of Rome and Wittenberg.

³¹ The *Final Report*, footnote 23, references the LCMS seminary responses which were published by the CTCR in 1999 with a summary and study guide.

³² The *Final Report*, *Sola Fides Numquam Sola—Justification by Faith (Sola Fides)*, 1.1, p. 14. For the response of the LCMS see The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (1999), <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/90BD9722-8E11-4DCF-96D3-869B579EC336>.

³³ *Final Report*, *Sola Fides*, 1.2, p. 14.

³⁴ *Final Report*, *Sola Fides*, 1.3, p. 15.

³⁵ *Final Report*, *Sola Fides*, 1.4, p. 15.

³⁶ *Final Report*, *Sola Fides*, 1.5, p. 15.

³⁷ On the textual change that Rome required, see The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (1999), pp. 16-17.

Sections 1.7 through 1.10 move the discussion away from dogma to “the liturgical and sacramental dimension.”³⁸ We note that these paragraphs no longer reference JDDJ, but instead rely entirely on references from the *Book of Concord*. The connection between justification and baptism was already introduced in section 1.6, but in § 1.8 the *Final Report* emphasizes the language in the Latin text of AC IV that those justified through faith “believe that they are received into grace.”³⁹ The *Final Report* notes this as significant, but does not indicate why. Is it understood to be consistent with a more Roman Catholic understanding of grace? What Lutherans mean is that by faith alone without works we are justified, i.e., declared righteous for Christ’s sake and made heirs of heaven.⁴⁰

We find these liturgical-sacramental paragraphs about baptism, absolution, and preaching to be helpful, but not in contrast with dogmatic language. Rather, they illumine the dogmatic truth emphasized in the biblical doctrine of justification: that God manifests his righteousness solely “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:22). Even as justification means that God “reckons” or “counts” faith as righteousness (Romans 4:3-5), so also it is enacted only as the gospel of forgiveness is made known in word and sign, promising the one who “believes in him who justifies the ungodly,” that “his faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:5).

We find the discussion of “**What Is Important for Our Dialogue between the ILC and the PCPCU**” to be very helpful.⁴¹ The centrality of justification for understanding the Gospel is affirmed, as is the recognition that Vatican II has enabled “a spirit of fraternal dialogue, not polemical exchange.”⁴² And we commend the *Final Report* for its frank admission that “mutual congruence” is not possible given the differing understanding of terms between the two sides.⁴³ Paragraphs 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6 then expand on the terminological distinction in discussing the all-important term “faith.” There are certainly points of agreement and the different views are better understood now, yet the critical difference remains over whether faith alone justifies.

We also find section **3. Commonalities**, to be generally helpful in terms of the stated items.⁴⁴ That only Christ is “righteous and holy” (§ 3.1) and so only he can sanctify the church is a vital truth. But we miss any discussion of how that relates to Roman teachings on the cult of the saints. The discussion of Justification by Faith in § 3.2 rightly points out convergences, and notes that the language of faith alone (*sola fide*) was “finally” affirmed in JDDJ’s Annex and by Benedict XVI. It also, in our opinion, modestly claims no more than that the formula “*may* no longer be the storm centre” (emphasis added). (This judgment must be considered alongside the comments in the preceding paragraphs on faith in 2.4-2.6.).

We are displeased with the title of 3.3, **Faith Becomes Effective through Love**, together with the particular sentence, “Faith precedes love; in love does faith become effective.” The Lutheran

³⁸ *Final Report, Sola Fides*, 1.7, p. 16.

³⁹ *Final Report, Sola Fides*, 1.8, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Kolb-Wengert understands that “*in gratiam recipe*” is using grace to mean “divine favor.” Kolb-Wengert, AC IV, Latin Text, footnote 52, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Final Report, Sola Fides*, 2., p. 17.

⁴² *Final Report, What Is Important*, 2.1, 2.2, p. 17.

⁴³ *Final Report, What Is Important*, 2.3, p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Final Report, Commonalities*, sections 3.1 through 3.7, pp. 17-20.

stress on justification by faith *alone*, full stop, must be preserved. Lutheran theology forthrightly declares that justification means to be declared righteous by God for Christ's sake (Ap IV, 72). It indicates that faith's primary effect must be seen apart from any emphasis on our love or our sanctification because faith *effectively* receives what it is promised: the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake. We understand that the main point of this section is that for both sides faith never remains alone (*sola fides numquam sola*). So also, faith is never divorced from sanctification.⁴⁵

Similarly, as the *Final Report* goes further into **3.4 Shared Aspects of Justification**, we appreciate the concern to emphasize the levels at which participants found agreement. Here the main point of agreement is that for both sides justification requires a faith that is dependent on grace as mediated by the church where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. And, again, that such faith is never alone—never without works.

Thus the *Report* argues that the Council of Trent and *Book of Concord* are closer than “previously supposed.” If there are indeed such “closer affinities,” does that judgment give proper recognition to the discontinuity that remains? As “Concordia Lutherans” we would never reject the teaching of sanctification or that faith is active in love. Yet, the Lutheran confessors were always also wary about any emphasis on sanctification that called into question the chief article—that justification is by faith *alone*.

Therefore, even if the converted and believers have the beginnings of renewal, sanctification, love, virtues, and good works, yet these cannot, should not, and must not be introduced or mixed with the article of justification before God, so that the proper honor may continue to be accorded our Redeemer Christ and (because our new obedience is imperfect and impure) so that the consciences under attack may have a reliable comfort.⁴⁶

Section “3.5 Cooperation?”—human cooperation in justification—is appropriately stated as a question. The *Report* indicates that Rome would answer with an unambiguous affirmative, insisting on “man's personal consent” to justification, even if such “consent to God's will” is not by human power (left unsaid is the assumption of infused grace). Lutherans, however, can only speak of cooperation as something that occurs *after* God's justification of sinners.

Another difference remains regarding **3.6 Certainty of Salvation**. The Lutheran side holds that the certainty of God's undeserved favor toward sinners results in the certainty of salvation. The Roman view claims only a certainty about God intending salvation.

The last portion of the discussion of justification in the *Final Report*, **4. Open Questions**, is a vital addendum to the previous discussions. We affirm the need for a discussion of eschatology (§ 4.1). We are particularly grateful for § 4.2's characterization of the different views on “Christian renewal.” Sections 4.3 and 4.4 are also helpful as clarifications.

b. Affirmation

⁴⁵ *Final Report*, Commonalities, section 3.3, p. 19.

⁴⁶ FC SD III, 34; KW 568.

The essential claim of JDDJ was the existence of “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ” (Preamble, § 4.). That is, past differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics do not overrule a present “consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification” (Preamble, § 5.). The response of the LCMS did not affirm such a consensus, finding that JDDJ adopted a transformational view of justification rather than the Lutheran understanding: that justification is God’s declaration of righteousness based on his utterly undeserved favor for fallen, un-transformed, sinners, on account of Christ and his merits alone.⁴⁷

We see a milder and more modest claim here in the *Final Report* that we can generally affirm. It argues that there is common ground on the doctrine justification as illustrated in sections 3.3 and 3.4 (**Faith Becomes Effective through Love Commonalities**). This common ground is most evident in the affirmation that faith never remains alone (*sola fides numquam sola*). However, what Lutherans mean is that sanctification always flows from faith, but is never its cause.

At the same time, we want to emphasize the points of disagreement that remain. And, contrary to JDDJ, the mutual condemnations of the 16th century remain as an ecumenical challenge because of the central question—Is justification solely on account of the undeserved favor of God received only by faith or is it finally dependent on a man’s transformation (the process of sanctification)?

However, we also hasten to add that such a frank assessment of the remaining differences is not a repudiation of these discussions between the ILC and the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it points to the value—indeed the necessity—of ongoing respectful conversations for the sake of the church catholic and her mission. Moreover, honest assessments are the only way that meaningful ecumenical progress can be envisioned.⁴⁸

IV. Conclusion

In our extensive review of the *Final Report* we have emphasized questions and points of concern—some of which may be viewed as disagreements with the conclusions of the discussion participants. For that reason we want to emphasize yet again our overall support for the ongoing conversations. Our response is intended to indicate our profound appreciation for the obviously cordial and respectful character of these conversations, our acknowledgment of important points of agreement and clarification, and our encouragement that such ecumenical meetings between ILC church representatives and Roman Catholics would continue.

With regard to further meetings, we gladly affirm section **IV. Ecumenical Tasks in the Horizon of Intentional Catholicity**. We also appreciate section **V. Ministry and Ordination—Addendum**. Given that the conversations surfaced a legitimate concern by an LCMS participant on the matter of ordination, we are grateful that the discussion process allowed for a further

⁴⁷ The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (1999), pp. 17-18. We also note a recent document that distinguishes the LCMS from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) *The LWF Today* (2024), especially pages 12-14.

⁴⁸ Please see the document cited earlier: “Theological Dialogue with Other Christian Church Bodies,” September 17, 2011, document link is at <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/F44DF93E-1ADB-45DB-ABDC-D128581EEA15>.

clarification of the LCMS understanding of ordination by including a letter from President Matthew C. Harrison and a document provided by the staff of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

In closing, we would suggest some additional topics for discussion. We encourage further meetings to consider the cult of saints and purgatory, especially in the context of ongoing discussions of the doctrine of justification. With regard to church and ministry, we hope the topics of apostolic succession, the ordination of women, and the papacy as well as the priesthood of all believers might be given attention. In addition, we think a thorough discussion and comparison of views on the doctrine of the church is of great importance. And, lastly, we believe that attention to moral teachings and social issues would be a particularly beneficial discussion and may be an encouragement for confessional Lutherans and Roman Catholics to cooperate in these areas.

Thank you for inviting our response. And thank you for your patience and understanding given the length of time between your request and this response.

Adopted
Commission on Theology and Church Relations
October 4, 2024