

Response to the Lecture of Walter Cardinal Kasper  
Conference of Bishops  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

I begin with a word of thanks to our Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson for his vision and hospitality in inviting Cardinal Kasper to be with us. This is a gift to all of us.

On behalf of myself and my colleagues in this conference, I again welcome you into our midst, Cardinal Kasper. You are a gift to the church and to us. I ask that you extend to Pope John Paul II our warmest greetings in Christ.

When you referred to the signing of the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” you stated that “the event itself was an ecclesiological one.” I want to begin my remarks and response with a story that, for me, has been that truth. October 31, 1999, was a warm day in Augsburg, in more ways than one. We began our time together in the Cathedral of the town where we prayed, sang, and worshipped. We then joined together to process behind the sign of the cross through the streets of the town. As you noted in your remarks, we were welcomed by many residents of Augsburg, young and old. We also were leafleted by both Roman Catholic and Evangelical protesters who objected to the signing of the “Joint Declaration.”

We followed the cross to St. Anna’s Church where we took our assigned seats. Again, we heard music and Scripture, listened to presentations and homilies, remembered our baptism into Christ and prayed. Then the time came for the signing of the document. As the ceremony began, the choir sang Durufle’s “Variation on Veni Creator.” The first signers went to the table and signed the document. Then Dr. Ishmael Noko and Cardinal Kasper went to the table. They signed the document, put their pens down and then warmly embraced each other. What had been a highly charged and emotional day to that point now moved to a new level of excitement and emotion and I, along with most in the room, could no longer contain myself. The tears of joy just flowed.

At the reception that followed, I visited with Dr. Noko and told him how moving that mutual embrace was. He told me, “When we rehearsed, they told us to go to the table, sit down, take our pens, sign the document and return to our seats. But when Bishop Kasper and I saw each other, we could not help ourselves.”

That phrase, “we could not help ourselves,” has become the rubric for me through which I continue to see and understand the ongoing work of reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics.

As you took us back forty or fifty years to the beginning of this endeavor, I was reminded that these early ecumenists faced challenges far more daunting than we face today. They had little, except hostility and condemnations, formal and informal, on which to build and begin their work, but “they could not help themselves” as they began talks and dialogues that eventuated in “*JDDJ*.” Healing the breach of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the primary ecumenical task and the focus of attention and study. All other

ecumenical work is a variation on the theme of this continuing melody of healing the breach of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We have received the truth that while we each are the body of Christ, the fullness of that body will not be experienced or proclaimed until we are reconciled.

We are pastors of the church and cannot help ourselves when we again and again experience the faithful who in their marriages are divided at the table. Lutheran wives and Catholic husbands who share everything in common except their deepest communion with their Lord causes us as pastors of the church to see the urgency in this task of reunion at the table. We are pastors and cannot help ourselves when we see the faithful separated this way.

As you rightly point out, we have made great progress, but there is much more to do as we seek reunion at the table of the Lord. My grandmother was a most devout and pious Lutheran woman. Her daughter, my aunt, married a Catholic man. My grandmother loved him dearly and they were very close, although whenever my grandmother spoke of his religion, she either would speak in German or could not say the word (Catholic). As a boy I can remember her talking about my Uncle Richard, who she would remind us “was -----.” I did not know what that meant, but now I see that we have made great progress from that generation and can at least acknowledge each others’ faith.

We cannot help ourselves in re-thinking the impact and proclamation of the doctrine of justification in light of your critique of the two ways of receiving and proclaiming it: as declaration for Lutherans and the effective power of grace that transforms us and makes us righteous for Catholics. Your reminder to us that Luther’s question and deep yearning to find a merciful God is not the question that people ask today. For us (Lutherans) we must acknowledge that truth and either assume the posture that says, “well, they should be asking that question” or go deeper into the doctrine with the help of ecumenical partners to see where and in what way that doctrine does speak to people in this generation. I would argue for the latter since we can already see some of the fruits of that work.

We cannot help ourselves in rejoicing over the method of differentiated consensus that *JDDJ* has taught us. Writing a statement of common conviction and then each party writing its own commentary or midrash on that text is a marvelous way to do theological dialogue and writing and find consensus. I think that not only is this a way to do ecumenical work but also will guide us in dealing with any conflicts that arise in the life of the church.

We cannot help ourselves in addressing the future tasks, daunting as they may seem. For the same reason that our forebears worked toward *JDDJ* against great odds, so we today must make our contribution to healing the breach of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In your paper, you stated that we must not always seek only convergence as much as conversion in this task. Conversion is confession, forgiveness and renewal of the heart.

I ask your patience in the face of my boldness to make this modest proposal to the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the President of the Lutheran World Federation. In our journey to whatever 2017 will bring is it possible for us to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *JDDJ* in 2009 in the following way? Can our communions engage each other in the work of conversion (confession, forgiveness and renewal of the heart) either by using materials that are jointly prepared by the Vatican and LWF or using materials that are already in use in parishes and congregations, synods, dioceses, and other expressions of our Churches? Perhaps in that spiritual discernment, we will discern where and how the Spirit of Christ is leading us to the table. We must find a way to discern the Spirit's leading together and your concern for conversation is a message we must hear.

Finally, I want to again thank you, your eminence, for your presence with us. You took us to the cross of Christ where we began, continue, and end every journey of faith and for that we thank you.

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