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Reflections on the Australian Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on the Augsburg Confession

Roger Whittall

Introduction

In September last year, during an ecumenical prayer service at the Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Poland, the Vatican's chief ecumenist and the federation's general secretary formally called for a joint reflection on the *Augsburg Confession* [AC] in the lead up to the quincentenary of its signing in 2030. 'A common reflection could lead to another "milestone" on the way from conflict to communion', said Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Rev. Anne Burghardt, the federation's general secretary, as they read a 'Common Word' declaration to the assembly on 19 September.¹

While this is a significant declaration, it is by no means an unprecedented development in the recent history of Lutheran–Catholic relations. Already in 1980, Catholic and Lutheran theologians in Europe and America produced *Confessing One Faith*, as a joint commentary on AC for its 450th anniversary.² Among its conclusions, the study was able to state that the confession 'unites us far more than it separates us', at the same time as it pointed to areas in which further dialogue and discussion were required. Those areas included the role of Mary in the economy of salvation, and the papacy.³

In 2016, our dialogue in Australia also began to explore the possibility that a formal study of AC could be a significant step in our journey towards a new ecumenical reality involving our two churches. At the conclusion of the joint statement on *The Petrine Ministry*, the following Lutheran suggestion appears:

It would be helpful if the Roman Catholic Church could consider whether important teaching documents used and treasured by Lutherans, such as *The Small Catechism*, could be seen as legitimate and authoritative catechetical materials in a church in communion with Rome. Similarly, the Catholic Church could consider whether *The Augsburg Confession* could constitute a legitimate ongoing confession for Christians in communion with Rome.⁴

1 Reports from *Catholic News Service* and LWF website (19 Sep 2023).

2 *Confessing One Faith: A Joint Commentary on the Augsburg Confession by Lutheran and Catholic Theologians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1982). Translated from *Confessio Augustana: Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens* (Frankfurt: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 1980).

3 *Ibid.*, 334–38.

4 Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia, *The Petrine Ministry in a New Situation: A Joint Statement*

This suggestion was quickly taken up, and after preliminary discussions it was agreed to embark on the study of AC as the next task for the Australian dialogue—one that has now occupied us for eight years.

It should not be surprising that this foundational confessional document is seen as a valuable focus for ecumenical dialogue between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on both regional and international levels. AC was written to present the defence of the German churches who had embraced Luther's reformation to charges that they had departed from the foundations of the church catholic, introducing theological novelties into their teaching and practice. In its preface, AC echoes the words of Emperor Charles' summons to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, to assert a willingness to engage in a process of dialogue with the other German rulers and theologians. The preface states:

The desire was expressed for deliberation on what might be done about the dissension concerning our holy faith and the Christian religion, and to this end it was proposed to employ all diligence amicably and charitably to hear, understand, and weigh the judgments, opinions, and beliefs of the several parties among us to unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth, to put aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by either side, to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ.⁵

Clearly, in its origins AC was intended as a 'dialogue document', with a view to preserving the unity of the church. Approaching its contents in the same spirit, our Australian dialogue is moving towards the publication of our conclusions. However, this article does not pre-empt those findings, or suggest at this stage what their outcomes for our churches might be. Rather, it highlights important learnings from the process of dialogue itself, presented under the following headings.

1. The unique character of the current dialogue—its range, complexity, and longevity

The overall aims of the dialogue are broadly those stated above, to 'consider whether [AC] could constitute a legitimate ongoing confession for Christians in communion with Rome'. In many ways, this reflects the purposes of all ecumenical dialogue—to reach a mutual understanding of one another's theological positions, and to work towards common statements that reflect the emphases and concerns of both parties, in keeping with the broader context of the universal faith of the church. There is, however, a unique character to this dialogue, given that it is based on a document that is already a carefully articulated statement of the Christian faith, albeit in summary form. Dialogue usually

on the Papacy by the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia; 2011–2016 (Adelaide, 2016), 60.

5 Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, c1959), 24.

focuses on a single teaching or related issue ('justification by faith', 'authority in the church'). But in this case, there are twenty-eight articles to be considered, each with a specific emphasis at the same time as it stands in relationship to the other articles and to the evangelical theology of the confession as a whole. Probably we did not realise just how much work there would be—or its potential range and complexity—as in 2016 we began a task that still awaits completion in 2024!

2. A developed methodology—presentation, response, clarification, revised response

In part, the time taken also reflects the thorough-going demand for theological integrity with which the Australian Lutheran–Catholic dialogue has always approached its tasks from its beginnings in the mid-1970s. Each of its eight investigations has produced theological statements that reflect deeply considered theological thinking and discussion that reflects careful listening to alternative views. Difficult questions have rarely been side-stepped and facile answers are not offered. Where necessary, the received opinions of both churches have been challenged in the pursuit of truths consistent with biblical, historical, and confessional realities. To this end, our study of AC's teaching has developed its own methodology to reflect the task in hand, where it is the Catholic response to existing Lutheran teaching that is being sought, rather than an attempt to reach common statements that carry new expressions of established truths. So here our study of a particular article begins with the preparation of two papers, one from either 'side'. The Lutheran team presents its understanding of the article in context. This includes its historical setting and also its reception and application as a foundational confession for the LCA NZ today. At the same time, an initial Catholic response considers the article from a broad perspective, suggesting points of coherence or divergence from Catholic teaching and raising issues for group discussion or for clarification by the Lutheran team. After that discussion has taken place in the dialogical setting, a further joint paper is prepared that preserves the important elements of the initial presentations but then also explores the basis on which Catholics today can accept the article's teaching as a 'legitimate confession' of the faith. This new paper is discussed, revised, and then provisionally adopted with a view to inclusion in the dialogue's plenary statement.

3. Learnings for Lutherans along the way:

(a) We have found that this dialogue is challenging us to consider more deeply our own engagement with and use of AC. Looking back through all the reports and statements of this and similar ecumenical dialogues, it is notable how important AC is for the presentation of Lutheran teaching in our discussions with other Christians. It is most frequently quoted as the authoritative source for Lutheran teaching on specific topics and in particular circumstances. But these current discussions also require that we

consider AC as a coherent whole, and to debate among ourselves the relevance and application of all of its teaching in the life and witness of the church today. What does it mean when we say in our church constitution(s), that we accept AC as a ‘true exposition of the word of God’ and as our ‘own confession’, together with the other documents in the *Book of Concord*?

(b) One thing this has meant is that, in agreeing as Lutherans on AC’s confession of faith, article by article, we are also driven to look for the presence (or absence) of that teaching and confession in the life of the church today. To be consistent, this should take place within LCANZ’s teaching and preaching, its life and its practice, not just on a synodical level, or in discussions with other Christians churches, but also in the congregational context and in the mission of the church in the wider Australian community. Needless to say, that is not always a comfortable self-examination in which to participate!

(c) Without exploring this in detail, it can be said that particular areas of discussion and concern have arisen in relation to ordering of the church’s public ministry, the roles of her bishops and pastors, and then also in terms of the sacramental life of our churches, their congregations and people. How should we react to a statement such as ‘it is manifest that the Mass is observed among us with greater devotion and more earnestness than among our opponents’⁶? Is it also true for us, (e.g.) that ‘the custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament [holy communion] to those who have not previously been examined and absolved’⁷? While times change, and the culture of today is very different to that of sixteenth-century Europe, a concern for Jesus’ gospel can still move us to take seriously the ways in which our spiritual ancestors confessed and practised their faith, and seek out our own paths into such vital expressions of the Christian faith.

4. The Catholic–Lutheran discussions: some final points

Over many years, participation in this dialogue has brought much joy and benefit to those privileged to share in its fruitful discussions, for both Catholics and Lutherans alike. The current dialogue is no exception, and we continue to enjoy the rigor of theological debate and the friendly and productive atmosphere of our meetings, four times a year.

One of the benefits of our wide-ranging meetings has been the way in which discussion of AC has opened up for each team insights into the church life and piety of the other, deepening our appreciation of what it means, respectively, to be a Roman Catholic Christian in Australia today, and to be a Lutheran.

Often, this has been integral to reaching an understanding of the thrust of AC’s teaching, as for example when a discussion of our baptismal celebrations—their liturgical forms and

6 Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 56.

7 *Ibid.*, 61.

their associated traditions—helps us to put flesh and blood on the confession’s sparse wording, and to explore in more detail what AC intends when it insists that the word and faith are together required for the ‘use of the sacraments’. The same has been true in discussing the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and then also in our different practices in relation to confession and absolution, the forgiveness of sins. Our exploration of the sacraments—and of ‘sacramentality’—looks likely to provide a topic for a future dialogue once the current talks reach their much-anticipated conclusion.

This report began by noting that in 2030 the Lutheran world will commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the *Augsburg Confession*. Certainly, that event will not command as much public attention as did Luther’s jubilee in 2017, but we can pray that it will include once again the participation of our Catholic sisters and brothers. Hopefully, we will celebrate together yet closer ties in our common faith, informed and encouraged by the results of this dialogue and others like it!

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