

# Lutherans, Catholics focus on reception

## Diocesan vicar writes

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Where were you in 1959? I had entered St. Bernard Seminary in Cullman, Alabama, immediately after having graduated from Holy Cross Academy in Lynchburg.

John XXIII was Pope and John J. Russell was Bishop of Richmond. Lutherans had nothing to do with Catholics; Catholics had nothing to do with Lutherans.

Where were you in October, 1999? I had been ordained a Catholic priest for 33 years.

John Paul II was Pope and Walter F. Sullivan was Bishop of Richmond. On October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, Germany, Lutherans and Catholics were

celebrating the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which had been enthusiastically approved by the Pope and the Lutheran World Federation.

This church-dividing issue of the Protestant Reformation was now transformed into a church-uniting issue.

In his homily at St. Peter's Basilica on November 13, 1999, in the presence of the King and Queen of Sweden, their daughter Victoria, the heiress to the throne, and a group of Lutheran and Catholic archbishops and bishops from Scandinavia, Pope John Paul II praised the Joint Declaration.

"The 'common understanding' which I had hoped for eight years ago today, thank God, has become an encouraging reality," he declared. "...This achievement of the ecumenical dialogue, a milestone on the way to full and visible unity, is the result of an

intense work of research, meetings, and prayer."

The Joint Declaration says very appropriately that the consensus reached by Catholics and Lutherans in basic truths of the doctrine of Justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our Churches. (#43)

In the years from 1965 to 1999, research, meetings, and prayer undergirded this remarkable achievement. It was indeed, a cause for celebration. On the local (Diocesan and Synodal), national and international levels of dialogue, these years give evidence of committed, gifted, faith-filled Lutherans and Roman Catholics providing the brickwork to pave the way to full communion.

In particular, the United States Dialogue contributed significantly to the International Dialogue's research, meetings, and prayer following the former's published report on Justification by Faith in 1983.

From Phase I, the establishment of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran Working Group in 1965, to the beginning of Phase II, the Joint Evangelical-Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission, in 1973, bricks were laid one by one to support the foundation of agreement on the centrality of the Gospel. The topics of the joint meetings held during these years formed the bricks: Gospel and Traditions (1967); World and Church under the Gospel (1968); Structures of the Church (1969); Gospel and Law - Gospel and Christian Freedom (1970); the Gospel and the Church (1972) referred to as the "Malta Report".

The meetings held between 1973 and 1984, resulting in some six joint statements, formed the brickwork of Phase II. Among these challenges were the need to develop a verbal formulation acceptable to both sides; the uncovering of the Hierarchy of Truths (Vatican II); the neuralgic issue of the doctrine of Justification; the problematic subjects of the Office of Ministry and apostolic succession; papal primacy; and finally, the process of Reception, which would enable the joint agreements to become part of the spiritual life at every level of the churches. Phase II culminated in the bold joint statement "Facing Unity: Models, Forms, and Phases of Catholic - Lutheran Church Fellowship."

Phase III constructed a strong framework which would be needed in order to bear the weight of arriving at a joint statement on Justification. Eight productive sessions took place from



Catholic Cardinal Edward Cassidy and German Lutheran Bishop Christian Krause shake hands at the signing of "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" in Augsburg, Germany, Oct. 31, 1999. Cardinal Cassidy, representing the Vatican, and Bishop Krause, president of the Lutheran World Federation, signed the document marking the resolution of a doctrinal dispute that sparked the Reformation. (CNS PHOTO FROM REUTERS)

March, 1986 until September, 1993, involving research, meetings, and prayer. During these meetings, every aspect of the doctrine was honestly and openly examined.

In Phase IV (1995-2003) the dialogue took on a new name which highlighted its past progress and emphasized its ultimate goal, the Lutheran - Catholic Commission on Unity. The bricks molded by the masons of this phase were formed by the challenging issue of Apostolicity.

It was during the years of Phase IV that Pope John Paul II issued his defining encyclical on Christian Unity "Ut Unum Sint" (That They All May Be One, 1995) repeating the irreversible commitment of the Catholic Church to full communion, one of the goals of Vatican II.

The Jubilee Year 2000 witnessed John Paul II's unparalleled resolve to ask for God's mercy on all those who had sinned against Christian unity not only in the past but also in the present. The Church was on its knees in St. Peter's Basilica for the historic Service of Reconciliation.

Currently, the hope of Pope John Paul II in 1999 and the expressed challenge of the "Malta Report" in 1972, can only be met through the process of Reception. Even after the recent celebration of the 5th anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, all levels of the two

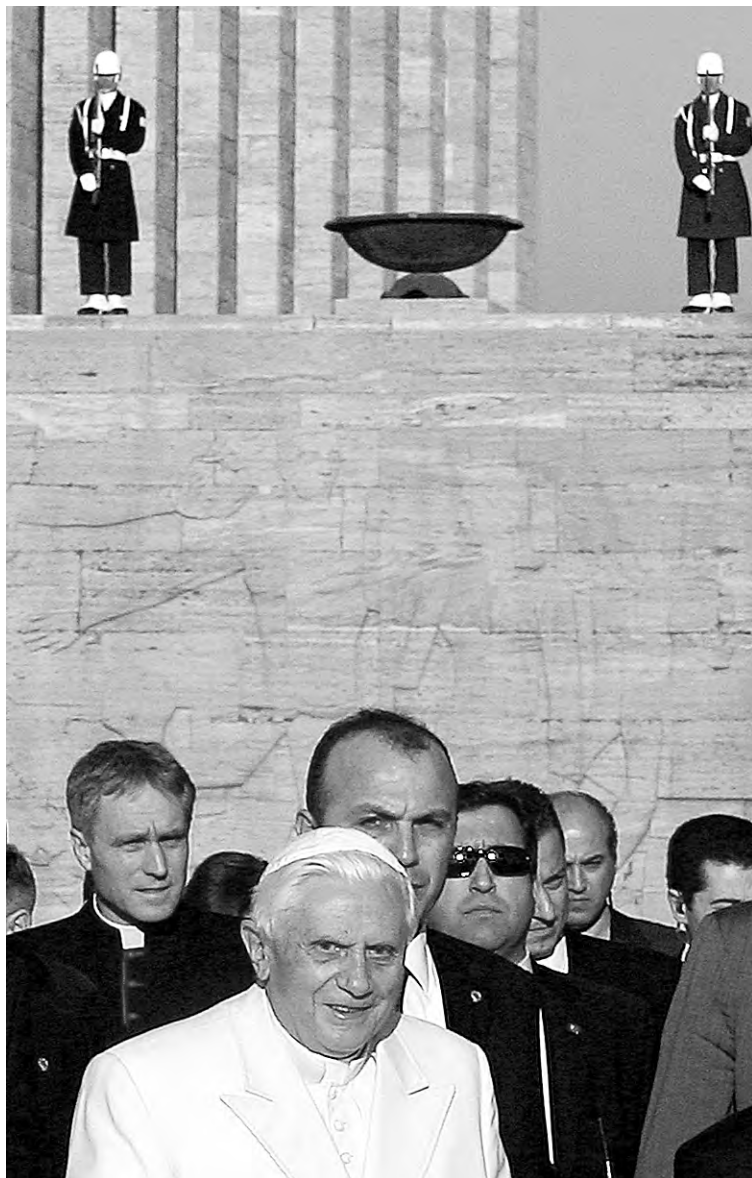
churches (international, national and local) still need to prayerfully and more deeply explore this most significant breakthrough for Lutherans and Catholics in almost 500 years. We all need to produce more tangible evidence demonstrating that a whole new relationship does exist. How will sacramental preparation in parishes incorporate this advancement?

How will Diocesan and Synodal leaders plan together, evangelize together, witness together? How will international offices and personnel come to grips with these tangibles, this new relationship, free of anathemas and united in saving grace?

I wish to close by returning to the setting of Pope John Paul's aforementioned 1999 homily. During Vespers, Queen Sylvia of Sweden read the appointed Scripture taken from the Book of the Apocalypse. The Holy Father commented on the passage "He makes all things new."

Citing the anticipation for the upcoming Jubilee Year, he reminded everyone that Christ once again makes everything new. He exclaimed, "...let us beseech him that all Christians may achieve unity as soon as possible. Nothing is impossible for God!"

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Pope Benedict XVI is surrounded by security guards in Ankara, Turkey, as he arrives at the mausoleum of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, Nov. 28.

(CNS PHOTO/KAI PFAFFENBACH, REUTERS)