

TEN YEARS SINCE THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

*Gerard Kelly**

It is reasonable to ask what should we do to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The simple thing to do would be to review the work that led up to the Declaration and to re-visit the issues that divided Lutherans and Catholics for four centuries. I don't think this is the best approach; we can do better than that! And it is certainly not really where the ecumenical spirit is at the current time.

Our starting point must be that the Joint Declaration was an act of the churches, rather than just the work of officially appointed dialogue groups. So the question becomes: where have our churches moved since the signing of the Joint Declaration? Both the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church can ask this of itself; and together we can also ask it in relation to the communion existing between us. This is not so much a question about theological issues, as about how the doctrine of justification has been shaping the lives of our churches and our people over the last ten years. To pose the question in a somewhat different way: how has the doctrine of justification been shaping the spiritual life and pastoral practice of the Catholic Church since the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1999?

While he was President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Cassidy noted that the consensus reached on Justification “must be brought into the heart of our churches, into the very life of our congregations and parishes”.¹ As we take heed of that challenge, we must also pay attention to the appropriate methodology that will enable

* Fr Gerard Kelly is the Catholic Co-chair of the Australian Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue. He is also the President of the Catholic Institute of Sydney, where he is a lecturer on Theology.

¹ Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, “The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: Pastoral Consequences”, LWF Ninth Assembly (Hong Kong, 8-16 July 1997), Exhibit 9.1.2.

this to happen. The technical term for this is “reception”. The methodology arises from the ecclesial act itself. The Joint Declaration has challenged both Lutherans and Catholics to learn from each other. To use the words of the current President of the PCPCU, Cardinal Walter Kasper, speaking about the Joint Declaration: “in the richness of the other we discovered our own richness. This new perception and re-reception is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into the whole truth”.² So the question for Catholics is: how has our recent encounter with Lutherans and the doctrine of justification helped us discover our own richness?

This is not easy for Catholics. I have often heard it said that Justification was more a Lutheran topic than a Catholic one, and that the Joint Declaration was more important for Lutherans than Catholics. That people would suggest this points to the problem. Let me illustrate it with a bit of my own story with justification. I’ll begin with my first parish appointment after ordination as a priest. One of my weekly tasks was to teach catechetics at the local state high school. One day, for some reason, I didn’t have my car so the youth worker from the local Anglican parish drove me home. It wasn’t a long journey, but as soon as we got moving he asked me, “Where do you stand on justification?” I don’t remember my answer, but I remember being totally thrown by the question. It was not a question I had ever given any thought to. Of course, it was the central question for him, and my answer would tell him a lot about the Catholic Church and also about me.

A few years later, just after the ARCIC document on justification³ was published, I was asked me to introduce it to a group of people interested in ecumenism at a local parish. I knew the topic was difficult and I put a lot of time into trying to understand not only the document but also the background issues. I was about five minutes into my presentation

² Walter Kasper, *That They May All be One: The Call to Unity Today* (London/New York: Burns & Oates, 2004), 125.

³ *Salvation and the Church, An Agreed Statement of the Second Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission* (Sydney: Anglican Information Office Press, 1987).

when an elderly couple in the front seat looked quizzically at each other, then the man put up his hand and asked, “What is justification?” I understood his question perfectly. His reaction was not unlike mine a few years earlier during that car ride from Moorebank High School back to the presbytery.

I’m tempted at this point to say that Catholics don’t do justification, but that is not quite right. We don’t do it the way our ecumenical partners do, and we don’t speak of it the way they do. Justification is not part of the language and piety of your ordinary Catholic. It is not much in any of our major schools of spirituality.

I came to appreciate this through meeting Lutherans. I was appointed to the Australian Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue just as the work on justification was coming to an end. Most of the major drafting had been done for the document, and we were now going through it sentence by sentence. I learnt a lot about justification in this process. But just as importantly I learnt how significant this doctrine is for Lutherans and how it shapes their lives. They kept saying, “Justification is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls”. That seemed to me a rather strange, even extreme, saying. And over the more than ten years that I have been on the dialogue I have noticed that justification is part of the conversation on every topic of our dialogue. Over time, as I have come to know Lutherans better I appreciate why this is so. The best way I can describe it is to relate it to my own experience as a Catholic and the place of the Eucharist in Catholic life. I’m not referring to my studies in Eucharistic theology, but rather to how the Eucharist has shaped me as a Catholic from my earliest days. For me and for other Catholics the Eucharist has been the place of encounter with Christ. Through the Eucharist my relationship with Christ was sustained and matured. The more I hear Lutherans speak the more I realise that this is exactly what justification does for them. It describes their relationship with Christ, it purifies and sustains that relationship, and it shapes the way they live the gospel.

In this sense the doctrine of justification, taught and cherished by Lutherans for over four hundred years, is a spiritual tradition. In a very real way it represents what we would call a spirituality, and it shapes the lives of Lutherans in the most profound way. In a collection of essays published to mark the centenary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Cardinal Kasper explains how important it is to recognise the spiritual traditions of our ecumenical partners.

So Christians did not primarily diverge through discussions and quarrels about different doctrines, but through the way they lived. Different forms of living the Christian faith had become estranged from each other, alienated to the point where they could no longer understand each other, and this led to divisions. Cultural, social, and political conditions and constellations played a role in this process. So to a certain extent, different spiritualities were and are still a reason for the divisions within Christendom.⁴

The signing of the Joint Declaration effectively declared that the Lutheran experience, which is embedded in the doctrine of justification, is a gift of the Spirit for the whole church. Earlier this year at a conference on receptive ecumenism and ecclesial learning, held in Durham, England, Fr Denis Edwards from Adelaide, and the then Catholic co-chair of the Australian dialogue, suggested that the signing of the Joint Declaration between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church was recognition of an institutional charism in the Lutheran Church, and that this charism is offered as a gift of the Spirit to the Catholic Church. In this, I believe he echoed the sentiments of Cardinal Kasper about the signing of the Joint Declaration. Denis Edwards described the signing of the Joint Declaration this way:

What is the gift given to the Roman Catholic Church in this event? I believe that it is nothing else than the positive institutional charism that has inspired

⁴ Walter Kasper, "The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: Origin and Continuing Inspiration of the Ecumenical Movement", *A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity*, Catherine E. Clifford, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 31.

the Lutheran tradition from the beginning, the joyful, liberating Gospel that we are saved not by what we do, but by God's grace alone and in faith. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church continues its emphasis on human cooperation in grace, the real inner renewal that grace works in us, and the fruits of grace in Christian life. But it does this now in the light of a new moment of the Spirit, as it receives into its own life the institutional charism of the Lutheran churches.⁵

As well as this emphasis on the utter graciousness of God, I have also been aware of the word of caution implicit in the doctrine. All Christians face the temptation of not totally trusting God. It is a temptation as old as the Church itself, and was perhaps most famously seen in the dispute between Augustine and the followers of Pelagius. It is what the Reformers called 'works justification'. As a result of my association with Lutherans I often find myself checking how I say things, especially when I become aware that I might be giving the impression that we can earn our salvation. I have come to recognise that in this area the way we say things may sometimes convey meanings that we do not really intend. In our dialogue, the Lutheran members react very quickly to anything that sounds like works justification. We have to explain ourselves – which we usually do to their satisfaction. These experiences have made me reflect on my own teaching and preaching, wondering whether the message people hear might in fact give them a picture of God and salvation that is somewhat distorted.

Let me turn now to another problem we can face in the reception of the Joint Declaration. This time it is not so much a problem peculiar to Catholics, but one that reflects more generally the current religious and social climate in societies like ours. The problem is how to translate the experience of Martin Luther in the sixteenth century into a language that communicates something to people today. His teaching on justification sprang from a deep

⁵ Denis Edwards, "The Charism of an Ecumenical Partner: the Example of Justification", 3. Text available at: <http://www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/microsoft-word-dedwardsshortececdeshort.pdf>.

personal crisis, from the burden of guilt and sin, and from fear of God's judgement. Let me turn again to Kasper's reflection on this. He comments:

We no longer feel the burden of guilt and sin as Luther did, we no longer live in the fear of God's judgement; we have all become too deistic, seeing God as quite withdrawn from our world and our everyday existence. Hence the question of a merciful God, which moved Luther so deeply, leaves us somewhat cold. The question of justification seems to be somewhat at odds with our modern experience.⁶

This is a difficult starting point. Other thinkers in other contexts would concur with Kasper's judgement that deism is a strong influence in the modern world.⁷ He does not pretend that the challenge we face in speaking about justification is easy. He notes that we need to translate both the questions and the answers of the past into contemporary language and thought. His point, I believe, is that our reception of the Joint Declaration – especially how it will be brought into the heart of our church and received in our parishes and communities – is less about the finer points of the doctrine, and more about human and spiritual experience. He says as much in another essay, where he points to a modern distrust of doctrines, while at the same time noting the post-modern search for spiritual experience.⁸

He suggests that the Joint Declaration can be the occasion for opening up and interpreting our experience, particularly the experience in many places of hopelessness and the search for meaning. He argues that the Joint Declaration raises deep anthropological and theological questions, and as such is part of a larger question about evangelisation. As such it offers us an occasion to delve more deeply into fundamental questions such as: "What does it mean to believe in a merciful God?", "What does it mean to believe we are saved and

⁶ Kasper, *That They May All be One*, 132-133.

⁷ This is discussed at length by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 221-269, *passim*.

⁸ Kasper, *That They May All be One*, 157.

redeemed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ?”, and “What does this imply for our personal and common life?” As he puts it, “the question of justification brings us back to the centre of the Gospel and to the basic questions of our human existence”.⁹

The Official Common Statement that accompanied the Joint Declaration concluded with a sentence about the pastoral challenge that Catholics and Lutherans would take up, saying they “will continue their efforts ecumenically in their common witness to interpret the message of justification in language relevant for human beings today, and with reference both to individual and social concerns”.¹⁰ The intention seems to be that we can help each other and even work together in the demanding question of evangelisation.

I’m sure we have all pondered those fundamental questions formulated by Cardinal Kasper, especially in the context of our pastoral mission or new evangelisation. It is easy to ask, “What is the fuss?” or “What is new in all this?” The point he is making, I believe, is that the Joint Declaration has given us a new way of considering both the questions and the answers. There is a gift to be received from our ecumenical partner, and it may help us see or grasp something that we haven’t noticed before, or help us understand with new insight something that has always been familiar.

Kasper notes that since the signing at Augsburg people have been working to make the deeper meaning of the doctrine of justification better understood. In a short paragraph he offers what I take to be his own statement about the contemporary significance of justification. He writes:

It has been made clear to us that the doctrine of justification wants to say to us that we neither can nor should ‘make’ our own life or its fulfilment: we cannot accomplish this by our own efforts. Our value as persons does not depend on our good or bad achievements. Before we ourselves do anything we have been

⁹ Kasper, *That They May All be One*, 133.

¹⁰ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, English-language edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 42.

accepted and affirmed. Our life stands under the horizon of mercy and is ruled by a merciful God, who through everything and despite everything holds us in his kind hands. We are able to live by God's mercy. This frees us from fear, gives us hope and courage and fills us with the joy of the children of God.¹¹

I guess this is what he means by taking us to the heart of the Gospel.

I referred earlier to the paper given by Denis Edwards in Durham. He concluded by giving an outline of a Catholic homily on justification. In it he pointed to examples in our society of how people try to make themselves right, by wanting to prove themselves to others. This is often manifest in the type of home someone has, or endless expensive home improvements. Some compete for attention, for status, for a better job, or for more money. The homily concluded by saying:

The Lutheran emphasis on the doctrine of justification is a powerful reminder of what is central to the Gospel: that we are made right by God, and by God alone. We are made right by God's love poured out in the world in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. We are made right by a God of love, whose grace and mercy always goes before us and in whom we can entrust ourselves in every aspect of our life and our death. In entrusting ourselves to the God of Jesus we find true freedom. We are enabled to live in freedom, free of the desperate need to prove ourselves. We are freed to take joy in God's creation and in love for those around us.¹²

I have been suggesting throughout this article that a Catholic reception of the Joint Declaration is first and foremost a spiritual task. To put it another way: we are engaged in spiritual ecumenism. Let me give the last word to Cardinal Kasper:

¹¹ Kasper, *That They May All be One*, 133.

¹² Edwards, "The Charism on an Ecumenical Partner", 5.

Spiritual ecumenism means listening and opening oneself to the demands of the Spirit who also speaks through different forms of piety; it means a readiness to rethink and to convert but also to bear the otherness of the other, requiring tolerance, patience and respect, and not least good will and love which does not boast but rejoices in the truth.¹³

¹³ Kasper, “The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”, 31.