

3-Minute Catechesis: Fruits of the Ecumenical Movement

November 18th marks the anniversary of the Lutheran Catholic Agreement. This agreement celebrates a major action in resolving a 500-year division between the Catholic and the Lutheran communions.

The split occurred after Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, began a dialogue with his bishop over a number of changes that he felt should be addressed by Rome. This “discussion” ultimately led to the Reformation and a split in the Church and the formation of most of the protestant faiths. The major issue for Luther and his followers was the “doctrine of justification.” Luther believed that Scripture indicated that salvation is ours simply by virtue of faith in Jesus, the Christ, as our Savior. This came to be known as “justification by faith alone.” This conflicted with Roman Catholic teachings that salvation is won through a life of good works and sacrifice that mirrors the example of the life of Jesus which is the *result* of faith.

Several of the documents of the Second Vatican Council called for the Church to initiate reform, leading to a spirit of openness between the Christian communions, with the hope of future resolution of the pain caused by the condemnations that were issued during the Reformation.

Several Lutheran-Catholic dialogues have taken place over the following 3 decades, and many resolutions have been written. Until the late 1990s, however, the question of justification – by faith or by works – remained a major stumbling block to any agreement between our faiths. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, issued in 1999, states: “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”

We also see these efforts to reconcile with other Protestant beliefs making large strides. In October of 2009, Pope Benedict XVI issued a decree allowing some Church of England communities, including married priests, to practice Catholicism while maintaining their own identity and liturgy. It has been more than four centuries since Henry VIII pronounced the Church in England to be independent of Papal authority, so this news was welcome indeed.

As Catholics, we are called to dialogue with and work alongside ministers and lay people from many denominations to celebrate what we have in common and to begin to put our differences aside. We are, indeed, all one body.