LUTHERANS AND ROMAN CATHOLICS IN DIALOG

Summary of Dialog and Practical Steps
➤ Lutherans and Roman Catholics jointly observe (not celebrate) the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. This is an important milestone in our life together, and both Lutherans around the world and Roman Catholics have taken this as an opportunity for conversation, revisiting of the theological and doctrinal matters of the sixteenth century, and the division and brokenness that has followed since.

➤ The opportunity to have this dialog is largely the result of the ecumenical movement, realized in the work of the Lutheran World Federation and the developments of the Roman Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council, and primarily its constitution on *Unitatis redintegratio* (1 November, 1964)
The decree (constitution) of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in 1964, assumes the following:

➤ The divisions in Christianity are a scandal and an affront to the Priestly prayer of Jesus that “they all be one.”
➤ Since the Church is the Body of Christ, divisions in it are violence against Jesus’ own body;
➤ Apostolic faith - handed down through the apostles - is represented by the Petrine ministry;
➤ Separated Churches are “…by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation.”
➤ The ecumenical journey is one that changes, and the Church is required to “recognize the signs of the times” as the work of the Holy Spirit’;
➤ “Unity in essentials,” but a “proper freedom in their various forms” for non-essential matters;
➤ The attainment of unity is the concern of the whole Church;
➤ Ecumenical convergence cannot come without a “change of heart;”
➤ Common prayer precedes other signs of unity: ecclesiological and altar fellowship follows;
➤ Particular affinity is established between the Roman Church and Churches which share a common heritage of liturgy, tradition, and theology;
➤ Baptism establishes a common bond; eucharist in separated Churches is incomplete, but not without union with the Risen Christ;
➤ “Refrain from superficiality:” that is, true ecumenism must be honest, and not shallow.
LUTHERAN ASSUMPTIONS

The Lutheran tradition, too, has laid out ecumenical and ecclesiological matters that guide the conversation:

“The Church is where the sacraments are rightly celebrated and the Word rightly preached.” (Confessio Augustana, VII)

➤ Luther’s intent is of importance to the dialog, because it establishes that the purpose of the Reformation was not a break, but a reform, particularly evident in the constant call of the reformers for an ecumenical council to be called in Germany. It was not possible until 1545 (final session: 1560), precipitating the the mutual condemnations and final break between the two communions;

➤ The fundamental disagreement of the Reformation was on justification, the doctrine “on which the Church stands or falls,” (“quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia” LW: 40:332.3). While later the Reformation took up matters regarding liturgy, saints, ecclesiology, papal authority, and scripture, all of these found their origin in the question of justification, they did not precede it. Fun fact: “Justification” (reminder!) is how we are made right before God. Luther rightly pointed out that this is purely because of the grace of God in Christ Jesus; it was not possible to earn it, and good works do not contribute to this justification. All other matters flow from this premise. The “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (1999) reached substantial agreement on this point.

➤ Official Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialog has been going on since 1965;

➤ Proclamations resulting are “in via,” along they way; they are provisional, and not final promulgations, realizing that we are all a work in progress, and that while significant work has been done, there is significant work yet to do.
CURRENT ASSUMPTIONS

➤ The place of dialog begins in *unity*, not division;

➤ Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics open themselves up to the possibility of *transformation*.

➤ Do you really want to be transformed? What would that mean, and what would have to die for both Lutherans and Roman Catholics to establish greater unity? How bad do you want that, or…do you?

➤ What would the world look like if “Lutheran” or “Roman Catholic” were no longer on the sign? Do you want to give that up?

➤ If you do give that up, what do you gain, and is the gain greater than the loss?
➤ Substantial agreement is reached on ordained ministry as “essential to the life of the Church;” (Luther agrees) there is ongoing dialog about what that looks like;

➤ Lutherans and Roman Catholics largely agree that episcopate, locally adapted to circumstances, is an office within one office of ordained priestly ministry; “Apostolicity” is the “normative origin and abiding foundation” of the Church (Apostolicity, 148); how they define this word - “apostolicity” - is different but the goal is the same: the establishment and guarantee of faithful witness;

➤ Lutherans and Catholics both affirm the real, physical presence of the crucified and risen Lord in the eucharist; they use different language to explain this, but the fundamental truth is the same: Jesus is physically present “in, with, and under” the elements of bread and wine;

➤ There is continued dialog that needs to happen on the relationship between sacramental efficacy and the apostolic succession; each communion defines these differently;

➤ Both agree that the Church is a “divinely created human reality” (Church and Justification, 1993); it is not simply a “human institution,” nor is it without sin or wounds. Both agree on the “indefectability” of the Church; that is, that Jesus will preserve the truth until the end of time in truth because he promised to do so;

➤ This is affirmed, again in the German Lutheran-RC dialog: that the Church is founded by Jesus himself, and it is a communion of life in Christ (Kirchengemeinschaft, 1984);
Both can affirm the statement of the CA:

“A basic if still incomplete accord is also registered today even in our understanding of the church, where there were serious controversies between us in the past. By church we mean the communion of those whom God gathers together through Christ in the Holy Spirit, by the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, and the ministry instituted by him for this purpose. Though it always includes sinners, yet in virtue of the promise and fidelity of God it is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church which continues forever” (CA VII & VIII)
REMAINING
DIFFERENCE

Homework for all!
REMAINING DIFFERENCES

Though there is significant ecumenical convergence between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, there remain significant differences in the way each communion articulates the Gospel. Further listening, dialog, and prayer must be the hallmarks of these different accents, primarily regarding:

- Roman Catholic definition of the Church as “sacrament of salvation,” is at odds with the Lutheran definition of a sacrament commanded by Christ, for which there is an earthly symbol (Fun fact: Luther said there were three, then had a beer, and then there were only two);

- The holiness and sin of the Church: Despite significant agreement on the Church as “indefectible,” Lutherans insist that the no decision of the Church is immune from err; Roman Catholics affirm the struggle against sin in the Church, but refrain from exploration of this dual nature of the ekklesia;

- The Teaching Authority of the Church: while both Churches affirm that the Church has the purgative to teach and correct, they locate this calling in different places. Roman Catholics view this as the charism of the episcopate; Lutherans assign this role to Scripture alone. (Fun fact: if this works, why are there so many different kinds of Lutherans?);

- Limits of Church Teaching: Roman Catholics view magisterial teaching as binding, when proclaimed by the episcopate; Lutherans view teaching as binding only insofar as it is open to examination by the populum Dei and corresponds with the clear teaching of Holy Scripture;

- The Fullness of the Church: Lutherans declare that the Church fully exists wherever the Word is preached and the sacraments “rightly administered;” Roman Catholics emphasize that the fullness of the Church is represented in the local Church headed by its bishop;

- Outstanding differences on the sacramentality of ordination.
“Doctrines,” *per se*, are ideas about God and humanity, rather than expressions of practice. They are not all created equal, and they are ranked. Most important are those matters about God alone (the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, etc.); secondly are those matters in which God relates to humanity (sin, redemption, etc.); third are those matters related to the Church (ecclesiology), and so on down to matters that are still important, but not central to the identification of who God is (*Deus praesens, Deus absconditus*; Luther: *Heidelberg Disputation, Bondage of the Will*);

Lutherans and Roman Catholics do well to keep in mind that in ecumenical dialog, we are generally speaking of matters that are doctrinal (i.e., about God), rather than matters of ecclesiological practice. The latter are important, but not as important as the first category.

For many however, the places that they see disagreement most acutely is in practice rather than doctrine. For example, Roman Catholics do not practice open Communion, while most Lutherans do. This is important, and oft-felt as a matter of *practice*, but is not a statement about the divinity of *God’s self-identification*. It is, rather, a matter of ecclesiology, a less-important (but still important!) category of doctrine and practice that speaks loudly about how the Church reflects what it says about God (the first category).

Be clear what you’re talking about. There are disagreements, but are the disagreements about God? Ecclesiology? About both? How are all these related (they are), and to what degree is their relation church-dividing?
WHO CARES?

Is this just a big yawn?
A lot of these dialogs are very technical matters that are the domain of professional theologians, ecclesiological officers, and ecumenical officers. These things matter, but they do not need to matter equally to everyone. Doctrine is important, and matters of technical and specific controversy must be addressed. Do not minimize the very real theological matters of the Reformation by ignoring them; hundreds of thousands of people lived and died to deal with brokenness in the Church, take it seriously.

At the same time, the subtleties of most of these details do not matter to the average Roman Catholic or Lutheran in the pew. For both, the matters of the Reformation are superseded by a more fundamental question: “How do I be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ here and now?”

Likewise, the commemoration of the Reformation is very important to Lutherans, but less so to Roman Catholics, simply because of the size of the Roman Church in comparison to the Lutheran communions;

Why does any of this matter? How would you answer that question? Does it matter because...if it doesn’t, we are each diminished in stature? Must we have the gifts of the other to be a fuller realization of Jesus’ priestly prayer?
SOME PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE (AND A FEW YOU SHOULDN’T)

Get busy on these works, but remember... you are not saved by them!
One of the great scandals of the Reformation was the breaking of relationship, on both the Roman Catholic and Lutheran side. Both stopped talking to each other, convinced that they were “right.” Might this “talking” piece be a place to start?

Call your local Roman Catholic parish. Get to know the priest, invite him and other religious to lunch. Seriously, this seems ridiculous but it’s incredibly important. Do the work of relationship building.

Doctrinal agreement is not needed to get to know one another. There are varying pieties, charisms, and viewpoints between ELCA and RC communities on things. Great. Can you set these aside for a moment to do the task of relationship building? And, how might - later - differing viewpoints be a way that the Holy Spirit might be challenging you to expand your vision? Can baptism the unity of baptism supersede - and inform - disagreements? Can we always return to this place of “unity” (as the dialog calls us to do) rather than “division?”

There are a lot of hungry people in the world and way too many wars going on. Can you work with your local RC parish (once you have gotten to know them) to work together on social ministry? Maybe we can’t work out (yet) all the doctrinal details, but again, that mostly doesn’t matter to people we serve. Leave that to the professionals and let our members work together in “hands-on” ministry; this builds relationships;
➤ You may have people in your communities who are interested in getting into the deep theological weeds. Do not dismiss this as something that “doesn’t matter.” It does, and we need people to understand the intricacies of theological nuance. Might you and a Roman Catholic community (relationship!) study the “Declaration on the Way” together?

➤ There are other resources, too for study: “One Body: Re:Membering the Body of Christ” is a resource published by Augsburg Fortress, a collection of essays by both RC and Lutheran Scholars on the questions of unity.

➤ Bored with ecclesiological theology? Then how about some…creation fun? In 2015, Pope Francis issued his encyclical *Laudato Si*. What in this document could be studied as a common witness to environmental theology? Might this be a starting point for a relationship in which two communities become more active in their localities to see to environmental stewardship?
COMMON PRAYER

➤ The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialog has produced great resources for common prayer, and while full altar fellowship is not yet possible, common prayer is and should be done frequently.

➤ Resources for Common Prayer can be found in “Common Prayer: From Conflict to Communion,” the report of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican. This can be searched for and downloaded. If you haven’t read it, do. You only have to do this every 500 years, so make time.

➤ Do not make things up. Use liturgical form and structures already existent that each tradition recognizes. For example, Morning or Evening Prayer.

➤ Do your common prayer during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is bookended by commemorations of Peter and Paul. Save Reformation commemorations for October.

➤ Both the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Area Synods and the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis have already gathered for common prayer this past January, and will do so again in January of 2018. Come. Show up. It’s important.
There are a great many generalizations that both Lutherans and Roman Catholics have developed about one another that are unhelpful. Do not generalize, learn. For example:

- Roman Catholics do not worship the Virgin Mary, nor is “the pope never wrong.” The subtleties of Marian dogma and magisterial teaching authority *ex cathedra* are much more nuanced than such misguided statements. Fun fact: Mary was not Catholic, she was Jewish.

- Lutherans do not “worship the bible” nor are they all Scandinavian Lutefisk addicts defined by Garrison Keillor. Lutherans vary in custom, ethnicity, and gift.

- The Roman Church is exceptionally large, and Lutherans have many, many expressions. Seek to understand, and not judge. Neither tradition just “makes stuff up.” There are significant, real traditions, expressions, and pieties that have enabled members of each tradition for hundreds of years to give voice and expression to their faith.