



# **Aquinas Memorial Lecture 2000**

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**TOWARDS CHRISTIAN UNITY  
LOVE LIGHTS THE WAY**

**PASTOR JOHN VITALE**



Pastor John Vitale was born in Ingham, North Queensland, in 1943, the son of an Italian father and a Finnish mother. His primary schooling was at a one-teacher school at Ripple Creek, just north of Ingham. His secondary schooling took place at Concordia Memorial College, a Toowoomba Lutheran boarding school, where he topped the state in his Senior Examination. He gained a Bachelor of Arts through the University of Adelaide in 1963, and completed his training for the ordained ministry in 1967. He was ordained at Ingham in January 1968.

Pastor Vitale had two parish ministries, the first in the Ingham-Tully parish and the second at Sutherland in the southern suburbs of Sydney. In 1977 he moved into school chaplaincy at St Paul's Lutheran College, Walla Walla, some 40 kms north of Albury. He moved to Brisbane in 1982 to become the first chaplain at Grace Lutheran College, Rothwell. During these years he gained a Diploma of Education through the University of New England and then a Graduate Diploma in Religious Education through McAuley College.

Then in 1989 he was appointed to provide theological education to teachers of Lutheran schools in Queensland. At the 1992 District Convention of the Lutheran Church, Pastor Vitale was elected to serve as the president (bishop) of the Queensland District of the Lutheran Church of Australia. In September this year, he will move to Darwin to take up a pastoral position in the Top End Lutheran Parish.

Pastor Vitale has been married for 32 years to his wife Judy and they have four grown-up children. He has always had a keen interest in ecumenism. He was on the committee which drew up the constitution for Queensland Churches Together and in 1996 served as its president. With Archbishop John Bathersby he has fostered an annual study and dialogue day between Roman Catholic priests and Lutheran pastors in South-East Queensland.

## **TOWARDS CHRISTIAN UNITY - LOVE LIGHTS THE WAY**

Pastor John V. Vitale,

The second week of Easter 2000.

### **Our sad divorce**

Roman Catholics and Lutherans were once one in the Western Church, but then came the pain and tragedy of divorce in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As a biased Lutheran I could add that from our side there was an attempt at reconciliation in the form of the Augsburg Confession. Given the fiery polemics of that era, this Confession is amazingly irenic. It clearly points out all those places where there was agreement, and sought to show that its central teachings were not something heretically new but in harmony with the Fathers of the Early Church and the decisions of ecumenical councils.

But this attempt by Luther and Melanchthon and their fellow reformers to rebuild the relationship failed. It failed for many reasons, some of them having little to do with Christian faith and life. Social and political factors played a strong part. This is best (worst!) illustrated in the so-called Hundred Years War of the 17<sup>th</sup> century where Catholic and Protestant princes and potentates fought each other to a standstill, devastating much of Europe in the process.

So we moved from the decree nisi stage to the decree absolute. And like a divorced couple, we battled over children and possessions and we decried and derided each other's stupidity and stubbornness. We looked for sympathy by declaring how badly we had been treated by the other party and how foolishly the other party was still behaving, and so on. For 400 years we remained at loggerheads and piled up our grievances.

## **Changed by our changing world**

Then, in this century, things began to change. What brought about a different way of acting in the relationship of Catholics and Lutherans?

Heading the list must surely be that movement of the Spirit that we call ecumenism, where Christians from many different denominations, not just Lutherans and Catholics, began to ask whether there was a better and more Christian way to deal with each other. These were people who were deeply disturbed by the scandal of a divided Christendom and who sought in various ways to reunite Christianity.

Secondly, we cannot overlook the impact of the two World Wars, where Christians fought with and killed Christians by the millions, where the Holocaust and weapons of mass destruction called into question the sanity and the sanctity of human beings. As a consequence, there was a great crisis of faith in the west.

Facing that wholesale falling away from the Christian faith, Christians made common cause to deal with this common enemy.

Thirdly, we also found a common cause on the mission frontiers in Africa and Asia and South America. Missionaries prayed with and supported each other out in the field, forming close friendships. When they returned home, wherever that was, they could no longer live with the absolute separation between denominations that was then the norm. The leavening influence of their voices made a real difference.

I would like to add two more causes, and I hope I will be forgiven any unintended implications of Lutheran self-satisfaction in these two causes within Catholicism. At the beginning of this century, after hundreds of years in which dogmatic and philosophical theology reigned supreme, there came a clear call for renewed emphasis on study of the Bible within Roman Catholicism. The result is that today Catholic biblical scholars are at the forefront of all forms of biblical theology, and this is reflected in popular zeal for Bible study as well. Then there was Catholicism's own reformation in the Second Vatican Council. One vital change that arose out of the Council's deliberations was that non-Catholic Christians now became "separated brothers and sisters" and the process of dialogue with other denominations was given a high priority.

Looking at the Lutheran side, I see a renewed awareness that the Lutheran Church began as a protest movement within Western Christendom, that Luther and his fellow reformers were not intending to establish a new denomination, that the constant fissiparousness of Protestantism was doing little for the cause of Christ. This “evangelical catholic” voice within world Lutheranism insisted that the only good reason for the existence of a separate Lutheran Church was the ongoing need to give clear witness to the good news of God’s unconditional love for sinners. Lutherans of this mould spoke longingly of reconciliation with Rome, of an end to the centuries of divorce. And the touchstone for such reconciliation would be what Lutherans called “the doctrine on which the church stands or falls”, the doctrine of justification, the teaching that sets forth how a person gets right with God.

I believe that God used all of these things in some way to prepare the way for the major change in the relationship between Lutherans and Catholics that is marked by the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”, now more simply called the Augsburg Accord.

### **The long journey to the Augsburg Accord**

As much as we might like to imagine that God would orchestrate all these influences so that eventually Roman Catholics and Lutherans would simply agree that all their differences had now been overcome, the reality has been very different. It has been a long slow journey back towards each other. Healing any broken relationship involves putting aside past hurts, overcoming present suspicions, and getting to know each other again. It requires genuine commitment, patience, and much understanding. (I could add, at this point, that bilateral dialogue seems to me to have been much more productive over time than a multi-lateral approach, which always runs the danger of becoming a “warm fuzzies” talk-fest.)

So it was between our two churches. The first tentative steps were taken immediately after the Second Vatican Council. Official dialogue groups were set up in Europe and North America and the dialoguing began to bear fruit. (Even here in Australia we have been dialoguing at an official level since 1975!) The third paragraph of the Joint Declaration lists the major publications that dealt with the doctrine of justification resulting from that

dialogue: “The Gospel and the Church” (1972); “Justification by Faith” (1983); “The Condemnations of the Reformation Era – Do They Still Divide?” (1986); and “Church and Justification” (1994).

So, after more than a quarter of a century of solid theological work by many people across the globe, there was a body of material indicating a considerable degree of agreement on the major issues. The Joint Declaration, then, was not so much the product of a new round of dialogue but rather it sought to “summarize the results of the dialogues on justification”. One important feature of the Joint Declaration was that in taking up the various aspects of justification, it stated first what was agreed and then also set out differences in emphasis, language, and approach.

So – and it should be noted carefully – the Joint Declaration does not signal complete agreement on the doctrine of justification. Its carefully nuanced conclusion is as follows: “The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paras. 18 to 39 are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding basic truths.” (Para. 40)

This may help to explain the wide variety of responses to the Joint Declaration. Many ordinary believers on both sides gave a huge cheer, believing that Lutherans and Catholics were on the verge of being one church again. At the same time professional theologians on both sides were complaining that it was a Clayton’s consensus, a trickery of ambiguous words that didn’t resolve any of the major differences. At the highest level Catholics had major concerns about Section 4.4 The Justified As Sinner. 251 German Lutheran theologians put their names to a protest document which claimed, among other things, that no consensus had been reached about faith as the assurance of salvation, about the sinful nature of the person justified, about the importance of good works for salvation, and about the relationship between law and gospel, and that therefore there would be no real changes in the relationship between or the practical life of our two churches. Some of these concerns were taken up in the Annex to the Joint Declaration, which became part of the Augsburg Accord.

## **Where are we now?**

So what is the truth of the situation? Have we arrived at our goal or are we still at the departure point?

Let me share with you a simple story which encapsulates for me the significance of the Augsburg Accord.

There is a modest church in the countryside near Augsburg that has been used for over a century by both Catholics and Lutherans. A dividing wooden wall runs down the middle of the church, which keeps the two worshipping groups apart. There is a doorway set into the wall but the double doors have been kept closed and locked for the whole time that the wall has existed. On 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1999 the doors were ceremonially unlocked and opened. Now there can be ongoing interaction between the two groups.

In my view, then, we are not stuck at the beginning nor have we arrived at the goal of true visible unity between our churches. We are still on the journey but the Augsburg Accord is an encouraging sign that we are not engaged in a fruitless chimerical quest. Or to change the metaphor, the doors of opportunity stand open for us, inviting us to an ever-deeper relationship.

## **The Augsburg Accord in Outline**

The Augsburg Accord is the first ever international doctrinal agreement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. As such it is a notable historic document. Before we go to its substance, let's get a snapshot of what it is about.

The final document has three main sections. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is the second and central part. Because of questions about the exact status of the Joint Declaration and about the meaning of particular statements in it, a preface was added, which sums up the status of the Joint Declaration and gives further "elucidations" of some of the controversial statements in it. The final section is an Appendix that lists the main documents from earlier Lutheran-Catholic dialogues that lie behind the Joint Declaration and quotes from them.

In the central second section, Joint Declaration itself, there is a Preamble which tells how and why it came into being. Section 1 "Biblical Message of Justification" is a brief overview of the biblical material dealing with justification. Section 2 "The Doctrine of Justification as Ecumenical Problem" simply declares that, since the doctrine of justification was "a principal cause of division of the Western church", reaching "a common understanding of justification is therefore ... indispensable to overcoming that division."

Section 3 "The Common Understanding of Justification" is the crux to the whole document. I therefore quote the two central paragraphs to show the level of agreement reached:

15. In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the Triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. 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.

16. All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

The longest and most interesting section is Section 4 "Explicating the Common Understanding of Justification". It has seven sub-sections dealing with different aspects of the doctrine of justification e.g. "Justification by Faith and through Grace" and "The Good Works of the Justified". Each sub-section contains three paragraphs, the first setting out what the two churches agree on, and the following two paragraphs presenting the particular emphases and understanding of each church. I think we can safely say that this section reveals that much more dialogue is needed before our two churches could say that they are in total agreement on the doctrine of justification.



The fifth and final section is “The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached”. This refers to the consensus in basic truths referred to earlier and declares that the mutual condemnations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century no longer apply to the teachings presented in the Declaration. The concluding words are most powerful and significant:

43. Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself. In this respect, there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification. ... We are convinced that the consensus we have reached offers a solid basis for this clarification. The Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church will continue to strive together to deepen this common understanding of justification and to make it bear fruit in the life and teaching of the churches.

44. We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ’s will.

### **So what are we talking about? What is “justification”?**

If you read the newer and simpler English translations of the New Testament such as the Good News Bible and the Contemporary English Version, you will not find the word “justification”. That goes to show that the word is fairly opaque and unintelligible to most readers today. It doesn’t communicate clearly and quickly. (GNB speaks of “being put right with God” and CEV uses “being (made) acceptable to God”)

Yet neither of those formulations catches the precise meaning of the metaphor in the Greek word that is being translated. The word is a law-court word. In our terms it has to do with the declaration by the judge that an accused person is innocent, not guilty. St. Paul uses the concept again and again through Chapters 3 – 5 of his Letter to the Romans to present the Christian understanding of how human beings are saved and brought into a right relationship with God, despite their sinfulness. Rom. 3:23-24 sums it up well: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.”

We should add here that Lutherans have grabbed hold of this particular expression and made it the sum and center of their teaching in the following motto: “We sinners are justified by God’s grace alone, on account of Christ alone, and through faith alone.” (Note the close similarity to the quotation above from Section 3 of the Joint Declaration.) Possibly because of that, Catholics have tended to shy away from speaking about justification, preferring other expressions such as “redemption”, “salvation”, or “reconciliation with God.”

In addition, as we shall see later, Lutherans made a clear distinction between the believer’s justification before God and the believer’s life of sanctification, while Catholics spoke of justification as including sanctification. In other words, they used the same word but gave it a wider meaning.

### **Who has now changed?**

It is probably more a comment on human nature that the question is asked: Who has changed? It involves at the simplest level the issue of who was previously right and therefore who was previously wrong, and lurking behind that is the unhappy face of human pride.

At a deeper level, there is the matter of denominational identity. Because the Lutheran Church came out of the Catholic Church, we needed to establish who we were over against Catholicism. So at a considerable number of points on the theological compass, we declared to faithful Lutheran followers: We are not like the Catholics. They believe x but we believe not-x. When the pope of the time rejected the Lutheran understanding of salvation, Luther responded with his “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope” and bluntly declared: “It is plain that the marks of the Antichrist coincide with those of the pope’s kingdom and his followers.” (Para. 39) Those who have grown up with such a concept of Lutheran identity would naturally feel threatened by any other view than that the Catholics have changed. No doubt this feeling is mutual. Yet ironically some Lutherans also hold the view that Catholicism is a huge and monolithic system that would never change its wisdom and ways. They therefore read the whole Augsburg Accord in that light, seeking the signs that prove that the Catholic leopard has not changed its spots.

Similarly disconcerting for staunch members on either side is the understandable perception that both sides have had to compromise their teaching in some way. The rallying cry goes out: "The truth cannot be compromised." It too is a call to retreat behind the barricades of past certainty and to guard the fortress.

But I would like to propound the perhaps startling (to such "defenders of the faith") idea that neither side has necessarily changed its teaching, even though each side has certainly been changed. Let me explain this paradox by summarizing what regularly takes place in dialogue between Christian denominations.

Each participant hopefully begins from (or arrives at) the fact that s/he is dealing with a fellow-believer who is genuinely seeking to know and explain the truth of God. The participant is thus ready to take seriously all that the dialogue partner says, no matter how incompatible it may be with her/his understanding of the issue under discussion. That "willing suspension of disbelief" then leads on to positive gains as the two sides begin to see that they may be saying the same thing in different ways or that they are using the same words but with different conceptions of those words. Similarly they may come to grasp the particular concerns behind each other's formulation of the doctrine and realize that the formulations are not in opposition to each other but rather that they are pointed in different directions or defending against different dangers.

There were two more things that worked in favour of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue process, I believe. The first is that both churches took the biblical witness seriously as God's revealed word and sought to understand it in a similar fashion. In addition, both had an extensive body of official doctrinal pronouncements on justification to serve as a solid starting-point in the discussions.

### **The Christian answer to the mystery of human existence**

The ultimate and abiding human question is "Who am I?" This capacity for self-reflection is what makes human-beings unique among living organisms on this earth. The great human thinkers have provided many different answers to the question. Religious faith of any kind adds the question: "What is the divine and how does human life relate to the divine?" The three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, phrase the question in more personal terms: "Who is God and what is the relation-ship between God and human beings?"

As the psalmist wrote: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour." (Ps. 8:4-5) Or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer mused in prison and facing execution:

"Who am I? They often tell me  
I would step from my cell's confinement  
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
like a squire from his country-house. ...  
Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I know of myself,  
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage ...?  
Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? ...  
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

*Letters and Papers from Prison* (Macmillan, 1971), pp.347-348.

I mention all this simply to alert us to the fact that there is a whole realm of human thought and speculation that we could investigate before we come to the answers that the Christian faith provides to the basic questions referred to above. I choose to set that aside in order to come to the Christian response. For Christians Jesus is the answer, the Jew who lived from about 5 BC to 29 AD, who had a brief career as a religious teacher and was then put to death by the Roman authorities and who, according to the Christian claim, rose from death. According to the New Testament witness, Jesus is the Word of God become flesh (John 1:14), the image of the invisible God (Col.1:15), through whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. (Eph. 1:7)

What I would want to claim about the Christian answer to the mystery of human existence is that it is a radically different answer to most other philosophical and religious answers. The regular answer is that enlightenment and/or right relationship with God is the result of human striving and effort, either mental or moral. In the highest thoughts of the greatest philosophers we catch glimpses of the divine; by the greatest sacrifices and the noblest actions, we earn the right to be with God. In pointed contrast, Christians declare that in Jesus, God comes down to us, to our level, to speak to us in human life and human language and that God acts through Jesus to rebuild the relationship between God and human beings. The shorthand term for that is grace i.e. God's undeserved love and goodness towards sinful human beings. It is just this "heart of the Christian faith" that the Augsburg Accord deals with, and that is why it is so significant.

### **The central issue and the resolution reached**

"Catholics teach that human beings are saved by God's grace and by their good works. They mix up justification and sanctification. So they live in fear because they can never be certain of their salvation." That's what I was taught 35 years ago as I prepared to be a Lutheran pastor. Possibly Catholic priests learnt similar but opposite things about Lutherans e.g. "Lutherans completely separate justification and sanctification. They think that because of Jesus Christ they are automatically saved."

In very simple terms, the argument between our two churches has been about the connection between Christian faith and Christian living. Catholics thought that Lutherans put too much stress on saving faith and not enough on Christian living; Lutherans thought that Catholics put too much emphasis on Christian living and not enough on saving faith. Catholics worried that the Lutheran emphasis led to the kind of careless presumption encapsulated in the attitude "I like committing sins. God likes forgiving sins. So everything is perfectly organized." Lutherans worried that the Catholic stress on the Christian's good works as meriting an eternal reward led eventually to trust in one's own achievements, as expressed in the view: "God will let me into heaven because I've tried to keep the Ten Commandments and lead a good life."

This issue weaves its way through the whole Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in various guises. It is there in each of the three paragraphs (15,16,17) that make up the core of Section 3 The Common

Understanding of Justification. For example, in Para. 17, we read this statement: “Our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way.”

It is dealt with most deliberately in Section 4.2 Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous. This distinction and connection between justification as being declared righteous and as being made righteous is the key, I believe, to the consensus reached. Let me quote at some length again:

We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin’s enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ. ... These two aspects of God’s gracious action are not to be separated ... When they (Lutherans) stress that God’s grace is forgiving love (“the favor of God”), they do not thereby deny the renewal of the Christian’s life. They intend rather to express that justification ... is not dependent on the life-renewing effects of grace in human beings. When Catholics emphasize the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace ..., they wish to insist that God’s forgiving grace always brings with it a gift of new life ... They do not thereby deny that God’s gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation.

So our two churches have sought to resolve the major differences between them as each church has more clearly recognized the intentions and concerns of the other church’s formulation of this doctrine. So, as I suggested earlier, it is not a case of one side being shown to be right and the other side wrong. Rather, deepened understanding and appreciation of each other’s teaching has led to the Augsburg Accord.

### **Some remaining concerns – through one Lutheran’s eyes**

The good news of the Christian faith is that God’s love for us human beings, demonstrated fully and finally in Jesus Christ, is unconditional and therefore God’s forgiveness and acceptance of each of us is also unconditional on anything we do. So this assurance of God’s unconditional love is the prime thing, the foundation for Christian faith, hope and love. Being declared right with God is the motivating cause of the Christian’s lived righteousness. As the Bible writers put it so simply and beautifully: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38-39) “We love because God first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

As a Lutheran pastor, I therefore want to proclaim forgiveness in Christ as the central reality, for the comfort and confidence of believers, and then invite them to seek to be what God's gracious activity has made them, children of God, impelled by merciful love.

So I am disturbed that the Vatican theologians seemed to have such trouble with the traditional Lutheran position that the Christian is "saint and sinner at the same time". If "this renewal in faith, hope, and love" is always dependent on God's unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification: (Para. 27), the corollary of this is that no sins or sinfulness in the believer can remove or destroy that justification, apart from the sin of unbelief, the deliberate rejection of God and God's offer of love in Jesus. In other words, God's forgiveness is to be seen not so much as forgiveness of sins as forgiveness of the sinner. God is not niggardly in love. God does not hold us in suspense by doling out discrete dollops of forgiveness but reaches out unreservedly to declare: "I love you. I forgive you. I accept you." That promise then transcends the reality of our continuing sinfulness, of our daily failures and imperfections.

Similarly, I struggle to see how the understanding of justification set out in the Augsburg Accord can be harmonized with the Catholic Church's teaching on purgatory as the place where believers have to "undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven". (Catechism of the Catholic Church, p.268). If "Christ himself is our righteousness" (Para. 15), what greater holiness can we ever achieve? As the document states, "Lutherans ... emphasize that righteousness as acceptance by God and sharing in the righteousness of Christ is always complete." (Para. 39)

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, I wonder why the practice of public confession and absolution (the Third Rite of Reconciliation) is supposed to be reserved for the most dire emergency situations, when it is simply the ritual proclamation of God's mercy in Christ to repentant sinners. While it is true that there is an unfortunate neglect of individual confession and absolution in Lutheranism, I do not see how the need to uphold one form of gospel ministry should lead to the exclusion of another just as valid form of that ministry. I would therefore hope that, as Catholics can encourage Lutherans to make fuller and more regular use of private confession, so Lutherans can urge Catholics to recognize more clearly the value of public confession in the Christian way of life.

## **Looking to the future**

I am not seeking to be negative or controversial in raising these three issues. I simply want to highlight again that we have some way to go before our two denominations can be one again. And I am sure that Catholic theologians could raise similar issues for Lutherans to wrestle with. What do we do?

There are those who say: "All Christians are already one in Jesus Christ. That's all that is necessary. So why go to all the bother to try to unite the churches? We can simply go on as we are." In this case simplest is not the best. Jesus prays that all those who follow him might be one so that the world might believe that he is the saviour sent by God. (John 17) Paul exhorts Christians to make every effort to preserve the unity given by the Spirit in a bond of peace. (Eph. 4:3) To repeat the phrase, we are to become what we are. God has given us a oneness in Jesus Christ, and our thankful response now is to express and make real that unity. As the Presidents on the World Council of Churches declare in their Pentecost message: "The Holy Spirit reminds us at Pentecost that we are not able to live for Christ independent of each other any more than we are able to be faithful to Christ without loving one another."

Others urge us to simply forget our doctrinal differences and get together. But both of our churches are committed to declaring the truth of the gospel because ultimately the eternal destiny of human beings is involved. Besides, to speak with many different voices would make a mockery of the unity we would be claiming.

So we have no alternative but to continue to press on along the path we have been walking and as stated in those closing words of the Joint Declaration: "Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. ... We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ's will."

This is a task not just for theologians and church leaders, but for all the members of both our churches. For some 10 years now, for instance, there has been an annual gathering of the clergy of both our churches here in



Brisbane, and I am certain that this has led to greater co-operation at the parish level. At the most recent gathering, one week ago, we discussed the Australian Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogue's latest publication: "Justification: A Common Statement" and then gathered clergy into regional groupings to plan how this document might be studied at the local level and other possibilities for joint worship and fellowship, witness and service.

### **Love lights the way**

We began this lecture with the sad image of a divorce and all its attendant disharmony, all the pain of the broken relationship. Can there now be a re-marriage? Prince Andrew and Fergie are considering re-marriage and I have heard of the very occasional happy re-marriage, but usually the wounds that led to the divorce are too deep to heal. So can our two churches come together again or is this a doomed quixotic quest?

The biblical description of marriage (They are no longer two but one. What God has therefore joined together, let no one part.), as you may already have been aware, is applicable to other relationships and supplies us with a hopeful analogy for the improving relationship between our two denominations.

What makes for a good marriage? One simple but sensible answer is that husband and wife need to share common values and goals, but that they should be rather different in personality. The common values and purposes provide the solid basis for their marriage relationship but the personality differences create the life and interest in their relationship and allow for mutual support, as one partner's weaknesses are balanced by the other partner's strengths.

So in my view the Augsburg Accord demonstrates that we share common Christian values and goals, while our different denominational traditions are like the personality differences in marriage. They make for a lively relationship and create opportunities for mutual correction and support.

But what about the emotional wounds from the "divorce" and its aftermath? Can these really be healed?

I believe they can. In theological terms, marriage is ultimately built, not on the imperfect love of two imperfect people but on the unconditional gracious love of God. Just as forgiveness and reconciliation lie at the heart of

God's love for human beings, so they form the unfailing center of a genuine marriage, where each partner is ready to forgive and to keep on loving despite continuing shortcomings and failures. I know that from experience, for I have a most gracious and loving wife who has put up with me and my absent-mindedness, my introspective silences, and my many other forms of thoughtlessness and selfishness for over 32 years, a wife who still smiles at me and calls me "darling", who supports and encourages me, and who shows in so many ways her love and care for me.

So if the realizing and enacting of God's gracious love in Christ is needed for a good marriage, it is surely just as relevant to the re-marriage of divorced denominations. And if God's unconditional love leads and lights the way for our two churches, we will eventually be reconciled and re-united. Past wounds will be healed and present faults will be lovingly corrected. Then we can more fittingly and fully be a sign of faith, hope, and love in our divided world.

So I will continue to pray and hope and work for such a reunion of our two churches (and of all Christian churches). I trust every Christian will join with me in that task and challenge. May Christ's love be our constant and compelling motivation.

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