

A RESPONSE TO
THE U.S. LUTHERAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE REPORT VIII
THE ONE MEDIATOR, THE SAINTS, AND MARY

1. Introduction

Hail Queen, mother of mercy; sweet life and our hope, hail! To thee we turn, exiled children of Eve; groaning and weeping in this vale of tears we sigh for thee. Come, therefore, our advocate, and turn to us those merciful eyes of thine. And show to us, after this exile, Jesus, the blessed fruit of thy womb, O merciful, O piteous, O sweet Virgin Mary!

This prayer, the Salve Regina, is a product of the popular devotion to the Virgin Mary that flourished in the early Middle Ages. Probably late 11th or early 12th century, it "expresses to perfection medieval men's attitude to Mary; their complete confidence in her, . . . her power as their advocate with God and her mediation between themselves and Christ. . . ." ¹

Most non-Catholics probably do not know the words of the Salve Regina--or even of its specific existence. But it illustrates quite well a highly visible difference between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, not to mention Protestants in general. If Lutheran lay people know of no other distinction between their church and the Roman Catholic Church, they know that Catholics pray to saints and to the mother of Jesus, and Lutherans do not.

Veneration and invocation of the saints and Mary became an issue in the 16th century Reformation and clearly separated Lutherans and Catholics after the Council of Trent. It remains today a point of significant difference between the two communions. But it must be said, too, that Lutherans often also harbor false notions about what Catholics actually believe and teach concerning the saints and Mary. For both reasons, it is most fitting for--and very gratifying to see--Lutheran and Catholic theologians to sit down together and tackle this particular issue.

¹Hilda Graef, Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion, vol. 1: From the Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 229.

2. Background

U.S. Lutherans and Roman Catholics began their theological dialogue in 1965. From 1983 to 1990, in the eighth round of talks,² the topic under discussion was "The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary."³

That topic grew out of the dialogue's "Common Statement" on "Justification by Faith," completed in 1983. In this statement, the dialogue said that it had found an "incomplete convergence on the use" of the doctrine of justification as "a criterion of authenticity for the church's proclamation and practice." Consequently, it cited a need for additional dialogue on a topic that would test the use of justification as such a critical principle.⁴

²Nine rounds of talks between U.S. Lutherans and Roman Catholics have been held and completed: I. "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church"; II. "One Baptism for the Remission of Sins"; III. "The Eucharist as Sacrifice"; IV. "Eucharist and Ministry"; V. "Papal Primacy and the Universal Church"; VI. "Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church"; VII. "Justification by Faith"; VIII. "The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary"; and IX. "The Word of God: Scripture and Tradition." The most recent common statement to be published with background papers is that for Round VIII. Round IX was completed in September 1992.

³The Commission on Theology and Church Relations appreciates the service of the LCMS representatives to the eighth round of the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue: Dr. Horace Hummel of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Dr. John Frederick Johnson, St. Petersburg, Fla. Although under the rubrics of the dialogue, those from the various traditions represent only themselves, the LCMS members are considered official representatives of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod by their church body. It also should be noted that the Roman Catholic members do represent only themselves and do not necessarily reflect the piety directed toward Mary and the saints by and in their church. While we rejoice over any true agreement in doctrine reached with the Catholic theologians in this dialogue, one should not therefore understand that the same agreement necessarily has been reached with the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), pp. 69, 70. In 1992, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued "A Response to the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Report VII: Justification by Faith." In that response, the Commission raised concerns that the dialogue document could permit use of justification by faith as a device to sanction an unacceptable view "that parts of the inspired Scriptures may have 'lesser rank' as normative texts for what is to be taught and believed in the church . . ." (pp.12-13). The Commission also registered basic concerns that "fundamental doctrinal differences still exist between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism on the doctrine of justification," citing in part an "intolerable ambiguity . . . about the nature and role of faith" in the dialogue document. The CTCR asked how we are to understand the document's assertion "that it is the 'grace-wrought transformation of sinners' that becomes 'necessary preparation for final salvation' (?157), and this especially in light of the customary Catholic view that 'faith, to be justifying, must be accompanied (or perhaps better, intrinsically qualified [emphasis added]) by the gift of love

Teachings on the saints and Mary were selected from among several possibilities for such a test "in light of the sole mediatorship of Christ, which was termed 'the correlative' of the principle of justification by faith." After nearly seven years and 14 sessions of meetings over a total of 56 days, the dialogue completed its work in February 1990. A "Common Statement" and 15 background papers were published in 1992.⁵

The "Common Statement" says that it deals not only with doctrines, but also with Lutheran and Catholic "thought structures" and "expressions of piety and practice." At the same time, however, it notes that the dialogue "did not discuss in any depth, nor do we attempt here to report on, present-day matters of popular and folk religion, aspects in comparative religion or the history of world religions, feminist questions, or a total systematic theology of the saints and Mary," but "have dealt only with issues that have divided our churches since the sixteenth century and seem still to be divisive" (?5). While this approach disregards to a large extent beliefs and practices that, while not having the status of official Roman Catholic theology, still are permitted by the Church, the parameters of the dialogue nonetheless leave plenty of significant issues for consideration.⁶

(caritas)' (?105)." The Commission said that "to imply in any way that the sanctified life of the sinner must somehow 'intrinsically qualify' justifying faith to accomplish justification before God is not only to misunderstand the nature of faith, but also to call into question the all-sufficient work of Christ itself." It therefore questioned "whether the dialogue . . . has really advanced much beyond the historic impasse between the churches on the role of faith alone in the justification of the sinner before God" (p. 11).

⁵H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1992), pp. 21, 22. Other test issues noted included ecclesiastical structures, means of grace, papacy, and infallibility.

⁶That is not to say that only a tradition's formal confession, or even public teaching in conformity with its confession, is all that matters when addressing the issue of church fellowship. As a third principle of church fellowship, a tradition's churchly practice also must be in harmony with its formal confession (c.f., "Theology of Fellowship" [St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1965], pp. 20, 21). The Roman Catholic members of this dialogue, too, seem to understand that the issue does not end with their church body's official teaching when they write under "Catholic Reflections" in The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary that "in the course of our history and even today some devotional practices operate within a disordered faith. This means that by the way they are structured they invite

Given those limits, the "Common Statement" lists 19 "church-uniting convergences" that relate to its topic (?103).⁷ While caution regarding the potential for exaggerated assessment is always in order, we do rejoice with the dialogue participants over true agreement reached on the basis of the Word of God.

Most of the focus, however, is placed on four "divergences" (??74-83)-- regarding the term "saint," the intercession of saints, the invocation of saints, and Marian doctrine (which includes elements of the first three issues). This does not mean that the "Common Statement" concedes some sort of defeat. "The goal of ecumenical dialogue is not to eliminate all differences," it says, "but to make certain that the remaining differences are consonant with fundamental consensus in the apostolic faith and therefore legitimate or at least tolerable" (?90). In other words, as the section heading immediately above that statement asks, "need the divergences be church-dividing?" Generally speaking, the dialogue's answer appears to be "not necessarily."

It is precisely because The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod is committed to upholding "the apostolic faith," for the sake of the saving Gospel, that our response will address not only the dialogue's conclusions as to continuing differences between Lutherans and Catholics, but especially the extent to which those differences stand in the way of church fellowship. Like the dialogue itself, we will restrict ourselves largely to the realm of official church teaching, whether Catholic or Lutheran. And in focusing on the divergences and their significance, we by necessity must also pass over much even in the "Common Statement" itself--including the list of "convergences"-- that is worth study and comment.

a person to transfer ultimate trust away from Jesus Christ and toward Mary or the saints. In time, the friends of Christ [i.e., Mary and the saints] come to substitute for the saving Redeemer in the life of an individual or community. Such practices or piety are expressions of fruitless and passing emotion, vain credulity or exaggeration, to use the words of Vatican II; they deserve critique" (p. 118).

⁷See "Appendix."

3. Organization and Contents of the "Common Statement"

In addition to an "Introduction" (??1-4), the "Common Statement" is divided into two major sections: "Part One: Issues and Perspectives" and "Part Two: Biblical and Historical Foundations."

The third and final chapter (??70-105) of Part One is really the heart of the "Common Statement."

It begins by acknowledging Catholic and Lutheran agreement in a number of areas: the lordship of Christ; the importance of canonical Scripture, tradition, word and sacrament ministry, ecclesial community, and the examples of saints, past and present; the unique mediatorship of Christ and the justification for sinners that He provides; as well as use of the doctrine of justification "as a criterion of authenticity" for the church's practice regarding the saints and Mary (??70-73). Then, it states what the dialogue sees as the "problem": ". . . how to affirm the unique mediatorship of Christ so that all the 'mediations' in his church not only do not detract from, but communicate and extol, his sole mediatorship." It adds, though, that "the very fact that we have come to agree on this form of the question and especially on the priorities that question reflects is for us a cause for joy" (??70). Finally, it says that the issue has been "how the saints and Mary function in mediation," adding that the "difficult questions" facing the dialogue "are tied to the criteriological use of justification and of the continuity of grace at work" (??72, 73).

The four "divergences" noted earlier then are identified. Need these divergences be church-dividing? We have already indicated the dialogue's general answer ("not necessarily"). (In the next section, we will examine and evaluate the specific answers offered by the "Common Statement.") In spite of divergences, the dialogue proposes 19 convergences for consideration by their churches (see the "Appendix").

Part One, Chapter Three concludes with a section titled "Next Steps." Admitting that "our churches are still separated by differing views on matters

such as the invocation of the saints and the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary," it offers two additional steps for common study and dialogue that it says would lead the churches to "greater progress toward fellowship" (?104). We will examine those steps in the "Conclusion" to this response. May it suffice to say at this point that the dialogue partners maintain that, while difficult, those steps are realistic in view of the material presented to this point and have further support from the material presented in Part Two (?105), which reviews Scripture on Christ, the saints, and Mary and Christian history from the second to the sixteenth century and from the Reformation to the present.

Part Two, Chapter Three (??182-219) provides some idea of where Lutherans and Catholics find themselves today: After the Council of Trent, Lutheran and Catholic attitudes toward the saints and Mary increasingly diverge. Catholic leaders encouraged veneration of the saints and Mary, and Catholic piety was reflected in many canonizations, new saints' feasts and renewed Marian devotion. Lutherans, meanwhile, "viewed these developments with a mixture of suspicion and benign neglect before 1854 [the year Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception], but then reacted with sharp polemics" (??182, 183). Anti-Catholic polemics were revived again in 1950 with papal definition of the dogma of the Assumption (?197).

Vatican Council II (1962-65), however, "attempted to deal with Christ, the saints, and Mary with sensitivity to Protestant concerns" in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium⁸) (?202). "Mary in the midst of the community of saints in heaven; the saints as sharing the koinonia of all the people of God; and the whole church itself reflecting the light of Christ as the moon does that of the sun--such is the relationship set up by Vatican II among the one Mediator, the saints, and Mary" (?211).

⁸For the text of Lumen Gentium, see Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, new revised edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 350-426.

4. Evaluation

Not only is it gratifying to see the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue take up such a visible difference between their respective traditions, but the context within which this discussion was placed--i.e, how respective views on the saints and Mary impact the sole mediatorship of Christ--makes this round of talks all the more important and worthwhile. This context also highlights an encouraging feature of this particular discussion, namely, the obvious concern on the part of both communions not to detract from Jesus Christ as the "one Mediator between God and men" (1 Tim. 2:5).

It is clear from the "Common Statement" that stereotypes such as those that would caricature official Roman Catholic doctrine as making idols of images of the saints and Mary or as placing them on equal standing with Jesus Christ (even though popular piety may do so) do not hold up under scrutiny. Moreover, we can thank the Catholic members for reminding us that Jesus Christ "is always found in the company of a whole range of his friends"⁹ and that we, too, identify ourselves as members of the same communion of saints as our Christian brothers and sisters who have preceded us into the Church Triumphant. Lutherans and Catholics alike would do well to study the "Common Statement" in order to attain better understanding of the other, not to mention better understanding of what their own churches teach.

In spite of the advances in understanding provided by the dialogue and identification of a significant number of "convergences" between the two communions, the dialogue participants also identified four significant "divergences." While that is hardly surprising and should of itself not cause a great deal of distress--after all, many of the caricatures and stereotypes put to rest by the dialogue were perhaps even more troubling in some respects --we do have concerns about the dialogue's "solutions" to those divergences. It is to the four identified divergences, the dialogue's question as to the extent that those differences are church-dividing, and the answers proposed by the "Common Statement" that we now turn our attention.

⁹Anderson, Stafford and Burgess, p. 117.

a. The term "Saint"

Lutherans and Catholics tend to give different meanings to the term "saint" (hagios, sanctus), says the "Common Statement." Lutherans tend to use the term in its "wider, biblical meaning, as including all the justified, whether on earth or in heaven." Catholics, on the other hand, tend to use it in reference to those who are deceased and in heaven, especially those formally "canonized" by the church "and proposed as models of holiness" (?76).

But the statement adds that while this difference in usage may create some problems for communication, it "is not of itself church-divisive, since neither church actually rejects the usage of the other." In fact, each tradition on occasion uses the term in a sense similar to that used by the other (?91).

As the dialogue participants point out, Lutherans "do accord certain individuals, biblical or postbiblical, the title of 'saint' and sometimes commemorate such individuals on particular days in their liturgical calendar and name churches or religious groups in their honor." Catholics "also use the term in a much broader sense, to include all who have entered into the joy of eternal life, as in the feast of All Saints, or all who are justified and live by their faith in Christ" (?91).

At first blush, then, it would seem that we could move immediately to other matters, for Lutherans have never made definitions of terms per se to be issues impinging on church fellowship. And the "Common Statement" does say that "of itself" the differing usage of the term "saint" is not church-divisive, which may qualify the matter enough to move on. But we would point out that definitions can, and often do, indicate more than merely how two groups have chosen to use a particular word. Different uses of a term can indicate differences in theology that should signal a concern that goes beyond any difficulties that may be created for communication.

In an earlier section of the "Common Statement," under "Catholic Perspectives," the Catholic dialogue participants discuss the matter of

invoking the saints:

The New Testament . . . encourages Christians to turn to their fellow disciples for help and prayer on their behalf. . . . In similar fashion Catholics are not deterred from turning to Mary or other sisters and brothers now in heaven for help and prayer. This is not in their view an affront to Christ or a meaningless gesture. Indeed, in this recourse they are encouraged by the conviction that the prayers of disciples now in heaven will proceed from a charity heightened by personal experience and awareness of the serious plight of wayfarers. One way, among others, of avoiding misdirection of such prayer and consequent abuses in the Catholic Church was by establishing and from time to time reforming the process of beatification and canonization [?67].

The Catholic members argue that neither beatification nor canonization conflicts with the teaching "that all who are justified are holy people and saints," implies that only those beatified and canonized are in heaven, or means that such saints have merits that bind God to do what they ask. "But both [beatification and canonization] do account at least in part for the fact that the term saint in Catholic parlance more often than not means one recognized by the church as in heaven and so one who can be turned to with trust [emphasis ours] as a true disciple of Christ" (?67). It would appear, then, that the Catholic participants mean to say that a "saint" in common Catholic usage is a deceased person who has been declared by the church to be "a true disciple of Christ" who is in heaven and who can be invoked in prayer.

This, of course, is not what Lutherans mean when they "accord certain individuals, biblical or postbiblical, the title of 'saint'" (?91). Nor does it grapple with the question of Roman Catholics granting special honor to opponents of the Lutheran Reformation who have been declared "saints," such as Ignatius Loyola, Robert Bellarmine and Peter Canisius.

Rather than summarily dismiss the differing uses of the term "saint" in the two traditions as a relatively minor communication problem, Lutherans ought acknowledge that the most frequent Catholic usage indicates a more serious problem tied up, in part, with the issue of invocation of saints. But because the Catholic teaching on invocation is in fact treated as a separate "divergence" by the dialogue, we will postpone further discussion on that matter until later.

b. Intercession of Saints

The dialogue participants identify the real root of the problem regarding the issue of whether or not deceased saints intercede with God on behalf of Christians still living on earth when they state that "the dispute comes down in great part to the sources of Christian doctrine and the principles of interpretation" (?78). The differing sources for Catholic and Lutheran doctrine are clearly stated:

For their confidence in the prayers of the saints in heaven Catholics rely not simply on biblical texts but also, as stated elsewhere, on the sense of the faithful, on ancient and approved liturgical prayers, on the explicit teaching of popes and councils, and on theological reasoning from the biblical data [?78]. . . .

Lutherans point to the paucity of information provided by Holy Scripture concerning the state of the dead between their death and the end-time. Like Catholics, Lutherans confess that God gives life to the dead in Christ. Lutherans grant that the saints in heaven and Mary intercede for the church in general (Ap¹⁰ 21:9) or at least perhaps do so (SA¹¹ 2:2:26), but in neither alternative do they find any decisive ground for affirming that the departed are aware of prayers addressed to them (Ap 21:9, 12, 27; SA 2:2:26) [?79].

Catholics draw their doctrine from Scripture and tradition, Lutherans from Scripture alone. The differing sources of doctrine (i.e., "formal principles") go far in explaining the differences over intercession of the saints and Mary. Scripture simply does not say whether or not the saints and Mary are aware of the prayers of those still alive on the earth or intercede for them. That is why the Lutheran dialogue participants can say, "Lutherans do not deny the Catholic doctrine, but question its biblical basis and certainty" (?92). How can Lutherans deny it if Scripture does not explicitly deny it? That does not mean, of course, that Lutherans can affirm the doctrine, since the Catholics cannot make a solid case for intercession of the saints from Scripture alone.

Is this "divergence" church-dividing? The "Common Statement" does not provide any real discussion of that question at this point. Seeing intercession as a "presupposition for the doctrine of invocation," as indeed

¹⁰Apology of the Augsburg Confession.

¹¹Smalcald Articles.

it is, we are moved along: "Intercession as a church-dividing issue, therefore, can best be treated below under invocation" (?92).

Unless the dialogue participants intend for us to read "invocation and intercession" whenever only "invocation" is cited in the next section, however, they never do answer whether or not the Lutheran and Catholic differences over intercession of themselves are church-dividing. Intercession per se is never mentioned again. It seems appropriate, therefore, for us to examine intercession ourselves at this point before moving on to invocation.

First, we should point out that it is perfectly proper to treat intercession along with invocation. The Lutheran Confessions themselves do this. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, for example, says:

Our opponents teach that we should put our trust in the invocation of the saints, though they have neither a Word of God nor an example from Scripture for this. They apply the merits of the saints in the same way as the merits of Christ and thus transfer to the saints the honor that belongs to Christ. Therefore we cannot accept either their ideas about venerating the saints or their practice of praying to them. We know that we must put our trust in the intercession of Christ because only this has God's promise [Ap 21:31]. (Emphasis ours.)

In addition to treating intercession along with invocation, the Apology maintains that only the intercession of Christ has God's promise. This assertion is an application of the sola Scriptura principle.¹³

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod has pointed out that the Confessions "ask two questions concerning a given doctrine or practice: (1) What does it do to the Gospel of God's free grace toward sinners in Jesus Christ? (2) Does it have Biblical foundation?" Thus, the Commission continues, "the Apology rejects invocation of saints both on the grounds that it robs Christ of His honor (XXI, 14) and

¹²Theodore C. Tappert, ed., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 233.

¹³Only a few paragraphs earlier, the Apology applies that principle to invocation of the saints when it states, "But our Confession [the Augsburg Confession] affirms only this much, that Scripture does not teach us to invoke the saints or to ask their help" (Ap 21:10). If Scripture does not teach a doctrine, the Lutheran Confessions insist that neither should the church teach it.

on the ground that it is 'without proof from Scripture' (XXI, 10)."¹⁴ At the very least, then, it appears that the Lutheran Confessors would reject intercession of the saints on the ground that it is "without proof from Scripture." For Lutherans, a doctrine taught as the Word of God, but which cannot be proven from Scripture, is just as unscriptural as one that is contrary to a clear teaching of Scripture.

Such is the case with teaching that the saints in heaven intercede for those still alive on earth. The dialogue itself admits to the uncertain biblical grounds for believing that the saints intercede for us.¹⁵ Does that make intercession as such a church-dividing issue, separate from the doctrine of the invocation of the saints? It would seem so, for while the Lutheran Confessions do not demand that "human traditions or rites or ceremonies" be everywhere alike, they do demand agreement "concerning the teaching of the Gospel" (AC¹⁶ 7). And to teach as the Word of God a doctrine not founded solely upon Scripture is to teach contrary to the Gospel, because it is for the sake of the Gospel that God has given us Holy Scripture.¹⁷

c. Invocation

The Catholic participants argue that although invocation of saints is not commanded in Scripture, neither is it forbidden. They view the practice as a "legitimate extension" of asking those living on earth for intercession-- a practice that is biblically approved (?80). Invoking saints, they say, no

¹⁴The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), p. 7.

¹⁵"As biblical grounds for the intercession of saints, the Confutation referred to texts such as Baruch 3:4, 2 Macc. 15:12-14, and Rev. 5:8 and 8:3-4, but the exegetical difficulties are today recognized. For their confidence in the prayers of the saints in heaven Catholics rely not simply on biblical texts but also, as stated elsewhere, on the sense of the faithful, on ancient and approved liturgical prayers, on the explicit teaching of popes and councils, and on theological reasoning from the biblical data" (?78).

¹⁶Augsburg Confession.

¹⁷For a discussion of the interrelationship between Scripture and the Gospel, see the CTCR report, Gospel and Scripture.

more attributes to saints power that belongs only to God or detracts from the work of Christ than does asking those on earth for their prayers (?81). The Lutherans, on the other hand, oppose invocation, "particularly for help on specific issues," on grounds that it (1) "leads to uncertainty in prayer," as it has no biblical promise, and (2) "detracts from the sole mediatorship of Christ" in that it attributes to saints "honor and power that belong to God alone; that it obscures the word of Christ; and that it transfers to the creature the trust that should be placed in no one other than God" (?83).

The "Common Statement" proposes three questions as a basis for discussing whether or not Lutheran and Catholic differences over invocation of saints is a church-dividing issue: "Does the Catholic Church require its members to invoke saints? Could Lutherans live in union with a church in which this practice was encouraged but not imposed? Could the Catholic Church live in union with Lutherans who preach Christ as sole Mediator with the conviction that the invocation of saints will thereby recede?" (?93).

In response to the first question, the dialogue participants maintain that the Catholic Church does not require its members to invoke the saints (though they are "strongly encouraged" to do so [?95]), pointing out that the Council of Trent, which provides the most definitive Catholic statement on invocation, "affirmed that it is good and useful to invoke saints and to have recourse to their prayers and help in obtaining God's benefits through Jesus Christ, 'who alone is our Savior and Redeemer.'" Vatican II, in Lumen Gentium, said only that it is "supremely fitting" to invoke saints "and have recourse to their prayers" (?94).¹⁸

The dialogue participants conclude that "there is no reason for thinking that a person who refrained from personally invoking saints would forfeit full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. This freedom now enjoyed by

¹⁸The latest word on official Roman Catholic teaching is the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Especially of those saints so recognized by the church, the new catechism says: "Their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world" (emphasis ours). Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori Publications, 1994), p. 645.

Catholics would certainly be enjoyed also by Lutherans should a greater degree of communion between the respective churches be achieved" (?95).

Could Lutherans live with such an arrangement? The dialogue participants imply that 16th century Lutherans could have done so, saying that they "asked for freedom to abstain from invocation of saints and freedom to preach the doctrine of justification by faith. . . ." And in the Apology, Melancthon objected to the Confutation's condemnation of Lutherans for not requiring invocation, but he and others "did not refuse to be in communion with a church that did not require them to invoke saints" (?96). (Emphasis ours.)

At the very least, it is not conclusive that Reformation-era Lutherans would have agreed to fellowship with a church that taught and encouraged invocation of saints, but did not require it. The assertion by the dialogue participants that 16th century Lutherans "asked for freedom to abstain" is made without citation, so it is not possible to judge its accuracy. What is more, the context for Article XXI of the Apology is the Confutation. It is inappropriate and unconvincing to make an argument from the Apology's silence regarding a church that would not require invocation of saints, because it is not addressing that particular question.

The Lutheran participants in the dialogue, however, are willing to live with a church that teaches but does not require invocation--under two conditions. While the dialogue did not agree on whether invocation is "legitimate and beneficial," the Lutherans "are of the opinion that the practice is not church-dividing provided that the sole mediatorship of Christ is clearly safeguarded and that in any closer future fellowship members would be free to refrain from the practice" (?97).

The first question that comes to mind is whether it is in fact even possible to safeguard the sole mediatorship of Christ while at the same time encouraging invocation of the saints. The Catholic participants in the dialogue steadfastly deny that the practice injures Christ's honor as sole mediator (cf. ?97). To say that, of course, does not make it so. But it is a

positive development to see the concern expressed by the Catholic participants for upholding the sole mediatorship of Christ.

At the same time, though, we are warned in the Apology concerning the invocation of saints that "even if it were not dangerous, [it] is certainly unnecessary."¹⁹ The Confutation required invocation and applied the merits of the saints to others, making them "mediators and propitiators." The Apology continues, "Even though they distinguish between mediators of intercession and mediators of redemption, they obviously make the saints mediators of redemption."²⁰ Catholic participants in the dialogue do not seek to apply merits of the saints to others, another positive. But even to call the saints "mediators of intercession," says the Apology, "obscures the work of Christ and transfers to the saints the trust we should have in Christ's mercy."²¹ We can only wonder that the Lutheran dialogue participants did not raise this issue in the context of the immediate discussion, as they do raise it in a preliminary section on "Lutheran perspectives":

. . . Although Lutherans do not deny that deceased and living saints join together in praising God--indeed this is affirmed in some eucharistic and other liturgical celebrations--they have difficulties with the customary definition of invocation when it applies to someone other than Christ, namely, as the practice of calling on someone and asking for something for one's benefit. Lutherans believe such practice detracts from the sole mediatorship of Christ because it seems to assume or imply that Mary and certain deceased saints are somehow more accessible or benevolent than Christ [?42].

The second condition set by the Lutheran participants for some measure of communion with a church that teaches but does not require invocation is "that in any closer future fellowship members would be free to refrain from the practice" (?97).

Under the section on "Intercession," we have already discussed the matter of teaching a doctrine that has no support from Scripture. In fact, the very example used by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to illustrate the Confessional questions asked of any doctrine (What does it do

¹⁹Ap 21:7.

²⁰Ap 21:14.

²¹Ap 21:15.

to the Gospel? Is it founded upon Scripture?) concerns invocation of saints, noting that "the Apology rejects invocation of saints both on the grounds that it robs Christ of His honor (XXI, 14) and on the grounds that it is 'without proof from Scripture' (XXI, 10)."²² Furthermore, the Augsburg Confession states:

. . . it cannot be proved from the Scriptures that we are to invoke saints or seek help from them. "For there is one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), who is the only saviour, the only high priest, advocate, and intercessor before God (Rom. 8:34). He alone has promised to hear our prayers. Moreover, according to the Scriptures, the highest form of divine service is sincerely to seek and call upon this same Jesus Christ in every time of need. "If anyone sins, we have²³ an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

In spite of any concessions that may have been made by the Lutheran participants in this dialogue, it simply is not consistent with the Lutheran Confessions to practice church fellowship with a church that teaches as God's truth doctrine that is not firmly grounded and clearly taught in Holy Scripture. Invocation of the saints simply does not meet this Confessional standard. Therefore even were Lutherans permitted not to invoke the saints (and presumably also not to believe that invocation is of any value but may, in fact, be dangerous), fellowship with a church that holds such a doctrine would not be possible. In other words, invocation is a church-dividing doctrine, even given the conditions outlined by the dialogue participants.

Finally, the dialogue participants answer the third question intended to help determine whether invocation of saints is a church-dividing doctrine, i.e., whether the Roman Catholic Church could live with Lutherans who preach Christ as sole Mediator "with the conviction that the invocation of saints will thereby recede" (?93). The Catholic participants respond in the affirmative, "with the understanding that their own tradition of worship would be respected and not impugned as idolatrous" (?98).

Roman Catholics will have to determine whether this response from Catholic dialogue participants is consistent with Catholic criteria for church

²²Gospel and Scripture, p. 7.

²³AC 21:2-4.

fellowship. But it is difficult from a Lutheran perspective to defend a "tradition of worship" regarding invocation of saints that is not drawn from Scripture alone (see above). It may be less difficult, however, to concede that such worship may not be idolatrous in the strictest sense of that term, if one accepts on face value the Catholic participants' assertions that invocation "does not attribute to [saints] the power that belongs to God alone because the saints are not addressed as saviors or redeemers but simply as intercessors, in much the same way that fellow human beings on earth are addressed when one asks them to pray for some intention" and that "in turning to the saints as intercessors one places trust ultimately²⁴ in God and in Christ to whom all prayer is ultimately directed" (?81).

That does not mean, however, that there is not room even here for Lutheran concern. In the Large Catechism, Luther writes, "Idolatry . . . is primarily in the heart, which pursues other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils."²⁵ In judging if invocation of saints is "idolatrous," Lutherans must ask whether or not it today fits that aspect of the definition given in the Confessions.

d. Marian doctrine

The "central question" about Mary in the context of this dialogue has to do with her mediatorial role, according to the "Common Statement" (?84). The "Common Statement" says that the Lutheran Confessions grant that Mary "prays for the church" and is "worthy of the highest honors,"²⁶ but that Lutherans deny that she or other saints should be "regarded as mediators or

²⁴ cf. The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, A Response to the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Report VII, Justification by Faith (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1992), pp. 9ff. The discussion of the adjective "ultimate" as it pertains to "trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ" for our hope of salvation is pertinent also to use of the adverb "ultimately" in this context. In other words, "ultimately" begs the question of the penultimate.

²⁵ LC Ten Commandments 21.

²⁶ See Ap. 21:27.

propitiators, on the ground that reliance on their merits would detract from the sole mediatorship of Christ" (?85).

The dialogue participants identify the two modern Marian dogmas--the Immaculate Conception, defined in 1854, and the Assumption, defined in 1950--as the two most difficult areas regarding Mary (?86). Lutherans object to the Immaculate Conception based on the Scriptural teachings asserted in the Augsburg Confession (2:1) "that all descendants of Adam and Eve except Christ are 'conceived and born in sin'; that Scripture nowhere teaches that Mary was born without sin; and that "the definition itself was an unwarranted assertion of papal authority" (?87). Similar Lutheran objections are raised to the dogma of the Assumption (??88, 89).

Are these differences and concerns church-dividing?

Regarding Mary's mediatorial role, the participants state that "our dialogue has not revealed any tendency on the part of Catholics to look upon Mary as a propitiator or to consider that her mercy is anything but an expression and reflection of the mercy of Christ himself." If the term "mediation" is used of Mary at all by Catholics, it is only to indicate her role as intercessor with her son. "Understood in this way, the heavenly mediation of Mary differs only in degree from what we have dealt with under the headings of the intercession and invocation of saints" (?99).

We have already discussed intercession and invocation as it pertains to the saints, so we will say no more here other than to repeat the words of the Apology, that even to call the saints "mediators of intercession obscures the work of Christ and transfers to the saints the trust we should have in Christ's mercy."²⁷

While it may be true, moreover, that the "dialogue has not revealed any tendency on the part of Catholics to look upon Mary as a propitiator" (emphasis ours), a reading of documents from the Roman Catholic magisterium leads one to wonder whether there is not a tendency to regard her as a

²⁷ Ap 21:15.

mediator to the extent that the sole mediatorship of Christ is impinged upon.

Vatican II, in Lumen Gentium, asserts, for example, that "in a wholly singular way [Mary] cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in restoring supernatural life to souls."²⁸

"Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation."²⁹

It is true that Lumen Gentium says the foregoing "is so understood that it neither takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator."³⁰ However, it seems wholly reasonable to question whether the sole efficacy of Christ's mediatorship is not impinged upon when Mary as well as Christ is said to possess a continuing "saving office" and an intercession that "continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation."

Regarding the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, the Lutheran participants believe that these need not divide the two churches as long as the sole mediatorship of Christ is safeguarded and in a closer fellowship, Lutherans need not accept these dogmas.

In Round 6 of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, on "Teaching Authority & Infallibility in the Church,"³¹ the Catholic participants said that disagreements on these dogmas did not "of themselves exclude all Eucharistic sharing between the churches," but did add that remaining differences could not thereby be ignored (?100). Once again, however, Lutherans must face the question already raised above concerning intercession and invocation of saints: Can one church have fellowship with another that teaches as God's truth a doctrine that is not firmly grounded and clearly taught in Holy

²⁸Lumen Gentium 61. Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, new revised edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), p. 418.

²⁹Lumen Gentium 62.

³⁰Lumen Gentium 62.

³¹See Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., Teaching Authority & Infallibility in the Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980).

Scripture³²--even if its members are released from any obligation to believe such doctrines? We have already answered this question in the negative as regards the other doctrines over which the dialogue has not found agreement.

But the two Marian dogmas deserve one additional comment. The problem of infallibility is an additional factor. Indeed, the Lutheran participants state that the link between the two dogmas and the problem of infallibility "make full agreement unattainable at this time" (?102).

In defining the two Marian dogmas, Popes Pius IX and Pius XII, speaking after the First Vatican Council, included anathemas against any who do not accept their teaching. After defining the Immaculate Conception, for example, Pius IX continues:

Hence, if anyone shall dare--which God forbid!--to think otherwise than as has been defined by Us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has defected from the unity of the Church; and that, furthermore, by his own action he incurs the penalties established by law if he should dare to express in words or writing or by any other outward means the errors he thinks in his heart.³³

By such words and the assertion of papal infallibility, the Roman Catholic Church has bound the consciences of the faithful to doctrines that Catholics themselves generally admit are not taught explicitly in Holy Scripture. This constitutes an attack on a Christian's freedom under the Gospel. As such, it goes to the heart of the Gospel and is therefore church-dividing. Lutherans ought not ignore such binding of consciences, even if theirs are not also thereby bound.

5. Conclusion

The "Common Statement" follows its discussion of the divergences it identifies and the question regarding the extent to which they are church-

³²The Catholic participants in this dialogue acknowledge that neither the Immaculate Conception nor the Assumption "is taught as such in Scripture or in early patristic tradition" (?88). Cf. H. Sasse, "Conversations with Rome," Christ and His Church, ed. M. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995).

³³"Ineffabilis Deus" in William J. Doheny and Joseph P. Kelly, compilers and arrangers, Papal Documents on Mary (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1954), p. 26.

dividing, as well as its listing of "convergences," with a short section titled "Next Steps." Put another way, it is asking, "Where do we go from here?"

Admitting that "our churches are still separated by differing views on matters such as the invocation of the saints and the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary," it offers two additional steps for common study and dialogue that it says would lead the churches to "greater progress toward fellowship" (?104):

(1) if Lutheran churches could acknowledge that the Catholic teaching about the saints and Mary as set forth in the documents of Vatican Council II (cf. ??192-201) does not promote idolatrous belief or practice and is not opposed to the gospel (cf. ?101); and

(2) if the Catholic Church could acknowledge that, in a closer but still incomplete fellowship, Lutherans, focusing on Christ the one Mediator, as set forth in Scripture, would not be obliged to invoke the saints or to affirm the two Marian dogmas (cf. ??100, 102).

The dialogue partners maintain that, while difficult, these steps are realistic. Unfortunately, given our discussion under the "evaluation" above, "difficult" seems to be something of an understatement. In spite of assertions to the contrary in the "Common Statement," these divergences do indeed appear to be church-dividing.³⁴

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to true church-uniting agreement is the fact that Catholics and Lutherans draw their doctrine from different sources--Catholics from Scripture and Tradition, Lutherans from Scripture alone. The Lutheran participants acknowledge the serious nature of this problem in their concluding "reflections" (LR?20):

We are alert to the fact that the question of Scripture and tradition lies behind much of what still separates Lutherans and Roman Catholics concerning the saints and Mary. We already signaled the importance of this question in our first round of dialogue (L/RC 1: p. 32). It was fundamental for our dialogue on Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church (L/RC 6). In the present round of dialogue on the saints and Mary we have again discovered the need to investigate biblical extension and magisterial tradition (Lutheran Reflections, ??10-12; CS ?100).³⁵

³⁴Entering into church fellowship, even on what some would call a "limited" basis (e.g., "eucharistic sharing"), is not in our view scripturally and confessionally acceptable, even were Lutherans and Catholics to respond to the two "next steps" in a way that their wording suggests.

³⁵The ninth round of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, completed in

Not only do we have differing "formal principles," but we also differ on our definitions of the Gospel. In our response to the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue report on "Justification by Faith," we noted that we must "reject as contrary to Scripture any understanding of the doctrine of justification which would include in God's forensic justification of the sinner 'a transformist view which emphasizes the change wrought in sinners by infused grace' (?158 [of the dialogue report on justification]). The doctrine of justification, strictly speaking, has to do with what God in Christ has done for us, not what He does in us."

The reason for raising this additional concern is well stated in our report on Gospel and Scripture:

When the term "Gospel" is used as the Lutheran Symbols use it, namely, to mean "the gratuitous promise of the remission of sins for Christ's sake" (Ap IV, 186; cf. FC Ep V, 5 and SD V, 27), then in a very real sense it is norm in the Scripture. For example, passages which speak of rewards must not be understood to mean that men can merit God's favor (Ap IV, 367ff.). It is a foregone conclusion that any doctrine or practice which robs Christ of His honor, buries the Gospel, and abolishes the promises, cannot be in agreement with the Scriptures.

The Gospel provides a rule of thumb, or norm, applicable to all of Scripture, namely, that Scripture cannot be against Christ or be in conflict with the chief article concerning the free remission of sins by grace through faith in His sole mediatorship.³⁶

Thus, a serious problem would remain concerning doctrines such as those regarding Mary and the saints, even were we to agree upon Scripture alone as the only source and norm of doctrine.

At the same time, the dialogue participants are to be commended for taking a very serious look at a significant issue that continues to divide Lutherans and Roman Catholics. We detect a more penetrating and critical appraisal of our differences than seemed to be the case with the preceding

September 1992, did in fact treat this very issue. The dialogue statement, "The Word of God: Scripture and Tradition," says participants found seven "significant points of agreement," but also three principal remaining differences: Lutherans hold to Scripture alone as the ultimate norm by which traditions must be judged, while Catholics hold to Scripture and living apostolic tradition together as norm; Lutherans deny the Catholic belief that the church's teaching authority can speak infallibly; and the two communions differ in their understanding of the development of doctrine (Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IX, "The Word of God: Scripture and Tradition," January 1993, pp. 41-42 [Typewritten]).

³⁶ Gospel and Scripture, p. 7.

round of talks, on justification.

The honest appraisal of differences we have seen here commend the dialogue process to our respective traditions. We do not believe that, even with the more recent statement on Scripture and tradition, Lutherans and Catholics ought now give up after more than a quarter century of talking to one another. Although differences remain, the dialogue to date has uncovered far more agreement than one might have imagined, and it has led to greater understanding of each other's doctrinal position while at the same time destroying stereotypes and caricatures.

More than that, we have a Scriptural mandate to seek agreement in confession of the apostolic and catholic faith. If that goal at times seems elusive--indeed, totally unrealistic--we as fellow Christians can together echo the words of the angel to Mary at the Annunciation, "with God, nothing is impossible" (Luke 1:37).

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The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod
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