

A German pope heads for the Land of Luther

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 2, 2011 | All Things Catholic

Back in 1966, a young German Catholic theologian penned a commentary on the final session of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), expressing some fairly strong reservations about what he saw as the overly optimistic and "French" tone of its concluding document, *Gaudium et Spes*, the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World."

The document's lofty humanism, this theologian charged, "Prompts the question of why, exactly, the reasonable and perfectly free human being described in the first articles was suddenly burdened with the story of Christ." He worried that concepts such as "People of God" and "the world" were given an uncritically positive spin, reflecting naiveté about the corrupting effects of sin.

Along the way, this writer offered an arresting aside. *Gaudium et Spes*, he opined, breathes the air of Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit, but not enough of Martin Luther, the German father of the Protestant Reformation. Saying so required a certain ecumenical chutzpah, given that Pope Leo X's 1520 condemnation of Luther's ideas as "heretical, scandalous, false, offensive to pious ears and seductive of simple minds, and against Catholic truth" remained on the books.

That's an irony worth recalling, given that the young theologian in question is today Pope Benedict XVI, and that in two weeks he'll be heading back to the Land of Luther for his first official state visit.

Benedict XVI may be as Catholic as they come, but he's also deeply German, and he obviously feels a streak of affection for his country's most celebrated theological son. Part of the drama of the trip, therefore, is how Benedict may use it to recalibrate relations with Protestantism heading into the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

Ecumenically, the highlight should come with a Sept. 23 visit to an Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, about two hours by car southwest of Berlin, where Luther lived from 1501 to 1511 while studying at the local university. (For the record, Luther's verdict on his stay was mixed. He described Erfurt itself as "the perfect place for a city," but derided the university as a "beerhouse and whorehouse.") It was in Erfurt that Luther entered the Augustinian order, after vowing to become a monk in gratitude for surviving a violent lightning storm, and he was ordained to the priesthood in its cathedral.

Jesuit Fr. Hans Langendoerfer, the secretary for the German bishops' conference, said this week that Benedict will use the stop in Erfurt to reshape Catholic perceptions of Luther and his contemporary disciples.

"In Erfurt, Benedict will aim to get further away from the idea that Protestants are first of all dissenters," he said. "This broad view of Christian history could be very fruitful as we approach the anniversary of the Reformation."

(Langendoerfer cautioned, however, against overheated expectations: "Hopes about this visit have gone wild," he warned. "There's talk Pope Benedict could grant the Protestants a new status or could just say 'OK, let's

completely change those rules about communion services.? It doesn't work that way.?)

By way of background, it's worth taking a brief stroll down memory lane to revisit a little-known episode from Benedict's biography, one with bearing on his attitude towards Luther and Lutherans. It involves the future pope's role in first sabotaging, then resurrecting, perhaps the most heralded ecumenical agreement of the 20th century: The 1999 "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" between the Catholic church and the Lutheran World Federation, which purportedly closed the debate over salvation through faith alone, versus faith plus works, at the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

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In some ways, the Lutherans are to Benedict what the Orthodox were to John Paul, the separated brethren he knows best and for whom he has the greatest natural affinity. Luther has loomed large in the pontiff's thought; after Augustine, there is probably no pre-modern Christian writer who has exercised more influence on his theological views. Benedict also openly admires several 20th century Lutheran theologians and Biblical scholars, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Wilfrid Joest, and Martin Hengel.

At the same time, Benedict XVI has long been a skeptic about the prospects for swift Catholic/Lutheran détente.

First of all, his judgment on Luther himself is mixed. In his 1987 book *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, Ratzinger wrote that there are really two Martin Luthers. First is the Luther of the catechisms, the great writer of hymns and promoter of liturgical reform. This Luther, Ratzinger wrote, anticipated much of the *ressourcement* that later surfaced in Catholicism prior to Vatican II. Yet there is also, Ratzinger asserted, Luther the polemicist, whose radical view of individual salvation leaves the church entirely out of view.

Second, Benedict over the years has been ambivalent about what one might call "bureaucratic ecumenism," including the joint documents that official dialogues between different confessions produce. In his view, such documents often attempt the impossible by trying to reconcile logically opposed positions of the past. Three decades ago, Ratzinger wrote that unity will not be found that way, but rather by taking "new steps" together.

Third, the water under the bridge during the five centuries since the Protestant Reformation has created new obstacles to unity, particularly with mainline Protestant churches. Those developments include changes in moral teaching and in ecclesiastical structures, as well as ministries (most pointedly, the ordination of women; a reminder will come in Erfurt, where Benedict XVI will be hosted by a female Lutheran bishop, Ilse Junkermann).

All of these forces -- Benedict's fondness for Luther and Lutheran thought, coupled with his ambivalence about official ecumenical agreements and the present realities of Western Protestantism -- were clearly on display in his reaction to the 1999 "Joint Declaration."

The fruit of decades of dialogue among Catholic and Lutheran theologians, the document was designed to address the central theological dispute of the Reformation: How the fallen human person is saved. The idea was that although Catholics and Lutherans may have different accents in answering that question, at heart they are in substantial agreement. By saying so out loud, the declaration would also take the mutual condemnations of the 16th century off the table.

The watershed moment seemed to have arrived on June 25, 1998, when Australian Cardinal Edward Cassidy, at the time the president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, held a news conference in Rome to present the text. It contained 44 "common declarations," summarizing areas of agreement. Each side was able to offer its own explanation of the reasoning that allowed it to sign the declaration.

The heart of the agreement was this key sentence: "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 us and calling us to good works."

Cassidy said the "high level of consensus" allowed both sides to state that "the condemnations leveled at one another in the sixteenth century no longer apply to the respective partner today." He obviously believed something transcendent had been achieved. Cassidy said at the time that when he dies and faces judgment, and God asks what he accomplished with his life, his answer will be: "I signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification."

As it turned out, however, the victory lap was premature. Shortly after Cassidy's presentation, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Ratzinger issued a "response" to the declaration, which seemed to suggest that the alleged consensus between Catholics and Lutherans was artificial.

(Procedurally, it must be said, this was a curious move. Outsiders fairly wondered what sense it made for the Vatican to issue a "response" to a document for which it was supposedly one of the authors. If Vatican officials had problems with the text, they asked, why sign in the first place? Alternatively, if the Vatican was going to back away from its own agreements before the ink was even dry, why invest time and treasure producing them? It was one of several episodes from the John Paul years illustrating a chronic lack of communication among the various Vatican departments, but that's another story.)

The doctrinal response, issued under Ratzinger's name and obviously shaped by his thought, ticked off a number of areas where, it charged, serious differences remained between Catholic and Lutheran theology:

- The Lutheran understanding of justification, in which the human person remains *simul iustus et peccator* -- simultaneously justified and a sinner -- is inconsistent with Catholic belief that baptism removes the stain of sin.
- Catholics believe in *both* salvation through faith *and* judgment on the basis of works, and it's not clear Lutherans share that belief.
- The Lutheran understanding of salvation is difficult to reconcile with the Catholic sacrament of penance.
- Lutheran insistence that justification is the cornerstone of the entire Christian faith is overblown; the doctrine of justification has to be incorporated into the organic whole of revelation.
- It was also unclear, according to the response, if the Lutheran signatories could speak for their denomination: "There remains the question of the real authority of such a synodal consensus, today and also tomorrow, in the life and doctrine of the Lutheran community."

The bottom line was that Trent remains in force: "The level of agreement is high," the response said, "but it does not yet allow us to affirm that all the differences separating Catholics and Lutherans in the doctrine concerning justification are simply a question of emphasis or language The divergences must, on the contrary, be overcome before we can affirm, as is done generically, that these points no longer incur the condemnations of the Council of Trent."

Many Lutherans were furious. One claimed that the Holy See had betrayed both the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic theologians who worked on the document, and that it would take decades to reestablish trust.

In the German press, Ratzinger quickly emerged as the villain of the story, which brought a rare flash of personal pique. On July 14, 1998, he published a letter in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* calling reports that he had torpedoed the agreement a "smooth lie," insisting that to scuttle dialogue with Lutherans would be to "deny myself."

Perhaps stung by the backlash, Ratzinger stepped in to put the dialogue back on track. On November 3, 1998, he quietly invited a small working group to assemble in Regensburg, Germany, in the home he shared with his brother Georg. In addition to Ratzinger, the group consisted of Lutheran Bishop Johannes Hanselmann, Catholic theologian Heinz Schuette, and Lutheran theologian Joachim Track.

Track later said, in an interview I conducted with him, that Ratzinger saved the agreement by offering three key concessions.

- First, Ratzinger agreed that the goal of the ecumenical process is unity in diversity, not structural reintegration. "This was important to many Lutherans in Germany, who worried that the final aim of all this was coming back to Rome," Track said.
- Second, Ratzinger acknowledged the authority of the Lutheran World Federation to reach agreement with the Vatican.
- Third, Ratzinger agreed that while Christians are obliged to do good works, justification and final judgment remain God's gracious acts.

On that basis, the working group retooled the Joint Declaration to satisfy concerns on both sides. Bishop George Anderson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, who was not present in Regensburg but who was briefed by the Lutheran participants, said Ratzinger's role was critical: "It was Ratzinger who untied the knots. Without him we might not have an agreement."

One year after his original announcement, Cassidy held a second press conference to present an agreement -- this time, one that the Vatican's doctrinal office did not disown.

The final version came in the form of three documents: the Joint Declaration itself, an "official common statement" indicating how the two parties understand the Joint Declaration, and an "annex" in which the points raised in the response were addressed as well as additional concerns from the Lutheran side. The statement asserted that "consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics."

The annex offered point-by-point commentary on the issues raised in the 1998 response:

- Baptism really does free humans from the power of sin, "yet we would be wrong to say that we are without sin."
- "The working of God's grace does not exclude human action."
- "In the final judgment, the justified will be judged also on their works."
- "The doctrine of justification is the measure or touchstone for the Christian faith. No teaching may contradict this criterion."
- Pointedly, the annex said that "the response of the Catholic church [to the original declaration] does not intend to put in question the authority of Lutheran synods or of the Lutheran World Federation."

With that, the doctrinal divide opened by the Reformation was, in effect, declared closed.

To be sure, the Joint Declaration has not exactly brought about an ecumenical New Jerusalem. Some Lutherans have rejected the agreement, including the International Lutheran Council and the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference. On the Catholic side, the Vatican's approval remains officially binding, but enthusiasm varies.

All signs suggest that sensitivities remain a bit raw. Recently, German Lutheran theologian Reinhard Frieling

suggested that Benedict XVI might be declared an "honorary head of Christianity." That, of course, falls far short of the "full, immediate and universal ordinary power in the church" asserted for the Roman Pontiff in canon law, but even so, Frieling's suggestion produced such a backlash in Lutheran circles that he was forced to clarify that he supports "unity with, but not under, the pope."

Yet the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification remains the ecumenical agreement in which Pope Benedict XVI was most intimately involved, first as a critic and then as its savior. As such, it illustrates both the doubts and the hopes that the first German pope in 500 years will carry with him on his homecoming later this month.

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