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A breakthrough for ecumenism

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All Things Catholic

Sometimes professional ecumenists, whose life's work is reconciliation among the divided branches of the Christian family, are jokingly referred to as "ecu-maniacs." The quip is usually one part satire, and one part grudging respect.

In fact, given the experience of recent years -- including ongoing tensions with the Orthodox over Ukraine and accusations of proselytism, and with the Anglicans and other Western churches over women's ordination and homosexuality -- perhaps one does have to be just slightly dreamy to cling to the vision of full, structural unity among all Christians as anything other than an end-time objective.

Yet the ecumenists continue to plug away, exhibiting a rather remarkable confidence that everything will sort itself out in God's time.

This week, the ecumenists scored an impressive victory in Seoul, South Korea, where the World Methodist Conference, representing 76 denominations with roots in the Methodist movement, voted on July 18 to join an agreement on the doctrine of justification first signed by the Catholic church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1998.

A signing ceremony will take place on Monday.

The heart of the agreement is 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." In one stroke, it seems to place Catholics and

Protestants on the same page in terms of resolving the old 'faith versus works' debate.

The Vatican official in charge of ecumenism at the time, Australian Cardinal Edward Cassidy, said the agreement 'virtually resolves a long-disputed question at the close of the twentieth century.'

Of course, not everyone felt that way; some Lutherans rejected the agreement, and it had to be nuanced by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in order to pass Catholic muster. Ratzinger actually organized last-minute meetings at his brother Georg's home in Bavaria in order to iron out the final version of the text.

Nevertheless, in the end, the agreement suggests that the Catholic church and the Lutherans were now in essential agreement over the issue that had been the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation. Cardinal Walter Kasper, today's top Vatican official on ecumenism, said the decision by the Methodists to sign on is 'historic,' marking a further stage in reconciliation. He also said he hopes other denominations will eventually join the agreement.

No one believes that the outcome in Seoul means that Catholics and Protestants will soon be taking part in one another's Eucharists, or jointly recognizing the pope as their primate. There is much theological, political and cultural work still to be done. Yet facing an ecumenical landscape in which temptations to despair are plentiful, Seoul will represent a much-needed sign of hope.

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