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There should be more focus on Lutheran/Catholic agreements

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A strong and vital official dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans continues yet remains one of the best-kept secrets in Christianity. The common understanding of the doctrine of justification is a case in point.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was approved by the Catholic church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999. The doctrine of justification by faith is at the core of Christian belief and has long been a major sticking point between Catholics and Lutherans.

The fact that both denominations now share the same belief on this doctrinal issue is pretty amazing. Yet how many Catholics or Lutherans are aware of this fact? I don't know about Lutherans, but I'm pretty sure you would be hard-pressed to find a Catholic in the pews who is aware of this joint declaration.

Another example of how poorly we have done in sharing and updating the Catholic faithful is in the area of Scripture study. Catholic Scripture scholars have made major advances in understanding both the New and Old Testaments. These advances have brought about entirely new spiritual insights and opportunities for individual and group reflection. Yet the majority of Catholics continue to understand the Gospels as essentially historical accounts of the life of Jesus. It illustrates once again our failure to help the faithful grow into an adult understanding of their faith.

Now this same worldwide Catholic/Lutheran group is prepared to come out with a joint understanding of the Reformation period of history. "From Conflict to Communion" will be published in May by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity. Again, after centuries of in-fighting, hostility and

denunciations of each other, they are now able to agree on what really happened during the Reformation and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of each church's position. They will need to accept the mistakes made on both sides. They will also need to recognize specific steps each side has taken that have contributed to the resulting ongoing disunity. This is a truly remarkable development. Will this effort be any more widely heralded than the document on justification?

The work of this group embodies such an important and positive effort in our divided world and divided Christianity. It deserves far more recognition and dissemination among both denominations and throughout worldwide Christianity.

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