

*Avery Dulles*

THE LUTHERAN-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE: THE YEAR 1980

Let me begin on a somewhat personal note. In the days when I grew up in New York and New England, I seem to have been surrounded by Protestants of many species, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, and others. Occasionally I ran into a Roman Catholic, but almost no one I knew was a Lutheran. Luther for me was a figure in history books. Only in the Navy during World War II did I come to know a Lutheran really well, and since he was a devout student of the Bible and of theology, the two of us had an excellent theological dialogue. But again after that, during my theological studies, Lutheranism became for me a purely academic matter.

Only when I went to Germany for a year as a priest in 1957 did I really encounter Lutheranism as a living community. At that time the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in Germany was in full vigor. At Münster I got to know the Catholic professor, Hermann Volk (now Cardinal Archbishop of Mainz), and the Lutheran professor, Ernst Kinder. I then visited the Catholic ecumenical institute at Paderborn, and became well acquainted with its director, Albert Brandenburg. After that I went to Heidelberg, where I spent some time at the Lutheran ecumenical institute of Edmund Schlink. Then I went to Niederaltaich Abbey, where I took part in a three day institute on the Eucharist and Lord's Supper directed jointly by the Lutheran dogmatician, Paul Althaus, and the Catholic patrologist,

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Alois Grillmeier. Everywhere I found deep mutual respect between the two confessions, a passion to learn about each other's heritage, and a sense of exhilaration at the richness of the shared patrimony. Mingling with professors and theological students, I was amazed to discover the faith, the devotion, the theological vitality, and the inner coherence of Lutheran Christianity.

In 1960 I returned to the United States to teach at Woodstock College, where I had previously studied. Several of my former professors, now my colleagues, were by this time in the mainstream of Catholic ecumenism. My closest colleague was Gustave Weigel, the English-speaking interpreter for the non-Catholic observers at Vatican II, who devoted the last years of his short life (he died in January 1964 at the age of 57) to the ecumenical apostolate. A second colleague was John Courtney Murray, often considered the main architect of the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom. A third was the patristic theologian, Walter J. Burghardt, who still today stands in the front rank of Catholic ecumenists. When the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue was launched in 1965, I was kept well informed through Father Murray and Father Burghardt, who were among the original Catholic participants. It was therefore with immense personal pleasure that I accepted in 1972 an invitation to become a member of that dialogue. In the past eight years Lutheran-Catholic relations have been a constant and growing preoccupation. The dialogue has led me into many interesting conferences, collaborative projects, and academic ventures. I have taught courses in Lutheran seminaries, jointly authored several articles with Lutheran theologians, and had many opportunities to address Lutheran audiences. The enthusiasm for the dialogue that began in my Navy days, and

reached new heights in my German sojourn, has remained with me to this day without any diminution.

This evening I should like to share with you some reflections on the work of the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, the Anniversary Year of the Augsburg Confession, and the present prospects for Lutheran-Catholic relations.

#### The American Dialogue

The American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue is of course only one of many such dialogues. Between Lutherans and Catholics there have been national dialogues in other countries; there has been an important international dialogue, and a number of local dialogues. The Catholic church has been in dialogue not only with Lutherans but with many other churches and communions; and the Lutheran churches have been in dialogue with many other groups besides Catholics.

It seems to be generally agreed that no other bilateral conversation has equaled the Lutheran-Catholic in its systematic approach to well-chosen issues, in its courageous approach to difficult questions, and in the scholarly quality of its publications. I can say this somewhat objectively since so much of the work of the dialogue was accomplished before I became a member of the team. I might add, too, that I would have serious criticisms of some of the earlier statements of the dialogue, but in spite of these reservations I find the volumes worthy of close study and attention.

You are probably somewhat familiar with the work of the dialogue thus far. The first two volumes of its deliberations, on *The*

*Nicene Creed as Dogma and on One Baptism for the Remission of Sins*, deliberately focused on central questions which promised to manifest a great measure of agreement. Whatever the differences between the Catholics and the Reformers, they were within the context of a still greater agreement about the basic Christological faith of the historic church and about baptism as a necessary and effectual sacrament. Today both Lutherans and Catholics have to face many new questions about Christology and baptism, but they face these questions together, and are not divided by their confessional allegiances. The first two volumes of the dialogue served to highlight the common ground.

From then on the dialogue began to grapple with more delicate issues. Volume 3 dealt with the Eucharist, which had been a center of fierce controversy in the sixteenth century, not only between Catholics and Lutherans, but also between each of them and other groups, such as the Calvinists, the Zwinglians, and the Anglicans. Rather surprisingly, the dialogue came to the conclusion that the two groups were no longer divided in faith on the two central issues of the Eucharist as sacrifice and of the real presence of the Lord in this sacrament. The unresolved differences regarding these questions were found to be matters of theological opinion rather than of faith, and hence not matters that should divide the churches.<sup>1</sup>

Volume 4 got still deeper into disputed territory by taking up the doctrine of ministry. The main problem was whether it might be possible for Catholics today to recognize the validity of Lutheran ministries, and to this question the dialogue gave a qualified "yes."<sup>2</sup> I say "qualified," because the Catholics did not recommend recognition without some equivocation, and because they

apparently disagreed among themselves about the basis on which such recognition should be given. Nevertheless the volume was of great theological value, especially for exposing the weakness of certain arguments commonly offered from the Catholic side against the validity of Lutheran ministries. Nearly every important ecumenical statement on ministry in the 1970s has relied, directly or indirectly, on the pioneering work of this dialogue.

Volume 5 dealt with Papal Primacy, again with surprising results. Many Lutherans were astonished to find how strong a case could be made from the Lutheran side for esteeming the papal office as a sign and servant of the unity of the universal Church.<sup>3</sup> Many Catholic readers were surprised to learn that Catholics could admit the absence of any compelling biblical proof for the doctrine of the papacy. The Catholic members of the dialogue acknowledged that the papacy had developed very gradually over the centuries and could not be clearly traced to Christ as the founder.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, some Lutherans and some Catholics attacked volume 5 as conceding too much to the other side. As a co-author I still feel confident that the volume will stand up under scrutiny as a solid and prudent achievement.

Volume 6, which should appear in print almost any day now, deals very thoroughly with the universal teaching office and its infallibility.<sup>5</sup> It is the longest volume the dialogue has yet published, and contains the longest common statement. The report registers convergence rather than full consensus. It does not purport to reach full agreement on infallibility, but it shows that Lutherans, who generally hold that the Church is indefectibly

maintained in the truth of the gospel, can come very close to accepting infallibility, and that Catholics, by setting severe restrictions on infallibility, can come very close to agreeing with Lutherans. Both groups see the importance of structures whereby the universal church can speak authoritatively to contemporary questions.

Since completing the volume on infallibility last year, the dialogue has been discussing the theme of justification. Increasingly throughout our discussions we have found that our differences on other questions seemed to arise out of different perspectives on justification. Central in the minds of Luther and Melancthon, might not the doctrine of justification still be the deepest source of our division? If we could agree on this, we might be in a good position to overcome our other differences.

It would not be appropriate this evening to enter into the details of any one of the dialogue volumes, since the field is so vast and the material so complex. It may be more appropriate to reflect on the question why it is that Lutherans and Catholics, both before and after Vatican Council II, have felt such an intense desire to engage one another in theological dialogue. If we can fathom the reasons behind this impulse, we shall be in a better position, I believe, to assess the value of the dialogue and of its results.

As a first reason for the dialogue, I would suggest that Lutherans and Catholics possess an immense common heritage, the whole biblical and medieval matrix out of which the Reformation arose. Luther imbibed this heritage as a scholar, priest, and monk. The Augustinian tradition flowed in his veins. He wholeheartedly

accepted the Scriptures of the church, the creeds of the church, and the central sacraments of the church. Here in the United States, where the dominant forms of Protestantism are of more recent origin, and less closely bound to their own origins, Lutherans and Catholics, as two minority churches, cannot help but feel closely drawn together by their common roots and even by their common memories of controversies that are all but forgotten by most other Americans. For Lutheran or Catholic theologians the issues addressed by the Augsburg Confession and by the Council of Trent are still actual.

As a second reason, I would assign the deep concern for purity of doctrine in both traditions. The Catholic faith has in most periods been distinguished by its affinity with the life of the mind. Great thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, Newman and Rahner, are among the glories of the Church. Luther, coming out of the medieval university world, shared this intellectual orientation. Whether right or wrong, he unquestionably ranks as one of the great theological geniuses of all time. The issues between Lutherans and Catholics have from the beginning been deeply theological, and for this reason representatives of the two traditions almost spontaneously engage in theological discussion. In conversing with other Christian traditions one often finds it harder to get the discussion on a strictly theological plane. Doctrinal standards have an importance for Catholics and Lutherans that they probably do not have for most other Christians in our day.

A third reason for the dialogue between these two communions is that Lutheranism originated as a message directed to Roman Catholics. Luther had no thought of setting up a separate sect or

a new church. Far from being a secessionist he was by desire and intention a reformer within Western Catholicism. There is no other major church or communion which defines itself so thoroughly in relation to Rome as do the Lutherans. The Eastern churches continue to live off their own heritage from antiquity, a heritage that is not to the same extent that of Western Christianity. The other Protestant churches define themselves in opposition to one another and in most cases not chiefly in reference to Rome. Many of them accept rather readily the fact of their own separation from Roman Catholicism.

From the Catholic perspective, Lutheranism presents a standing question that cannot be ignored. Rome must continually ask itself how much of the Lutheran program it can accept. In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent accepted some of the proposed reforms, but rejected others as contrary to Christ's will for his church. In our own century, Vatican Council II went further than Trent. It stressed the primacy of Scripture and the importance of preaching as a form of the word of God; it was silent on purgatory and indulgences; it encouraged the vernacular liturgy, it discouraged so-called "private" Masses, and it conceded the chalice to the laity. Thus the Lutheran intentions continue to be attentively considered by Catholics, and we have to ask ever again whether the remaining differences are so great that we must look upon ourselves as members of divided churches.

Lutherans and Catholics have, one might say, a unique ecumenical responsibility. For the most part, the contemporary divisions in Western Christianity, are historically traceable to the quarrel between Luther and the Roman theologians. If there is



to be a general reconciliation it must probably begin with these two traditions.

1980: A Crucial Year

Our hopes of reconciliation are stimulated by past memories. In the year 1980, Lutherans and Catholics all over the world are recalling in a special way the Augsburg Confession, which was composed 450 years ago. On January 21, 1530 the Emperor Charles V summoned the electors and princes of the German Empire to the Diet of Augsburg with the aim "that divisions may be allayed, antipathies set aside, all past errors left to the judgment of our Saviour, and every care taken to give a charitable hearing to every man's opinion, thoughts, and notions, to understand them, to weigh them, to bring and reconcile men to a unity in Christian truth, to dispose of everything that has not been rightly explained or treated of on the one side or the other, to see to it that one single, true religion may be accepted and held by us all, and that we all live in one common church and in unity."<sup>6</sup>

In response to this invitation the Lutherans, with Melancthon as their chief spokesman, composed in the spring of 1530 what remains to this day, in the judgment of most historians, the most formal official statement of Lutheran principles. The Augsburg Confession, as it is called, seeks to demonstrate that Lutheranism does not differ from Roman Catholicism on any essential points of doctrine, but rather on points of discipline. At the end of the doctrinal section, the Confession states: "This is about the sum of our teaching. As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the Catholic church or the Church of Rome, insofar as the ancient church is known to us from its

writers. Since this is so, those who insist that our teachers are to be regarded as heretics judge too harshly. The whole dissension is concerned with a certain few abuses that have crept into the churches without proper authority."<sup>7</sup> Then again at the beginning of the second part, dealing with abuses, the Confession states explicitly: "...our churches dissent from the church catholic in no article of faith but only omit some few abuses which are new."<sup>8</sup>

To a very great extent the Catholic theologians at Augsburg accepted these claims of the Augsburg Confession, but they had difficulty with a number of particular points which seemed to them contrary to the Scriptures, the ancient tradition, and the teaching of the Roman church. Thus the Augsburg Confession was not accepted by the Imperial Diet, but the Emperor ordered that theological discussion should be continued. During the ensuing months the theologians of both sides came to almost total agreement on many of the central doctrinal points, including justification, though the question of practical abuses continued to resist solution. But by this time the situation was complicated by many nontheological factors. For example, the Lutheran princes began to fear that if the jurisdiction of bishops were restored (as proposed by the Augsburg Confession), the properties confiscated from the church might have to be returned. Gradually the two parties fell into the polemical attitudes that have characterized the past few centuries. Luther himself at one point lamented: "I fear that we shall never again come as close together as we did at Augsburg."<sup>9</sup>

In the more ecumenical atmosphere of the past decade the question has arisen: can we make use of the Augsburg Confession as a basis for Lutheran-Catholic rapprochement, so as to get back behind the

subsequent polemics to the broad doctrinal agreements of 1530? Since 1974 a number of prominent Catholic theologians in Germany, including Joseph Ratzinger, the present Cardinal Archbishop of Munich, have proposed that the Augsburg Confession be treated as the fundamental declaration of Lutheran identity and that it be recognized as evidence of the essentially catholic character of Lutheran Christianity. In general, Lutherans have responded favorably to these proposals. For example, the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Dar-es-Salaam, in June 1977, greeted these Roman Catholic initiatives and expressed willingness to enter into dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church over the possibility of recognizing the Augsburg Confession as a particular (Lutheran) expression of the common faith of Lutheran and Catholic Christians.

In a variety of ways, the Lutheran and Catholic churches are commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Already there have been two important meetings in 1979, preparing for a major celebration at Augsburg in June 1980. A distinguished international group of Lutheran and Catholic scholars has already written a joint commentary on the Augsburg Confession, to be published in German in the coming months, and, I would hope, in other languages as well. The authors in a common declaration characterize their commentary as "our contribution to the discussion whether the competent organs of the Roman Catholic Church can recognize this doctrinal document as an expression of Catholic faith and what the attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to this question might be." "We have found the Augsburg Confession," they declare, "a 'confession of the one faith,' even though open questions remain and we cannot, or cannot yet, speak of it as a common confession of our Catholic faith."

In a jointly authored article on ministry in the volume just mentioned, Professor George Lindbeck and I point out that the Augsburg Confession unquestioningly assumed that there must be bishops in the church, and that it attributes to bishops the traditional threefold function of teaching, sacramental ministry, and governing. Insisting on the distinction between spiritual and secular power, the Confession holds that bishops hold spiritual jurisdiction over their churches as a matter of divine right. In all essentials, the positive assertions concerning ministry in the Augsburg Confession are in agreement with Catholic teaching. There are some omissions, ambiguities, and open questions, but these can be resolved in a Catholic sense. In view of the declared intention of the Confession to demonstrate that the Reformers stood within the traditional faith of the church, and wished to contest only practical abuses, it would seem methodically justified to clarify the doctrinal ambiguities in a Catholic sense, even at points where other Lutheran writings, of earlier or later date, reject the Catholic positions.

A second, independent venture commemorating the anniversary is a collection of essays by twelve theologians, six Lutherans and six Catholics, on the question of Catholic recognition of the Augsburg Confession. *The Role of the Augsburg Confession*, as this volume is called (Augsburg Press, Feb. 1980) is in part translated from a German volume that appeared in 1977, but omits two essays in the original text and adds four new articles by American theologians. In my own contribution to this volume I take the position that the Catholic church is unlikely to give official recognition to the Augsburg Confession, since on a number of points the Confession repudiates doctrines and practices still accepted by the Catholic church. But because the

Augsburg Confession is more Catholic in tone than other Lutheran Confessional writings, and since it enjoys a certain preeminence of authority for Lutherans, it can serve to solidify the common ground between Lutherans and Catholics, and thus to prepare the way for a time when, as Melanchthon hoped, the two may "live together in unity in one fellowship and church" (Preface, quoting summons of Emperor Charles V).

Still another project for observing the 450th anniversary year of the Augsburg Confession deserves mention in this context. The *Lutheran Forum* and the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute in New York City have prepared a number of study aids so that the fruits of the dialogue may be better understood and appreciated at the "grassroots" level. Among these study aids is a volume, *Exploring the Faith We Share*, just published by Paulist Press under the editorship of Glenn C. Stone of the Lutheran Forum and Charles V. LaFontaine of the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute. Described as a handbook for Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, this volume is designed to explain to lay audiences the principal accomplishments of the national dialogue thus far.

Responsible dissemination of the results of the dialogue through study aids such as these is, I believe, important for the continued success of the dialogue itself. The dialogue depends for its effectiveness on popular support and understanding. Misled by inaccurate or sensational press reports, some naively imagine that the theologians have already overcome all major doctrinal problems, and that only the stubbornness of church officials prevents full reconciliation. Others suspect that the dialogue is a threat to the distinctive heritage of one communion or the other, and should be terminated forthwith. Still others look

upon it as an idle speculative exercise that cannot possibly yield any practical fruits. Impetuous enthusiasm, anxious self-assertion, and cynical disinterest, taken in combination, could conceivably lead the pastoral authorities to wonder about the continued usefulness of the dialogue. In raising this possibility, I am already touching upon the future prospects of the dialogue, which belong to the third and final portion of this paper.

#### Future Prospects

Both in Germany in the 1950s and in this country in the 1960s, the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue was notable for achieving new and dramatic advances, far beyond what could have been anticipated. Ecumenical theologians, in their scholarly research, in private discussion, and in official consultation, reworked almost all the contentious questions which had previously seemed to divide the two confessions--questions such as the sufficiency of Scripture, justification by faith, the nature of the Eucharist, the pastoral office, the papal ministry, and Mariology. The reinterpretation of these various doctrines raised hopes in many quarters that the ancient barriers might not prove insurmountable. After Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, and comparable ecumenical declarations from other church bodies and councils, the highest authorities of the Catholic church and of world Lutheranism gave great encouragement to the dialogue and seemed genuinely eager to hear of new agreements. Ecumenical theologians, working in this favorable atmosphere, felt confident that they were preparing the paths of the future.

In the past few years, the enthusiasm has somewhat abated. In part, this may be due to the passage of time. The honeymoon period is over, and many of the original pioneers of the dialogue have either retired or died. On the Catholic side, we still sorely miss the presence of Gustave Weigel, who did so much to clear the ground for the dialogue, and that of John Courtney Murray, who took such a prominent part in the early stages. On the Lutheran side, the dialogue team has been weakened by the loss of Paul Empie, the Lutheran chairman, and that of prominent participants such as Kent Knutson, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, and Warren Quanbeck. Giants such as these have not been, and probably cannot be, replaced. A younger generation is coming along, who never shared the conciliar experience and the ecumenical excitement of the 1960s. Reflecting the general mentality of the seventies, they tend to proceed with greater caution and reserve.

The dialogue cannot but be affected by the general state of life in the churches. In the past decades both Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism have experienced inner polarization and division. The daring advances of the post-conciliar years have aroused anxieties and tensions that cannot be ignored. Ecumenists are under particular suspicion as fifth columnists in their own churches. Church officials are inevitably solicitous to prevent new divisions and breakoffs, which could hardly serve the cause of ecumenism. For this reason they are tending to rein in some of the more venturesome theologians and ecumenists. Can they afford to encourage greater unity among the confessions if this will increase disunity within the confessions? Can they promote a dialogue which seems likely to blur the sense of confessional identity on the part of either Lutherans and Catholics? Questions such as these are repeatedly asked.

It is in this context, I believe, that one must view certain intra-Lutheran developments, such as the recent turmoil within the Missouri Synod and its Concordia Theological Seminary. In Germany, too, there have been a number of depositions of pastors for doctrinal reasons. In the 1960s Max Lackmann and Richard Baumann were dismissed for their "catholicizing" positions, and only last year, Pastor Paul Schultz of Hamburg was relieved of his pastoral office for departing in other respects from the teaching of the Lutheran Confessional writings.

Similar developments have occurred within Roman Catholicism, the most celebrated being the recent judgments of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith against Hans K<sup>u</sup>ng. As might be expected, this ruling has provoked strong reactions in both secular and ecumenical circles. *Christian Century*, for example, ran a strong editorial in its Jan. 2-9, 1980 issue, entitled, "A Profane Act by the Sacred Congregation." Some Lutherans have also been critical. On Jan. 8, 1980, the Lutheran members of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in this country wrote a letter to Cardinal Seper, the Prefect of the Congregation, voicing their "dismay." "We fear," they wrote, "that the lack of even inner-Catholic dialogue in the recent action of your Congregation will hinder further advances in Lutheran-Catholic relations, and even render nugatory those already made."

Other Lutheran commentators have emphasized the complexity of the question. Martin Marty, in *New Republic* (Jan. 5-12, 1980), acknowledged that K<sup>u</sup>ng "pushes the borders of orthodoxy" and that many were understandably "grieved over his op-ed approach to challenging, if not taunting, an immensely popular pope." Marty observed also that the Catholic church, like any community, has



boundaries and has the right to define them, and left somewhat vague the procedures whereby such boundaries ought to be established.

Still another Lutheran commentator, Richard John Neuhaus, writing in *Christian Century* for Jan. 16, 1980, remarked that K<sup>u</sup>ng himself has done nothing to enhance mutual trust between the Church's pastoral leadership and its theologians. "Even his friends complain that he has often been needlessly confrontational, flaunting his rebellion almost as a dare to the Vatican, buying headlines at the price of dialogue and scholarship." While expressing misgivings about the current procedures of the Congregation for Doctrine, Neuhaus recognized that there are no easy solutions. The church as a community, he said, must find ways of distinguishing "between its own self-understanding and the individual opinions of the many who belong to it." The decision, according to Neuhaus, would not necessarily be any better if referred to an assembly of academic theologians (as K<sup>u</sup>ng has suggested) or if placed in the hands of democratically elected church governors, such as now preside over the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. "Rome's problem," said Neuhaus, "is our problem." The K<sup>u</sup>ng episode, he concludes, should not be permitted to become a lasting setback to ecumenical progress or to reinforce anti-Catholic or anti-ecumenical sentiments, where these still exist.

My own reactions are somewhat similar to those of most of the Lutherans from whom I have quoted. They are eminently fair in recognizing the responsibility of the church to define the limits of admissible doctrine. According to both the Lutheran and Catholic traditions this responsibility cannot be properly transferred to academic theologians or settled by popular referendum. As the

Augsburg Confession declares, it pertains by divine right "to the bishops as bishops to reject doctrine which is contrary to the Gospel."<sup>10</sup>

The principal issue raised by the critics is whether the Congregation or the German bishops have violated the norms of due process. Although I would not be in a position to speak with authority on this point, the reports seem to show that the current procedures of the CDF fall short of the standards of due process we have come to take for granted in the English-speaking world. But in the last analysis the issues in the case of Kung are not so much procedural as substantive. No conceivable improvements in the procedure would be likely to yield a significantly different understanding of Kung's theological positions or of the arguments whereby he supports these. He has written repeatedly and voluminously on the points under discussion. Although he has declined to respond to Roman inquiries, he did on one occasion discuss his views with members of the German Bishops' Conference, and they were not satisfied with his responses, either in the oral exchange or in subsequent writings.<sup>11</sup>

I do not know exactly what is meant when some speak of a lack of dialogue within the Catholic church in connection with the case of Kung. A whole series of inquiries and admonitions have been addressed to Kung over a period of twelve years, beginning with the publication of his book, *The Church*. His works have been subjected to extensive criticism within the theological community, and dozens of other theologians have expressed their differences with him, sometimes in friendly reviews, sometimes in hostile tracts. Kung has sometimes responded to the attacks, but he has apparently been unwilling to engage in dialogue either with Rome

or, generally speaking, with the German episcopate. He gives the impression of being more at home with the tactics of confrontation. Any complaints about lack of dialogue should in fairness be directed to Kung at least as much as to ecclesiastical authorities.

The two main points on which Kung's views are found unacceptable are matters that have been discussed at some depth in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, namely Christology and infallibility. In the first round of their dialogue, American Lutherans and Catholics reached prompt agreement on the Nicene creed as dogma of the church. They concurred that the Son, who was made man, is true God, and that in so teaching Nicea had given "its definitive reply to an ever-recurring question."<sup>12</sup> Lutherans and Catholics, in fidelity to their respective doctrinal standards, agreed that Nicea's use of non-biblical terms to respond to the Arian errors was legitimate, necessary, and binding on Christians. Unlike the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, Kung seems not to recognize Nicea's declaration as a valid dogmatic development. In the words of Cardinal Höfner, the president of the German Bishops' Conference:

On the central Christological question, whether Jesus Christ *is really* Son of God, in other words, if he is of the degree and level of being of God, without diminution, Kung notwithstanding all his attempts at clarification, avoids a confession that is decisive and formulated in binding words.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to infallibility, Kung denies that the church in any of its teachings is effectively protected against the possibility of error. In this denial, he appears to contradict the defined teaching of Vatican I and Vatican II. I recognize, of course, that many Protestants would agree with his position. But the precise question being asked is whether on this point Kung speaks more like a Protestant than a Catholic. In our American dialogue, neither the Catholic nor the Lutheran participants looked upon

Küng's position as a viable one for Catholics. George Lindbeck, writing as a Lutheran, clearly stated that Küng's views on infallibility "lack sufficient visible *romanitas* to be useful in a community which is committed to maintaining, even while reinterpreting, its traditions."<sup>14</sup> Even the Lutheran positions, as expressed in several volumes of the dialogue, are more favorable to post-apostolic dogmatic developments--as in the case of Nicea-- than Küng shows himself to be. It can scarcely be surprising, therefore, if Rome and the German Bishops' Conference find that Küng's stand is at variance with Catholic teaching.

Although some headlines have given the contrary impression, the Holy See and the German bishops made it clear that they were neither declaring Küng a heretic nor excommunicating him. They left him a church member and a priest in good standing, with undiminished power to speak and publish. What they did was to deprive Küng of his mandate to teach on an ecclesiastical faculty with canonical mission. This action they took on the ground that Küng had departed on certain important points from the "integral truth of the Catholic faith" and had failed, after repeated warnings, to bring his teaching into line with the official doctrine of the church. Far from being a "surprise pre-Christmas attack," as Küng called it, this decision was the almost inevitable outcome of a whole series of preliminary exchanges going back to 1967.

What, then, shall we conclude? Does the recent action against Küng hamper the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue or bring its results into jeopardy? Far from calling into question any consensus positions of the dialogue, it confirms the dialogue's own interpretation of the Nicene faith and of the Catholic doctrine of infallibility.

Whatever one may think of the ruling in this particular case, it may be profitable to recall that a church's capacity for dialogue increases in almost direct proportion to its ability to make corporate decisions on matters of doctrine and discipline. Some churches find it difficult to enter into dialogue because there is no one who can implement any recommendations or decisions that might be reached. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue has been relatively successful because set up by competent agencies to whom it reports its findings. The dialogue itself has never pretended to make doctrine or establish policy. From time to time it offers suggestions and recommendations to the pastoral authorities to whom it reports. The presupposition of the whole process is that the pastoral leaders have the power and authority to accept, reject, or modify any recommendations made to them. A church that can never say no is inevitably a church that cannot say yes either.

In my judgment, therefore, the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue is not directly jeopardized by the recent action taken with regard to Hans K<sup>u</sup>ng. It might, however, be indirectly threatened by the new mood of caution of which I have already spoken. The recent moves of the CDF are only part of a much larger picture, discernible in many parts of the world. Pastors and faithful are alike demanding that their security be not disturbed by challenging questions or by venturesome programs. This craving for security could, if unchecked, gravely weaken the churches' responsiveness to the demands of truth and honesty and their commitment to take bold steps for the sake of the unity Christ wills. Fidelity to tradition must not be made an excuse for failing to reform abuses and to adjust to the demands of a new age. The present proceedings against K<sup>u</sup>ng and others could be ominous if they signified

a timid withdrawal from the courageous initiatives of Vatican Council II.

In the present ambiguous situation, ecumenical dialogue groups must be more than ordinarily careful not to isolate themselves from their own communities. Nothing would be gained--but much might be lost--if they were to wander into a kind of ecumenical no-man's-land between the existing churches. For the fruitfulness of the dialogue, the theologians must be true to their own confessional heritage and must seek to recommend only what has a solid chance of gaining acceptance.

Gradually, through a step-by-step procedure, it may be possible to overcome the misunderstandings and mistrust that separate the various communions. Provided that the pastors and faithful of the churches are brought along with the changes, every step forward renders the next step easier. By receiving from the other, each tradition can be enriched, with the result that both share a larger fund of common beliefs and practices.

Whether this gradualist approach will ever lead to full visible unity only time can tell. Perhaps the day will come when the churches will recognize that it is no longer enough to reinterpret their own past documents, but that bold innovation is required. If so, something like a conversion will be at hand. Theology, by itself, cannot produce conversion, but if the churches feel drawn by God to a kind of corporate conversion, theology can help to interpret that moment of grace. Theology has always sought to reflect on the dynamics of conversion, and ecumenical theology can illuminate, if it cannot effect, the ecumenical conversion that may be needed if the churches are to extricate themselves

from their entrenched positions and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord of the church, who is always powerful to join together in one body all those communities that sincerely call upon his name.

NOTES

- 1 *The Eucharist as Sacrifice* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1967), p. 198. This volume is also available from Augsburg Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- 2 *Eucharist and Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1970), pp. 31-32. This volume is also available from Augsburg Press.
- 3 *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), pp. 19, 33.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35. In my summary, I have not been able to indicate the exact nuances of the statement, which should be consulted by anyone wishing to understand precisely what was said.
- 5 Since this talk was given, the volume became available: *Teaching Authority and the Infallibility of the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).
- 6 In J.M. Reu (ed.), *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources* (reprinted by Concordia Seminary Press, St. Louis, Mo., n.d.), pp. 71-72.
- 7 In T.G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), p. 47, Latin version.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 48, Latin version.
- 9 Quoted in J.J. Hughes, "A Catholic Recognition of the Augsburg Confession," *America* 142/1 (Jan. 5-12, 1980), p. 16.
- 10 In Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 84, Latin version.
- 11 Cf. Cardinal J. Hoffner, "Declaration on Father Kung," *Origins* 9/29 (Jan. 3, 1980), pp. 464-66.
- 12 *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma in the Church* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1965), pp. 31-32. Also available from Augsburg Press.
- 13 Hoffner, "Declaration," p. 465.
- 14 G.A. Lindbeck, *Infallibility* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ., 1973), pp. 36-37; cf. his essay, "The Reformation and the Infallibility Debate," *Teaching Authority*, pp. 105-106.