

**Response of Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson to
Vatican Statement “Responses to Some Questions
Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church”**

The Vatican’s statement, “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church” (“Responses to Questions”), does not appear to change previously stated positions. It does, however, restate known positions in provocative ways that are before us in the ongoing U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic bilateral dialogue.

It is no surprise that the Roman Catholic Church asserts that in it subsists the Church of Christ; surely every Christian church body makes the same assertion, for it is only because Christ’s Church survives in and lives through the community we call “Church” that we preserve and promote the apostolic faith. However troubling such exclusive claims may be, we recall the Second Vatican Council’s “Decree on Ecumenism” which affirmed that the separated churches and ecclesial communities are used by the Spirit of Christ “as means of salvation” (*Unitatis redintegratio* 3.4). The statement, “Responses to Questions,” does not minimize this affirmation.

As Lutherans we uphold the *Augsburg Confession*, which states that, “The Church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught and the sacraments are administered rightly” (AC VII). Therefore, although our witness is wounded by the division that exists among Christians, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes no deficiency in our self-understanding as “Church.”

The anguished response of Christians around the world to the Vatican’s statement, however, clearly indicates that what may have been meant to clarify has caused pain. Now is the time for our thoughtful and measured response. The question all Christian people should reflect on today is how best to exercise forbearance and love for one another. With Roman Catholics, we trust that, “. . .the Lord of Ages wisely and patiently follows out the plan of grace on our behalf, sinners that we are. In recent times more than ever before, he has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to a longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians” (*UR* 1.1).

“Responses to Questions” does not alter the commitment to ecumenism of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It will not cause us to step back from our U.S. or international relationships or promises. We remain dedicated to the ecumenical task described in “Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA,” which stresses that, “Ecumenism has as its focus and goal clarity of understanding among Christians and a greater realization of unity among Christ’s people. As such it is closely related to the mission of the Gospel to all the world.” That singular focus and goal has led to numerous breakthroughs with the Roman Catholic Church, including the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” in 1999 which resolved a bitter 500-year dispute. We will continue to celebrate and build upon the deepening relationships fostered by that “Joint Declaration” even as we long for greater visible unity itself.

I encourage you not to pull back from your own personal commitment to ecumenism. I agree with Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity,

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that in order for the ecumenical movement to bear the weight of change for the future, it must be rooted in an ecumenism of life. This is ecumenism at the local and personal level through joint prayer, Bible study, and service with Christians of other traditions.

Difficult and important matters of ministry and ecclesiology remain to be discussed in our ongoing U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue. Since “Baptism . . . establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it” (*UR*, 22.2), Christian unity already exists through baptism into Christ, which serves as a continuing sign of hope that our churches will not always remain divided.

Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*