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The Roman Catholic Reception of the Augsburg Confession

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In the Catholic response to the Augsburg Confession (CA) three stages can be discerned. The first includes the 1530 Diet of Augsburg itself and also the following years, until about 1555. This was a period of considerable consultation, discussion, and debate. The second period, the longest by far, extends from 1555 to 1957, and is best described as absence of consultation, a period of unrelenting *Kontroverstheologie*. The third period's beginning I date 1958 because in that year then theologian, now also Cardinal Archbishop of Munich, Joseph Ratzinger, conducted a seminar on the ecclesial meaning and ecumenical significance of the CA. From that time on there have been at first sporadic, but then, steady, efforts on the parts of both Lutherans and Roman Catholics to achieve some kind of mutual consensus about and acceptance of the CA as an ecumenical confession of faith. Against the backdrop of the first and second stages we can better understand the present status and future possibilities of the third stage.

Before we undertake our historical survey of the Roman Catholic reaction to the CA, it is critically important to note that there has never been an authentic, authoritative reaction, much less condemnation, by either papal or conciliar magisterium jurisdiction.¹ The response of the Council of Trent to the Protestant Reformation in general does not include the CA by name. Nor are the doctrines rejected by Trent necessarily attributable to the Confession--nor, as various investigations have shown, to the Reformers themselves nominatim. Hence, since the CA was then and remains now, whatever the vicissitudes, the "primary particular symbol of the Lutheran Church,"² it is most fitting that its possible mutual acceptability as a common creed for both Roman Catholics and Lutherans be (again) seriously and "ecumenically" investigated.

I

I say "again" because it once was seriously considered, in the *Constitutio Pontificia*³ prepared by the Catholic theologians at the emperor's

¹See A. Ebner, "Anerkennung des Augsburger Bekenntnis der Lutheraner?" *Orientierung*, 42 (1978), 88.

²A. C. Piepkorn, "Augsburg Confession," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 1040.

³This document, as well as many other pertinent texts, is readily available in M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession* (Chicago: Wartburg, 1930).

behest as the Catholic response to the CA, although this fact still escapes some contemporary observers. Why anyone would wish to call this document a "polemical response" entirely escapes me, especially since Eck's original proposal was rejected by the emperor and the Catholic estates because of content and style deemed to be "malicious, sullen, and unnecessary." Certainly the atmosphere was polemical, and the *theological* barrages of Eck and Luther, for example, can hardly be termed irenic, nor conciliatory, whatever must be said of the emperor, whose formal intentions, at least, were certainly for "peace and unity."⁵ Likewise, the presentation of the *Confutatio* to the Lutheran delegates was inept. Only an oral presentation, no written copies, was permitted. Furthermore, one section was omitted from the copy used for the public reading. To such *Schlamperei* on the part of Germans one is not accustomed. And one could be tempted to suspect a devious mischief designed to thwart any possible reconciliation. However, it must be noted again that on the part of both Melancthon and the emperor (for his own perhaps not immaculate but nevertheless *religious* reasons), there was the sincere and serious desire to have issue from the *Confessio* and *Confutatio* peace and unity for both empire and church. Hence, the rejection of the *Confutatio* was not followed by the immediate termination of the assembly. Rather, theological consultations ensued and were able to achieve broad consensus in interpreting the "Articles of Faith and Doctrine" (I-XXI) of the CA. However, no satisfactory agreement could be reached in regard to the "Articles about Matters in Dispute, in Which an Account Is Given of the Abuses Which Have Been Corrected." How strange it seems today that sufficient consensus could have been achieved on such matters as justification, church and sacrament, but not on sacerdotal celibacy, monastic vows, and various other "human traditions" and "human ordinances," terms which recur refrainlike throughout articles XXII-XXVIII.

Obviously, not only theological factors impeded the reconciliation. The Lutheran princes can hardly be expected to have enthusiastically embraced episcopal jurisdiction as theologically understood by Melancthon and the CA since this could have entailed the return of expropriated church holdings to their former ecclesiastical owners. Furthermore, although both *Confessio* and *Confutatio* were confected by theologians, the chief negotiators at Augsburg were neither theologians nor ecclesiastics, but politicians. Hence, the very title *Confutatio Pontificia* is something of a misnomer although it is also quite clear that the emperor considered himself to be acting in behalf of and in the name of the (Roman Catholic) church. In his case, then, as well as in that of the Lutheran princes, motives other than

⁴T. Rausch, "Catholics, Lutherans and the Augsburg Confession," *America*, 140 (February 10, 1979), 86.

⁵See the conclusion of "The Imperial Summons, 1530" in Reu, pp. 71-72: "to move against error and schism in the holy faith: to submit all just error to our Savior, to hear with all possible discretion and in love and kindness the diverse opinions that exist amongst us, to understand and to weigh them, and to bring them together in a single christian truth . . . and as we all fight under the one Christ, so shall we all live in unity in a common church."

ecclesial and theological can easily have been of such urgency that the patience necessary for mediation and final conciliation of the religious conflict cannot simply be supposed. This is not to imply, of course, that the theologians and ecclesiastics did enjoy such patience. Luther's 1520 statement, "I am hot-blooded by temperament, and my pen gets irritated easily,"⁶ is no doubt true of his person, hardly less true, however, of his epoch. In such an atmosphere the judgement recounted by John Jay Hughes is all the more noteworthy, namely that "scholars now recognize that the *Confutatio* was in fact hardly less irenic than the Augsburg Confession itself." Although the Diet of Augsburg failed to restore unity, attempts to mediate the differences between the "old believers" (the Catholics) and the "evangelical believers" (soon widely known as the Protestants) continued at Leipzig (1534, 1539), Hagenau (1540), Worms (1540-1541), and Regensburg (1541, 1546).⁸

I realize that the choice of 1555 as the termination for the first stage is open to challenge. However, it seems to me the best, symbolically, for two reasons. First, however slim the real chances for church reform without church division may have been at Augsburg in 1530, there was still alive a real sense of being one church.⁹ Melancthon can thus honestly confess that "it may be made very clear that we have introduced nothing, either in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church" (CA, conclusion; see also conclusion to part I). And he can also protest to the papal legate, Cardinal Campeggio, "We have no dogma which is diverse from that of the Roman church . . . We shall in future, until our end, also remain true to Christ and the Roman church even if you should refuse to mercifully receive us."¹⁰ Indeed, during the deliberations after the reading of the *Confutatio*, serious efforts were made toward a pluralism of diverse churches within the unity of the one church. That these attempts finally failed, it seems to me, is symbolically stated, once again at Augsburg, in the provisions of the "eternal, unconditional Peace" of 1555, whereby diversity was not brought into communion, but rent into divisions. As H. J. Grimm nicely notes, "In most respects the Peace of Augsburg merely recognized a *fait accompli* in the empire, namely the emergence of territorialism . . . the destruction of medieval Christian unity during the first half of the sixteenth century was recognized by the

⁶Cited by O. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 51.

⁷J. J. Hughes, "A Catholic Recognition of the Augsburg Confession," *America* (January 5-12, 1980), p. 17.

⁸For which both the Confession and *Confutatio* served as partial, perhaps principal documents, because of the consensus reached in their regard in the theological discussions at Augsburg. See "Lutherische-Katholische Dialog in den USA: Avat und universale Kirche," in *Papstum und Petrusdienst*, ed. by H. Stirnemann and L. Vischer (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1975), pp. 116-117.

⁹Thus A. Kimme claims that article VII of the CA documents "am ausdrücklichsten den Anspruch der lutherischen Reformation auf Bedeutung der Augsbургischen Konfession," *Die Aktualität des Bekenntnisses, Fuldaer Hefte* 21 (1971), 30.

¹⁰Reu, p. 127.

Peace of Augsburg . . . the break had become so complete by 1555 that it is difficult to conceive of any force strong enough to restore unity."¹¹

Second, in 1555 it became evident that "Charles V's failure was crushing. He who had dreamt of assuming responsibility for the whole Christian world and of guiding the Catholic church along new paths was forced to admit that in Germany, in the very heart of his vast domains, heresy had free play. Protected by the rulers and embodied in official churches . . ." ¹² By commissioning Ferdinand to conclude peace at Augsburg, he clearly confessed his failure to preserve / restore the unity of Christians. Thus, in the Peace of Augsburg the lively hopes of unity which had inspired both the Confession of Melancthon and the *Confutatio* of Charles V heard their death knell.¹³

Need it necessarily have been so? Historically, one must probably reply affirmatively, without thereby succumbing to brutish historical determinism. The events as they in fact happened hardly allowed any other outcome. Theologically, one can dare the proposition that theoretically the division was not inevitable, although practically, again, the division seems to have been destiny's child. The Augsburg experience from 1530-1555 is a sobering caution to us theologians about the practical power and ecclesial efficacy of our theologizing. This experience effectively brings home the truth that *praxis*, which has become such a *Modewort* in the current theological vocabulary, has always enjoyed and exercised its own proper and peculiar ascendancy. We cannot remind ourselves too often that the Augsburg negotiations foundered, not precisely on the shoals of dogmatic and theoretical beliefs, but on the shoals of pastoral and practical behavior.

By this I do not intend to imply that there are no disagreements about the doctrinal articles (I-XXI) of the CA. Indeed, the *Confutatio* originally "approved nine articles without exception, approved six with qualifications, or in part, and condemned thirteen."¹⁴ According to Reu, "the commissioners came to agreement on a number of articles . . . as 1, 3, 7 (?), 9-11, 13 and 16-19."¹⁵ Noteworthy in his listing is the complete absence of the articles of the second part (XXII-XXVIII). However, assuming (not granting) that these practical abuses could be ameliorated to mutual satisfaction, are the doctrinal understandings of the first part such that a consensus in faith between Romans and Lutherans might be possible?

Vinzenz Pfnür contends that this question is to be answered positively.¹⁶ Thus the "Evangelical" faith of the Confession would be

¹¹*The Reformation Era 1500-1650* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 262-263.

¹²H. Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation* (New York: Dutton, 1961), p. 507. The provisions made by Charles V for his burial, recounted on pp. 507-508, clearly indicate his understanding of himself and of his role precisely as a *church leader*.

¹³See Papstum und Petrusdienst, p. 117, fn. 20.

¹⁴Piepkorn, p. 1040.

¹⁵Reu, p. 131.

¹⁶V. Pfnür, *Einig in der Rechtfertigungslehre?* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1970). Also his, "Anerkennung der Augustana durch die Katholische Kirche," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 4 (1975), 298-307; 5 (1976), 374-381; 477-478. A summary appeared in *Theology Digest* 24 (1976), 65-70.

capable of a "Catholic" recognition and reception. For Pfnür finds that the traditional disputed and dividing points are patient of a fundamental ecclesial, confessional consensus. We shall briefly examine the Article IV of the Confession which does not teach a merely external and forensic justification, as if nothing happened in the justified human being (see also V, XVIII as well as Melancthon's Apology IV). Nor is the Confession's position on merits and good works unacceptable to Catholic doctrine. The *Confutatio* (VI, 3) rejects the Confession's on grounds that "it is entirely contrary to Holy Scripture to deny that our works are meritorious." But this is not what the Confession teaches; its strictures on merit are restricted solely to justification (to be achieved). Both documents condemn "the Pelagians, who thought that man can merit eternal life by his own powers without the grace of God" (*Confutatio* IV, 1).

Article II on original sin is more complicated. Although this article does not explicitly assert that the concupiscence perduring in the child after baptism is sin in the proper and strict sense, neither does it explicitly distinguish between habitual and actual sin. Thus, the *Confutatio* was easily able to suspect the Confession of reasserting the opinions rejected by Leo X in 1520 (DS 1452-1453 as well as Trent DS 1515).¹⁷ Melancthon's position in this regard is ambivalent. He is able both to defend Luther's statements that designate post-baptismal concupiscence as sin, and also to find acceptable (at Augsburg 1530, Worms 1541) the Thomistic theory whereby concupiscence, the *materiale peccati*, perdures, whereas guilt, the *formule peccati*, ceases. Here we encounter one of the most striking instances of the much vaunted different *Denkformen* of Roman Catholic and Lutheran theology and spirituality.¹⁸ It is quite possible that recognition of the importance of the formality of the *Denkform* in the constitution and content of a system of thought (thoughts) could be a generally positive development for ecumenical theory and practice. In regard to Article II this would mean that a common ecclesial, confessional understanding of the sinfully compromised, nonetheless graced human condition might be found which would allow for various spiritualities, and even theologies, which would correspond to factually existent, morally non-eliminatable psycho-historical consciousnesses, whether individual or societal. Encouragement for such a possibility is at least incipiently offered by the mutual, if not always pacific, coexistence of Augustinian and Thomistic theologies and

¹⁷See H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (34 ed., Freiburg: Herder, 1965; henceforth, DS).

¹⁸On the importance of *Denkform* for inner-Catholic theology, see J. B. Metz, *Christliche Anthropozentrik* (Munich: Kosel, 1962). On the value of *Denkform* and even *Denkvollzugsformen* for Lutheran-Catholic understanding the greatest contribution has been made by O. H. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology--The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), pp. 61-82, where much literature on the topic is also given. See also his "Twenty Years of Catholic Lutheran Research," *Lutheran World* XIII (1966; reprint), 1-16. In this respect the volume of S. Pfürntner; *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964) is most commendable because of both its clarity and size.

spiritualities (as well as others) within the Roman Catholic church.¹⁹ Hence, although article II remains a problem, it need not necessarily be a diriment impediment to the mutual acceptability of the CA.

For all its importance, the complex of justification, faith, and sin has probably not provoked acrimony as acerbic as the complex of church and office in the church. Even here, however, the CA is not necessarily divisive.

Although the *Confutatio* felt obliged to warn against the possibility of Hussitism in Article VII (although it is VII which expressly states that "The Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints"), such suspicion is clearly unfounded, as the same Article VIII indicates in its rejection of Donatism. One may also suspect the CA of a certain ecclesiological mimetism because of article VII's famous "satis est." However, it is striking that the *Confutatio* registers no such complaint. Obviously, the Confession does not provide a complete theology of the church. But neither do any of the other creeds, and such amplitude is not to be expected. In principle the CA clearly accepts a visibly unified, perpetually existing, "office-ly" articulated church, in which absolute uniformity is not required, but a legitimate pluralism is accepted. Its cautions about "universal church rites" are such that the *Confutatio* need only caution about the identification of such in distinction to "special rites" (VII, 4). Article V's assertion that "God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the gospel and the sacraments . . . as means" is approved by the *Confutatio* and also eliminates any possibility of a congregationalist interpretation of articles VII-XIV. Likewise, according to Article XXVIII, bishops have "spiritual . . . power, sword and authority . . . according to divine right . . . by God's word." Hence, although there may be dispute about the precise range of such power, there is surprising agreement about the nature of the church and church office.

It is true that Article XIII mentions only three sacraments and that the *Confutatio* "requests . . . that what they here ascribe to the sacraments in general they confess also specifically concerning the seven sacraments of The Church . . ." However, two remarks must be made. Even the Council of Trent allowed for a gradation within the sacraments (DS 1603; they are not "*inter se paria*"). Likewise, Trent, not able to achieve a formal essential definition of sacrament, also intended not a positive exposition of doctrine but only a rejection of erroneous teachings.²⁰ Hence, for an ecumenical orientation, there may well be more room for negotiation in regard to the sacraments than has customarily been assumed.

¹⁹Recent studies indicate the value of studies about Luther's *Denkform* and *Denkvollzugsform* not only for ecumenical purposes, but also for inner-Lutheran understandings. See, for example, on the importance of Augustinian *thinking* and thought on Luther's hamartiology M. Kroeger, *Rechtfertigung und Gesetz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1968). On the often overlooked mystical dimensions of Luther's thinking, see B. R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), where, for example, on pp. 126-129 the ecumenical value of such considerations is explicitly noted.

²⁰See Y. Congar, "The Idea of Major or Principal Sacraments," *Concilium*, 1 (1968) 12-17. See also L. Kruse, "Der Sakraments-begriff des Konzils von Trient und die heutige Sakraments-theologie," *Theologie und Glaube*, 45 (1955), 401-411.

In his appraisal of its "Catholicity," Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests that the most severe obstacle to Roman Catholic acceptance of the CA may lie in its doctrine about penance, to which the CA ascribes two parts (contrition or sorrow and faith), the *Confutatio* three (contrition, confession, and satisfaction). Certain it is that both the *Confutatio* and Melanchthon's Apology are exceedingly vigorous in regard to this topic and these articles (XI, XII). Likewise, perhaps here more than anyplace else, Trent itself (DS 1704) seems to zero in unequivocally on a formulation of the CA. Nevertheless, he immediately suggests that there may be a solution, (if it can be shown that Article XII refers to the theological nature of penance (repentance) as act or virtue, not as sacrament). Hans Jorissen²² takes up this suggestion and shows that both the *Confutatio* and *Trent* misunderstood the terminology of the CA. Likewise, as V. Pfnür has shown, the negotiations at Augsburg had been able to reach full agreement about this matter, for the two parts of the CA and the three parts of the Catholic teaching (e.g., at Florence DS 1323) were not mutually exclusive, since they were concerned with different points.²³ Hence, the Tridentine Anathema (DS 1704) does not condemn *what* the CA (XII) and Apology (XII) taught, although it does condemn the *words* they used. Furthermore, it is clear that Article XI need not offend against the Catholic understanding of the enumeration of sins requisite for integral confession²⁴ Not only is no one bound to the impossible in general according to Catholic doctrine, but also not to the impossible in regard to the recall of one's sins. The *Confutatio* itself requires only "a diligent examination of their conscience . . . although they cannot state all their sins individually (XI, 3)."

On the basis of various investigations Walter Kasper is able to conclude that, "at least in the light of . . . Vatican II the Augustana can be basically interpreted in a Catholic sense and thus also be received as Catholic."²⁵ Without wishing to appear Pollyannaish, I have arranged this presentation to emphasize that even in 1530, there was the definite possibility of mutual theological (and, perhaps, ecclesial) acceptance. Even the much maligned *Confutatio* is by no means entirely impatient of such a possibility. But political (and perhaps, again, ecclesial) factors rendered this possibility vain.

²¹W. Pannenberg, "Die Augsburgische Konfession als Katholisches Bekenntnis und Grundlage für die Einheit der Kirche," in *Katholische Anerkennung des Augsburgischen Bekenntnis*, ed. by H. Meyer, H. Schütte and H.J. Mund (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1977), p.33.

²²"Steht die Busslehre der Confessio Augustana einer Anerkennung durch die Katholische Kirche im Wege?" in *Katholische Anerkennung*, pp. 132-150.

²³*Einig*, pp. 264-268.

²⁴See K.-J. Becker, "Die Notwendigkeit des vollständigen Bekenntnisses in der Beichte nach dem Konzil von Trient," *Theologie und Philosophie*, 47 (1972), 161-228.

²⁵"Was bedeutet des: Katholische Anerkennung der Confessio Augustana," in *Katholische Anerkennung*, p. 151.

II

And subsequent centuries continued this vanity.²⁶ The diligent and calm Melanchthon is maligned for his timidity almost as much as the *Confutatio* for its brusqueness. Insofar as Catholics and Lutherans learned to delight in defining themselves negatively, the positively postured Confession can hardly have a chance of flowering ecumenically. Nevertheless even in this dry season, conciliatory voices were heard:

It is a significant contradiction of the Augsburg Confession when it is said that "the Evangelical church was formed *in spite of* the Catholic church through a fresh act of the Holy Spirit," that the church which had existed up to that time was *not* the mother of the Christians of the Evangelical faith but a completely alien church, and the like . . . Those who subscribe to the Augsburg Confession must reject this formulation as in principle contrary to their confession.²⁷

Already in 1930 Fridrich Heiler had recalled "Die Katholizität der Confessio Augustana" and urged it as an ecumenical topic.²⁸ Such an approach is true to the origins of the Lutheran church(-es), for "it is not the 'Lutheran' church (this designation is repudiated in the Confessions themselves) but the *una sancta catholica et apostolica ecclesia* which has spoken in the Confessions. They therefore make their claim not only with respect to the time in which they arose, but for all time to come, even until Christ's return."²⁹

III

Certainly in this imminent apocalyptic age of ours I want to do nothing to encourage immediate expectation of Christ's return. But it is a good transition point, since the CA's precisely Catholic (with upper and lower case "c") opportunity may have returned.

In 1967 Peter Brunner expressed the hope that there might be some sort of Catholic recognition of the faith-statements of the CA. Indeed, as we noted above, Joseph Ratzinger had already dealt with the ecumenical significance of the CA in 1958-1959. He returned to this theme in a 1976 lecture at Graz on the future of ecumenism. In this oft cited lecture Ratzinger spoke of "Catholic recognition of the Confessio Augustana or, more correctly, of a recognition of the Confessio Augustana as Catholic."³⁰

²⁶See E. W. Zeeden, *Das Zeitalter der Gegenreformation* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), especially pp. 206-226 on "Anfänge der Konfessionsbildung."

²⁷A. Vilmar, *Die Augsburgische Confession erklärt*, in 1870, cited by T. Sartory, *Augsburger Confession*, "Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche," Vol. I (2 ed. Freiburg: Herder, 1957), p. 1081.

²⁸*Kerygma und Dogma*, 13 (1967), 179.

²⁹E. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961, 1975), p. XVII.

³⁰"Prognosen für die Zukunft des Okumenismus," *Bausteine*, 17 (1977), 6-14.

The moving force in this project has been the Catholic theologian Vinzenz Pfnür, a former student of Ratzinger. At a meeting of the International Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in Rome in 1974 Pfnür spoke of the possibility of a Catholic recognition or acceptance of the CA. The idea was taken up by the Ecumenical Commission of the diocese of Münster and recommended to the German Episcopal Conference for consideration. In November 1975 Lutheran representatives met with the Secretariat for promoting Christian unity in Rome. In the discussions, which included both Cardinal Willebrands and Msgr. Charles Moeller, the Lutherans indicated their interest in the ecumenical significance of a possible Catholic recognition of the Augsburg Confession. The Catholic participants did not judge it impossible that the confession could be accepted as a Catholic confession of faith.

Since then various theological discussions have taken place under both Lutheran and Catholic auspices. Of special significance is that this further movement has not been restricted to only "theological discussions." Rather it has also included initiatives of church officials, both Catholic and Lutheran. At a Lutheran sponsored consultation on ecumenical methodology in Geneva in June 1976 Moeller stressed the possibility and ecumenical importance of such a catholic recognition. In response, the proceedings of this consultation called on the Lutheran churches to indicate their "openness and interest" in such a Catholic reception of the CA. At the 1975 Uppsala meeting of the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, Heinz Schütte, an observer for the Secretariat for Unity, again emphasized the desirability of such an expression of interest by the Lutheran churches. In June 1977 this desire was more than fulfilled by the plenary assembly of the Lutheran World Federation meeting in Dar-es-Salaam. It called explicitly the cooperation with Roman Catholic theologians and expressed Lutheran willingness to enter into dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church on this question. In fact, it accorded this discussion a priority of "A".

As we have seen theologians have worked diligently to show that theologically the *Confession* need not be unacceptable to Catholics. Interestingly enough, in the course of these investigations the confession's problematic, not only for Romans, but also for Lutherans themselves, has become acutely evident. Although it enjoys a privacy among Lutheran confession, its privileged status does not annul the other confessional documents, some of which do have considerably more forceful non- if not, indeed, anti-Catholic statements. The relationship of the *Augustana* to these other documents is critical, then, and awaits elaboration among the Lutherans themselves, both theologically and ecclesially. Given the reluctance he perceived among European Lutherans to interpret the other confessional documents in the light of the *Augustana*, John Hughes concludes that "in this situation, Catholic recognition of the CA would be largely theoretical, because only distantly related to present ecclesial reality."³¹

³¹*America*, p. 18.

I find this judgement too unsanguine—which does mean that I have imminent ecclesiological expectations anymore than eschatological ones. I think Roman Catholic recognition of the CA would be of great profit to “present ecclesial reality,” for such recognition would force (at least challenge) Lutheran theologians and churches to decide (more) precisely whether and how much to be Lutheran depends on not being Catholic (or being non-. if not anti-Catholic). I find this challenge especially pertinent for Lutherans, if Hughes’ judgement is correct, namely that “where such an interpretation (that is, a Catholic interpretation of the *Confession*) contradicted contemporary Lutheran practice, European Lutherans were unwilling to admit the possibility of a divergence from the intent of one of their founding documents.”³² A startling attitude, is if not, for those who bear the name of him in whom Ratzinger finds that “the theme of *traditio* is here transformed into that of *abusus* . . . the Lutheran equation of *traditio* and *abusus* . . .”³³ In any case, on what grounds is post-sixteenth century (Lutheran) Christianity to be exempted from that degeneration which Luther found to be a principle of church history and the consequent *senectus ecclesias*?³⁴

I would like to suggest, with all due humility, a similar benefit for the Lutheran churches and their relationship to Luther and the CA.³⁵ Luther’s well known *leise treten* in regard to the *Confession* has evoked considerable discussion and some hesitation among Lutherans about the *Confession*’s fidelity to the “Protestant Protest and Principle.” It has been shown satisfactorily that whatever reluctance Luther might have had, he nevertheless accepted the *Confession* and even embraced it as “plane pulcherrima.”³⁶ Now, my proposal here is not to play Melancthon off against Luther. It is, rather, to suggest that, as the *Confession* precisely as *Confession* played and plays a particular role in challenging *Catholics* to examine their fidelity to the Christ, and the tradition³⁷ arising in and proceeding from him, so too it might also serve as a challenge to Lutherans. Both *Catholics* and Lutherans have the tendency to invest with absolute

³²*America*, p. 18.

³³J. Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), pp. 27, 29; see also pp. 60, 63.

³⁴See J. M. Headley, *Luther’s View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 106, 118-24, 179, 187. See also M. Maurer, “Luthers Lehre von der Kirche: Kirche und Geschichte nach Luthers Dictata super Psalterium,” in *Lutherforschung Heute*, ed. by V. Vajta, (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958), p. 93.

³⁵I plan to develop this idea at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Princeton, N. J., May 4-5, 1980, in a lecture entitled “Leise treten: Augsburg and Trent Toward an Ecumenical Hermeneutic.”

³⁶On June 25, after the “Satan adhuc vivit . . .” of June 21. See Enders, *Briefwechsel*, 8, 133, 83.

³⁷K. Stendhal points out that “the Faith and Order meeting . . . in Montreal pondered a draft which said that the church lives “sola traditione.” See his “The Question Concerning the Gospel as Center and the Gospel as Totality of the New Testament Witness,” in *Evangelium-Welt-Kirche*, ed. by H. Meyer (Frankfurt: Knect, 1975), p. 103.

necessity theological and spiritual items which, legitimate as such, are nevertheless not apt to be included in a creed / confession and thus not apt as requirements for church unity. Here must be recalled the distinction made throughout this paper among ecclesial, theological, and spiritual (piety) as well as the importance not only of *Denkformen*, but also of *Denkvollzugsformen*. Immediately apparent is the applicability of such distinctions to the problem of the younger or older Luther and which is normative. One can wonder whether Helmut Thielicke's caution in *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* is fitting only for this age group. "It is possible to be thoroughly bewitched intellectually by the mighty thoughts the young Luther and then to lapse into the illusion that what is 'understood' in this way and makes such an impression is genuine faith."³⁸ As the CA challenges Catholics not to require of creedal, ecclesial communion what might be quite legitimate as theological theory or pious practice, so does it provide the same challenge to Lutherans. Catholic recognition of the CA could lend a certain urgency to this challenge.

The value of Roman Catholic recognition of the "Catholicity" of the CA, insofar as such is indeed possible, would be not only, not even chiefly, the taming of Roman Catholic and Lutheran ecclesial demands on one another, which we have just discussed. Such an ecclesial recognition would also be different than the theologians' proper work and achievement, but at the same time its fulfillment and crowning. The convergence which the theologians have been able to discern and achieve would no longer be "merely" academic-theological; it would also be ecclesial-confessional.³⁹

³⁸(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 11.

³⁹Convergence is a term which occurs constantly in both the official bi-lateral consultations as well as unofficial ecumenical discussions. In addition to the series *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, see also the Catholic Theological Society of America's evaluation, chaired by A. Dulles, *The Bilateral Consultations Between the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and other Christian Communion* (Bronx: Manhattan College, 1972). This evaluation has been updated to 1979 by a similar committee, this time chaired by Richard McBrien and published in the 1979 proceedings of the CTSA. Also to be consulted are H. Meyer, ed., *Luthertum und Katholizismus im Gespräch* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1973) which reports on the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA and elsewhere (on p. 42, expressly "Konvergenz statt Konsens"), G. Gassmann, *Vom Dialog zur Gemeinschaft* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1975) which reports on the dialogue between Anglicans and Lutherans as well as Roman Catholics. Even the papacy has been discovered to be patient of some mutual acceptance. See R. Brown, K. Donfried, J. Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1973); G. Denzler et al., *Zum Thema Petrusamt und Papsttum* (Stuttgart: KBW, 1970); and H. Stirnimann and L. Vischer, eds., *Papsttum und Petrusdienst* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1975). In any case the Lutheran theme of the Pope as Anti-Christ must be understood in the apocalyptic-eschatological context of the times, as has been shown by Hans Preuss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist im späteren Mittelalter bei Luther und in der professionellen Polemik* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906). See also N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford Galaxy, 1970), pp. 80-84, 112, 156, 211, 243. Hans Urs von Balthassar has shown that such anti-papal rhetoric is hardly the exclusive property of non-Catholics: "Casta Meretrix," *Sponsa Verbi* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1961), pp. 203-305.

As Ratzinger says, it would be "far more than a mere theoretical-theological act, which is worked out among historians and ecclesial politicians. It would be much more a concrete spiritual decision and thus a new historical step for both sides."⁴⁰

To this formal benefit must be added immediately the material benefit. Such a recognition and reception of the CA would be a decisive step in the achievement of that "korporative Vereinigung in der Unterschiedenheit," that "Einheit der Kirchen, die Kirchen bleiben und doch eine Kirche werden."⁴¹ From the Lutheran side comes approbation: this understanding in the form of the "versöhnte Verschiedenheit," which Harding Meyer describes as a corrective to the "konziliare Gemeinschaft" elsewhere advocated. Its purpose is to urge, within the ecumenical movement, "space for the diversity of confessional traditions and for corresponding ecclesial communities as institutional bearers of these traditions."⁴²

Methodologically, there would also be a significant contribution, indicated by the not readily patient of translation remark of Ratzinger "Er (the act of Catholic recognition) wurde bedeuten, dass die katholische Kirche in den hier gegebenen Ansätzen eine eigene Form der Verwirklichung des gemeinsamen Glaubens mit der ihn zukommenden Eigenständigkeit annahme."⁴³ This would certainly be a glorious exercise (sign and cause: sacrament) of that *unitas in diversitate* which has always been the inner dynamism of the church, however variously compromised throughout history.⁴⁴ For, in Ratzinger's view, the Roman Catholic Church would be able to discover its own proper catholicity (in *esse*, in *fieri* and in *facto esse*) in an event which has happened elsewhere than within its empirically discernible identity.

Thus would also be fulfilled another aspiration of the CA, hinted at by E. Gritsch and R. Jenson; "The plural 'churches' at one point in the German text assumes not denominationalism but the general experience of churchly plurality: between territorial churches as they had existed in varying independence through medieval history, between confessing groups of the

That such convergence cannot be regarded as having already been exhaustively achieved, so that further expectations would be only vain dreams, is indicated by the volume *Mary in the New Testament*, ed. R. Brown et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Thus, there is hope that the divergences mentioned by the Common Statement of the Roman Catholic-Evangelical Lutheran Commission on the Augsburg Confession (February 23, 1980), as still existing may also one day be matters of convergence. As the Common Statement indicates, so much has already been achieved although it had been thought impossible that further recognition of "commonality in central Christian truths of faith" is a "well-founded hope."

⁴⁰"Prognosen für die Zukunft des Ökumenismus," *Bausteine*, 17 (1976), 12.

⁴¹Ratzinger, "Prognosen," p. 12. This idea is developed by H. Schütte, "Zur Möglichkeit einer katholischen Anerkennung der Confessio Augustana," in *Katholische Anerkennung*, pp. 35-53.

⁴²LWB-Information (7-7-1977) cited in *Herderkorrespondenz* 31 (August 1977), 394.

⁴³"Prognosen," p. 12.

⁴⁴See Y. Congar, *De la communion des Eglises a une ecclesiologie de l'Eglise universelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1962).

Reformation period, or between the Eastern and Latin churches."⁴⁵ Although the Roman Catholic church has theoretically always accepted and even urged the plurality of churches in the one church, its practice has not always been unequivocal.⁴⁶ Its reception⁴⁷ of the CA, especially insofar as its origin was not sponsored by the Roman Catholic church itself, would be both realization of and testimony to that "one-Spirit-many-gifts ecclesiology" according to which the Church consists "*de Trinitate et ex hominibus*."⁴⁸

Thus could and would be experienced that Spirit whose coming and going is beyond our calculation (John 3:8) and by whose power "anyone who is not against you is for you"--even when they are "not (empirically discernibly) with us" (Luke 9:50, 49). Exotic expectation? Perhaps, but as Ratzinger proclaims: "But Christendom rests quite completely on the victory of the improbable, on the adventure of the Holy Spirit, who leads man above and beyond himself and just in this way brings him to himself."⁴⁹

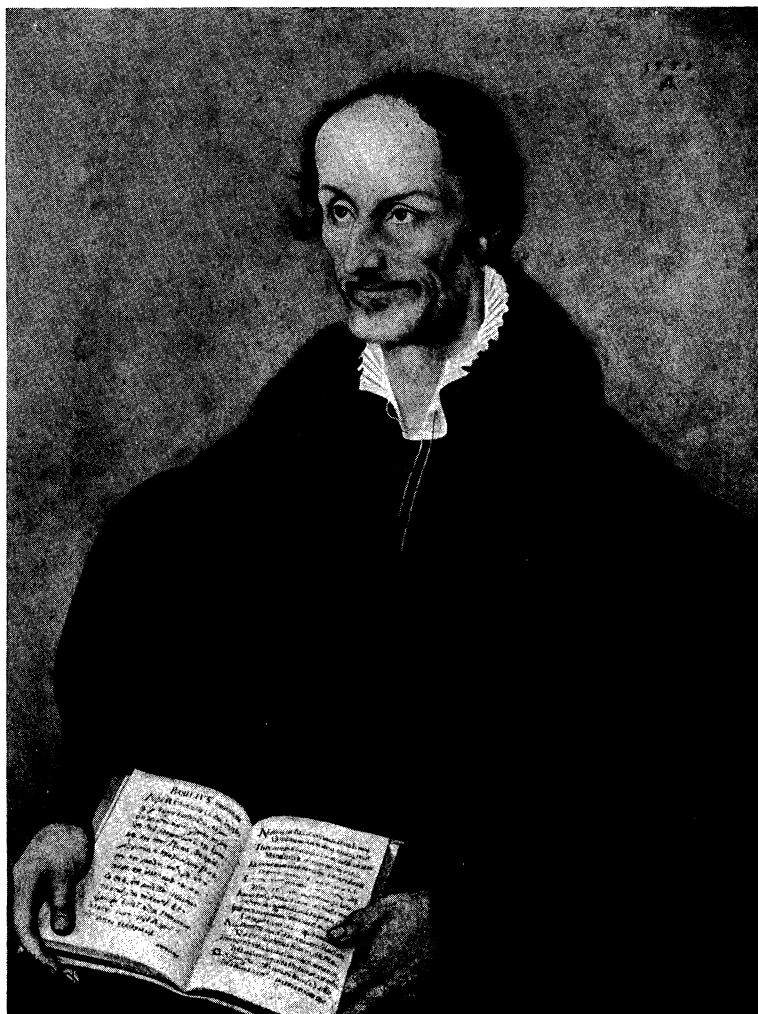
⁴⁵*Lutheranism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 174.

⁴⁶See R. Kress, "The Church as *Communio*: Trinity and Incarnation as the Foundations of Ecclesiology," *The Jurist*, 36 (1976), 127-158.

⁴⁷I have deliberately used this term, reception, in the title and throughout this paper for a twofold purpose. First, adequate appreciation of the theological-ecclesial reality known as "reception" would certainly contribute to the "recognition-ability" of the CA. Second, the recognition-acceptance of the CA would likewise further the appreciation of the all too much neglected reality of "reception." See Y. Congar, "La 'réception' comme réalité ecclésiologique," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 56 (1972), 369-403, and F. Wolfinger, "Die Rezeption theologischer Einsichten und ihre theologische und ökumenische Bedeutung; von der Einsicht zur Verwirklichung," *Catholica*, 31 (1977), 202-233.

⁴⁸See Y. Congar, "Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche," in *Mysterium Salutis IV / 1*, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1972), p. 395.

⁴⁹"Prognosen", p. 13.



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