

Augsburg Confession and the Joint Declaration
John F. Hotchkin
October 31, 1999

The city of Augsburg sparkled under a blue October sky as hundreds of invited guests from around the world arrived for the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. This was an evocative setting for an event destined to be remembered alongside others connected with the long history of the place. The two thousand year old city hails the Roman Emperor Augustus as its Aparent,@ and his imposing statue stands atop a fountain in front of its city hall. Its basilica is dedicated to the memory of Saints Ulrich and Afra. Afra, perhaps an African woman, perhaps from Syria or elsewhere, was martyred here in 304 A.D. during the persecutions under Diocletian. Ulrich was the bishop of Augsburg in the first part of the tenth century and was canonized by Pope John XV. Both saints are entombed in the basilica's crypt. Here Christian history stretches back well before the events of the sixteenth century.

Yet Augsburg also played a significant role in those events. It was at Wittenberg in 1517 that Martin Luther posted his famous ninety-five theses, perhaps affixing them to a church door. No surprise, he was called to Rome. But the political conditions of the time made it unsafe, even impossible, for him to undertake that trip. So the next year, in 1518, up from Rome to Germany to meet with him came Cardinal Thomas De Vio Cajetan, Master General of the Dominican Order and Rome's leading theologian. The conversation they had over three days was held at the Fugger Palace, which one still finds on Maximilian Street in central Augsburg. Not all questions were put to rest between Luther and the Cardinal, but this meeting did mark a turning point in Cajetan's work. Up until then he was renowned as a commentator on Thomas Aquinas and proponent of Thomistic scholasticism. Subsequently his attention and his writing turned to biblical exegesis, for he saw how decisively the authority of the Scriptures would be invoked in the disputes that lie ahead.

The disputes deepened in intensity until they threatened the unity both of the Church and of the Empire. Fearful of what the future would hold, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, summoned representatives of both the reforming and the Roman parties to meet in the hope of bridging their widening differences. Lord Philip Melancthon led the one group, while Master John Eck, an energetic Luther opponent, is the most well remembered member of the other. In 1530 they met before the Emperor in the city of Augsburg where the reformers composed what came to be for them a charter document, one bearing the name of the city in which it was presented, the *Confessio Augustana*. It was not accepted as satisfactory by a commission of theologians from the Roman side appointed by the Emperor. So his hopes were disappointed, while the "Augsburg Confession" lives on as one of the pivotal texts in Christian history. The site where the Diet of Augsburg convened is known but the structure that housed it has since gone.

Key and fundamental to all the disputes was the basic teaching on grace, the doctrine of justification by faith. This was ground zero, the explosive core, which detonated to fracture the Church and destroy the Empire. It was to this explosive core that Lutheran and Catholic explorers were drawn together in dialogue twenty year ago when the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic

Dialogue undertook a five year search. Its findings, published in 1983, encouraged other efforts, as the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission acknowledged in its 1986 report on "Salvation and the Church." Parallel scholarly work in Germany resulted in five volumes which questioned the divisive force today of the condemnations the Reformers and the Council of Trent aimed at one another. From these sources a commission named by the Lutheran World Federation and by Rome drew the elements which came together to form the text of the Joint Declaration in which the prior work culminates in a "common understanding" and "consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnation" between Lutherans and Catholics.

After review and approval by the churches of the Lutheran World Federation and by Rome, the time came formally to sign. Cardinal Edward Cassidy, who signed for the Catholic Church, said when the question rose as to where the signing should take place, there was little doubt in anyone's mind but that it should fittingly be in Augsburg. The bridge intended by the Augsburg Confession is now spanned by the Augsburg Joint Declaration. But this can scarcely be the end of the story. There can be no question but that the dispute over justification by faith had a tremendous impact over a long period on the history of western Christianity. Now the question is whether agreement on this doctrine will be a similarly strong shaping force on its future.

John F. Hotchkin attended the signing of the Joint Declaration, October 31, 1999.