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6. Reforming the Reforms

Doctrine in a Time of Ecumenism

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Abstract

The article affirms that the contemporary ecumenical agreements (especially between Roman Catholics and Lutherans) are the result of extensive study and exhaustive dialogue at an institutional level. The author's thesis pushes back against a particular claim that these contemporary ecumenical breakthroughs are the result of a progressive, liberal attitude that is dismissive of the importance of rigorous doctrine. The author argues that, in the cases he presents, the ecumenism of the twentieth and twenty-first century is actually most faithful to the processes and insights of confessional dialogue in the sixteenth century. It is not a devaluation of doctrine but the decoupling of church and state as a context for these dialogues that offers the greatest cause for why more recent dialogues have met with more success than dialogues in the past.

Keywords: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Ecumenism, Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, From Conflict to Communion, colloquy, Regensburg, Formula of Agreement

Introduction

For the last seven years, it has been my honor to serve as a delegate for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in its official bilateral dialogue with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. We are nearing the end of the dialogue and I have been on the drafting committee for a final summary text on our theme, "Faithful Teaching." I was chosen not for my knowledge of ecumenical theology but rather as an historical theologian. So, my engagement in the dialogue has been informative and enlightening. How do two institutions "dialogue" in a way that acknowledges their past differences while also accounting for and allowing for the diversity within each tradition, not to mention current issues that serve as common challenges or opportunities?

As a member of the dialogue, I have consistently worked with a talented cohort of theologians from both traditions, who represent a spectrum of theological disciplines and perspectives (that is the whole point of the dialogue). Our conversations have been at turns jocular and contentious (especially within traditions) but always with sincere devotion to Christ. Moreover, I am aware that my colleagues in the dialogue stand at the end of an illustrious line of past contributors (viz., Avery Dulles and Eric Gritsch; George Tavard and Arthur Carl Piepkorn; Raymond Brown and John Reumann). As the saying goes, I suspect those theologians have forgotten more than I will ever learn. The collective weight of this realization moves me to conclude that great progress – growth in true understanding, developing appreciation for each tradition, and increasing hunger to manifest at an institutional level – toward full and visible union is closer today than it was at the resumption of dialogue fifty years ago. I have in mind the Malta Report (Ecum. Docs. 1972), the national and international affirmations that eucharistic differences need not be Church dividing (Ecum. Docs. 1978: 51-52), the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Ecum. Docs. 1999a), *From Conflict to Communion* (Ecum. Docs. 2013), and the *Declaration on the Way* (Ecum. Docs. 2015) – reports that have been received and affirmed at the highest levels of institutional processes by both traditions.

Criticisms of Ecumenism

So it is a source of grave concern and no small amount of confusion when the work of the dialogue (not just generally but in the concrete and monumental documents mentioned above) is dismissed as "lowest common denominator" ecumenism at best or heretical at worst. And if you think I am being overly dramatic, just read the official responses to these documents from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and its global counterpart, the International Lutheran Council (see Ecum. Docs 1999b; McCain; LC-MS website for all of its counter-positions to important Lutheran-Roman Catholic documents). Likewise, while negative Roman Catholic commentators have to be a bit more circumspect given the official endorsement of some documents (especially the *Joint Declaration*, which gives it a measure of magisterial authority), there seems to me an equally profound lack of charity and/or understanding from commentators on various websites.[1] I am not one to give oxygen to their

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[1] For a perspective, one could search the following websites for "Lutheran" or "Common Prayer" for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation: Rorate Caeli (rorate-caeli.blogspot.com); OnePeterFive (onepeterfive.com); and Fr. Z's Blog (wdtprs.com/blog).

fires or engage in ecclesiastical pearl clutching. As a participant in the dialogue, I know also that I can be accused of special pleading in what follows.

I think we can, however, boil down their collective dismissals as a sense that the post-modern Church has abandoned true, pure doctrine in an effort to push a watered-down "deeds not creeds" approach to religion. That is, the post-modern ecumenism is merely an extension of the nineteenth century liberalism that created the mess in the first place. The "remedy" for such mushy-headed, bleeding-heart fallacy is to return to the clarity, purity, and carefully-monitored boundaries of an idealized age. For Roman Catholics, that would seem to be the pre-Vatican II church. On the other side, the motto of the "Brotherhood of John the Steadfast" – a conservative LC-MS group – is: "this is your grandfather's church."

Primarily, as a historical theologian, it seems to me that the vision of the past held by these folks is flawed. So, for the purposes of this essay, I want to examine the nexus of polemics, apologetics, and – if it is possible – the opportunity for shared catechesis. To illustrate this point, I want to present snap-shots from the sixteenth century – the alleged "age of doctrinal purity" – to demonstrate that it was in fact an age of tremendous inter-confessional dialogue, one that prefigured the current post-modern ecumenical movement. That is (and this, at last, is my thesis): the ecumenical dialogue of the last fifty years (one that has emphasized apologetics and what can be taught together) is not without precedent in the methods and models of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. I will argue – using Lutheran language about pure doctrine and methods – that the most *confessional* model is reflected in the very documents rejected by religious purists and rigorists today. In the unfolding of my thesis, I will speak most of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, since that is my bailiwick.[2]

From Polemics to Post-Christendom Apologetics

To explain my thesis a bit more, I would say that the current divide between those who embrace the ecumenism of the post-Vatican II church and those who reject it is located in a failure to appreciate the shift from polemics to apologetics. By polemics I mean that dialogue is done to convert the other, to convince the other of the error of her ways and the superiority of one's own. The only acceptable end result is her repentance and request to return to full, visible unity. I have contrasted polemics to apologetics. By apologetics I mean to refer not to the sub-discipline of apologetics *per se*. But, very much related to it, I mean the practice of explaining and seeking explanation of another partner in dialogue. The goal is to listen, to understand, to state with clarity and conviction one's own position, but not in a way that lacks charity and compassion. Convergences are celebrated; divergences are discussed, defined, and respected. In essence, I am after a description of a true dialogue. By framing our discussion as a shift from polemics to apologetics, I mean to indicate a discernable turn in the reason and the manner in which opposing theologians meet for dialogue. Instead of "arming" themselves to "battle" with treatises and decrees in an effort to force the opposing side to "submit" and

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[2] I must also acknowledge that my thesis is not entirely my own. Rather, it is an attempt to explain and extend the observations of Eric W. Gritsch (1931-2012). As a noted Lutheran historical theologian and ecumenist, Gritsch emphasized that the Lutheran reform movement was, by nature, "ecumenical" in that it was an attempt to maintain the best of the broad, catholic traditions of the Church (127-37).

admit error (i.e., schism or heresy), in an apologetics model the equally earnest and learned theologians representing separated "brethren and sisters" meet to explore and discuss the root causes (e.g., historical circumstances and theological presuppositions) of their differences, examine the converging and diverging realities experienced by both since the original split, in order to explore (where possible) what is held in common, what differences remain, and evaluate the severity of each, all with an eye to some form of visible unity in *diakonia* (service to the world in the name of Christ) and institutional cooperation.

This kind of authentic dialogue requires vulnerability – a willingness to submit one's own convictions to scrutiny and the struggle to articulate one's own position beyond rote forms. It requires the charity of assuming that one's dialogue partner is not without biblical and historical foundation for her theological positions; that she too – no matter how severe the divide – has an earnest and sincere love for Christ and for his Church and for pure teaching. At the end of the day, ecumenical dialogue is based on an affirmation of the fundamental dignity of all baptized persons, who have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27; Romans 13:14) and made members of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13) and consecrated fellow priests (1 Peter 2:9) – even if that unity is difficult for us to see. The dominant Christian theology of Baptism (especially since St. Augustine) undergirds this effort, since all who are baptized with water and the Triune Name (viz., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are already united in the person of Christ as well as in the Body of Christ (the Church); it is the task of each Christian to make visible, where and when possible, the unity already shared.[3]

Now, let me hasten to add that there are indeed "bad forms" of ecumenism. By these bad forms I mean the kind of ecumenism that comes from indifference to dialogue all together, or a shared conviction that all doctrine and canons can be reduced to patriarchy and control; that ecumenism is necessary because (with a tip of the hat to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz) we really cannot say anything concrete about the transcendent anyway; that it is our deeds and not our creeds that should unite Christians, since Jesus never laid down a doctrine (despite that, in laying down the moral teaching, Jesus seems to be clearly teaching and doing so based on a doctrine about the nature of God as well of concrete human sin and redemption). Likewise, ecumenical collegiality pushes me to acknowledge that my friends and colleagues of either a more progressive or Reformed perspective would not shape the conversation in this way. In faithfulness to my own tradition, however, I acknowledge and affirm the positive and substantial role of doctrine. In doing so, I join in criticism of certain forms of ecumenism that are guided by apathy or antagonism toward the idea of pure doctrine; further, I also dismiss them as lacking substance and enduring importance.

The documents I am lifting up are the product of prayerful experience and sustained intellectual scrutiny, which both echo (and even exceed) the apologetic model of the sixteenth century. The ecumenism practiced in the sixteenth century, as in the twentieth century, certainly understood that real and profound theological differences among Christians exist. Some matters of faith and morals are mutually exclusive. For instance, one either accepts the

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[3] From the Ecumenical document on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982): "Through Baptism, Christians are brought into unity with Christ, with each other, and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us in faith to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity. We are one people and are called to confess and serve one Lord in each place and in all the world" (Baptism, II, D, 6 and Baptism, V, 17).

Trinity or one does not. One either can affirm a real presence of Christ in the sacraments, or one cannot. In those cases, the best one can hope for is the affirmation that violence is not the remedy (though the historical reality of life together does not always make that obvious). When two dialogue partners confront real and profound differences in understanding and affirmation, those differences need to be – even when done with charity – clearly and thoroughly articulated. Otherwise, each partner is not authentic to herself or a faithful representative of his tradition. In those cases, any result can be cast into the wind.

My thesis is based on the idea that the sixteenth century (the age of the Lutheran Confessions and the Council of Trent – so an age nearly fetishized by modern critics of ecumenism) was a better model of apologetics, of dialogue than of polemics. Now that may seem surprising, especially since an historically accurate "Martin Luther Insult Generator" exists on the Internet (ergofabulous.org/luther). I am no idealist – polemics were part and parcel of the Reformation. Moreover, the academic setting in which the Reformation grew was strongly influenced by the medieval system of dialectics and the revival of ancient forms of rhetoric. Sharp words (often with references that were as likely to be scatological and sexual as they were classical) and physical aggression were realities.

Historical Examples of Ecumenical Consensus

All of which makes the inter-Christian dialogue of the day all the more impressive and noteworthy. As another caveat, we should also note that some dialogues were a farce – where the hostilities resulted in predetermined outcomes (e.g., the Diet of Worms in 1521). Yet, there were many that were not:

- Marburg Colloquy (1529): where Luther and Zwingli met to discuss their differences over the Lord's Supper.

- Diet of Augsburg (1530): in which the Lutheran princes and estates of the Holy Roman Empire made the case for why they were not heretical and thus should not be subject to imperial suppression.

- Wittenberg Colloquy (1539): where Lutheran and Reformed theologians met to discuss their differences over the Lord's Supper.

- The Regensburg Colloquy (1541): where Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians met to discuss their differences over the doctrine of Justification.

- Colloquy at Poissy (1561): where French Reformed-Calvinist and Roman Catholic theologians met to discuss their differences.

- Formula of Concord (1580): in which various factions of Lutherans within the Holy Roman Empire met to discern a unifying doctrinal thread that would bind them together in the post-Reformation controversies (particularly with the rigorist-Lutherans, Tridentine Catholicism, and the Reformed).

- Colloquy of Montbéliard (1586): in which Lutheran and Reformed Calvinist theologians met to discuss a host of differences, especially over the Eucharist, Christology, icons, and predestination.

These were formal, official dialogues at the highest level (many at the level of an imperial diet of the Holy Roman Empire or, in the case of France, at a national level). In most cases (where Roman Catholics were involved), a papal legate attended. Gifted theologians and diplomats from the conflicting side were engaged and given the time and the resources to discuss matters thoroughly. Only the most cynical of observers would ignore the significant resources (not the least of all, the money and time) expended by the secular and ecclesiastical estates toward earnest and extended theological debate and conversation.

My point is this: the story of a single friar taking on "the man" by nailing papers to doors and exclaiming "here I stand" and the bulwark of angelic (or, depending on one's perspective, demonic) power of the Roman Church rising up against it is indeed a powerful story. But it is not only grossly simplistic, it fundamentally fails to appreciate how slow things moved, how in many cases wiser and calmer heads – yes, even Luther can be put into that group – realized the gravity of the situation and called for dialogue, patience, and calm. Again, this call for dialogue stands *alongside* strongly held convictions and forceful theological arguments about the weighty matters at stake.

Just two examples here: First, the Marburg Colloquy of 1529 comes to no one's mind as a model of calm dialogue. Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli were engaged in a fierce pamphlet war over the Lord's Supper. Margrave Philip of Hesse brought the two men together for a week to discuss their differences. The story of how the conversation ended is well known, with Luther writing with chalk *Hoc est corpus meum* (This is my body) on the table and saying "show me from the words where Jesus is lying." When Zwingli foreshadows William Jefferson Clinton by questioning what the meaning of "is" is, Luther flips the table and storms out. Professors and historians often end their account of the colloquy here, on the dramatic high note. But historical accountability would insist that we also articulate that before leaving, even in the midst of such fevered emotions and intellectual disharmony, the two sides issued a statement of agreement on fourteen out of fifteen major points of doctrine (these are called the *Marburg Articles*) (see Kolb and Nestingen: 88-92; LW 38: 85-89).

Second, *The Augsburg Confession* (formed for the previously mentioned Diet of Augsburg in 1530) is known for emphasizing the continuity of the Lutheran position within the Catholic tradition (signaling a larger Lutheran distinction between the true Catholic tradition and the false papal/decretalist or scholastic tradition). Several weeks of small group discussion by theologians did not produce full agreement on controversial topics. Yet, the *Confutation* of the Augsburg Confession, written by Roman Catholic opponents, itself repeatedly acknowledges and affirms many points of agreement between the two parties though the few remaining differences were significant (see Kolb and Nestingen: 105-39). There was a general, shared lament that war would be the likely result of their failure to achieve consensus.

Both Confessional and Ecumenical

Eric Gritsch repeatedly emphasized that to be a true Confessional Lutheran is to be ecumenically engaged. That is because the Confessions themselves were born out of such ecumenical dialogues; moreover, these dialogues refrain from defining the true Church in a narrow fashion. The person who wants to truly honor the theological legacy of the Reformation (Protestant and Roman Catholic) must always keep open the door of dialogue with other Christians.

Now, we keep this door open not just by parroting what was said in the past, as it were, as an officer might review the strength of long-established trenches. That is an exercise in futility. To be taken seriously, those who profess the Christian faith (a faith dedicated to reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20) must be known for their reconciling efforts. Therefore, the legacy of the Reformation is not the triumphalism of inter-confessional warfare. It is rather a legacy of many earnest yet failed attempts to prevent a split within the western Church.

The next major point in the development of my thesis is this: many of the twentieth and twenty-first century breakthroughs in ecumenical relations were largely the result of accepting the conclusions of some sixteenth-century inter-confessional dialogues. The subsequent success and later reception of earlier insights is best attributed not to a more irenic or tolerant modern spirit but to a radical shift in the relationship of the church to the state.

Let me offer just two examples: First, the Lutheran-Reformed agreement on the Eucharist. The *Leuenberg Agreement* of 1973 is a European agreement that allows for Eucharistic sharing between Lutherans and the Reformed – a major step in demonstrable Christian unity. In 1997, the *Formula of Agreement* established altar and pulpit fellowship between the ELCA, the Presbyterian Church-USA, and the Reformed Church in America. Critics wondered: "How could this happen unless one side had changed its interpretation of the Eucharist?" That is, either Lutherans stopped being sacramental realists or Calvinists had jettisoned the Geneva reformer and swam the Elbe *en masse*. In fact, enshrined in both documents (i.e., the "Leuenberg Agreement" and the "Formula of Agreement"), each side rearticulated their different and conflicting understandings of the Eucharist (Ecum. Docs. 1973: §18-20, 37b; 1997: 2-3). Yet, the documents continue, both Lutheran and Reformed traditions could affirm together that Christ was not absent from his own supper nor were his promises to the Church merely empty. While Lutherans would continue to affirm that presence really, physically, and locally (in the consecrated bread and wine) and the Reformed would continue to affirm that presence really but spiritually in the hearts of the faithful, their common affirmation in the divine promise and sacred presence were enough to join them together in the common calling to one table by the same Lord.

More modern liberalism, right? Well, at least on the Lutheran side, the major factor in pushing for this agreement was Martin Luther himself, who signed the Wittenberg Concord of 1536 (on which, see Jensen; Trueman and Kolb). Yes, this brash and bold confessionalist essentially agreed that though he disagreed strongly with the Reformed position, if they agree that Christ is not absent – that if Christ were indeed truly and really present (even if only spiritually) – he would not condemn them. Now, for various political reasons, the Concord failed. But it was an artifact, a model, whose time had yet to come.

A second example: in 1541, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V appointed six theologians to a religious colloquy in the imperial free city of Regensburg. The goal was to define areas of agreement and disagreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. The participants at this colloquy were veterans of the Reformation polemics, including Johann Eck and Philip Melanchthon. Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, a noted Christian Humanist cleric and scholar, also joined the discussions. From April 24 through May 30, the participants met in various sessions and discussed multiple topics. Some topics (such as baptism and original sin) were not controversial and met with quick formulations of common affirmations. Other, such

as justification, met with early resistance. Yet, as the theologians continued to meet, a common formulation on the most contested doctrine began to emerge.

The breakthrough on justification at Regensburg was, in large part, the resolution of harmonizing two different theological languages: the scholastic and the Christian Humanist (see Rummel). Here again, we see demonstrated the power of reconciled diversity: initially, the scholastic articulation of justification differed from the renewed patristic and literary reading of the Christian Humanists. Yet, as the two sides moved beyond a discussion of methodology to core affirmations of the biblical text and their own convictions about the fundamental biblical message, each side was essentially saying the same thing in different ways (see Pfnür: 378; Lexutt). In particular, each recognized that humanity is saved entirely by an act of divine grace and that even our will to do good is itself a grace. Likewise, the Christian life is not without good works; we may even say together that good works are necessary in the Christian life. Further, these good works – even and ever a result of grace – can be meritorious and worthy of reward in heaven (or punishment thereafter). The result was a consensus paragraph using the language of "double righteousness." Both affirmed the primacy of grace and the necessity of good works as fruits of grace. Each side acknowledged a different emphasis within how their traditions speak of justification and good works but, in the end, the differences were in tone and emphasis, not in substance.[4] In celebration, the church bells of the city rang out.

Despite such a breakthrough, the Regensburg Colloquy was, in the end, a failure. There were several reasons for this. One problem was that the final draft of the colloquy (i.e., *The Regensburg Book*) was not penned by the participants of the colloquy; thus, each side felt the need to add clarifying statements to the main document. Another reason is that some zealous Catholic observers asserted that the agreement on justification meant that Lutherans would again submit to the authority of the pope – something that was decidedly rejected. Likewise, some thought the moment necessitated a clear articulation of differences and not consensus; this was the attitude of Martin Luther, who was looking for certain scholastic, understandings of justification to be explicitly condemned. While this was the first time a common article on justification had been formulated at an official colloquy, the larger disagreement over how to articulate the authority of the Church remained hotly contested and unresolved. Perhaps as a demonstration of the previous point, we might say that the Colloquy of Regensburg failed because neither side seemed to really trust that the other sincerely agreed to what they had signed; each felt that the other must have played some trick. *The Regensburg Book* (and the article on justification) became an ecumenical dead letter.

The Emergence of a New Paradigm for Dialogue

The awareness of different theological vocabularies and the appreciation of the unity that may at times result when those vocabularies are "translated" – particularly on justification – was revived in the 1980s, when Lutherans and Roman Catholics turned again to the doctrine of justification in their official bilateral dialogues (both in the U.S. and internationally). The carefully nuanced language used at Regensburg – of shared convictions and "fraternal

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[4] See Pfnür: "In the conviction of the participants of the [Regensburg] colloquy, the agreement concerning the doctrine of justification was not based on a formula that obscured the existing differences but on a mutual willingness to subordinate different theological language to a commonly confessed matter" (379).

admonishment" about extreme interpretations latent within each position, and warnings against simplistic characterization of the other's position – would be enshrined in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999. That document – a major achievement in ecumenical dialogue – acknowledges that Lutherans and Roman Catholics do not agree in every aspect of the doctrine, but that fundamental unity that is shared means that these differences need not be church dividing.

So, what does this mean? Where is the reform of the reform? With just these few examples, I hope to show – or at least caution – against assuming that the ecumenical agreements among Christians (especially those of the Reformations of the sixteenth century) are the result of forgetting or denying the theological convictions and formulas of that time in favor for a fluffier, warmer, and weaker modernist sensibility. Indeed, the sincerity of their faith and love for Christ and his Church established foundations for *rapprochement* – even if it would be 500 years before something was built on that foundation.

The reason for the change is not that we are smarter, or more tolerant, or more enlightened. It is, in part, due to the fact that we no longer live in Christendom. In the past, the failure to reach agreement – even when, as in many cases, the agreement far outweighed the differences – resulted in a political and social action. There was one state (in theory; one Holy Roman Empire or in the case of France or England, one sovereign state). A fracture in unity necessitated legal action: the power of the state had to be used against the minority party. Even when a bi-confessional toleration was achieved (such as in the Peace of Augsburg) the two existed uncomfortably side-by-side. More often than not, persecution and suppression were the rule (think of the Mennonites in Lutheran territories, the Huguenots in France, or the recusant Catholics in England). Again, in some cases – such as the Anabaptist and Lutherans or the Calvinists and Catholics – there was no way the political and social (not to mention theological) imagination of the sixteenth century could accommodate such a divergent, multi-confessional world. But even in the cases mentioned earlier, where the differences were few and the commonalities great, the resulting disagreement required a justification for separation and suppression.

Now, however, we exist in a different social and political reality. The role of ecumenical dialogue is to find ways to affirm what can be said together. In a post-Christendom world (perhaps even a post-Christian world), Christians need to evaluate seriously the received legacy of what has divided them. While taking these differences seriously, the need is now to affirm what unites Christians in their work in the world. In some cases, it is getting harder and harder to justify the separations.

The shift is discernable in the bilateral dialogues. Beginning with the document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* and extending into the *Joint Declaration*, and the three previous and current U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues, the emphasis has shifted toward what can be affirmed and taught together in the midst of our differences. In some cases, especially when the traditions stand in generally close proximity, the remaining differences are seen as an "exchange of gifts" and "salutary arguments" in the context of a "reconciled diversity" anda "differentiated consensus" (viz., Roman Catholic-Orthodox discussions on the episcopacy or Lutheran-Roman Catholic teachings on the Eucharist).

Conclusion

To conclude, this shift from polemics to apologetics, this recovery of previous dialogues in a new context free of a church-state union, this turn toward mutual affirmation of core principles and articulated differences is all part and parcel of the ministry given to the Church. We no longer seek to capitulate one to the other. Rather, the effort is to reconcile, with appropriate mutual repentance, two separated traditions for the sake of the Gospel. This reality is acknowledged in the document *From Conflict to Communion*, in which Lutherans and Roman Catholics affirm that they are yoked together in the task of the new evangelism. Such ecumenical work, such shared apologetics and evangelism (or, to use a phrase coined by Avery Dulles, *mutual magisteria*) requires continued patience, vulnerability, and dialogue – values sorely lacking in the general discourse of our nation. If the Church will not practice it, what hope is there for society?

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