

# Receptive Ecumenism and the Charism of a Partner Church: The Example of Justification

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The notion of ecumenical receptivity is an invitation and a challenge to our churches. It proposes that the ecumenical encounter with another church tradition is an event of the Holy Spirit. In the otherness of the other tradition, the Spirit of God offers us a gift. In this understanding a central dimension of ecumenical action involves a stance of openness to the Spirit and the attempt to discern the Spirit. Paul Murray has pointed out that ‘receptive ecumenical awakening is properly a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in the people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments to closer relationships will be overcome.’<sup>1</sup> Ecumenical receptivity encourages a stance before the other tradition that expects to find this tradition a place of grace. And the gift of the Spirit is to be found not only in the personal, but also in the structural-institutional dimensions of the other tradition.

I will use the language of institutional charism to describe the grace embodied in the life and structures of one church that can be perceived as a gift of the Spirit by a partner church. The proposal is that a theology of institutional charisms can contribute to the development of receptive ecumenism. This was not an explicit focus in the recent volume on receptive ecumenism, except in the

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1. Paul D. Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning—Establishing the Agenda,’ in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, edited by Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

contribution by Ladislav Orsy, but it is implicit in much of the discussion.<sup>2</sup> I will explore the notion of institutional charisms by beginning from Congar's understanding of the place of the charisms of the Spirit in the life of the church.

Then in a second step I will apply this to the ecumenical encounter, taking up some suggestions and hints from Congar and seeking to develop them. Finally, as a concrete example, I will discuss the agreement on the doctrine of justification between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches. The suggestion will be that the Roman Catholic Church is called to receive into its own life and preaching, from its Lutheran partner, the charism of a liberating theology of justification. I will conclude with an outline of a Catholic homily on justification.

### ***Congar on Charisms in the Life of the Church***

Yves Congar sees the church as built upon the charisms of the Spirit. He insists that ecclesiology springs from Christology, and Jesus Christ is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led in every aspect of his life and ministry. As there is a true history of the Spirit in the life of Jesus, so there is a real history of the Spirit in the life of the church. Congar acknowledges that traditional theologians like Aquinas have seen the work of the Spirit as accomplished in Jesus once for all at his conception. While Congar agrees that Jesus was Son of God from his conception, he seeks to do justice to the New Testament which indicates successive stages in the history of the Spirit in Jesus' life. As a fully human servant of God, Jesus is led by the Spirit in a series of events: in his conception, baptism, temptation, ministry, death and resurrection. The resurrection involves a new and ultimate stage in the union between the humanity of Jesus and the Spirit and, from this profound union, the risen Christ sends the Spirit upon his disciples.<sup>3</sup>

Congar sees these stages of the Spirit as 'authentic qualitative moments in which God's communication of himself in Jesus Christ and in a very real sense also to Jesus Christ was accomplished.'<sup>4</sup> He points to the way that the New Testament texts applies Psalm 2:7 – 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you' – to particular moments in the history of Jesus, to the annunciation (Lk 1:35), the baptism in the Jordan (Mk 1:11; Mt 3:17; Lk 3:22), and the resurrection (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5). Congar sees these as texts as reflecting actions of the Spirit in which Jesus is not only proclaimed as Son but actually becomes the Son in a new way.<sup>5</sup> Why is this important? It is because a more historical view of the work of the Spirit in the life of Jesus demands a more historical view of the work of the Spirit in the church.

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2. Ladislav Orsy, SJ, 'Authentic Learning and Receiving—A Search for Criteria,' in Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, 39-51, particularly at 47.

3. Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 89.

4. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 87.

5. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 92.

The idea that the Spirit is given to the church once for all at Pentecost can lead to complacency. If, by contrast, the Spirit comes to us in our concrete history as church, then the Spirit needs always to be invoked anew.<sup>6</sup> Congar insists that the Spirit acts not only in the foundation of the church, but also *in a concrete and historical way* in all aspects of its life. We need to await and to expect the Spirit's action in all pastoral and sacramental ministries of the church.<sup>7</sup> The church lives at every point from the free action of the Holy Spirit. Congar has as his heading for the last chapter of his three volumes on the Holy Spirit: 'The Life of the Church as one long epiclesis.'<sup>8</sup> He rejoices in the restoration of the invocation of the Holy Spirit to the liturgical rites of the Roman Catholic Church, and insists that every action performed in the name of the church calls for an invocation of the Spirit. He sees the church not as something already made, but as a community that is always in the process of being built by the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> It is always being called forward into a new future.

While Congar had always thought of the Spirit as the animator of the life of the church, by the time he wrote his three-volume *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, he had come to see the church as made by the Spirit. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit co-institute the church.<sup>10</sup> Together they establish the church in its charismatic reality and together they establish the means of grace – the scriptures, the sacraments, the apostolic ministry. Congar develops the significance of the Spirit's role as foundational for the church by offering reflections on the Spirit as principle of the church's unity, catholicity, apostolicity and holiness. In his later work, he came to see the charisms of the Spirit as a basis for the whole life of the church. It is not that he sees a charismatic element alongside an institutional one in the church. There is not an institutional zone running parallel to a charismatic one. He explicitly rejects an idea that he had himself taught in 1953, in *The Mystery of the Church*, that there is a kind of 'free zone' reserved for the Holy Spirit alongside the instituted structures and means of grace of the church. Rather, in both the charisms and in the structural means of grace, Word and Spirit act together.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of the charisms as central to the life of the church forms the basis for a properly 'pneumatological' ecclesiology: 'Pneumatology should, I believe, describe the impact, in the context of the vision of the Church, of the fact that the Spirit distributes his gifts where he wills and in this way builds up the Church.'<sup>12</sup> The charisms are gifts of nature and grace given for the fulfilment of the mission of the church. They include not only preaching and teaching, but also music, art, healing, peace-making, and prophetic words and deeds on behalf of human

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6. Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 3 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 267.

7. Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 2 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 44-7.

8. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 3, 267.

9. Yves Congar, 'Pneumatology Today,' *American Ecclesiastical Review* 167 (1973): 443.

10. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 2, 5-14.

11. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 61.

12. Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 1 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 156.

liberation.<sup>13</sup> Congar attempts to keep a balance between charisms and structural elements of the church. On the one hand, he insists on the central importance of word and sacrament, ordained ministry, and proper authority in the life of the church. On the other hand, he sees the charisms of the Spirit as part of the church's constitution and as a principle of its order.<sup>14</sup> It is the operation of the charisms that produces the institution.<sup>15</sup> The charisms give rise to the variety of ministries in the church, including the ordained ministry, which then has a role in the ordering of the charisms.

A theology that holds together Word and Spirit will be a theology that listens for the promptings of the Spirit in the 'signs of the times' and does this specifically in the light of the tradition of Jesus Christ. It will be a theology that finds ways to listen to the Spirit at work in the *sensus fidei* of the whole People of God as well as in the teaching office of the church. It will value both the charisms of every member and the ministry of the ordained. Congar insists that charisms are given to all members of the church. In a remarkably strong statement, he claims that the church is open to the Spirit only when it is open to the charisms of each member: 'The Church receives the fullness of the Spirit *only in the totality of gifts made by all her members.*'<sup>16</sup>

How might this theology of charisms be further applied to the ecumenical movement? I would propose in two fundamental ways. First it might suggest that there is a history of the Spirit not only in the life of Jesus and in the life of the church, but also in the ecumenical movement. And there is a need to invoke the Spirit at every point along the journey and to be open to the Spirit leading us into the new. And, second, it might suggest that when dealing with Christians of another tradition, we may need to recognise that they too have charisms of the Spirit, that their church tradition may embody an institutional charism. It may suggest that openness to the Spirit involves being open to the gift of an institutional charism of a partner church. This second line of thought will be taken up in the rest of this paper.

### ***Applying the Theology of Charisms to Ecumenical Receptivity***

Congar has offered hints and suggestions about how a theology of charisms might apply to ecumenical receptivity. Already in the 1930's, with his *Chrétien Désunis*, he was discussing what he then called the *spiritual impulses* or *positive faith values* of the great schisms that have divided Christianity:

Each of the great schisms which have become great Christian communities represents, in its positive aspect, certain genuine values,

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13. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 66-67.

14. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 80-1.

15. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 130.

16. Congar, 'Pneumatology Today,' *American Ecclesiastical Review* 167 (1973): 443.

even if it is tragically astray in those aspects in which it is negative, exclusive and peculiar to itself.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that his aim at this stage was to make clear that the reunion of churches need not mean that a partner church is required to give up the genuine spiritual impulse that is central to its existence. He finds examples of such genuine spiritual impulses in Luther's *sola gratia* and Calvin's *solī Deo Gloria*. He proposes that such genuine faith values could be found to be, in their positive content, not only truly Christian but also truly Catholic. At this stage in Congar's thought, there is as yet no sign of a theology of charisms or a strong view of mutual receptivity. What he does argue is that, in a reunited church, 'what is partial in individual experience is corrected by the experience of others, in communion with whom we complete our own.'<sup>18</sup>

Congar's extensive work on the Holy Spirit culminated in the publication of this three volume work in French in 1979 and 1980. In books that follow this foundational work on the Spirit, he explicitly suggests an ecumenical application of the theology of charisms. In his new work on ecumenism, *Diversity and Communion*, published in French in 1983, he reflects on recent work on the Augsburg confession and on the suggestion of Catholic scholars like H. Fries that the Roman Catholic Church might recognize the Augsburg Confession. Congar comments on this suggestion:

In these conditions, the Lutheran expression of the common faith would represent a development in response to a *particular charism*. It would make clear the message of salvation by pure grace, of Christian liberty in the faith, of the sovereignty of the Word of God, and finally of a theology of the cross. It would be a school not only recognized as such, but one which kept its parochial and organizational structure, though henceforth in reconciliation and unity. Is this possible?<sup>19</sup>

Another important book, *The Word and the Spirit*, first published in French in 1984, integrates Congar's theology of the Spirit within a systematic synthesis where the Word of God and the Holy Spirit always 'do God's work together' in the economy of creation and redemption. In the final paragraph of this book, Congar turns again to his passion, ecumenism:

How and to what degree does the grace of Pentecost play a part in the

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17. Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, translated by M.A. Bousfield (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1939), 40. For Congar's distinction between 'faith' and 'faith-value,' see Aidan Nichols OP, *Yves Congar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 97.
  18. Congar, *Divided Christendom*, 43.
  19. Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM, 1984), 148.

disunited churches? Under what conditions can a theology of the variety of charisms be applied to them? How should the dialectical tension between ‘diversity’ and ‘communion’ be conceived and put into effect? It calls for an immense effort on the part of Jesus’ disciples. It calls above all for effort on the part of the Catholic Church, which looks back at Jesus and at its own origin and forward to the fulfillment to which the Breath is urging and leading it.<sup>20</sup>

Congar asks about the conditions under which a theology of charisms might be applied to partner churches. In the *Receptive Ecumenism* volume, Ladislav Orsy has offered some criteria for ecumenical learning and receiving, which I find helpful.<sup>21</sup> William Rusch has described ecumenical reception in detail, showing how it involves a number of stages, and providing some fundamental criteria for reception, such as fidelity to Christ and to the apostolic faith.<sup>22</sup> Building on their contributions, I suggest, in response to Congar’s question, that the following six conditions might provide guidance in the reception of an institutional charism of an ecumenical partner church:

1. What is proposed as an institutional charism of the partner church can be recognized by the receiving church as an authentic expression of biblical and apostolic faith.
2. The proposed institutional charism leads to Christ, to faith in him and to authentic discipleship.
3. It is not opposed to the deepest self-understanding of the receiving church.
4. It can be seen as an organic development of the faith of the receiving church.
5. It brings to the receiving church a renewed energy and life.
6. It is accompanied by the fruits of the Spirit – ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (Gal 5:22).

Where these conditions are met, then a theology of the diversity of charisms can rightly be applied to a partner church’s guiding spiritual impulse. It can be celebrated as an institutional charism of the Spirit, and as a gift of God for the receiving church.

### ***Justification as an Example of an Institutional Charism***

In Augsburg, on 31 October 1999, official representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church solemnly signed and

20. Congar, *Word and Spirit*, 132.

21. Orsy, ‘Authentic Learning and Receiving,’ 43. Orsy has further helpful comments in the rest of his article, particularly in his treatment of the receiving community (pp. 44-46).

22. William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 54-88.

confirmed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. After decades of work by theologians and after intense discussion in bilateral dialogues, the two churches formally agreed to a central common statement: ‘Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.’<sup>23</sup>

What is ground-breaking about this common statement is that it is not simply an agreement between dialogue teams but an agreement of *the churches*. There had been difficulties on both sides, resulting in the addition of an ‘Official Common Statement’ and an ‘Annex’ to the original *Joint Declaration*. The ‘Official Common Statement’ states: ‘On the basis of the agreement reached in the *Joint Statement on the Doctrine of Justification* (JD), the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church declare together: “The understanding of the doctrine of justifications set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics.”’<sup>24</sup> On the basis of this consensus, the two churches reconsider their mutual condemnations of the past. Together, they formally declare that the teaching of the Lutheran Churches presented in the *Declaration* does not fall under the condemnations of the Council of Trent, and that the condemnations of the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the Roman Catholic teaching presented in the *Declaration*.

As William Rusch points out in the *Receptive Ecumenism* volume, this agreement is of a particular kind: it is a *differentiated consensus*.<sup>25</sup> In this kind of ecumenical consensus a basic agreement is declared, while remaining differences are acknowledged as continuing to exist. As Walter Kasper notes, in a differentiated consensus there can be no contradiction of one another’s position, but there can be differences that are complementary.<sup>26</sup> He goes on to point out that behind this ecumenical methodology there lies an image of the united church for which we are striving, a church of *unity in reconciled diversity*.<sup>27</sup> The ‘Official Common Statement’ of both churches explicitly takes up and thereby endorses this ecumenical model for a united Church.

Something truly remarkable has happened in this agreement. The two churches have come to a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification, agreed that mutual condemnations of the past no longer apply to the doctrine of partner churches, and present a common vision of a united church as a unity in

23. Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 15.

24. Joint Declaration, 41.

25. William G. Rusch, ‘The International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue-An Example of Ecclesial Learning and Ecumenical Reception’ in Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism*, 153. On this ‘differentiated consensus’ see Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today* (London: Burns and Oates, 2004 ), 124-30.

26. Kasper, *That They May All Be One*, 129.

27. Kasper, *That They May All Be One*, 130.

reconciled diversity. Kasper points to the deeper pneumatological meaning of this event:

Thus we neither discovered a new Gospel nor rejected what our fathers and forefathers believed to be the expression of the revealed Gospel. What we did discover anew was that this once for all revealed Gospel is so deep and so rich that nobody, no council and no theologian, can ever exhaust it. *It was by the gift of the Holy Spirit that we were able to deepen our understanding, so we could recognize and re-receive our respective traditions.* In the richness of the other we discovered our own richness. This new perception and re-reception is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into the whole truth (John 16:13). There was at stake a Spirit-guided development of dogma. So the event of Augsburg was not only, or primarily, a formal signing of a document, but above all a celebration of joyful thanksgiving to God in the presence of his people.<sup>28</sup>

What is the gift given to the Roman Catholic Church in this event? I believe that it is nothing else than the positive institutional charism that has inspired the Lutheran tradition from the beginning, the joyful, liberating Gospel that we are saved not by what we do, but by God's grace alone and in faith. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church will continue to emphasize human cooperation in grace, the real inner renewal that grace works in us, and the fruits of grace in action in Christian life. But it is called to do this now in the light of a new moment of the Spirit, as it receives into its own life the institutional charism of the Lutheran churches.

In the preceding section, I outlined six conditions for the reception of an institutional charism from another church: that it be recognized by the receiving church as an authentic expression of biblical faith, that it leads to Christ, that it is not opposed to the deepest self-understanding of the receiving church, that it can be seen as an organic development of the faith of the receiving church, that it brings to the receiving church a renewed energy and life and that it is accompanied by the fruits of the Spirit. From a Roman Catholic perspective it is abundantly clear that the first four of these conditions have been met. This is shown by the fact that the *Joint Declaration* has been received into the Catholic Church through the official instruments of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity, with the Bishop of Rome expressing his approval and joy. The last two conditions, renewed energy and life and the fruits of the Spirit, have been experienced by those closely connected to the events at Augsburg and to Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues around the world, but not, as yet, by many ordinary members of the Roman Catholic Church.

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28. Kasper, *That They May All Be One*, 125 (emphasis added).

This points to the fundamental importance of what might be called the second level of reception. As Paul Murray has said of reception: ‘Ecumenically, it is used in two complementary ways: first of the process whereby particular denominations authoritatively affirm teachings deriving from international ecumenical dialogues; and more generally of the even more unpredictable appropriations of such achievements into the lives of local Christian communities.’<sup>29</sup> If the Lutheran tradition on justification is truly a gift of the Spirit at this moment for the Catholic Church, then it is to be received not only at the level of proper church authorities, but also at the level of local Roman Catholic communities.

This kind of reception can happen through many means, but homilies will be crucial if this gift is to be appropriated by those who assemble in local congregations for Sunday Eucharist. Such homilies, I suggest, would have two aims: 1. They would seek to communicate the signing of the *Joint Declaration* as an act of the Spirit in the life of the Church; 2. They would seek to communicate the gift being offered to Roman Catholics from their Lutheran brothers and sisters. There are opportunities for such homilies in the three year liturgical cycle based particularly on the second readings. In order to make this suggestion more concrete, I will offer an outline for a homily for the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, where the second reading is taken from chapter 3 of Romans.

### ***Outline for a Homily on Justification***

God’s justice that was made known through the Law and the Prophets has now been revealed outside the Law, since it is the same justice of God that comes through faith to everyone, Jew and pagan alike, who believes in Jesus Christ. Both Jew and Greek sinned and forfeited God’s glory, and both are justified through the free gift of his grace by being redeemed in Christ Jesus who was appointed by God to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation through faith since, as we see it, a man is justified by faith and not by doing something the Law tells him to do. (Romans 3:21-25.28)

In the second reading for today’s liturgy, we find St Paul talking to us about justification. He tells us that we are justified through the absolutely free gift of God’s grace. And that we are justified simply by our faith and not by doing something that the Law tells us to do.

What does this word *justification* mean? It may mean very little to some of us. It is not a common word among Catholics. We more often talk about our *salvation*, or about our *redemption*, or simply about the *forgiveness of our sins*. These are words you hear a lot in Catholic circles, but the word justification is seldom used in our schools or in our Sunday homilies.

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29. Paul Murray, in a review of *Rome and Canterbury: the Elusive Search for Unity*, by Mary Reath, *The Tablet* (18 Oct, 2008), 24.

Yet this word is extremely important. Just ten years ago, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. This followed many years of intense dialogue in different parts of the world. Justification was the central doctrinal issue that divided Lutherans and Catholics at the Reformation. What was so exciting about the *Joint Declaration* was that it affirmed a common understanding of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ.

There are some remaining differences between the two churches. But they now share a consensus on basic truths concerning justification. In the past, the two churches had condemned each other's doctrine. In the light of the new agreement, both churches have declared that the old condemnations do not apply to each other's doctrine as it is found in the *Joint Declaration*.

It is truly a joy to celebrate the fact that we have come to such an agreement on what was the central cause of division between the two churches. And what a joy it is, that we Christians no longer condemn each other's views on the central truth of our faith, our salvation in Christ! This agreement has been endorsed and accepted not only by the Lutheran World Federation, but also by the authorities of the Catholic Church. So we should ponder the work of the Holy Spirit in all of this and give thanks and praise to God.

But what does it mean for us? Obviously, it is important because it is a real step towards overcoming the division between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church. Of course, there are other issues that divide us, including the role of the bishop of Rome in the life of the church. But, with the help of God's grace, we have taken a big step that brings us closer to full communion.

But there is also something deeper here. The Lutheran Church has always given a central role to the doctrine of justification. Now that we have reached substantial agreement, we Catholics can find that Luther and the Lutheran tradition have something precious to teach us about our life of faith.

Luther lived at a time when theology had degenerated and there was a good deal of corruption in the life of the church. Many people lived in terrible fear of God. They feared final damnation and this was reinforced by popular preaching and piety. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther himself experienced intense anxiety about where he stood before God. He had a deeply troubled soul, and a troubled conscience. Many of those around him also had troubled consciences. By studying the Scriptures, and particularly St Paul, Luther came to a truly *liberating* discovery. We don't make ourselves right before God. We are justified simply by God's grace. It is God who saves us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation comes to us as an absolutely free gift. We do not earn our salvation. It does not depend on us. It is not a matter of how well we perform. Our response is faith. We entrust ourselves to God. We trust not in ourselves but in God's grace.

Of course, being made right by God, being justified necessarily involves us in living a Christian life of love for others. At the time of the Reformation the Catholic Church emphasized our human cooperation with God's grace, and the

reality of our transformation by grace. But what is clear in this new agreement is that we can hold onto these precious truths while also receiving into our own lives what was so precious to Luther and his companions: the discovery that we are justified not by what we do but by God's grace and that what we need to do is trusting in a God of mercy and grace.

What is so liberating in all of this is Luther's discovery of a *gracious God*, a God who reaches out to us in Jesus Christ, bringing healing, forgiveness and peace. We can be freed from a troubled conscience because we no longer depend upon our own efforts, but depend radically on a God of grace and mercy. At the end of his life, Luther reflected on how he felt when he made this discovery: 'Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through open gates.'

Luther's discovery was that we don't have to make ourselves right. It is God who makes us right in Christ. And God does this as an absolutely free gift. God justifies us through grace, by faith. Our Christian living flows from this free gift of God.

I believe that this insight is a gift from the Lutheran Church for the Catholic community of our time. Some of us are still caught up with troubled consciences today. Some people are afflicted by a scrupulous attitude to Christian life. Some have a view of God that fills them with fear. They need to hear again the liberating idea that God is a God of grace and mercy, and that it is God who makes us right, not what we do.

But there are other important ways in which this insight is important in our society today. We attempt to make ourselves right in all kinds of ways. There is a kind of desperation to prove to ourselves and others that we matter, that we are important. We can try to make ourselves right by the kind of home we have, or by endless expensive home improvements. We can try to make ourselves right by competing for attention, for status, for a better job, for more money. Many of us get caught up in a cycle of more and more work, as if taking on more work, or achieving more, makes us right.

The Lutheran emphasis on the doctrine of justification is a powerful reminder of what is central to the Gospel: that we are made right by God, and by God alone. We are made right by God's love poured out in the world in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. We are made right by a God of love, whose grace and mercy always goes before us and in whom we can entrust in every aspect of our life and our death. In entrusting ourselves to the God of Jesus we find true freedom. We are enabled to live in freedom, free of the desperate need to prove ourselves. We are freed to take joy in God's good creation and to live lovingly with those around us.

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