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Eileen Scully

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## **Affirmations and Admonitions: Lutheran Decisions and Dialogue with Reformed, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic Churches**

Gabriel Fackre and Michael Root

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998

124 pages, \$25.99 Softcover

The 1997 Hein-Fry lectures at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America seminaries shone a probing spotlight on the prominent bilateral dialogues in which the ELCA presently finds itself engaged. In the six lectures that make up the body of this book, Gabriel Fackre and Michael Root provide an insightful survey of the key theological issues involved in three ecumenical proposals: The Lutheran-Reformed Formula of Agreement (to establish full communion between the ELCA and three Reformed Churches); the Episcopal-Lutheran Concordat (to establish full communion between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, USA); and the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. While other agreed statements and proposals for full communion (such as Waterloo and Porvoo) do appear as occasional reference points, the book is clearly centred on these three proposals. This focus is one of the elements that provides a concrete and practical foundation for the book, and this foundation is extremely helpful: the theological issues dealt with are heady and heavy, difficult and challenging issues of ecclesiology and soteriology, and yet the specific focus lends a concrete immediacy to these issues that is helpful. The lecture format carries into the book to make the chapters well-paced and accessible to those not steeped in theological and ecumenical jargon.

That the votes were taken on these proposals in the summer of 1997, and that other chapters now need to be written does not detract from the usefulness of this book. This is due in part to the care with which Root and Fackre each search for the heart of the theological question(s) at stake in each dialogue and ecumenical proposal. It is also due, perhaps more importantly, to the contribution that their work makes to Lutheran theological self-understanding in light of these ecumenical dialogues. If it is a truism of the ecumenical movement that one discovers and learns about oneself in dialogue with another tradition perhaps as much or more so than of the other tradition, it is a truism that bears fruit when that self-learning is teased out and reflected upon.

Gabriel Fackre contributed three lectures/chapters to the book, in which he reflects on Lutheran charisms brought to other churches, Lutheran learnings, and the life of congregations in the context of ecumenical agreements. Perhaps the strongest section of these essays is when he asks "well, what *is* the special Lutheran charism?" In the theological context of the Joint Declaration on Justification, Fackre points out, justification is – as ever – the special gift brought by Lutherans to the ecumenical gift exchange. But more, the gift is brought with

particularly Lutheran wrapping, which he describes as the heritage of Lutheran piety, theology and practice in 1) a “condescension Christology” of divine solidarity with us and 2) the simultaneity of *simul iustus et peccator*. Divine solidarity, the *capax* serves to shape admonitions of Reformed traditions, a corrective offered to Reformed emphases on divine sovereignty that can lead to either predestination or universalism. To Episcopal dialogue partners the same challenges are raised, along with the question of whether emphasis on the historic episcopate to ensure apostolicity has not diminished apostolic faith, the fruit of divine solidarity. In the following chapter, Fackre reflects on gifts and admonitions received from dialogue partners, which he names as “Sovereignty and Sanctification”.

Michael Root’s lectures start from very practical questions: “What are we doing? Should we do it? and What difference does it make?” In a first chapter, on the nature of Christian unity as gift of grace, he is careful to draw our attention to the theological point that it is not our job to create the unity of Christ’s church. Our work, rather, is to seek to live out that unity given in Christ. In the chapters that follow Root searches out the criteria for this “living out” of the unity to which we are called. Here, the difficult dialogue sticking points are explored in careful detail. For the LWF-Vatican dialogue, having reached agreement on such a fundamental point of doctrine as justification, members had to consider whether the disagreements that remain pose an obstacle to shared proclamation of the gospel. The answer of the Joint Declaration is “no”. The criteria issue here centres on priority of the gospel. Well-drawn out treatments of the issue of real presence (ELCA-Reformed agreement) and episcopacy (ELCA-ECUSA Concordat) follow. The book concludes with a chapter written after the votes were taken. Reflecting on the narrow defeat of the Concordat and on its revising, Root reminds us that “ecumenical decisions are also in part decisions about self-identity”. In a powerful further reminder of what the Protestant traditions have brought to shape the ecumenical movement, he adds, “Will the ELCA realize a vision of a church which is serious about the theological heritage of the Reformation and *for that reason* seeks the greatest unity possible with the theological, liturgical, and institutional heritage of the church catholic?” (121).

Eileen Scully  
Waterloo, ON