

Pope lauds Lutherans, warns of difficulties: Lutheran-Catholic dialogue

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In a Vatican visit by a top U.S. Lutheran bishop, Pope Benedict XVI praised dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics but called on both groups to ignore neither their doctrinal differences nor “a general climate of uncertainty” about truths today.

“We should intensify our efforts to understand more deeply what we have in common and what divides us,” Benedict told Mark Hanson, president of the Lutheran World Federation and presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Hanson was accompanied by Ishmael Noko of Geneva, LWF general secretary.

Benedict underlined the 1999 Catholic-Lutheran Joint Declaration on Justification, calling the document “a significant milestone on our common path to full visible unity.” In that document, Catholics and Lutherans aimed to settle their disagreements over justification—the issue of whether salvation is God-given or earned through good works. Divisions over the issue played a key role in prompting the Protestant Reformation.

While praising that formula, Benedict stressed that new moral challenges face the dialogue and expressed concern over “a general climate of uncertainty regarding Christian truths and ethical principles which formerly went unquestioned.” Added the pope: “Our ecumenical path together will continue to encounter difficulties and will demand patient dialogue.”

The International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity expects to release a document on the “apostolicity of the church” in early 2006, addressing variant views on such issues as apostolic succession.

Although Hanson noted “differences” between the churches in governance, the document “will certainly also show the richness of shared apostolic faith, which we

treasure together," he said. -*Religion News Service*