

**On the 40th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Research Institute, Strasbourg, France.
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Since 1999, Luther College has offered a January Term course "Sacred Spaces," designed to address *the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In 2000, the biennial course became a joint effort between both faculty and students of Luther College and our Roman Catholic sister institution, Loras College of Dubuque, Iowa. Ruth R. Kath, Ph.D., Professor of German and Director of the Luther's *Sense of Vocation* program led the course the first time with Fr. Gary F. Krapfl, D. Min., of Luther College, before the historic signing, and has led it three times following the signing, with Fr. Douglas O. Wathier, STD, of Loras College, including in January 2005. In all, some 60 students of both colleges have taken advantage of the opportunity for a close encounter with ecumenical formation in the very places most associated with each of the dialogue partners—Rome, Wittenberg, and Strasbourg.

As the study course unfolds, our group travels first to Rome, where the special focus of attention for the on sites that represent the "shared history" of all Christians, those places that defined the church at its earliest beginnings and through some twelve centuries until the Reformation in the sixteenth century. After nearly a week in Rome, we travel far north to Wittenberg, Germany, home of the famous sites of Martin Luther and the Reformation. Our last stop on the study tour is always Strasbourg, France, where our focus is the Ecumenical Research Institute.

Inevitably, one of the high points of the whole trip is our meeting in Strasbourg with Dr. Theodor Dieter, who supported Lutheran negotiators with expert theological research the long ordeal of drafting and then international ratification of the document. Dieter was honored in spring 2004 as a special Vocation Visitor at Luther College. His unwavering commitment to ecumenical understanding, his sorrow at the difficulties and controversies raised by the *Joint Declaration*, and his tempered joy at its final passage always deeply move the students, as they listen to his personal reflections amidst updated information on continuing dialogues. One student summarized the feelings of many in the various groups, when she wrote:

"Overall, it took 40 years of dialogues and meetings to create a document that both churches could agree upon. It is truly an amazing feat. Even more impressive are the people who work towards those historical meetings. As a class, we asked Dr. Dieter why he works toward ecumenism and he responded, *There is only one body of Christ, so the division of churches is unnecessary.* To me, his personal dedication to the work of ecumenism is just as important as the signing of the document because it is proof that there are faithful people doing God's work"

The students who travel with us begin studying the *Joint Declaration* the first day of the study tour. By the end of the three weeks together, they have experienced much community and much division, and in Strasbourg, they are ready and eager to engage in

solid conversation about the relations between Catholics and Lutherans, as well as about ecumenical progress globally. The enthusiasm and interest of the many students who have visited since 1999 have touched the staff of the Institute. In a recent e-mail, Dr. Dieter reflected on one class. "I like very much to remember your visit, the intelligent and competent questions of your students, their interest in questions of the ecumenical movement. In view of the German debate on the *Joint Declaration*, it is extremely helpful for us to experience that our work is regarded as important in other countries, and that also students are interested in it. Thus, thank you once again for your visit..."

In January 2005, the course experienced two new enhancements that made the concluding visit to the Institute all the more fruitful: the first was the inclusion of two seminary-level students with the traveling group, one a Lutheran senior at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the other a Roman Catholic M.A. candidate in Pastoral Theology from Loras College. Their conversations with our undergraduates, with us, with our guests, and with each other added enormously to our ecumenical exchanges. The other new piece added was a visit with Msgr. John A. Radano at the Pontifical Commission for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome. Like Theodor Dieter, Msgr. Radano has dedicated his life to ecumenical work and was kind enough to reflect personally with the students on his long time experience with it. The parallels between the men were not lost on those listening. In a concluding reflection paper, one of our students wrote:

"Ecumenism has not always been at the forefront of my religious experience. Since I started studying at Luther, I've seen the importance of ecumenism. In many situations we as students have been able to worship together regardless of denomination. I really started to appreciate it more after talking to Msgr. John Radano and Dr. Theodor Dieter. Those two men come from very different places geographically and spiritually. However, their goal is the same: to bring Christians together. I was greatly inspired to see these two people working so hard for something that seems to be so distant it is impossible. The amount of work it took just to get one document signed between the Catholic and Lutherans traditions demonstrates how monumental a task it is to promote ecumenism."

Perhaps one of our many students will begin a lifetime of ecumenical research and teaching because of the learning that has occurred on the study tour and at the Ecumenical Research Institute. At the very least, those who have already gone on to ordained ministry in either church tradition never regard Christians of other denominations the same way again. The students who have now entered teaching or business or other lines of work have been changed by the encounter too. Because of their deep experiences and encounters with dedicated ecumenists like Theodor Dieter, our former students have told us that ecumenical cooperation has become a way of life for themselves and for their congregations and parishes. We believe that there could not be a finer tribute than that to Dieter and to the crucial work of the Ecumenical Research Institute.

We congratulate the Ecumenical Research Institute on its fortieth anniversary and look forward to many more very fruitful years of life-changing work with Dr. Dieter and its excellent staff.