

A Fruitful Dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics in the South Land of the Holy Spirit

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Lutherans and Catholics in Australia have engaged in fruitful ecumenical dialogue for forty years, producing eight documents that have consistently had a view toward reception in the two respective churches. In recent years this Dialogue has been encouraged on its journey by the concept of receptive ecumenism. Ecumenical encounter is a work of the Holy Spirit, and each church can be enriched by recognising and receiving the charism of a partner church.

Keywords: *fruitful ecumenical dialogue, receptive ecumenism, justification, dialogue documents, Sacrament and Sacrifice*

Introduction

In 1606 the Portuguese navigator Pedro Fernandez Queirós landed on a Pacific island that he named “Australia del Espiritu Santo” (South Land of the Holy Spirit), thinking that it was the northerly part of a great southern continent that he was in quest of discovering. It was more than two hundred years later that European settlers officially adopted the name “Australia” for the island–continent, “discovered” long after Queirós, which they had forcibly occupied. Until recent times, no-one had thought to link it with the Holy Spirit, as the pious Queirós had done. On the contrary, Australia has sometimes been described as “the most godless place under heaven”. While the Aborigines who had inhabited this continent for thousands of years were deeply spiritual people, the convicts and soldiers of the first British settlement were notoriously irreligious. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, Christianity did take root in Australian society and by the beginning of the twentieth century more than 90% of the population identified as Christian. There are numerous stories from the pioneering days of Christians reaching out to help each other across traditional denominational divisions in the isolation and harshness of those times. For example, there are stories of Protestants pitching in to help Catholics build their church, or everyone in a remote community turning up for the visit of a pastor or priest. From the beginning, denominational divisions in Australia were never as rigid as they were in the old countries of Europe.

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