



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO A DELEGATION OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF GERMANY

Thursday, 18 December 2014

[Multimedia]

Sisters and Brothers,

I cordially greet you and thank Bishop Ulrich for his words, which testify clearly to his ecumenical commitment. I also greet the other representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany and the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops' Conference, on their ecumenical visit to Rome.

Today, the official dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics can review its nearly 50 years of intense work. The significant progress which, with God's help, has been achieved constitutes a firm foundation of sincere friendship lived in faith and in spirituality. Despite the remaining theological differences on various questions of faith, collaboration and fraternal harmony characterize the life of our Churches and of our Ecclesial Communities, which today are committed to a common ecumenical journey. The ecumenical responsibility of the Catholic Church, as underscored by St John Paul II in the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, is indeed an essential task of the Church herself, convoked and directed by the unity of the Triune God. Joint texts, such as the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" — to which you referred — between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, officially signed 15 years ago in Augsburg, are important milestones, which allow us to proceed with trust on the path undertaken.

The common objective of full and visible Christian unity seems farther away at times, due to different interpretations within the dialogue, on what the Church is and her unity means. Notwithstanding these still open issues, we must not resign ourselves but rather focus on the next possible step. Let us not forget that we are walking together on the path of friendship, of mutual esteem and of theological research, a journey which lets us look at the future with hope. This is why on this past 21 November, the bells of all the cathedrals in Germany were rung, in order to

invite Christian brothers and sisters everywhere to a common liturgical service for the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of the *Second Vatican Council*.

I am pleased that the Commission of Bilateral Dialogue between the German Bishops' Conference and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany is about to conclude its work on the theme: "God and the Dignity of Man". Today, these questions relating to the dignity of the human person at the beginning and the end of life, and those pertaining to the family, to marriage and to sexuality, are among the most important issues and they cannot be omitted or overlooked simply because one does not want to jeopardize the ecumenical consensus reached thus far. It would be a shame if, on such important issues bound to human existence, new confessional differences should arise.

Today ecumenical dialogue can no longer be separated from reality and from the life of our Churches. In 2017, Lutheran and Catholic Christians will jointly commemorate the Fifth Centenary of the Reformation. On this occasion, for the first time, Lutherans and Catholics will have the opportunity to share one ecumenical commemoration throughout the world, not in the form of a triumphalistic celebration, but as the profession of our common faith in the Triune God. Therefore, at the heart of this event, common prayer and the intimate request for forgiveness for mutual faults will be addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ, together with the joy of making a shared ecumenical journey. This refers in a meaningful way to the document produced by the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity published last year and entitled "From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017". May this commemoration of the Reformation encourage all to take, with the help of God and the support of his Spirit, further steps toward unity and not to simply limit ourselves to what we have already accomplished.

In the hope that your fraternal visit may contribute to strengthen the positive collaboration that exists between Lutherans and Catholics in Germany and in the world, I wholeheartedly invoke the Lord's blessing on you and on your communities.