



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE
TO NORWAY, ICELAND, FINLAND,
DENMARK AND SWEDEN

**MEETING WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH, OF OTHER CHURCHES
AND ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES IN DENMARK**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Moltkes Palace, Copenhagen
Wednesday, 7 June 1989

*My dear Brothers and Sisters,
dear Friends in Christ,*

1. I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to meet today this *representation from the Danish Lutheran Church, as well as the representatives of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities in Denmark*. I also greet Chief Rabbi Melchior Ben. In particular I wish to thank Bishop Christiansen and Reverend Werner Jenssen for their kind words and for the reflections which they have offered on the theme of the Scriptures and human fellowship.

As Christians who strive to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth (Cfr. *Io.* 16, 13), we are constantly reminded of the prayer which Jesus made on behalf of his disciples the night before he died: "I do not pray for these only, but for all who believe in me through their word, that they all may be one..." (*Io.* 17, 20-21). The *unity* of all who believe in Christ is clearly *a matter of Christ's will*. It touches the very heart of the Church's life and mission in the world. It compels us to acknowledge that, for lack of unity, our witness to the Gospel and our credibility as followers of Christ have been seriously hampered. It also commits us to serve the cause of *reconciliation*, since we ourselves have been reconciled to God in Christ (Cfr. *2Cor.* 15, 18). It is Christ who,

once for all, broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Israel and the nations, and now summons all his followers to perfect unity (Cfr. *Io.* 17, 22).

Some four hundred years ago, the ties of full ecclesial communion which had united the majority of Christians in Denmark with the Church of Rome were severed. This tragic separation, often marked by hostility and mutual distrust, has endured up to our own times. Today, in Moltke's Palace, I come to you as a brother in Christ and as a disciple of the one Master, in order to stress *my own commitment, and the commitment of the entire Catholic Church, to work for the restoration of unity among Christians*, in accordance with the Lord's will. Surely we are bound by the Gospel to work and pray together for a restoration of full unity "in the bond of peace" (*Eph.* 4, 3). Fidelity to the full truth of Christ compels us not only to acknowledge the differences which separate us, but also to seek their resolution, with confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit. This, in fact, is the aim of the important theological dialogue presently taking place between the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches and Ecclesial Communities whose representatives are here present, including the Lutheran World Federation. In this dialogue, we must first *acknowledge those things which we already share*, in the hope of overcoming distrust and of fostering growth in mutual understanding.

2. My brothers and sisters: The Second Vatican Council made important doctrinal statements about Holy Scripture, its place in the Church of Christ, and its role in the movement towards Christian unity. The Bible is a great gift from God which all Christians, whatever their differences, continue to hold in common. Inspired by our shared love for the written word of God, I wish to offer, in this ecumenical assembly, some personal thoughts on this great gift and its role in our work for greater mutual understanding.

The Council's Decree on Ecumenism solemnly affirms: "in dialogue itself, the sacred utterances are precious instruments in the mighty hand of God for attaining that unity which the Saviour holds out to all men" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21). "*Precious instruments in the mighty hand of God*". Holy Scripture is in fact God's *own word*. All Christians hold this as a basic tenet of faith. The Council Fathers, in the Decree which I have just quoted, acknowledge this quite explicitly: "Calling upon the Holy Spirit, in these sacred Scriptures (our Christian brethren) seek God as he speaks to them in Christ" (*Ibid.*). And almost in the same breath, they go on to say, "A love, veneration, and near cult of the sacred Scriptures lead our brethren to a constant and expert study of the sacred text" (*Ibid.*).

All Christians "seek God" in his own written word. We are convinced that our Lord Jesus Christ reveals himself to us, today and always, in the Scriptures. The Incarnate Word of God continues to speak to the Church through the sacred books. In reading and studying the Scriptures, then, Christians seek to know God and to understand his plan for the human family. Technical and scientific study is only an instrument of this larger aim. Primarily, the word of God is intended to build up and sustain the Church; to provide strength for her children, food for the soul, and to be a

pure and lasting source of spiritual life (Cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 21). That is why Catholics and Lutherans as well as the members of other Ecclesial Communities make the word of God a fundamental component of the Liturgy, which, according to the Fathers of the Church, consists in the “table of the word” as well as the “table of the Eucharist”.

3. Is there not a “principle of unity” to be found here? Does the conviction of our dependence on God’s written word not provide a solid foundation for Christian unity?

The answer to these questions is surely in the affirmative, as the present status of our relations can demonstrate. This is true not only because of a kind of psychological convergence that has grown up between us, but much more because God, the One who speaks in Scripture and through Scripture, is at work in those who read it with pure and sincere hearts. It is precisely for this reason that the Council says that Scripture is a powerful instrument in the hand of God to reach the goal of that unity which the Saviour offers to all (Cfr. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21).

The extent of our *growing convergence* is attested by the fact that we use the same critical methods, and often arrive at the same exegetical conclusions, that more and more we listen to the voice of Tradition in the interpretation of the word of God, and that, on the practical level, collaboration has increased among us in the translation, publication and diffusion of the Sacred Texts.

4. However, my brothers and sisters, we are all well aware that much remains to be done to make of Scripture that instrument of unity which the Lord wills for it – and for us. And it is sad to acknowledge that the *interpretation of Scripture sometimes remains a factor of division* and therefore of disunity among Christians. This is not so much because we read in different, or even divergent, ways certain particular texts or passages. Rather, it is because we hold different views of the “relationship between the Scriptures and the Church” and the role of the Church’s authentic teaching office in their interpretation (Cfr. *ibid*).

These differing views are now an important subject on the agenda of our dialogue. I am convinced that it is by *pursuing this dialogue* with confidence and perseverance, and *above all with prayer*, that we shall be able to overcome our differences, without being unfaithful to what belongs to the integrity of the Christian faith. We shall be led to strengthen our faithfulness to the revealed word of God, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit who “guides us into all the truth” (Cfr. *Jo.* 16, 13). It is precisely in this endeavour, difficult as it is, that the “powerful instrument” of God’s sacred word can serve to build that “peace” between us which “surpasses all understanding” (Cfr. *Phil.* 4, 7).

Thus, the road ahead of us is clearly indicated. We are called to continue and deepen our *common study of Holy Scripture*, our *dialogue on its content and interpretation*, and our *collaboration in making it more accessible and understood*.

Above all, as Christian individuals and in our Ecclesial Communities, we are called to *practise in our lives the message* of reconciliation, of victory over sin, of love and peace in Christ, which are revealed in the Scriptures. We must be renewed in Spirit so as to become more faithful to the revealed word of God and the teaching of Christ by becoming “holy, as he is holy” (Cfr. *1Petr.* 1, 16). In this way, we shall be drawn together towards deeper unity, in true faith and in active love. This is what the Second Vatican Council implied when it stated: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this explains the dynamism of the movement towards unity” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6).

5. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: in the Holy Scriptures, all Christians have been given a *common treasure*, a rule of faith, a source of spiritual growth and an encouragement to know and serve the one true God. In today’s world, so deeply affected by a loss of the sense of God, a world which has forgotten the meaning of life and the reality of sin and forgiveness, a world lacking transcendent hope, the Scriptures offer to all the message of salvation in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. For you, the Christians of Denmark, the Bible is a precious key which opens the door to understanding a culture which for a thousand years has drawn inspiration from its teaching. Through the power of God’s word, you come to an ever new awareness of *the profound religious and moral principles which underlie the best traditions of your society*. By teaching its message to the young, you will pass on the wisdom they need to distinguish between good and evil, between life and death in making important decisions for their future and the future of Denmark. By leading them in a prayerful reading of Holy Scripture, you will be challenged by a message that fully responds to the questions of life’s meaning, that question about which so many of our contemporaries are confused.

In concluding these reflections, I thank you all once again for your kind invitation, and I pray that each of you, in all that you do, will always serve the Lord in obedience to his holy word. May Christ bless the efforts of all who preach his name and strive to do his will. May his Holy Spirit ever guide us in our efforts to overcome the divisions which separate Christians from one another. To God “who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen” (*Eph.* 3, 20-21).

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