



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE WORLD LUTHERAN FEDERATION

December 9, 1999

Mr President!

1. I very cordially welcome you to the Apostolic Palace, together with the delegates of the Lutheran World Federation. It was seven years ago that I had the joy of receiving your distinguished predecessor, President Gottfried Brakemeier, in the Vatican. At that time we were able to celebrate together the first 25 years of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. We could look with gratitude at the many significant fruits produced by the bilateral discussions. Since the Second Vatican Council Catholics and Lutherans have drawn considerably closer: with God's help it has been possible slowly and patiently to remove barriers separating us. At the same time the visible bonds of unity have also been strengthened. Ecumenical cooperation between Catholics and Lutherans has steadily increased at both the national and the international level. Signs of companionship in our faith journey are now a regular habit. Meanwhile collaboration in the charitable and social fields is particularly close.

2. A few weeks ago at Augsburg we received a particular fruit from the theological dialogue. The Joint Declaration on the *Doctrine of Justification by Faith* was signed there: a subject that for centuries was a sort of symbol of the division between Catholics and Protestants. Thanks be to God for enabling us to achieve this *milestone* on the difficult path to re-establishing full unity among Christians (cf. *Angelus*, 31 October 1999).

Without doubt the document represents a sound basis for further ecumenical steps. It is an encouragement to continue theological research in the ecumenical field and to remove the obstacles that still stand in the way of the deeply longed-for unity at the Lord's table. In addition,

we must join forces in working together so that the content of the doctrine is translated into the language and life of our contemporaries. So there is a need for good interpreters who can convey the truth in fidelity to their own identity and out of love for the person they are addressing.

3. With our gaze focused on the mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son, we have together reached the threshold of the third millennium. "Jesus is the genuine newness which surpasses all human expectations" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 1).

I am delighted that you have agreed to celebrate the Jubilee Year together with the Catholic Church here in Rome and throughout the world. Two high points of our ecumenical cooperation deserve special mention. First is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when I will solemnly open the Holy Door at St Paul-Outside-the-Walls. I would also like to commemorate the new Christian martyrs.

Especially in this century so plagued by violence and horror, the witness of the martyrs has become equally important for Catholics and Lutherans. It is "a sign of the truth of Christian love, ageless but especially powerful today". The martyrs are the ones "who have proclaimed the Gospel by giving their lives for love" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 13).

In this way martyrdom acquires an ecumenical significance, since those who believe in Christ and are united by the long line of martyrs cannot remain divided (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 1).

4. The joint celebration of the Great Jubilee is an opportunity to deepen our common witness to the faith. Today's world, in particular, yearns for Christians to draw closer together. The Holy Year calendar therefore includes other meetings of an ecumenical nature. Why should we still go our separate ways when we are already on the same road? As a spiritual event, the Jubilee Year offers Catholics and Lutherans various possibilities to take advantage of together.

We were given a foretaste of this by the ecumenical Vespers that we recently celebrated on the occasion of the elevation of St Bridget of Sweden to co-patroness of Europe. On that occasion, as we offered our thanks to God with hymns and psalms, I sensed the "spiritual space" in which Christians stand together before their Lord (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 83). This common spiritual space is larger than many of the denominational barriers that still separate us on the threshold of the third millennium. If, despite our divisions, we can grow ever more united in common prayer around Christ, we will grow in the awareness of how little divides us in comparison to what unites us (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 22).

Whoever is aware of this realizes that ecumenism "is not just some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activity" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 20). Full unity is a goal for which it is worth striving. It is an incentive for the spiritual activity of the whole Church.

5. Regarding these hopeful thoughts, I am convinced that the good relations between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation provide a basis for all further discussions on resolving the questions that are still open.

Just as prayer to the Lord is the "soul" of ecumenical renewal and of the yearning for unity" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 28), so may our shared dialogue on the fundamental questions of doctrine also be supported in the future by insistent prayer in our communities. The prayer of believers is also a "tailwind" for ecumenical dialogue.

God grant that we will soon attain the unity that conforms to Christ's will! This prayer will be offered with our thanksgiving to the Lord of history. For we should not only look back at the 2,000 years *since* Christ, but be able, in view of the Year 2000, to advance confidently *with* Christ into future. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord yesterday, today and for ever, may the peace and blessing of God's incarnate Son be with you all.