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MEETING WITH THE COUNCIL
OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN GERMANY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Chapter Hall of the Former Augustinian Convent, Erfurt
Friday, 23 September 2011

(Video)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As I begin to speak, I would like first of all to say how deeply grateful I am that we are able to come together. I am particularly grateful to you, my dear brother, Pastor Schneider, for receiving me and for the words with which you have welcomed me here among you. You have opened your heart and openly expressed a truly shared faith, a longing for unity. And we are also glad, for I believe that this session, our meetings here, are also being celebrated as the feast of our shared faith. Moreover, I would like to express my thanks to all of you for your gift in making it possible for us to speak with one another as Christians here, in this historic place.

As the Bishop of Rome, it is deeply moving for me to be meeting you here in the ancient Augustinian convent in Erfurt. As we have just heard, this is where Luther studied theology. This is where he celebrated his first Mass. Against his father's wishes, he did not continue the study of Law, but instead he studied theology and set off on the path towards priesthood in the Order of Saint Augustine. And on this path, he was not simply concerned with this or that. What constantly exercised him was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life's journey. "How do I receive the grace of God?": this question struck him in the heart and lay at the

foundation of all his theological searching and inner struggle. For Luther theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for and with God.

“How do I receive the grace of God?” The fact that this question was the driving force of his whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me. For who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? What does the question of God mean in our lives? In our preaching? Most people today, even Christians, set out from the presupposition that God is not fundamentally interested in our sins and virtues. He knows that we are all mere flesh. And insofar as people believe in an afterlife and a divine judgement at all, nearly everyone presumes for all practical purposes that God is bound to be magnanimous and that ultimately he mercifully overlooks our small failings. The question no longer troubles us. But are they really so small, our failings? Is not the world laid waste through the corruption of the great, but also of the small, who think only of their own advantage? Is it not laid waste through the power of drugs, which thrives on the one hand on greed and avarice, and on the other hand on the craving for pleasure of those who become addicted? Is the world not threatened by the growing readiness to use violence, frequently masking itself with claims to religious motivation? Could hunger and poverty so devastate parts of the world if love for God and godly love of neighbour – of his creatures, of men and women – were more alive in us? I could go on. No, evil is no small matter. Were we truly to place God at the centre of our lives, it could not be so powerful. The question: what is God’s position towards me, where do I stand before God? – Luther’s burning question must once more, doubtless in a new form, become our question too, not an academic question, but a real one. In my view, this is the first summons we should attend to in our encounter with Martin Luther.

Another important point: God, the one God, creator of heaven and earth, is no mere philosophical hypothesis regarding the origins of the universe. This God has a face, and he has spoken to us. He became one of us in the man Jesus Christ – who is both true God and true man. Luther’s thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: “What promotes Christ’s cause” was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture. This presupposes, however, that Christ is at the heart of our spirituality and that love for him, living in communion with him, is what guides our life.

Now perhaps one might say: all well and good, but what has this to do with our ecumenical situation? Could this just be an attempt to talk our way past the urgent problems that are still waiting for practical progress, for concrete results? I would respond by saying that the first and most important thing for ecumenism is that we keep in view just how much we have in common, not losing sight of it amid the pressure towards secularization – everything that makes us Christian in the first place and continues to be our gift and our task. It was the error of the Reformation period that for the most part we could only see what divided us and we failed to grasp existentially what we have in common in terms of the great deposit of sacred Scripture and the early Christian creeds. For me, the great ecumenical step forward of recent decades is that we have become aware of all this common ground, that we acknowledge it as we pray and sing together, as we

make our joint commitment to the Christian ethos in our dealings with the world, as we bear common witness to the God of Jesus Christ in this world as our inalienable, shared foundation.

To be sure, the risk of losing it is not unreal. I would like to make two brief points here. The geography of Christianity has changed dramatically in recent times, and is in the process of changing further. Faced with a new form of Christianity, which is spreading with overpowering missionary dynamism, sometimes in frightening ways, the mainstream Christian denominations often seem at a loss. This is a form of Christianity with little institutional depth, little rationality and even less dogmatic content, and with little stability. This worldwide phenomenon – that bishops from all over the world are constantly telling me about – poses a question to us all: what is this new form of Christianity saying to us, for better and for worse? In any event, it raises afresh the question about what has enduring validity and what can or must be changed – the question of our fundamental faith choice.

The second challenge to worldwide Christianity of which I wish to speak is more profound and in our country more controversial: the secularized context of the world in which we Christians today have to live and bear witness to our faith. God is increasingly being driven out of our society, and the history of revelation that Scripture recounts to us seems locked into an ever more remote past. Are we to yield to the pressure of secularization, and become modern by watering down the faith? Naturally faith today has to be thought out afresh, and above all lived afresh, so that it is suited to the present day. Yet it is not by watering the faith down, but by living it today in its fullness that we achieve this. This is a key ecumenical task in which we have to help one another: developing a deeper and livelier faith. It is not strategy that saves us and saves Christianity, but faith – thought out and lived afresh; through such faith, Christ enters this world of ours, and with him, the living God. As the martyrs of the Nazi era brought us together and prompted that great initial ecumenical opening, so today, faith that is lived from deep within amid a secularized world is the most powerful ecumenical force that brings us together, guiding us towards unity in the one Lord. And we pray to him, asking that we may learn to live the faith anew, and that in this way we may then become one.

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