



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO A DELEGATION
OF THE UNITED EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF GERMANY**

Monday, 24 January 2011

Dear Bishop Friedrich,

Dear Friends from Germany,

I extend a cordial welcome to all of you, who represent the leaders of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, to the Apostolic Palace, and I am delighted that you have come to Rome as a Delegation at the end of the [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#). Thereby you also show that our deep longing for unity can only bear fruit if it is rooted in common prayer. I would like to thank you, dear Bishop, in particular, for your words, that with great sincerity, express the common effort for deeper unity among all Christians.

In the meantime, the official dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics — as written here — can look back at more than 50 years of intense work. You mentioned 30 years. I think that it was 30 years ago, after the Pope's Visit, when we officially initiated the dialogue but we had in fact already been dialoguing for some time. I too was a member of the "Jaeger-Stählin-Kreis" that came into being directly after the War. Therefore, one can speak of either 50 or 30 years. Notwithstanding the theological differences that continue to exist on questions that in part are fundamental, a "togetherness" has developed between us which is increasingly becoming the basis of communion lived in faith and in spirituality between Lutherans and Catholics. What has already been achieved reinforces our trust in continuing the dialogue, for only in this way can we stay together on that path which is ultimately Jesus Christ himself.

Hence the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenism, as my Venerable Predecessor Pope John Paul II said in his Encyclical [Ut Unum Sint](#), is not a mere strategy of communication in a changing world, but a fundamental commitment of the Church, starting with her own mission (*cf.*

nn. 28-32).

To some of our contemporaries the common goal of full and visible unity of Christians today seems once again to be very distant. The conversation partners in the ecumenical dialogue express ideas on the unity of the Church that are entirely different. I share the concern of many Christians that the fruits of the ecumenical endeavour, above all in relation to the idea of Church and ministry, are still not sufficiently acknowledged by the ecumenical spokespeople. However, even if new difficulties always arise, let us look with hope to the future. Although the divisions among Christians are an obstacle to fully moulding catholicity in the reality of the Church's life as was promised in Christ and through Christ (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 4), we trust in the fact that under the Holy Spirit's guidance ecumenical dialogue, such an important instrument in the Church's life, will serve to overcome this conflict. This will also happen, in the first place, through the theological dialogue which must contribute to an understanding of the open-ended questions, that are obstacles on the path to visible unity and to the common celebration of the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity among Christians.

I am pleased to say that in Germany the international Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on the topic: "Baptism and growing ecclesial communion", has been flanked by a bilateral commission for dialogue, since 2009, between the Bishops' Conference and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, which has resumed its activity on the topic: "God and the dignity of man". This thematic context also includes in particular the problems that have recently arisen in relation to the protection and dignity of human life, as well as urgent questions on the family, marriage and sexuality, which cannot be silenced or neglected merely to avoid endangering the ecumenical consensus attained so far. We hope that in these important questions related to life, new confessional differences will not emerge but rather that we will be able together to testify to the world and to men what the Lord has shown us and is showing us.

Today ecumenical dialogue can no longer be separated from the reality and the faith life of our Churches without harming them. Thus, let us turn our gaze together to the year 2017, which recalls the posting of Martin Luther's theses on Indulgences 500 years ago. On that occasion, Lutherans and Catholics will have the opportunity to celebrate throughout the world a common ecumenical commemoration, to strive for fundamental questions at the global level, not — as you yourself have just said — in the form of a triumphant celebration, but as a common profession of our faith in the Triune God, in common obedience to Our Lord and to his Word. We must give an important place to common prayer and to interior prayer addressed to our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of mutual wrongs and for culpability relative to the divisions. Part of this purification of conscience is the mutual exchange appraising the 1,500 years that preceded the Reformation, and which we therefore have in common. For this reason we wish to implore together, constantly, the help of God and the assistance of the Holy Spirit in order to take further steps towards the longed-for unity and not to be satisfied with the results we have achieved so far.

We are also encouraged on this journey by this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It recalls the Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: "And they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early Christians were constant in these four actions and in their behaviour so the community grew with Christ, and from it flowed this "togetherness" of men and women in Christ. This extraordinary and visible witness to the world of the unity of the early Church could also be an incentive and a norm for us on our common ecumenical journey in the future.

In the hope that your visit will reinforce further the effective collaboration between Lutherans and Catholics in Germany, I implore for you all the grace of God and his abundant Blessings.