



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO BISHOP JAMES R. CRUMLEY, JR
PRESIDENT OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA**

*To Bishop James R. Crumley, Jr
President Lutheran Church in America*

I Received with gratitude your letter for May 22, 1985 as another ecumenical gesture on your part towards the Catholic Church. Your three journeys to Rome have enabled us to share views on the relations developing between Lutherans and Catholics, especially in the United States.

Your letter gives praise for the progress being made in the ecumenical movement in the United States. Indeed, many Catholic Bishops from your country have spoken to me of that progress. This development is important for Catholics because the Second Vatican Council had as one of its principal concerns “the restoration of unity among all Christians” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1). This task continues as a priority in the Catholic Church today. It is a primary concern of mine, especially since being called to the See of Peter, which by its very nature exists to serve the unity of Christ’s Church. For the Scriptures show that Christ himself gives us the example, praying for his followers “that they may all be one, even as you Father are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me” (*Jo* 17, 21). It is a joy to hear of your strong personal commitment to see that progress continue, confirmed by the official Statement of the LCA: “*Ecumenism: A Lutheran? Commitment*” (1982).

It is always appropriate in our conversation to reflect on the Scriptures. For all Christians must be nurtured by the good news of salvation contained therein. Especially the Gospels, which have preserved for us the words of Christ, are dear to all of us and we desire with all our heart to be faithful to their spirit and their teaching. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic international dialogue has reminded us that the “unity of the Church can be a unity only in the truth of the Gospel”. It reminded us in fact that “ultimately Lutherans and Catholics separated over the issue of the right understanding of the Gospel” (*Malta Report*, 1972, § 14). That is why our common quest for unity

today is also a search to be more truly evangelical. And at the same time “in the dialogue itself, the Sacred Word is a precious instrument in the mighty hand of God for attaining to that unity which the Savior holds out to all men” (*Ibid.*). To respond to the prompting of the Spirit by seeking unity is to allow ourselves to be formed by the Word of God. It is to become more credible witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the ecumenical movement as truly “fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21). The manifestations of this grace can be seen in the various ways in which unity is taking shape among Christians. In your letter you have kindly called attention to my own testimony to this, in speaking on the occasion of the 450th Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession (June 25, 1980), that ecumenical dialogue “has enabled us to discover how great and solid are the foundation of our Catholic faith”. Your own reminder that dialogue has made us increasingly aware of how close we are to each other in the “heart of the Gospel” recalls for us the Malta Report’s affirmation of what the center of the Gospel is: “The eschatological saving act of God in Jesus’ Cross and Resurrection” (*Ibid.* 1). And for the progress that has been made in this common affirmation we must be grateful.

But we still experience anguish because full unity has not yet been achieved. Did we not both speak of this anguish when you were last here? For the lack of unity is a pastoral problem as well as one of history and theology. Does not the New Testament image of our Lord as the Good Shepherd here come to mind, the image of the shepherd gathering the sheep into one fold? For divisions among Christians obscure the face of Christ, making it more difficult for the world to believe. I know that at the local level members of Catholic parishes and those of other Christian communities in neighbourhoods experience the pressures of disunity since they do not yet confess in the fullness of unity the same faith and therefore cannot take part in the fullness of Church life together. And when members of the same family belong to separated Christian communions, they must live in hope and work for the unity that should exist. But persons in this situation may also experience the confusion or even alienation that can come when individuals in one family confess different, even conflicting, views of Christian faith. Pastoral situations such as these give us the personal awareness of how vital the work for Christian unity is. For “there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all, and works through all, and is in all” (*Eph.* 4, 5-6).

Words that I addressed to the Council of the German Evangelical Church on November 7, 1980 have meaning here also: “All the gratitude for what remains to us in common and unites us cannot make us blind to what still divides us. We must examine it together as far as possible, not to widen the gaps but to bridge them. We are called to strive together . . . to full unity in faith. Only full unity gives us the possibility of gathering with the same sentiments and the same faith at the Lord’s one table”. We might add that it is especially in the light of what unites us that we are able to see the seriousness of what divides us and the urgency of finding the way, in faithfulness to the Word of God, towards that unity which is the will and the grace of the Lord for his Church.

For these same reasons I am happy that the dialogue continues in the United States between Lutherans and Catholics, a dialogue that began even before the Second Vatican Council ended. It has produced a number of impressive statements such as the recent Justification by Faith. Surely we must commend these efforts that have been made. Since the Second Vatican Council, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States, taking steps to implement the Decree on Ecumenism in a spirit of collaboration with the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, has been involved in the initiation of a number of dialogues with various Churches and ecclesial Communities. These dialogues in a national context, such as the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States, are important not only for the region in which they are undertaken but also for the contribution they can make to the relationship of our respective Christian families at the international level. Along with the contributions of dialogues in other countries, and in continuing liaison with the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation, your dialogue in the United States can contribute to the task of achieving that unity in faith which is our goal. The words of Saint Paul challenge us: "I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement" (1 Cor. 1, 10).

I am happy to hear you speak of the other type of collaboration in prayer and good works taking place in the United States between Lutherans and Catholics on various levels. The annual meeting of Presiding Bishops of the several Lutheran Churches engaged in dialogue, with the Catholic bishops of the BCEIA, in which you discuss ways to encourage ecumenism in local parishes, is important. In the Catholic Church, Bishops have a special responsibility to give leadership and guidance in promoting and "fostering ecumenism as it is understood by the Church" (*Christus Dominus*, 16). It is a joy to hear again of these efforts and it is hoped that they will continue. For the ecumenical collaboration by the Catholic faithful under the guidance of their Bishops and in close union with the Bishop of Rome is a task engendered by the Second Vatican Council and a continuing responsibility in the Catholic Church.

As the Lutheran Church in America proceeds towards a new ecumenical relationship with other Lutheran Churches in the United States in the next few years, please know that these efforts at unity are in my prayers. And as all of us, Christians of many communities and countries, approach the twenty-first century, perhaps we can see this time as a new occasion of grace. Another stage of history unfolding before us offers opportunities to leave behind the vestiges of hostility and misunderstanding that are the heritage of the millennium now coming to a close. There may not be easy solutions to the problems to be faced in order to achieve unity. But "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us".

Can we not aim therefore at making the dawn of the third millennium the beginning of a special time for seeking full unity in Christ? It is my prayer that this will be so.

From the Vatican, July 22, 1985.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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