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Audience with the Ecumenical Delegation of the Lutheran Church of Finland on the occasion of the Feast of Saint Henrik

At 10.00 this morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a delegation from the Lutheran Church of Finland on the occasion of the annual ecumenical pilgrimage to Rome to celebrate the Feast of Saint Henrik, patron of the country.

The following are the words of greeting the Pope addressed to those present:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet all of you with joy. For some decades now, your ecumenical pilgrimage to Rome for today's feast of Saint Henrik has made possible this fraternal encounter and contributed to advancing the cause of Christian unity.

A shared commitment to ecumenism is an essential requirement of the faith we profess; it stems from our very identity as Christ's followers. As disciples, following the same Lord, we have increasingly come to realize that ecumenism is a journey and, as the various Popes have repeatedly stated since the Second Vatican Council, a journey that is irreversible. This is not an optional way. Our unity grows as we make this journey. Your annual pilgrimage to Rome is a particularly eloquent sign of this, for which I am grateful. It is a summons to pursue together the path of unity that, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, leads us to Christ our Lord as beloved children of the Father, and thus as brothers and sisters. I am grateful to the Lutheran Bishop of Kuopio for his kind words and very welcome prayers, but also for indicating our duty to carry out, before all else, a common service of charity and witness to the faith. These are rooted in baptism, in our identity as Christians: this is the heart of the matter! Indeed, as was said, the various sociological classifications, often attributed in a superficial way to Christians, are secondary aspects, or even useless. When we pray in common, when we join in proclaiming the Gospel and serving the poor and the needy, we are walking together on the path leading to the goal of visible unity.

The theological and ecclesiological issues that still keep us apart can only be resolved in the course of the journey along this common path – they will never be resolved if we remain still – without forcing matters and without being able to foresee when and how it will take place. Yet we can be certain that, if we are docile, the Holy Spirit will guide us in ways that today we can hardly imagine. In the meantime, we are called to do what we can to promote encounter and to resolve in charity the misunderstandings, conflicts and prejudices that have tainted our relations for centuries. The journey towards theological consensus has been aided by the recent Declaration of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Commission for Finland on the Church, Eucharist and Ministry *Communion and Growth*. The dialogue needs to continue and to build on this beginning.

On this journey, we are not alone. There are witnesses that we have in common who, like Saint Henrik, precede us along the way. It is quite true – thank you for reminding us of this too – that Tradition is not a problem but a gift. Tradition comes from the Latin *tradere*, which means to hand over. Tradition is not something we seize upon as a sign of our identity, but rather a gift entrusted to us for our mutual enrichment. We are called continually to return to what was originally handed down, the source from which the river of Tradition flows: the pierced side of Christ on the Cross. There he gave himself up completely, and to us he consigned his Spirit (cf. *Jn* 19:30.34). That is the source of our life as believers, and of our constant rebirth. There we find the strength needed to bear one another's burdens and crosses. Preceded and sustained by those who gave their lives for love of the Lord and for their brothers and sisters, we are called to continue tirelessly on our journey.

Each year, Christians around the world set aside a specific time to pray to the Lord for greater unity. It is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which this year focuses on the biblical verse, "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue" (cf. *Deut* 16:18-20). The verb is in the plural, and it reminds us that we cannot work for justice apart from one another. In a world so deeply torn by conflict, hatred, forms of nationalism and division, our common prayer and commitment to greater justice cannot be deferred. We cannot permit ourselves such omissions. I am confident that our shared witness of prayer and faith will prove fruitful and that your visit will strengthen the good cooperation already existing between Lutherans, Orthodox and Catholics in Finland. For this intention, and for each of you, I beg God's abundant blessing. I also ask you to continue to pray for me. Thank you.
