



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES
LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

Greeting to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

by Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)

President, The Lutheran World Federation

Vatican City, 7 November 2005

Your Holiness,

I greet you on behalf of the *Lutheran World Federation - A Communion of Churches* with 140 member churches, in 78 countries. We are most grateful for this occasion to greet Your Holiness in this first year of your Pontificate.

The organizational forms of the Lutheran Communion are of recent origin. But the Communion itself is theologically founded in a common faith, as expressed in the Lutheran confessions, founded on the Holy Scriptures and the faith of the Early Church as formulated in the three Ecumenical Creeds. The Lutheran teaching of the Reformation was set forth explicitly not as a *novum* but as the faith of the Church of all ages. Together with the Church universal, the Lutheran Communion confesses, in the words of the Nicene Creed, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Although Lutheran and Roman Catholic ecclesiologies contain differences, our roots in the tradition of the apostles remain foundational for our churches and must also be foundational for our ecclesial relations.

Since your election you have emphasized that service to the unity of the whole Christian church will be a high priority for you. We wish to express our sincere appreciation for your strongly expressed commitment in this area. In the recent exchange between Your Holiness and the bishops and presidents of different Protestant churches in Germany, you stressed the importance of our maintaining a clear focus on what is the real question for all churches, namely the presence of God's Word in the world. As you stated, our considerations of the institutional church must always be subordinated to this Word. And as Martin Luther stated in his 62nd thesis in 1517: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." As Lutherans we see it as our shared responsibility as churches to do all that is possible so that the historically given and living gospel, may truly fill the life and mission of our churches. And in this, we must always be mindful of the fundamental interrelatedness between the Word of God, the witnesses of the Word, and the *regula fidei*, as Your Holiness also underlined in Germany.

This year the 40th anniversaries of significant documents of the Second Vatican Council, such as *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Dei verbum* are being celebrated. This recalls to us how much was achieved by Vatican II, also ecumenically. We gratefully recall, among other things, how

relationships established during the Council prepared the way for the many international bilateral dialogues, such as the *Joint Lutheran – Roman Catholic Study Commission* in 1967.

Recently, the fourth phase of our international dialogue, the *Lutheran – Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* completed ten years of work and is preparing a report on the topic of “The Apostolicity of the Church.” Although this report will undoubtedly show the differences between our traditions in the area of its topic, it will certainly also show the richness of shared apostolic faith, which we treasure together. Regarding the theme of “Apostolicity”, the words of Pope John XXIII are undoubtedly true for Roman Catholics and Lutherans, that "what unites us is much greater than what divides us" (cf. Pope John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, par. 20). It is also my pleasure to recognize on this occasion the achievement of the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in the USA, which last year completed its tenth round with a report on *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*. This report seeks a new approach to the relation between priest and bishop through reflection on the relation between the communities they serve: parish and the diocese or regional church body.

We know that this year is the special *Year dedicated to the Eucharist* in the Roman Catholic Church. Although we have historically used different forms of language to express the mystery of Christ’s presence in bread and wine, Lutherans believe, with Catholics, that Christ himself is present at the holy eucharist in the consecrated bread and the wine ‘truly and in substance’ (*vere et substantialiter*), and that the baptised believer receives the gift of salvation in all its fullness. United with the living Christ, both in the waters of baptism and in the bread and wine of the eucharist, we know ourselves impelled by Christ himself toward the visible unity of his Church.

A significant milestone of our bilateral relations was the signing by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* six years ago in Augsburg, Germany. We are aware of how you yourself, with the support of Pope John Paul II, actively contributed to the fulfilment of this ecumenical landmark. Various processes of follow-up to the *Joint Declaration* have been set in motion. At the present time, the *World Methodist Council* is preparing to formally affirm its support of this declaration by an official action planned to take place next summer in Seoul, South Korea, in which our General Secretary, the Reverend Dr Ishmael Noko, is scheduled to take part together with Cardinal Walter Kasper. This development gives us great joy and shows to all that the biblical doctrine of justification is not seen as belonging to Catholics and Lutherans alone, but belongs to the whole church. It is an expression of God’s gift of salvation in Christ by grace through faith (Eph 2:8s). This faith, formed by Christ, is active in love and service to one another. The *Joint Declaration* is a living letter, documenting a unity in shared faith.

There should be no doubt that Lutherans and Roman Catholics, together with others, also see issues of ethics and social justice in the light of the doctrine of justification. As an expression of the gospel itself, the message of justification provides important perspectives for the church’s involvement with the poor and those suffering from political oppression and abuse. During recent travel in Latin America, visiting Lutheran churches there, I was happy to witness the strong church commitment to human rights and ministry among the poor. As Christian churches we are committed to ecumenical cooperation in the area of human rights on all continents in the years to come. At this time of history, where the human family suffers so greatly from wars of different origins, from natural catastrophes, from diseases and poverty, may we as churches be bridges of community and service, which was and remains Christ’s design for his Church.

We struggle today with movements of religious fundamentalism within the churches and within the human family. Since true faith in the Triune God forbids enmity in God’s name, Christian world communions have a special responsibility to promote mutual respect and

understanding across the barriers of religious differences. In this perspective I much appreciated the affectionate greeting of Your Holiness, on the day of your Solemn Inauguration, to “all those who have been reborn in the sacrament of Baptism but are not yet in full communion with [the Catholic Church]” to our “brothers and sisters of the Jewish people, to whom we are joined by a great shared spiritual heritage”, and to “all men and women of today, to believers and non-believers alike.”

As we continue to move forward as churches in the ecumenical movement we become increasingly aware of the urgent need to consider the extent to which differing ecclesiologies can be regarded as complementary. As the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches appear to be ready to consider what we, Lutherans, would call a “differentiated consensus” regarding visible forms of church communion, it is our hope that such consensus may contribute to richer, more comprehensive visions of unity also within the broader ecumenical movement.

In this first year of your Pontificate we pray that the Holy Spirit will be with you, and with all of us as, we seek together to manifest the unity of the Church for which Christ so fervently prayed. May we relentlessly seek to “reach full church communion, a unity in diversity, in which remaining differences would be ‘reconciled’ and no longer have a divisive force.”
(Official Common Statement to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.)
