



# The Holy See

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## *ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION*

*Thursday, 23 April 1992*

*Dear President Brakemeier,*

1. I am pleased to welcome *you* and *the delegates of the Lutheran World Federation* on your visit to the Vatican today. Four years ago, when I met the former President of your Federation, Landesbischof Johannes Hanselmann, I noted with gratitude to Almighty God that in the years since the Second Vatican Council Lutherans and Catholics have made much progress in overcoming the barriers of separation between us and in strengthening bonds of unity, through both theological dialogue and practical cooperation. I remain confident that our patient efforts will continue to bear fruit for the full unity of all who put their faith in the Risen Lord and have received new birth through water and the Holy Spirit (Cf. Jn. 3:5).

The Church's commitment to work for Christian unity is derived in the first place from her obedience to the will of the Lord, who on the night before he died prayed that all his disciples would be one (Cf. *ibid.*, 17:21). As a *gift of the Holy Spirit*, the unity of Christ's Church is meant to be the sign and pledge of that deeper reconciliation in Christ which is the sovereign work of God's grace and which transcends all human efforts and initiatives. The goal of full unity between Christians will come about according to God's providential designs, for he is the Lord of History. What he demands of us is a constant determination to respond to the urgings of his unfailing grace. We recognize that our meeting today, representing a significant step on this ecumenical pilgrimage, is a gift of God to us. I pray that it will strengthen our commitment to press forward, confident that the hope which his Spirit inspires will not leave us disappointed (Cf. Rom. 5:5).

2. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Lutheran Catholic dialogue, and it is appropriate that today we should recall with gratitude the significant results which it has yielded.

Through its examination of such vitally important questions as justification and the nature and mission of the Church, I am confident that this dialogue will make a lasting contribution to our progress towards unity in the apostolic faith. Since the two issues I have mentioned are so closely linked to the authentic proclamation of the Gospel, and since disagreements about them at the time of the Reformation were decisive in bringing about the sad divisions which still exist, it is all the more essential that they should be studied patiently and in a spirit of fidelity to the Word which the Father has spoken to us "in these last days" (Heb. 1:2).

In this regard, I would express my conviction that ecumenical dialogue must strive for an ever deeper understanding of the mystery of our salvation, accomplished through the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Within this perspective, theological dialogue will become a source of mutual enrichment and will certainly lead to that growth in the truth which the Lord promised as the work of his Holy Spirit (Cf. Jn. 16:13). We would all agree that attainment of Christian unity can never be the result of masking differences or searching for some lowest common denominator acceptable to all. Indeed, "our efforts will only be fruitful to the extent that we discover and accept together the full authentic heritage of faith given by Christ through his Apostles" (John Paul II, Address at the Ecumenical Prayer Service in Uppsala [9 June 1989], 4).

3. It is also a source of encouragement that the many theological discussions, official contacts and other common projects taking place between Catholics and Lutherans have been conducted in a climate of increased fraternal charity. Among the events of recent years which have contributed to this more positive atmosphere, I recall with gratitude my visit to the Nordic Countries, an important part of which was devoted to ecumenical meetings and prayer services. Nor can I fail to mention the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the canonization of Saint Birgitta of Sweden, when Lutheran and Catholic Bishops joined me at Solemn Vespers in Saint Peter's Basilica. The outstanding holiness of that great woman, whose witness of love for Christ and the Church makes her a "fulcrum of unity" (John Paul II, Homily at the Ecumenical Prayer Service for the Sixth Centenary of the Canonization of Saint Birgitta of Sweden [5 Oct. 1991]) between the separated Christians of Europe, can serve as a model for all believers and inspire a renewed commitment to our unity for the sake of the Gospel.

4. Distinguished friends: a few days ago we celebrated Christ's victory over sin and death. The One who has the power to defeat death is also able to overcome the divisions between his followers. With trust in the reconciling love of Him whose "power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20), I express my hope that relations between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation will lead to ever greater understanding and more dedicated service of the Gospel among all who confess that "Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). May the peace of the Risen Lord be with you all.

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