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Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration

Sermon on the occasion of the Joint Commemoration of the Reformation

Lund Cathedral, Sweden, October 31, 2016

Rev. Dr Martin Junge, General Secretary of the Lutheran World
Federation

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

For centuries, generation after generation, we have been reading this text from the Gospel that presents Jesus as the True Vine. However, rather than reading it as an encouragement to affirm our unity, we focused on the branches that, because they did not bear fruits, were removed from the vine. This is how we have seen one another: as branches separated from the true vine, Christ.

But there were women and men who, in times when this joint commemoration was still unimaginable, already gathered together to pray for unity or to form ecumenical communities. There were theologians, women and men, who already entered in dialogue, seeking to overcome doctrinal and theological differences. There were many, who together offered themselves to serve the poor and the oppressed. There were even some who suffered martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel.

I feel deep gratitude for those bold prophets. As they lived and witnessed together they began to see one another no longer as separated branches but as branches united to Jesus Christ. Even more, they began to see Christ in their midst and to acknowledge that even in those periods of history when dialogue was broken between us, Christ continued talking to us. Jesus never forgot us, even when we seemed to have forgotten him, losing ourselves in violent and hateful actions.

Thus, as we see Jesus among us, we have also started to see each other anew. We acknowledge that there is much more that unites us than that which separates us. We are branches of the same vine. We are one in Baptism. This is why we are here at this joint commemoration: to rediscover who we are in Christ.

However, the revelation of the unity that we have in Jesus Christ clashes with the fragmented reality of Christ's body, his church. The vision of a communion grounded in Jesus Christ, with all its beauty and the hope that it inspires in us, also entails to suffer with even greater pain from the wounds of our brokenness. What never should have been broken was broken: the unity of the body of Christ. We lost what is given to us.

How can we continue walking now with the same boldness and hope of those who preceded us in this ecumenical pilgrimage towards unity? How do we direct our steps towards the future of communion into which God calls us? How can we be healed so that finally we may become what we already are in Christ: branches of the same vine?

A Latin American thinker, Eduardo Galeano, wrote: "History is a prophet who looks back: because of what was, and against what was, it announces what will be."

I suggest that from now on we apply this key when we read the Bible text of the true vine. Let it be the hopeful and prophetic announcement of the solid link between the vine and its branches bearing fruits of healing and life in abundance. Let this be the spirit to approach this historical moment in which we commit ourselves, Catholics and Lutherans, to move away from a past overshadowed by conflict and division and to walk the paths of communion.

No doubt, it is a promising but also a demanding journey. It takes place in times of great fragmentation and marked by tendency to conflict. Imposing sectarianisms alienate individuals and communities, leaving them unable to communicate. However, the journey we are called into must be built on even more intense dialogues. Our own narratives about who we are and who the other is generally underline and highlight our differences. Our memories are often marked by pain and conflict.

Aware of all those centrifugal forces that always risk separating us, I would like to call us to rely trustfully on the centripetal force of Baptism. The liberating grace of baptism is a divine gift that calls us together and unites us! Baptism is the prophetic announcement of healing and unity in the midst of our wounded world, and thus becomes a gift of hope for humanity that longs to live in peace with justice and in reconciled diversity. What a profound mystery: the cry of peoples and individuals living under violence and oppression is consonant with what God continually whispers into our ears through Jesus Christ, the true vine to which we are united. Abiding in this vine we will bear the fruits of peace, justice and reconciliation, mercy and solidarity that the people cry for and that God brings forth.

Let us move forward then, answering faithfully God's call and, by doing so, responding to the cries for help, to the thirst and the hunger of a wounded and broken humanity.

And if tomorrow God would see us holding stones in our hands, like those we carried in former times, may they not be to be thrown at each other. Who could throw the first stone now that we know who we are in Christ? May they not be used either to build walls of separation and exclusion. How could we when Jesus Christ calls us to be ambassadors of reconciliation? Rather, may God find us building bridges so that we can come closer to each other, houses where we can meet together, and tables – yes, tables – where we can share bread and wine, the presence of Christ, who has never left us and who calls us to abide in him so that the world may believe.