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The Pope receives an ecumenical delegation of the Evangelical Church in Germany: may the Holy Spirit indicate His bold and prophetic ways

This morning the Holy Father received in audience an ecumenical delegation of the Evangelical Church in Germany. The Pope thanked the regional Bishop Bedford-Strohm for his kind words, and expressed his joy that Cardinal Marx, president of the German Episcopal Conference, accompanied the delegation of the Evangelical Church in Germany. “It is the fruit of a long collaboration and the expression of an ecumenical relationship that has matured over the years. I hope that we will continue to go ahead on this blessed path of fraternal communion, continuing with courage and decisiveness towards an ever fuller unity. We have the same Baptism: we must journey together, without tiring!

It is significant that, on the occasion of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, Evangelical Christians and Catholics seize the occasion of the joint commemoration of the historical events of the past to place Christ newly at the centre of their relations. It is precisely the ‘question of God’, on ‘how to receive the grace of God’, that was for Luther ‘the deep passion and driving force of his whole life’s journey”, affirmed Francis, citing the words Benedict XVI pronounced in his encounter with the representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany in 2011. “What moved and unsettled the Reformers was, at heart, indicating the way towards Christ. It is what should concern us today too, after having newly undertaken, thanks be to God, a joint path”.

“This year of commemoration offers us the opportunity to take a further step ahead, looking at the past without rancour, but in accordance with Christ and in communion with Him, to repropose to the men and women of our time the radical newness of Jesus, the limitless mercy of God: precisely what the Reformers in their time wanted to stimulate. The fact that their call to renewal gave rise to developments that led to divisions among Christians was certainly tragic. Believers no longer felt they were brothers and sisters in faith, but rather adversaries and competitors; for too long they bore hostility and engaged in struggles, fomented by interests of politics and power, at times even without scruple about using violence against each other, brothers against brothers. Today, instead, let us thank God since finally, ‘laying aside every weight … let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus’ (Hebrews 12:1-2).

I am grateful to you as, with this view, you have the intention of approaching together, with humility and freshness, a past that pains us, and of sharing soon an important gesture of penance and reconciliation: an ecumenical function, entitled ‘Healing memory: witnessing Jesus Christ’. Catholics and Evangelicals in

Germany, you will thus be able to respond, in prayer to the strong call that together you hear in the country where the Reformation originated: to purify memory in God so as to be renewed from within and to be send by the Spirit to bring Jesus to mankind today”.

Francis went on to mention other ecumenical initiatives planned for this year, such as the joint pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the joint biblical congress to present together the new translations of the Bible and the ecumenical day dedicated to the social responsibility of Christians. All this, he said, gives “a concrete configuration of the ‘Feast of Christ’ which, on the occasion of the commemoration of the Reformation, you intend to celebrate together. May the rediscovery of the common sources of faith, the healing of memory in prayer and in charity, and concrete collaboration in spreading the Gospel and serving brothers, all inspire you to proceed even more swiftly on your path”.

“It is thanks to the spiritual communion consolidated in these decades of ecumenical progress that today we are able to deplore together the failure of both with regard to unity in the context of the Reformation and subsequent developments. At the same time, in the reality of the single Baptism that makes us brothers and sisters, and in our joint attention to the Spirit, we know, in a now reconciled diversity, how to appreciate the spiritual and theological gifts that we have received from the Reformation. In Lund, on 31 October last year, I thanked the Lord for this and I asked for forgiveness for the past; for the future, I wish to confirm our call, from which there is no return, to bear witness together to the Gospel and to follow the path towards full unity. Doing so together, there also arises the desire to go further, along new routes. We increasingly learn to ask ourselves: this initiative, can I share it with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Can we travel another stretch of the road together?”

“The differences in terms of faith and morality, which still exist, remain as challenges on the path towards visible unity, which our faithful yearn for. The suffering is felt especially by husbands and wives who belong to different confessions. In an astute way we need to apply ourselves, with fervent prayer and with all our strength, to overcoming the obstacles that still exist, intensifying theological dialogue and reinforcing collaboration between us, especially in the service of those who suffer the most and in the protection of creation, which is under threat. Jesus’ urgent call to unity challenges us, and the entire human family, in a period in which we experience serious lacerations and new forms of exclusion and marginalisation. For this reason too, our responsibility is great!”

The Pope concluded his address by reiterating his hope that in today’s meeting, the communion between the two Churches may grow, and asked that the Holy Spirit, creator and restorer of unity, may fortify those present on their joint path, with the consolation that comes from God, “indicating His bold and prophetic ways”. After invoking the Lord’s blessing, he asked for their prayers and invited them to recite the Lord’s Prayer together.
