

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

SERMON FOR CATHOLIC-LUTHERAN JOINT PRAYER SERVICES

Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Amman, Jordan

and

Church of St. Catherine, Basilica of the Nativity, Bethlehem, Palestine

February 2017

Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

Psalm 133:1 (free translation)

“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live—and pray, and witness—together in unity!”

Your Graces, Your Excellencies, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, dear pastors and clergy, esteemed sisters and all the people who are assembled here today:

“This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”
(Psalm 118:24)

Today is a day of unity. Today is a day of joy and gladness, that we are implementing visible unity in reconciled diversity. Today the Holy Spirit is guiding us here to continue the historic journey which began in Lund. The Spirit has led us to have this joint prayer together, as an extension of the common prayer that was co-hosted by His Holiness Pope Francis I, and me, your servant as president of the Lutheran World Federation,

and the General Secretary of the LWF, Rev. Martin Junge, to commemorate 500 years of Reformation. Who would have predicted that we would see this with our own eyes? But this is the fruit of the harvest of fifty years of constructive dialogue between the Catholic and Lutheran churches.

Who would have thought, before today, that we would be determined as Catholics and Lutherans to hold joint prayer services in Amman, Jordan and at the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, Palestine. If this means anything, it means that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of unity. The Holy Spirit gathers us together as one. The Holy Spirit inspires us and leads us forward to glorify the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes and hearts to see that what unites us is much greater than what divides us. So today, we gather in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Let us pray today with open hearts and minds, allowing the Spirit of unity to work in us and through us.

This common service of prayer today is the same liturgy as in Lund, and it is composed of three main parts:

First, this is a service of thanksgiving. We thank Our Lord Jesus that he has listened to our prayers, and that He has called us to this journey toward unity. We thank the Lord Jesus that He has allowed us a foretaste of the heavenly unity we share through him. And in this prayer service, we also thank the Lord that both of our churches, the Lutherans and the Catholics, have been committed through the centuries until today to proclaim the Gospel of love in a sinful and broken world. Each in our own way, and from our own traditions, we have been loyal to the Gospel. We have proclaimed it, implanted it in the hearts of the people and in the hearts of the world. In addition to that, we are thankful for the many ways the Catholic and Lutheran

churches—as well as other churches—have been faithful in witnessing to the Gospel through various institutions which serve the Jordanian and Palestinian societies. How much we always learn from each other! We have much to be thankful for, and by the grace of God, the witness and work of our respective churches will continue.

Secondly, this is a service of repentance and forgiveness. We have together confessed and repented in Lund, Sweden, and we will do it again in this service. We repent of our sin of division, of our mistakes, and of the pain that we have sometimes caused each other. The living, witnessing church of Jesus Christ does not hide the mistakes of the past. Instead, she confesses and asks for forgiveness. By this repentance, Jesus will guide the church in serving the Gospel. For this reason, when LWF and the Holy See signed a joint declaration of faith in 1991, we have also lifted all kinds of historic bans and condemnations against each other. And when we have signed the joint statement in Lund, we have promised to see Christ in each other and in our respective churches.

Today, I also stand with humility to repent and ask for forgiveness in front of the throne of Jesus. If I and my church have done anything which was not appropriate against your church, I ask for forgiveness. Let us agree together that the mistakes of the past will not determine the present and the future of the witnessing church. A mutual repentance can build a future for unity. As the Pope and myself have affirmed in the joint statement made in Lund:

“Our common faith in Jesus Christ and our baptism demand of us a daily conversion, by which we cast off the historical disagreements and conflicts that impede the ministry of reconciliation.”

Thirdly, this is a service of commitment. The common prayer service in Lund with His Holiness the Pope was a commitment for a common future together. As it is written in our joint statement:

“As we move beyond those episodes in history that burden us, we pledge to witness together to God’s merciful grace, made visible in the crucified and risen Christ. Aware that the way we relate to one another shapes our witness to the Gospel, we commit ourselves to further growth in communion rooted in Baptism, as we seek to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder us from attaining full unity. Christ desires that we be one, so that the world may believe. (John 17:23)”

As this statement has affirmed, it is the Holy Sacrament of Baptism which commits us to a common future together as sister and brothers, engrafted into the one body of Christ. Our baptism commits us to witness and work together, to challenge injustice, oppression and violation of human rights together, and to serve all of humanity together. For this reason, the Lutheran World Federation/ World Service and Caritas International have signed a commitment to serve humanity together through our diverse institutions. This is a tangible and visible sign of the seriousness of our commitment to unity through service.

A journalist has recently asked me: “Why did you not con-celebrate the Holy Communion together with the Pope in Lund?” I answered him, that the Holy Spirit has only guided us to this stage in our visible unity. And as the Holy Spirit does not follow human logic or human ways, we anticipate that the Holy Spirit will lead us one day to a further expression of unity. We don’t know what the future will bring, but one thing I trust—I trust the Holy Spirit. I trust in the head of the church, Jesus Christ. And I expect that through His leadership, one day it will

happen. As it is written: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

The ecumenical movement of the future will not only be built on theological dialogue. Dialogue is necessary and significant, but the future of the ecumenical movement must also be built on friendship and trust. Over these past fifty years of dialogue between our two churches, we have been tearing down the wall of fear of the other, and the wall of suspicion of the intentions of the other. Slowly, we have built up a mutual trust and friendship. I am thankful for all who have worked for this trust, in both the Catholic and Lutheran churches. I would like to thank the Apostolic Administrator, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, and all the Catholic bishops, clergy, sisters, and members of your congregations, for the love and trust which has been nourished between our two respective churches.

I pray that this honest friendship will unite us for one common purpose. Let us continue to walk on this path toward unity, even if it is difficult or long. Especially in these days, when our Middle East is passing through difficult days, unity is not a luxury, but is a dire need for our steadfastness and continued presence and Christian witness here in the Holy Land. For this reason, let us in this service embody the high priestly prayer of Our Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father:

“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

(John 17:23)

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.