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**by the Chair of the Council of the
Evangelical Church in Germany
President Nikolaus Schneider**

**Former Chapter House of the Augustinian Monastery
Erfurt
23 September 2011**

Your Holiness, dear brother Christ, it is a joy for me that you have accepted our invitation to come to Erfurt. I am delighted to welcome you and your delegation, along with the sisters and brothers from the Reformation Churches, here in the very room in which Martin Luther was admitted to the Order of Hermits of Saint Augustine. The Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt truly sets the atmosphere for our encounter.

Christians from our two churches live in this city in diaspora. Their life together and their common witness are strengthened by the knowledge and experience that there is much more that unites than divides us. Gifts we hold in common include our understanding of Holy Scripture as the 'Word of the living God'. It guides our churches to 'fear and love' God as the creator and Lord of the world and to find a right measure of human fulfillment in this life.

Scripture, in the Letter to the Ephesians, encourages us through the prayer "... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." So that the resultant promise may also come true: "That you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17f).

We place our trust in this prayer as we tread our ecumenical path. It gives us greater confidence in all our endeavors to achieve ecumenical fellowship and makes our witness to Christ more convincing.

In a diaspora situation, ecumenical fellowship is a source of strength and inspiration in our calling to be 'ambassadors for Christ', because together we issue the invitation: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Trusting in the effect of this intercession nurtures the hope that we can overcome our self-will, and understand traditions that have grown up separately as common gifts. That is what many yearn for, in all regions of Germany – above all the people of faith living in interdenominational marriages and families. It would be a blessing for us if they could be enabled to partake more freely in Eucharistic fellowship, in the foreseeable future.

The Spirit of God - and a clear-eyed look at our history - has brought us to the point of having overcome mutual hostility. In many different ways we already live out our faith together.

That is a great step forward! In separate churches, we are different, in friendship – and we are grateful for that.

But we cannot be satisfied yet – neither with reference to Christ's prayer for 'unity in discipleship, so that the world may believe' (cf. John 17:21), nor with reference to the huge common challenges we face: the widespread disregard for God, loss of orientation and sense of uncertainty.

Therefore it is time for an 'ecumenism of gifts', in which our charisms complement and enlighten each other.

The apostle Paul says of our perceptiveness: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12). It corresponds to the realism of this statement that we have to join forces in order to lighten up the picture. You, dear brother in Christ, played an essential part in making this possible with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians also contributes to ensuring that our voices resonate together in reconciled diversity, and can now bear fruit in practical situations.

Combining our respective gifts, may we succeed in speaking of God in such a way that people will discover a divine address for their longings, questions and perplexities, as also for their supposed certainties.

We mutually recognize the sacrament of Baptism. We trust each other to integrate people into the church as the Body of Christ, and entrust them to one another. We can build on that, and take further practical steps towards more common ground.

The churches of the Reformation understand each other as a 'church of freedom'. By that we mean a freedom founded in saying 'yes' to Jesus Christ – not a non-committal 'anything goes'. For we have learned from the Reformers and, basically, from church father Augustine, that only freedom understood in the interaction of freedom and bonding is true freedom.

This Augustine-based theology of the Reformation is our special gift to the Christian world.

If your diagnosis is correct, that there are lines leading from the solitary individual of late medieval theology - deeply uncertain about God and the world - into the modern age, then it is also true that the theological approach of Luther and the Reformers, that of allowing themselves to receive assurance from God despite all such uncertainty, has never been more relevant. That applies to the Protestant churches. But does it not also apply to our Roman Catholic sister church and to the whole world - differently believing, non-believing, and deeply insecure – particularly in this extremely crisis-ridden age?

Dear brother in Christ, these stones can testify: Martin Luther was a member of the order of Saint Augustine right here. In the cathedral he was consecrated a priest and in the monastery church he read his First Mass.

Does nothing essential, and lasting, link him with the Roman Catholic Church? Can we not also understand Martin Luther, the Augustinian monk from Erfurt, to be a hinge between our churches, because he belongs to both?

The Reformers understood the Reformation as the church turning to Christ. As Christians, clergy and members of church institutions, we are called upon to turn to Christ every day!

I would rather speak of 2000 years of common church history and not just of 1500 years. Even after 1517 we remained related to one another in a special way as 'western churches' – for better or for worse, in salutary cooperation but also in death-bringing reciprocal hostility.

In my opinion, it is time to heal the memories of the mutual injuries in the Reformation period and the subsequent history of our churches; it is time to take real steps for reconciliation. I would like you to invite you to do so, particularly in view of the upcoming anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The anniversary will not be marked by a spirit of triumphalism. Rather, we invite all Christians to rejoice with us that God gives the whole church a strong theology of assurance in times of great uncertainty – and has kept this theology alive for the whole of Christendom over the last five hundred years.

I would thus like to ask you, dear brother in Christ, to understand 31 October 2017 as a festival of confessing Christ and to celebrate it with the churches of the Reformation, so that we can all testify to Christ in ecumenical commitment "that the world may believe".

I look forward to the act of worship we are about to celebrate together.

May God bless you and our ecumenical fellowship.

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