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Welcome and Opening Remarks
EKD Synod President Katrin Göring-Eckardt
Ecumenical Celebration
Church of St Augustine
Erfurt
23.09.2011

“My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you” (Isaiah 26:9).

This is the text for today drawn by the Moravian Church,¹ and with it I welcome you, sisters and brothers, to our act of worship. An especially heartfelt welcome to our brother in Christ, Pope Benedict XVI. We are glad that you have joined us to pray, sing and listen to God’s Word, and that you will give the sermon. Welcome also to our brother Nikolaus Schneider, Chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany; you both will lead us in worship.

I am very happy that we have at least one married couple among us who live denominational fellowship in their family - the Federal President and Mrs Wulff. How lovely that you are *both* here and will worship with the Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians from various congregations. A warm welcome to the students from the Catholic Edith Stein School and the Protestant Ratsgymnasium (secondary school) here in Erfurt. You bring the future of our churches to our gathering. I hope you sing along heartily! And with us, Christians will pray and sing here in the monastery, out in the city and at home in front of their television sets. We are all God’s community and we are pleased to be able to worship here.

“My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.”

¹ At least in the much-read German version of Daily Texts randomly selected for each day of the year. The Bible translation used is the New International Version (1984).

Our ecumenical service of worship here is a big, very public event. Yet, despite the spotlights, it is not a show. It serves a different, much greater purpose. Although some things divide us, *the most important thing* unites us: the yearning for God, for our home is heaven. It is God's light that shines in the lowliness, in the stable of Bethlehem, the light radiating from the cross and the resurrection.

Accordingly, I would like to welcome the curious listeners, who perhaps view us with skepticism; those who have little hope of God, who hardly know God and cannot believe at all. Rest assured, Christian hope is not always great and our questions are sometimes greater than our faith is firm. But above all, be aware that you are welcome. Happy Christians do not want to stay on their own!

“My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you”

At night, when the shadows get longer, we yearn – restless, confused, uncertain – for God. And it is night in the world: people are losing their homes, fleeing from hunger, war, environmental destruction; they are also becoming homeless through violence against body and soul, homeless in narrowness and despair. In the morning, when the day is still full of opportunities, we seek God at the crossroads and turnoffs, when we have to decide what is right and good and lasting. How we live – without destruction; whom we love – without hurt; what we do – without arrogance. Again and again we have to choose. And yet above all we want one thing: to find a home, be accepted and know the place where we can stay.

At home in God's comfort, safe in God's love, people become free and fearless. Or as you, dear brother Pope Benedict, have put it: “Between him and us HE wants the mystery of love to arise which is premised on freedom.”²

In these walls of the Church of St Augustine, the monk Martin Luther turned to God and sought this love. And he set out to leave behind: power without love, faith without freedom, anxiety with no escape. He set out towards a freedom that has found its roots in God and its place in the world, again and again, through the centuries, right into recent history, to the present day.

Luther's statement: “A Christian is a free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a dutiful servant of all, subject to all”³ was a combative, an inspiring motto for Christians in the German Democratic Republic. Yes, we are comforted to know that God is greater, greater than the petty bourgeois SED government in any case, and likewise greater than the martial Stasi (ministry for state security). And certainly greater than the whole hypocritical, oppressive system that wanted to erase faith from public view. And from this history we have learned anew: When you guard walls for too long, walls of stone and walls of silence, then they break open from inside - because people know about freedom.

“My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you”

² Joseph Ratzinger: *Das Geheimnis der Weihnacht*, in: *Ein Stern weist uns den Weg. Die schönsten Geschichten der Weihnachtszeit*, Leipzig 2009, 13 (quotation translated for these remarks).

³ Martin Luther: *On the freedom of a Christian* (1520).

Many people seek God with their mind and spirit, morning and evening, alone or together; and God watches it all, and us all, with the same great, uniquely divine love: whether we are old or young, male or female, this or that kind of believer, happy or depressed, regardless of whom we love and with whom we share our lives. "In my father's house there are many dwelling places," says St John's Gospel (14:2), and this house in which we live, into which we can come, regardless of what we are called or like, still has rooms free for those who seek and find a home with us. We have *one* foundation, the Word of God, and we have *one* common ground, holy baptism. And, yes, at the right time and at the brightest and best place in the house we will set the table together and for one another to which HE invites us, at which we will eat and drink together what Jesus shared on his last evening. Not because we must, but because we can and want to.

Thank you, dear brother Pope Benedict, for stopping over with us here, on the way that God has set before us. After all, the ecumenical movement is primarily a gift of God.

"My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you," says Isaiah.

This Friday afternoon in Erfurt is no ordinary one. Anyone looking at us now should sense that. No, we are not better, greater, richer than others, not even when taken all together. And, yes, we make mistakes and focus on the short term, and our own interests. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was, however, right in saying: "I believe that even our mistakes and errors are not in vain, and that is no harder for God to deal with them than with what we regard as our good deeds."⁴

Anyone watching us should sense that, in all things, we know of God's love that does not press but sustains us, that sometimes hides and then shines brightly.

That we know this love, live in it, remain with it, that we can find our home in it and live in our Father's house, together as the *one* community of Christ, that is what fulfills the searching of our minds and the yearning of our hearts.

May God bless our listening and speaking, our singing and talking, our setting out and our coming home.

Let us stand, come before God and pray.

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⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1st English edition 1953).