



Keynote Address

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Keynote speech at the 13. General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

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Sisters and brothers!

Christianity stands on the threshold of a new reformation. It will not be the first, nor the second, nor the last. The Church is, in the words of St. Augustine, ever reforming, "semper reformanda". But especially in times of great change and crisis in our common world, it is the Church's prophetic task to recognize and respond to God's call in relation to these signs of the times.

From Martin Luther, the great teacher of the paradoxical wisdom of the cross and disciple of the great German mystics, we must learn in these times to be sensitive to how God's power is manifested - "sub contrario" - in our crises and weaknesses. "My grace is sufficient for you" - these words of Christ to the Apostle Paul apply to us too, whenever we are tempted to lose hope in the dark nights of history.

Reformation, the transformation of form, is necessary where form hinders content, where it inhibits the dynamism of the living core. The core of Christianity is the risen, living Christ, living in the faith, the hope, and the love of men and women in the Church and beyond its visible boundaries. These boundaries need to be expanded, and all our outward expressions of faith need to be transformed if they stand in the way of our desire to hear and understand God's Word.



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Two parallel Reformations in the 16th century, the Lutheran Reformation and the Catholic Reformation, enriched, renewed, and deepened Christianity, but they also divided it. The 20th century also saw the beginning of two great parallel Reformations - the global expansion of Pentecostal Christianity and the Second Vatican Council. The latter marked the transition (exodus) of the Catholic Church from "Catholicism" (confessional closedness, counter-culture to Protestantism and modernity) to *Catholicity*, universal ecumenical openness.

The newest, the present-day Reformation can build on both of these ongoing "unfinished revolutions" and thus take an important step towards Christian unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope. But I am deeply convinced that we will receive the gift of unity among Christians if we engage in a common journey towards an even wider and deeper ecumenism.

The ecumenism of the 21st century must go much further than the ecumenism of the last century. Unity among Christians cannot be the ultimate goal of the new Reformation; it can only be a by-product of the effort to bring the whole human family together and to assume a common responsibility for its environment, the whole of creation.

The new Reformation must strengthen the consciousness of Christian co-responsibility for the whole "body" of which we are part through the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God: for the whole human family and for our common world. We must ask not only what "the Spirit says to the churches today" but also how "the Spirit, who blows where he wills" works beyond the churches. We need to have the courage to kenotically self-transcend the current forms and boundaries of Christianity.

It is necessary to understand and accept more deeply what is the mission and essence of the Church: to be an effective sign (*signum efficiens*) of the unity to which all humanity is called, to be an instrument of reconciliation and healing of the wounds of our common world. We strive for unity not to make Christianity more powerful and



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influential in this world but to make it more credible: “so that the world might believe”.

We are to communicate the message entrusted to us in a credible, intelligible, and convincing way. Tensions between Christians undermine that credibility.

St. Paul calls Christians not to uniformity but to mutual respect and harmony among the various parts of the body, irreplaceable precisely because of their diversity and uniqueness. It is this unity of Christians, unity in diversity, that is to be the beginning, the source, and the example of coexistence within the whole human family, a way of sharing, of mutual compatibility of our gifts, experiences, and perspectives.

The first Reformation arose from the courage of St. Paul to lead young Christianity out of the narrow confines of one of the Jewish sects and into the broader ecumene of the world at that time. He presented it as a universal offer, transcending religious, cultural, social, and gender boundaries: it no longer matters whether one is Jew or Gentile, male or female, free or slave - we are all new creatures in Christ.

Today, too, Christianity is faced with the need to transcend existing mental and institutional, confessional, cultural, and social boundaries in order to fulfill its universal mission. We must be more open and receptive to God's call, hidden in “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” (GS 1), of the people with whom we share the "oikumene", the common world.

Will we contribute to making our witness help to transform this world into a "civitas ecumenica", or will we be complicit, through our indifference and self-centeredness, in the tragic clash of civilizations? Will communities of faith become part of the solution to the difficulties facing us today, or will they rather be part of the problem? The history of the world and of the Church is neither a one-way progress nor a permanent decline and alienation from an idealized past, but an open drama, a constant struggle between grace and sin, faith and unbelief, waged in every human heart.



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Martin Luther taught that every Christian is "simul justus et peccator". Let us add that many people in our world today are "simul fidelis et infidelis" - a hermeneutic of trust intertwined in them with a hermeneutic of skepticism and doubt. If we can turn the conflict of faith and doubt within our minds and hearts into an honest dialogue, it will help the maturity of our faith and can contribute to a dialogue between believers and unbelievers living together in a pluralistic society. Faith without critical questions can lead to fundamentalism, bigotry, and fanaticism. Doubt that is incapable of doubting itself can lead to cynicism. Faith and critical thinking need each other.

A mature faith can live with the open questions of the time and resist the temptation of the too-simple answers offered by dangerous contemporary ideologies. At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself to strive for unity among Christians, to dialogue with believers of other religions and with people of no religious faith, and to solidarity with all people, especially the poor and the needy. It professed to be a "communio viatorum", a community of pilgrims who are far from the eschatological goal of full unity with Christ and in Christ. The Church on earth is not the "ecclesia triumphans", the victorious, perfect Church of the saints in heaven. Whoever considers any form of the Church and its theology in the midst of history as final and perfect, whoever confuses the earthly "Church militant" (ecclesia militans - whose primary struggle is with its sins) with the victorious ecclesia triumphans, commits the heresy of triumphalism, the sin of idolatry.

To critics of religion such as Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, we owe the recognition that many of our ideas about God were only projections of our fears and desires and our social conditions. To Friedrich Nietzsche we owe the recognition that this God of our imaginations is dead. To Dietrich Bonhoeffer we owe the knowledge that our faith can live without this god of our illusions.

Bonhoeffer, a disciple of Master Eckhart and Martin Luther, taught us that the only authentic Christian transcendence is self-transcendence toward others in solidarity and sacrificial love.



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Today, not only individual Christians but also our churches, the whole of Christianity, are called to this self-transcendence (kenosis).

But if Christianity "steps out of itself," will it not lose its identity? People in Martin Luther's time were gripped by fear for the salvation of their souls. In our time, people, nations, religious communities, and churches are haunted by the fear of losing their identity. Perhaps the concept of "identity" is not too far from what the word "soul" used to express in the past - that most precious thing in us that makes us who we are. "What can one give in exchange for his life (his soul)? (Mark 8:37).

Populists, nationalists, and religious fundamentalists exploit this fear for their own power and economic interests. They exploit it in the same way that the fear for the salvation of one's soul was exploited when indulgences were for sale. They offer as a substitute for the "soul" various kinds of collective identity in the form of nationalism and political or religious sectarianism. They also misuse Christian symbols and rhetoric; they make Christianity an identitarian political ideology.

Martin Luther along with the mystics of the Catholic Reformation, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius of Loyola, recognized the way of salvation in faith, in our personal relationship to Christ, and in Christ's self-gift to me (pro me).

What forms the basis of Christian identity, and what for us Christians is also the hermeneutical key to understanding history, including the signs of the times today, is the Easter event that once entered history and continues to transform it. I am convinced that Luther's theology of the cross needs to be renewed, rethought, and deepened today.

Through the cumulative global crises of our world - climate change, environmental destruction, pandemics of contagious disease, the growth of poverty, war, and terrorism - we participate in the "passio continua," the ongoing mystery of the cross. "Where sin has multiplied, grace has also multiplied," writes St. Paul. The cross is the way to resurrection.



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Resurrection is not a cheap happy ending; faith in the resurrection is not cheap grace.

The resurrected Jesus came in such a changed form that at first even those closest to him could not recognize him and for a long time doubted whether or not it was he.

Christ also comes to us in many new, surprising, ambivalent forms. He comes to us as to the apostles after the resurrection. He comes in strangers, as on the road to Emmaus; we only recognize him after the breaking of the bread. He comes through the locked doors of our fear, "legitimizes" himself with his wounds. When we ignore the wounds of our world, these wounds of Christ in the present world, we have no right to say with the apostle Thomas: My Lord and my God!

Faith in the resurrection includes the adventure of seeking the hidden, transfigured Christ. We know the true Christ, the true Church, and the true faith by being wounded. A wounded Christ, a wounded church, and a wounded faith bring the gift of the Spirit, peace, and forgiveness into the world.

Jorge Maria Bergolio, in a sermon before his election as Bishop of Rome, quoted the words of the Apocalypse: Jesus stands at the door and knocks. And he added: today Jesus knocks from the other side, from inside the Church - he wants to go out and we must follow him. He wants to go first of all to all the marginalized, to those on the margins of society and the Church, to the poor, the exploited, He goes where people are hurting. The Church is to be a field hospital where wounds - physical, social, psychological, and spiritual - are dressed and healed.

In the midst of the pandemic and lockdown, I wrote a book, *The Time of Empty Churches*. I saw this experience as a warning sign of the times: unless Christianity undergoes a radical transformation, closed and empty churches, monasteries, and seminaries will continue to multiply.



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The empty and closed churches at Easter during the coronavirus pandemic at Easter were reminiscent of Jesus' empty tomb. "Aren't these churches just tombs and tombstones of a dead God?" Friedrich Nietzsche asked in his famous text on the death of God.

Many churches in our part of the world that were once full are now empty. In our countries - yes, even in traditionally "Christian countries" like Poland - the number of "nones" - people who answer "none" when asked about their religious identity - is growing rapidly.

In many countries, the number of people who fully identify with and actively participate in churches is declining. The number of ex-Catholics and ex-Protestants is growing.

Among the nones - those who subscribe to no religion - there are many who have been disappointed, often scandalized, by the state of their churches. They include those who have looked to the churches for answers to their serious existential questions but have heard only stereotypical religious phrases. There are the "apatheists" who are indifferent to faith because they have never encountered a Christianity that speaks in a language they can understand and believe. There are those among them who were brought up in the faith in childhood, but when they grew up beyond the infantile form of faith, no one offered them a mature faith for adult people. When Jesus gives us children as an example, he is not calling us to infantile religiosity, but rather to be open, spontaneous, eager, uninhibited, and also able to grow and learn as children.

However, in many parts of the world - unlike Europe and North America - the number of new Christians is constantly growing. We should rejoice in this. Here in Europe, we should listen more and understand what new things the experience of Christians in Africa and Asia brings to theology, liturgy and spirituality. However, we cannot suppress the question of whether those churches which today are filled with the enthusiasm of young Christianity will not meet a similar fate in the future as Christianity in the West and North of our planet. Jesus' parable of the sower also



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speaks of areas where sowing comes up quickly but then dies because it has not taken root. From our past experience, we must remember that the number of baptisms and full churches are far from being a reliable criterion and the only sign needed to guarantee the Church's continued vitality.

The main mission of the Church is evangelization. Fruitful and effective evangelization consists in inculturation - in the creative incarnation of faith in the living culture, in the way people think and live. The coming reform of the Church is a response to a long-term process that is the opposite of evangelization: the process of ex-culturation of Christianity in much of our world.

We can speak of ex-culturation where the Christian faith, or its external form, the Church and its ways of expression, lose credibility, clarity and fruitfulness. A certain form of the Church then becomes a grain that cannot die on its own and produce a new plant. It remains unchanged and perishes without benefit.

But let us return to the Easter story. Those who come to the "empty tomb" are not to fall into sorrow and confusion. We are not to lament the dead Christianity of the past. We should not be deaf to the voice that asks us, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Go to Galilee, there you will see him!"

The task of Jesus' disciples from Easter morning onwards is to seek the living but often unrecognizably changed Christ, to seek the "Galilee" where we can meet him today. Is this Galilee of today not precisely the world of "nones", of people living outside the boundaries of religion? Is it not primarily to them that our mission should be directed?

The missionary efforts of Christianity today must first be directed inward to the Church. There we find many "valleys of dry bones" to whom the Word of the Lord must be proclaimed.



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Only then can we head out into the wide world of "nones" beyond the visible boundaries of churches and religious communities. But we must first understand this world well. It would be a misunderstanding to regard those "who do not walk with us" as atheists or unbelievers. And we must distinguish well also among atheists. If many "atheists" reject a certain kind of theism, human theories about God, it does not necessarily mean that they are closed to the mystery that we designate by the word God.

We too, in the footsteps of Master Eckhart, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich, are to discover and proclaim a "God beyond the god of theism."

Part of the "new Reformation", the "new evangelization" and the ecumenism of the 21st century is also a transformation of the way of mission. We cannot approach others as arrogant possessors of truth. Only Jesus can say: I am the truth. We are not Jesus; we are imperfect disciples of Jesus, on a journey of discipleship in which the Spirit gradually brings us into the fullness of truth.

The goal of this journey, the fullness of truth, is an eschatological goal. Now we see only in part, as in a mirror, as in a puzzle. This awareness of the limits of our individual and group perspectives should lead us to humility and the recognition that to expand these limits we need receptivity and respect for the experience of others.

The goal of mission is not to recruit new church members to squeeze them into the existing mental and institutional boundaries of our churches, but to go beyond those boundaries and together with them, in mutual respect and mutually enriching dialogue, take the next step on the journey toward a Christ who is greater than our ideas of him.

You are meeting in a part of the world that has gone through the dark night of communist persecution. Communist oppression took very different forms in the different countries of Central and Eastern Europe and changed over the years. The great moral authority of Pope John Paul II, the former Archbishop of Krakow, contributed significantly to the fact that the solidarity of workers, intellectuals, and the



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Church initiated here in Poland the Europe-wide collapse of the Communist dictatorship, which culminated in the non-violent revolution of 1989. The transition from communism to democracy in most of Europe at that time (with the exception of Romania) was bloodless, but not easy. Democracy is not just a certain political regime, but above all a certain culture of interpersonal relations. Democracy cannot be established and sustained merely by changing political and economic conditions; democracy presupposes a certain moral and spiritual climate.

The collapse of communism was not an immediate transition to the promised land, but the beginning of a long exodus that is still ongoing, during which Christians in post-communist countries have been subjected to many trials and temptations. After a long period of dictatorship, society is always wounded, sick - it requires a therapeutic process. Here is an important place for the Church; Christians should be experts in the process of reconciliation. The churches in countries that are yet to see the fall of communism should be prepared for this. The process of reconciliation is often difficult - guilt must be named and confessed, a path of repentance, of healing must be adopted.

In many post-communist countries, this process has been neglected. Many of the last communists became the first capitalists. Some post-communist countries are ruled by populists and oligarchs - former communist elites, the only ones who had the capital of money, influential contacts and information after the fall of communism. 'Wild capitalism' in post-communist countries leads to major social problems. In Russia there is an economic, moral and demographic crisis. Putin's dictatorial regime has nothing to offer its population except the drug of national messianism.

After the collapse of communism, there were optimistic visions that the happy ending of history, the global victory of freedom and democracy, was coming. Today, not far from where we meet, an apocalypse is unfolding that poses the real threat of a quite different 'end of history', nuclear war. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not just one of its local wars; the attempted genocide of the Ukrainian people is part of Russia's plan to re-establish its expanding empire. The main reason for the Russian invasion was the Russian regime's fear that the example of the democratizing 'color



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revolutions' in the former Soviet republics would awaken civil society and the desire for democracy in Russia itself.

What is happening now in Ukraine is strongly reminiscent of the strategy, with which the nations in this part of the world have experience from the last century: first occupy the territories with linguistic minorities, and if the democratic world remains silent and succumbs to the illusion that agreements and compromises can be made with dictators, the expansion will continue. If the West were to betray Ukraine and give in to Moscow's demands, as it did in the case of Czechoslovakia on the threshold of the Second World War, it would not save the peace, but would encourage dictators and aggressors not only in the Kremlin but throughout the world. To love the enemy means, in the case of an aggressor, to prevent him from doing evil, Pope Francis teaches in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*; in other words, to knock the murder weapon out of his hand.

Vladimir Putin cynically uses Russian religious messianism and the corrupt leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church to further his aims. The global ecumenical Christian community cannot be blind and indifferent to this scandal either.

Where the Church enters into "registered partnerships" with political power, especially with nationalist and populist parties, it always pays a heavy price. When the Church allows itself to be corrupted by a political regime, it first loses its youth and its people educated in critical thinking ; nostalgia for the past, for the marriage of Church and State, deprives the Church of its future. When the Church enters into "culture wars" with its secular environment, it always comes out of them defeated and deformed; culture wars deepen the process of ex-culturation and secularization.

The alternative to the culture wars is not conformity and cheap accommodation, but a culture of spiritual discernment. This discernment is about the distinction between the "Zeitgeist", which is the language of "this world", and the "signs of the times", which are the language of God in the events of the world, society and culture. In the time of communism, the Church needed most the virtue of fortitude to defend itself.



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Today it needs most the virtue of wisdom, the art of spiritual discernment.

At a time of devastating religious wars in the seventeenth century, the Czech Protestant theologian, John Amos Comenius, bishop of "Unitas fratrum", in his writing "De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica" (General Consultation on the Rectification of Human Affairs), put forward an invitation to a common path of mutual learning, sharing, renewal, reflection and acceptance of responsibility.

Similar to what the Evangelical Bishop of Bohemia taught then, the Bishop of Rome proclaims today with his call to synodality and to strive for the unity of the whole human family, which he writes about in his encyclical Fratelli tutti.

The programme of synodal reform launched by Pope Francis can have a much broader and deeper meaning than the necessary reform of the Catholic Church. I am convinced that here is the possible beginning of a new reformation of Christianity that will build on both the Second Vatican Council and the Pentecostal revitalization of global Christianity. The reform of the Church must go much deeper than the reform of the Church's institutions. The fruitfulness of reform and the future vitality of Christianity depend on a rediscovery of the relationship to the spiritual and existential dimensions of faith. A renewed and newly understood Christian spirituality can make a significant contribution to the spiritual culture of humanity today, even far beyond the churches.

When Francis of Assisi heard in a vision God calling him three times: "*Francis, go and repair my church which, as you see, is all in ruins!*" , at first he understood God to mean repairing the small ruined chapel of San Damiano in Assisi, which he did. Only later did he realize that he was called to help radically rebuild the entire ruined Roman Church. Perhaps even Pope Francis and the whole Catholic Church is only gradually realizing that synodal renewal is a process that does not concern the Catholic Church exclusively.



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It is about much more than the transformation of the clerical mentality and rigid institutions of the Catholic Church, wracked by scandals and internal strife, into a dynamic network of mutual communication. Synodality (syn hodos - common way) requires solidarity, cooperation, compatibility and ecumenical communion in the broadest and deepest sense of the word. It is more than unity among Christians or the deepening of interreligious dialogue.

The process of globalization, the coalescence of the world, is in serious crisis in our time. Its many dark sides have been revealed - the rise of economic inequality, the globalization of terrorism, contagious diseases and the infectious ideologies of ethno-nationalism, populism and conspiracy theories. But the great problems of humanity cannot be solved at the national level alone. Global interconnection at the level of economics, transport and information will not create an 'oikumene', a common home by themselves. No ideology, not even "Christian ideology", Christianity as an ideology, can replace the missing spiritual dimension of the globalization process.

One body, one Spirit, one hope. It is not only with all Christians, but with all human beings and all forms of life on earth that we form one body. The Spirit of God, the Spiritus Creator, is constantly creating, animating and transforming this body, the unfinished symphony of creation. It lives and works through our hope, faith and love; it is constantly transcending and breaking down all the boundary walls we have erected between us and within us.

In closing, I would like to quote a Jewish, Hasidic story. Rabbi Pinchas asked his pupils a seemingly simple question about when night ends and day begins. "It's when it's light enough to tell a dog from a sheep," one suggested. "It's when we can tell a mulberry tree from a fig tree," argued another. "It is at that moment," replied Rabbi Pinchas, "when we can recognize in the face of any human being our sibling. Until we can do that, it is still night."



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Dear siblings, in parts of our world, in parts of our communities of faith and our churches, in parts of our hearts, it is still night; the darkness of prejudice, fear, and hatred reigns.

The goal of the "New Reformation" is to transform and unite Christianity in striving for the unity of the human family.

It is an eschatological goal, but in our time, we have an important step to take in here and now. It consists in recognizing and acknowledging - with all its implications - that all people are our siblings, that they have equal rights to recognition of their dignity, to our acceptance in respect, love, and solidarity. People, nations, cultures and churches are searching for their identity and new hope in a broken world.

Your Assembly is entitled: One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.

Yes, this is our hope that we want to share with everyone.

Our hope rests in the fact that the Spirit of God is continually uniting humanity into one body.

St. Paul wrote about faith acting in love. Let us be witnesses of a faith that continually awakens hope through love. Let us be witnesses to the ongoing resurrection of the Giver of hope.

I wish that your Assembly may be a convincing sign of hope that night is passing and that day is approaching.



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The [Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation](#) takes place 13-19 September 2023 in Krakow, Poland. The theme of the Assembly will be “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” It will be hosted by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland.

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