

“Give us today our daily bread” – Paper delivered to the Eleventh Assembly of
the Lutheran World Federation

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- (1) It gives me great pleasure to address the Eleventh General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. I speak here today on behalf of the German government and in particular of our Chancellor, Dr Angela Merkel who has asked me to convey her very best wishes to your meeting.
- (2) Germany is a country with a variety of religious traditions, but the heritage of Martin Luther and the Reformation holds a special place. Even those who do not themselves belong to a Lutheran Church know of, and are grateful for, the many contributions Lutheranism has made to our culture, to the German language, to our literature and music. We would not be what we are now were it not for this particular tradition and its rich heritage in buildings and in poetry, in arts and in philosophy.
- (3) Of course, not all these influences were entirely positive. For many centuries, Lutheran Churches were also closely aligned with the political system in many of the German states. While there have been many instances in which they raised their critical voices for the causes of justice and peace, it has also been observed that the Lutheran heritage in Germany has tended to encourage individuals to be obedient subjects rather than active citizens. It probably is no coincidence that democracy took root first in countries where the Reformed influence was stronger, in the Netherlands, in England, and in the United States. Germans had to learn, in a painful history, that good government is the responsibility of all citizens; Protestant Germans in their majority took a long time to understand that this was also what their Christian faith demanded of them.
- (4) For the majority, this insight came only after the Second World War. However, they had examples to look back to. Today is the 20th of July. On this day in 1944 a group of courageous men, most of them army officers and senior civil servants made a desperate attempt to end the madness of Nazi rule and of the war by assassinating Adolf Hitler. They were a diverse group, but many of them acted out of their Christian conscience. They had realised that in a situation as extreme as this one, the normal civic duties of loyalty towards national leadership had to be abandoned in order to end the current rule of terror. Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself was a member of this group. We know that he struggled committing himself to their cause, but today we see that even though their plot failed and most of the conspirators lost their lives, their action gives important witness for the need to translate one's Christian faith into active, political practice.
- (5) Today, state and church in Germany are no longer affiliated the way they used to be. They are and must be independent of each other otherwise the result is both bad religion and bad

politics. However, they are not totally and completely separate. For me as a politician who is also a Protestant Christian, it is clear and very important that faith and politics are not and could never be two entirely different things. Politics is done by people and for people, and these people do not exist in a vacuum. Religion is one of the major forces dominating the lives of individuals and of communities, and politics even when it is conducted in a secular democracy has to take this reality into account. It is therefore one of the major challenges facing modern, democratic countries that the insights faith produces and the energies it sets free in believers are brought to bear on the political process of decision-making. I am in no doubt whatsoever that my own country's political culture would be much poorer without the contribution made at various levels by religious individuals and institutions. Churches play a major role in social work, in health care, and in education, but they also contribute actively to practically all major political debates. This is of supreme value in a democratic society, which can only thrive through such contributions. Democracies are only alive to the extent that their citizens participate in the political process, and I am pleased to say that the Churches in Germany contribute in this sense to the life of our democracy.

- (6) At the same time we all must recognise that in our increasingly pluralistic societies any such contribution and any insight, however important it may seem to us, will inevitably not be shared by everyone and therefore be controversial. Politicians must be willing to listen, there must be room in the democratic institutions for all parties to be heard and to feel respected, but each individual and each group must also understand that the result of the political process may not represent exactly what they had hoped to achieve. Many Protestant Christians in my experience today feel very strongly about the political implications of their faith. This is good and helpful while it inspires them to be active and passionate about their convictions. Yet I sometimes would like to encourage them to respect that other opinions have been arrived at in good faith too and indeed quite often more than one political option arises from the same religious perspective.
- (7) What are the resources religious faith can contribute to democratic politics? In my view, one of the central aspects is belief in God as a call for responsibility in our actions. As a politician I have to make decisions which often affect many people and whose full impact cannot be known in advance. It is important then to have guidance, a firm foundation in which these decisions are grounded. Belief in God means that there is one ultimate authority to which we owe responsibility for everything we do, in fact for our entire life. There is something that is greater than we are; whatever we achieve or fail to achieve has to be justified in relation to this absolute authority. This is an important insight for politics: we cannot do all that we might in theory do. We need boundaries. We need an awareness of rules, norms, and values we have to respect because we have not made and introduced them ourselves. It is with this in mind and for this reason that the preamble of Germany's constitution, the Basic Law, evokes responsibility to God as a foundation of the basic rights that it stipulates in limitation of state authority.
- (8) At the same time it is important that in Christianity belief in God can never be detached from respect and love for our fellow humans who, according to the Bible, are created in the image of God. The commandments to love God and to love one's neighbour are directly related: one cannot obey one without obeying the other. This religious insight has led, in the modern era,

to the rise of the concept of human rights. In this spirit, the first and most fundamental article of the German constitution prescribes that human dignity is inviolable. It means that there are things we could and should never do or even condone however politically desirable they might appear, for example the use of torture. I could never understand how this could have become in recent years an area of serious debate. There cannot, in my view, be any lenience in regard to that principle.

- (9) The two then belong together: belief in God calls upon us to accept boundaries for our actions; it reminds us that whoever we happen to be, however important and influential we are, there is always someone else above us. And the limits this idea imposes on our actions must be drawn with regard to the life and the wellbeing of human beings everywhere. One area in which this seems to be especially obvious today is the economic realm, the realm of the market. The financial crisis of the last few years has once again demonstrated the results of unmitigated human greed and of human desire for wealth and power. We could have known before. Religion teaches us that human beings are ambivalent; what we want and what we desire is not always and not necessarily what is good for everyone including ourselves. Whatever we have does not seem enough; people who have a good salary think they need an even bigger salary. Is there a limit? I think we have by now all understood that there is no 'natural' limit. There is no point at which everyone just says, 'I have enough'.
- (10) The consequences are severe. Some people get ever more wealthy while there are many others who have hardly enough to survive. Some countries can afford discussions about problems that would seem pure luxury elsewhere. Our desire to have more and become as rich as possible has created massive economic imbalances globally but also at home. The same process has also strained our natural resources, and we all know the serious ecological consequences this has. They must now be borne by everyone, and as is so often the case, the heaviest burden falls on those who can least shoulder it.
- (11) In this situation, the topic of your Assembly is indeed apposite. The fourth petition of the Our Father, asking God for 'our daily bread' reminds us of elementary human needs. We all must have something to eat; we cannot be human without it. Lack of nourishment, lack of something to eat is not merely a physical problem. It is dehumanising; it violates human dignity. This is why international efforts to overcome hunger and starvation worldwide are so important. Where they exist they constitute a fundamental attack on the value of the human person. They deny individuals their humanity. For this reason we must never accept a world in which this is still a reality for too many people.
- (12) Important though it is, food is just the beginning. Give us today our daily bread – by saying this we also recognise elementary human needs more broadly, food, water, housing, clothing, medical treatment. This is very little by the standard of what everyone expects in this and in many other countries; yet it is what too many people elsewhere still do not have. Once again, this lack of elementary provision for human existence is so pernicious because it robs the human beings concerned of something that is essential to their humanity. We cannot be what we are, human beings, without having these needs fulfilled. By accepting this truth, but saying this prayer we recognise that working towards a world in which elementary human needs are fulfilled for everyone is more than a matter of political convenience. There is a

moral imperative here that must not be disregarded if one respects human dignity as the basis of communal life.

- (13) What does this mean for the current international order? We cannot conceal the fact that we live in world which consistently makes some people ever richer while it denies many others the opportunity to exist with any human dignity at all. We cannot conceal the fact that at the moment this is not just a problem of some individuals and their personal greed, but of complex economic and financial systems, which enable and encourage such behaviour. There is therefore need to reform these systems in a way that allows democratically elected governments to make sure, in the interest of the people, that the economic sphere is not completely detached from moral and political considerations.
- (14) Of course, we all know that such a reform is not easily achieved. The globalised economy is a reality whether we like it or not. It has its dangers and downsides, it perpetuates and even increases injustice and poverty, but it also keeps many people all over the world in employment. We cannot hope for a collapse of the international economy – the recent crisis has shown us how that once again affects the poor more than anyone else. We must ensure that it works better, but it can only work better if it continues to work at all. Therefore, in order to reach the goal of elementary humane existence for everyone we must work through the international organisation we have, such as the IMF and the World Bank, the EU and the United Nations. This sometimes means that solutions have too much of a compromise character, but this is the step-by-step approach necessary in politics.
- (15) However, to ask God for ‘our daily bread’ does not only tell us about the human need for elementary provision. It also reminds us that in a sense what we need is not so much. In the richer parts of our world, it is customary to speak of needs for an almost unlimited amount of things. In the Our Father we ask God to give us what we really need; this also contrasts with our own excessive demands to fulfil every possible wish we might have. Our economic system is faulty on both counts – it deprives too many people of their basic needs, but it also fosters an attitude of unlimited and unrestrained desire which continues in the face of wealth and abundance. As much as we ought to commit ourselves to the goal of abolishing hunger worldwide, we should equally, in Western countries, commit ourselves to limits of economic growth in our own countries. We should be able to accept that falling behind emerging nations like China or India or Brazil in our growth rate does not mean we are failing. It means that we already have achieved substantial wealth for large parts of the population. There are many other areas in our own societies which we can and should improve. And of course it is also true that not everyone even in Western countries is treated fairly at the moment. Yet our societies and our economies as a whole are wealthy; they have reached a certain degree of saturation, and I think we should recognise that in this situation our needs lie elsewhere.
- (16) In this sense, we can understand the fourth petition of the Our Father as a call to accept measures and boundaries in our acquisition of wealth. This is something we do not like to do; we human beings tend to transgress boundaries, and yet we need them. This is true for our thirst for political power, but it is also true for our desire to get wealthy. There is a too little, but there is also a too much, and this is true at both the level of individuals and at the level of societies. By asking for our daily bread we acknowledge that our needs are limited and that

our intuitive sense that whatever we have, we want more, is deeply problematic both for ourselves and for our world.

- (17) Allow me to make one further observation about the theme of your assembly. By asking God to give us our daily bread we recognise that even today we are still and fundamentally dependent on God; we cannot make and provide the most basic and most fundamental things in our lives on our own. He gives us our daily bread. We tend to forget about this. Our technologies are so advanced, our opportunities are so much greater than at any previous point in history that we persuade ourselves that we are entirely in control of our lives and of the world in which we live. Yet this is only true to a point. While we can cultivate the soil to produce grain in ways, which would have seemed impossible only a couple of decades ago. We can treat many diseases that would have been fatal until quite recently. Modern communication and transportation mean that people around the earth know about each others' condition, and they can assist one another much more easily than in the past. All this is true and significant. Lives everywhere have been radically transformed and in many instances improved due to the advances of modern technology.
- (18) On the other hand, we feel now that many new responsibilities result from these advances. When disaster strikes anywhere in the world, we now always ask ourselves what we could or should have done to avert it or at least what we must do now to contain its consequences. In our globalised world it has become practically impossible to sit back at home and enjoy the rest and quiet of a peaceful land calmly reflecting about problems elsewhere as if they were of no concern to us. They are – partly because we know at once about them (or at least we ought to know about them!) and partly because we believe that we have the means and the capacities to address problems wherever they occur and whatever they consist in. 'No man is an island' – these words by John Donne ring very true for us today.
- (19) So we have reasons both to be proud of the many new possibilities generated by modern technologies and to be aware of the additional burden of responsibility that is created by them and must be accepted by us. Nevertheless, all this should not tempt us to believe that we are increasingly becoming omnipotent. There are limits to what we can achieve, and it is important for us to be reminded of those limits. We are not and will never be fully in control of our world because in spite of all our powers and innovations we still need to respect that some of the most fundamental realities in the world are merely received by us. Of course, the precise amount of what is given and what we can influence and control has been changing and will continue to change. I am not discouraging further advances in science and technology, and yet I believe that the fundamental truth contained in the words 'Give us today our daily bread', which is that we ask God for this gift, will remain untouched even a long time from now. It expresses, once again, a fundamental insight about ourselves, which we all, politicians and citizens, believers and non-believers, ought to heed. Whoever we are, however successful we become, we are beings with limits and we need to recognise this both in our own interest and in the interest of the world at large.
- (20) The theme of this year's Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation thus resonates with many urgent problems a politician faces in today's world. These problems of course have to be tackled by our societies in their entirety. Given that these societies are composed of people

of many and various religious convictions including many non-believers, it is important that we find common ground to bring together all those who can contribute to the solution of humankind's most burning problems. A politician who is willing to embrace specific religious views or use religious language is therefore in the danger of appearing exclusive. In this case, however, I do not think that this problem exists. The idea that we are responsible to God unites many believers of different faiths. Actually, I think it even appeals to a number of non-believers who might wish to put in its place ideas such as conscience or the moral law.

And the history of the past 60 years has shown how much the deeply humanitarian ideas of dignity and rights for all human beings are able to bridge the differences between members of different religious groups or confessions.

- (21) There is, then, hope that even in our pluralistic societies consensus can be reached across religious and cultural divides. Progress can only be made, however, where individual believers and religious communities make an effort to participate in public debates. Democracy, as I have said before, needs participation; it needs the critical participation not only but especially of people who are motivated by their faith to work towards a world in which human needs are addressed at a global level. I conclude by expressing my hope that Lutheran churches and Christians will continue to provide this kind of contribution in a spirit of constructive and respectful engagement with the many other agents in today's civil societies.