

## Joint sermon at the Festive Ecumenical Service “Healing of memories – witnessing to Jesus Christ” on 11 March 2017 in St. Michael’s Church in Hildesheim

Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and Cardinal Reinhard Marx, chair of the German Bishops’ Conference

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**1 - Cardinal Marx:** Sisters and brothers, where do we come from as Christians? My dear brother, where do we come from? We come from a long history – a history that weighs heavily, that inspires, that points to the future. We must not ignore or overlook anything – whatever it was that happened. Nor must we ignore what we together have found disturbing to this day. Matthew the Evangelist says that we should forgive again and again: “not seven times but seventy times seven.” That really means, without limits. We are constantly dependent on being forgiven. And we are always in the situation that we have to forgive each other, and are able to. I am so happy that we are sending this message today. We accept our history, looking at what we have done to each other, and go forward together. We do so without accusation or an attitude of depression, but in an attitude of healing and a new beginning. I am grateful for that.

**2 - Bishop Bedford-Strohm:** We have seen the past in the barrier that used to divide this church. We have seen what separated us from one another. We have sensed the hurdles that we put up for one another. And we have just experienced a very moving moment. We felt

something we have increasingly felt in our heart for a long time now: there is a way around a roadblock; there are ways of overcoming the divisions. And we have seen what the key to that is: the barrier has turned into a cross. The barrier has been cleared away and we can move forward. Now the cross stands here. Its beams point in all directions. People from quite different contexts look to Christ. They come together around Christ. We have set up the cross. It gives us orientation and on this day we say: We no longer want to look at what divides us. Despite all the wounds, but also with all the wounds that we have inflicted on each other, we want to look to this cross, that points to the future. The cross leads us together. Christ leads us together. The Reformation commemoration is meant to be a new beginning on a road that no longer separates us as churches, but brings us together.

**3 - Cardinal Marx:** And so we can say, sisters and brothers: it is a day of joy! In the middle of Passiontide we want to experience a healing of memories, but the underlying tone of our encounter is joy that we together bear the name of Jesus Christ. He inspires us. We see that his cross points in all directions, and depicts the whole cosmic reality - North, East, South, West. The whole house of creation is to

be healed by looking to the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, who makes God's love visible for us. We want to bear witness to that together.

It is marvellous that the Protestant church has invited us Catholic Christians to set out together on this path this year, saying: why are we church at all in this country? We are church in order to proclaim the cross of Christ, in which is our salvation. That is the sign of our faith, the sign of redemption, the sign of the great hope that we are not alone, that God goes with us and that he opens heaven's door to us, i.e. the door to indestructible life. We have a mission to proclaim this good news to all people. It would be foolish if we did that against one another, or in competition: we can only do it together. I hope that we can say: Christians in our country will no longer be driven apart, they stand by the sign of the cross, not for themselves but for all people and particularly for those without hope.

**4 - Bishop Bedford-Strohm:** And we Protestants rejoice from the bottom of our hearts that you, our Catholic sisters and brothers, are commemorating this year with us, remembering and celebrating with us - and worshipping the one who alone was Martin Luther's focal point, namely Christ. For that reason we are celebrating the Reformation year as a great festival of Christ, a Christus-Fest. We intend no longer to be divided in faith. We want to believe together. Together we believe in the one from whom we all come and from whom we gain our identity as Christians. And the one who, one day, will again lead us to his table to celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

We want to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in this world, in which many people no longer know anything about the gospel. We want to reach out with what we are talking about. We want

to live from God's love and we want to pass it on to all people. For that reason, we advocate together for humane treatment for refugees. For that reason we strive together to find ways out of poverty for people. For that reason we together work to understand nature as God's creation and to handle it carefully. For that reason we try to overcome violence, to find paths of reconciliation between people, so that suffering and death and violence can finally end. We want to walk this road together. We want to be friends in Christ.

**5 - Cardinal Marx:** You have put into words what moves me too, and what moves us all. Sometimes people ask: is something missing if Christ is not proclaimed in this society? Then I ask: Who could replace the preacher of the gospel, what could replace the preaching of the gospel in this society? Is there a stronger message, precisely with respect to the poor and vulnerable, but also to the hope for all people in spite of death, violence, sin, complicity? Christians proclaim a God who gives us infinite love and shows us paths of healing and reconciliation. That is why we can forgive seventy times seven. We could not imagine our society without this gospel. But that is precisely our common task. We should not complain, we should not accuse others; instead, we should set out ourselves. That is why the Reformation anniversary is an opportunity to re-articulate the gospel together for our society. I find that very encouraging.

**6 - Bishop Bedford-Strohm:** And if all of us here today, and also those who are watching and listening, commit to witnessing together to the power of God's love in our lives, and radiate it themselves, then we can renew this society. Then we can take faith and love into the world anew.

**7 - Cardinal Marx:** What can people expect today of the churches? In answer to this, a politician - who is himself not a religious practitioner - said to me recently, "I expect the churches to give us hope." And we should do just that - together.

**8 - Bishop Bedford-Strohm:** Yes, today is a day of joy and a day of hope!

**Together: Amen.**