

“The Relationships between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Communities in
the Light of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation”

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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today at the Jerusalem Campus of the Faculty of Theology of the Salesian Pontifical University. I am particularly happy to be with you as you open this semester of studying the Christian Churches within the context of the Graduate Diploma in Inter-religious Dialogue and Ecumenism. This Diploma emphasizes an area of study and expertise beneficial and necessary not just for Christian communities, but for the wellbeing of the societies and communities the church is called to serve.

In John’s gospel, we read that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:16–17). Building on this inclusive, embracing vision of the Gospel—the Good News—the Apostle Paul proclaimed that the work of God in Christ Jesus brought lasting peace since “in his flesh he . . . has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph 2:14). In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul concludes that because “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . . the message of reconciliation” has been “entrust[ed] . . . to us” (2 Cor 5:17–19).

This vision of God’s reconciling embrace in Christ Jesus and call to the ministry of reconciliation has animated my career of engagement across lines of ecumenical and inter-religious difference. Because we confess that Jesus is the incarnation of a universal God with a universal mission, we are called into a life of global awareness with unceasing commitment for the wellbeing of the poor, the least of these, the communities placed on the margin by the logic of the world. The joint commemoration of the Reformation undertaken by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church provided reminder upon reminder that God’s concern is not for our particular confessions or our particular communities alone, but that we are called into God’s mission for the sake of the world.

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Fr. Gustavo invited me here to speak about “The relationships between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Communities, in the light of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.” This is a wonderful topic; you are fortunate to be studying the theme of ecumenical relations between the churches during this remarkable year.

I will attempt to do justice to such a profound and far-reaching title. As he will share with you, however, I did protest to Fr. Gustavo that the topic falls outside of my precise academic expertise. What that means for you, dear students, is that in this address, you will largely be spared the dry minutiae of academic precision. I will be a bit more experiential in my approach, which will hopefully spark some conversation between us.

For the past several years, I served as the Special Adviser to the President of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Munib Younan. One of the greatest achievements of his time as LWF President was the joint commemoration of the Reformation in Lund, Sweden, co-hosted with His Holiness, Pope Francis. I was blessed to attend that event, an experience that changed my heart. But before I tell you how it changed my heart, you need to know a bit about me and how I worked with Bishop Younan to prepare for the event.

Presently, I am a Lutheran pastor working for a Roman Catholic University in partnership with the Vatican’s Tantar Ecumenical Institute. I’ve had more than one person say “and it’s okay for someone who’s not Catholic to work there?” Tantar was set up after the Second Vatican Council to continue the pursuit of Christian unity so beautifully envisioned during the Council. It’s an *ecumenical* institute. So yes, it’s okay that I am there!

I am an ordained Minister of Word & Sacrament in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The ELCA, which has its church-wide office in Chicago, is one of the 145 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, which is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The LWF membership represents over 74 million Christians in the Lutheran tradition in 98 countries across the globe.

I am originally from the US state of Oklahoma, the state directly on top of Texas. Oklahoma was designated as “Indian Territory” before it was made into a state. I am a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, a tribe ethnically cleansed out of the southeastern US in the mid-1800s. Oklahoma is now a politically conservative state, with a great deal of support for politicians like President Trump. I was raised in a Pentecostal megachurch, the sort of evangelicalism now growing in many places around the world.

During my teenage years, my family and I stopped going to church. In contemporary congregational theory lingo, we became “de-churched.” Part of it was that we moved to Germany, where my father had a position with the US Government. The Protestant church on the army base (this was in the early 1990s) was, in a word, *boring*. It wasn’t until much later that I found out it was *Lutheran*. But the deeper reason we became unchurched was that the evangelicalism of my youth was infused with something called the Prosperity Gospel.

The Prosperity Gospel teaches that if you believe the right way, if you pray the right way, and especially if you give money to your church, you will live a life of blessing, especially financial prosperity. That so-called Gospel makes sense in places as diverse as suburban Oklahoma City or rural Nigeria. The problem in my family, though, was that I had a brother who died of leukemia when he was just five years old. Later, I would find out that church members had blamed my parents for not having enough faith for him to be healed. His death left them with tremendous pain and the additional burden of judgment for their apparent failure. When I was a teenager, though, all I knew is that the constant drumbeat of the Prosperity Gospel didn’t make sense in my life.

But it was also a tradition where any question probing the teaching was rejected as a lack of faith. So eventually, I just stopped asking questions. At least within the church. I took my questions elsewhere—to literature, to history, to philosophy. Eventually, during my university years, I found myself asking all of these pent-up questions to a Lutheran pastor. She wasn’t afraid, and she wasn’t dismissive. And soon after, I was confirmed as a Lutheran. It was a quick jump after that to discerning a call to ministry. The next year, I was in seminary.

While at seminary, I found a new love: the study of Christian theologies of other religions. Through the study of Islam, I was exposed to a new world of religious ideas. I was of course aware of other religions; what I did *not* know was the long history of interfaith engagement and dialogue. I wound up writing an additional MA thesis comparing Nicene, Arian, and Qur’anic Christologies and developed a sense of interfaith ethics.

All of this is what first brought me into relationship with Christians from Palestine and other Arab countries. That included an opportunity to build a relationship with the Rt. Rev. Munib Younan, who, when I was in seminary, was near the beginning of his 20 years serving as Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. All of this is what brought me to Israel and Palestine in late 2002, in the middle of Second Intifada.

After serving in parish ministry in central Texas during my years of PhD coursework and some time as Lutheran Campus Pastor at the University of Chicago, I was invited to join the church-wide staff of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as Global Mission Director for the Middle East and North Africa. During my time in that role, I continued our church's focus on accompanying fellow Lutherans in the Holy Land. That brought me directly into a working relationship with Bishop Younan.

Our relationship intensified through the years of the so-called Arab Spring. Through the World Council of Churches, I was able to develop relationships on behalf of the ELCA with other churches in the Middle East, especially those living in Syria and Iraq under conditions that could be described as genocidal. It was in these relationships that my responsibility as a Christian from the United States became clearer: in order to be in right relationship with these sisters and brothers, I needed to acknowledge the destruction wrought by US policies in the Middle East.

Bishop Younan was a constant conversation partner as we—from our very different perspectives and roles—sought to navigate a region and an ecumenical landscape changing before our eyes. When he was elected as President of the Lutheran World Federation, I soon found myself assisting him—informally, always as a volunteer—as he prepared the many necessary speeches and sermons.

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It was quite exciting for me to realize that Bishop Younan's term as President would include the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Quickly, plans began to form for a joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic event. I soon found out that nice ideas like that quickly develop into an entire world of work.

One of the first tasks was to develop the theological and historical foundations for joint commemoration. That joint foundation came in the form of a document titled "From Conflict to Communion," produced in 2013 by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity. In a way, this document and all that followed it can be understood as the fruit of 50 years of intensive dialogue established as a result of the Second Vatican Council, the same spirit that led to the founding of Tantur Ecumenical Institute.

But we needed to arrive at several other mutual decisions and understandings before a major event could be planned. First, we needed to agree that the Reformation is not Lutheran alone; it is a broadly ecumenical reality itself. We cannot forget the reforming work of Wycliffe and Hus,

both of whom inspired Luther. And we will soon come upon anniversaries related to Zwingli and Calvin, two equally important Reformers. Our other understanding is that the Reformation is not European alone. Christianity now has a global reach. Although the story of the Reformation begins in Europe, the geographic center of Christianity has crossed into the Global South. A Eurocentric commemoration would not be true to the realities of Christian witness over the past 500 years.

The other deep question had to do with what we could call a gathering focused on the Reformation. Was it a celebration? Do we celebrate divisions in the Body of Christ? The decision was made to call any joint efforts a “Commemoration” of the Reformation, a neutral word for a shared observing of an historical reality.

This is quite different from how many Lutherans—at least in my American experience—have observed the anniversary of Martin Luther’s nailing of his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Every year, “Reformation Sunday” celebrations in churches too often devolve into a sort of Lutheran triumphalism. Too often, our celebrations focus less on what Bishop Younan calls “the freshness of the Gospel” than on some supposed triumph against Roman Catholic Christianity or some abstract notion of “the Pope.” I am sure many Catholics also have their same unhelpful conceptions of Martin Luther and Protestantism in general. These feelings, of course, do nothing to promote Christian unity or ecumenical cooperation.

I was therefore deeply grateful to see early drafts of “From Conflict to Communion.” The document examines the stories we tell about one another and provides guidance on how we can reconstruct the historical narratives that we have built up over the past 500 years. I continue to be inspired by the five “Ecumenical Imperatives” that form its conclusion. They are short, so I will read them here:

- *The first imperative:* “Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.”
- *The second imperative:* “Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith.”
- *The third imperative:* “Catholics and Lutherans should again commit themselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal.”
- *The fourth imperative:* “Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.”

- *The fifth imperative*: “Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.”

The joint commemoration prayer service in Sweden involved a great deal more negotiation. Everything—from the location to the various statements, messages and sermons, to every element of the liturgy, including vestments—was the subject of careful study and negotiation. That level of practical cooperation, although sometimes frustrating for everyone involved, was a beautiful manifestation of the commitment to walk together in this new era of ecumenical cooperation. It showed that we could truly live in the theme chosen for the occasion: Together in Hope.

As important as the official ceremonies and statements of the joint commemoration were and will continue to be, it was something that happened the day before October 31—Reformation Day—the day *before* His Holiness, Pope Francis, joined the LWF President, Bishop Younan, and General Secretary, Martin Junge—that changed my ecumenical heart.

As I reported via Facebook to people who were following my experiences, I was in Lund for this major ecumenical event, but I haven’t always been the most stereotypically ecumenical person. As I think you can tell, I really like being Lutheran, just like I hope you love being Catholic. Lutheran doctrine provides a theological and philosophical touchstone for my life and work. When I first discovered the tradition, I appreciated its embrace of critical thought, its commitment to absolute human equality before God, and its willingness to take risks in confronting power.

I admitted that I was, at some level, skeptical of the week’s events. Are we simply embracing the same power against which we have defined ourselves for centuries? Just what was it we were so excited about in Lund? That Sunday morning, Oct. 30, I wrote that the major public events would have little meaning without a strong process of ecumenical reception. The big event is important, but not as important as the one Lutheran-Catholic couple in your own congregation who could eventually openly receive the Eucharist in both of their churches. Gestures of openness and embrace at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy only matter if that same embrace is offered in your neighborhood.

And then it happened.

That Sunday morning, as we neared the completion of normal Sunday worship at the Lund Cathedral, the main doors of the church opened and we were joined by another congregation. A buzz went through several of us who hadn’t fully understood the previous announcement in Swedish: there, with a banner, a processional cross wrapped with olive branches, and an icon of

the Virgin of Guadalupe, were the priests and the entire congregation of Lund's St. Thomas Aquinas Parish.

As they processed to the front of the Lutheran cathedral, their choir joined the Lutheran choir for a beautiful, shared song. As the leadership of both congregations joined around the altar, Bishop Younan, as President of the LWF, was invited to address the now-combined congregations. As we closed the worship in song, Lutherans handed their worship books over to Catholic neighbors eager to join in a shared hymn. Everyone, including me, had tears in their eyes.

My skepticism evaporated. The prayer I had posted earlier that morning was being fulfilled before my eyes. It was a doubtful prayer, and in that moment, I recalled the verse from Mark's Gospel: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9.24). That morning, I saw and felt what ecumenical unity can be. Seeing Pope Francis and Bishop Younan embrace the next day was impressive, but not as important as what I saw in the cooperation between local parishes.

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Now that I have shared some of my personal experience and you are ready to study the official documents underlying the Joint Commemoration of the Reformation, I would like to speak more directly about the possibilities of what we can call Applied Ecumenism or Practical Ecumenism. When you are finished with this course of study, what will you take with you in the parishes and offices you will serve?

The events in Sweden included a broader public event in the Malmö Arena. There, the World Service division of the Lutheran World Federation and Caritas Internationalis—our churches' aid and development agencies—signed a declaration of intent for cooperation. As I said in my opening comments, the growth of mutually affirming relationships between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Christians strengthens our mutual capacity to respond to the needs of the world, seeking the flourishing of human communities far beyond the limits of our confessions alone. LWF World Service and Caritas were doing that before any such document was signed; but signaling our intent for meaningful integration and cooperation implies a globally significant partnership.

Constantly improving relationships between Roman Catholics and Lutherans also allow us to more fully promote women's voices and leadership within our communities. The Lutheran Archbishop of Sweden, Antje Jackelén, was a local host of the Joint Commemoration. During

the prayer service at the Cathedral, Pope Francis embraced her. This was not in the official protocol for the event; it was a spontaneous act of gratitude between leaders of two Christian communities.

Although I am a strong advocate for women's leadership at all levels within the church, I am not necessarily raising the question of women's ordination to the priesthood. We should be troubled, however, when questions of gender become a stumbling block. Unfortunately, this feeds the simplistic misogyny of many men throughout the world, many claiming to be religious leaders. The American Protestant ideologue John Piper comes to mind. He recently claimed that no woman should be allowed to teach in seminaries since only men are fit to be pastors. My only guess is that he hasn't reflected on the examples of St. Paula and St. Eustochium, who assisted St. Jerome in his translation of the Vulgate. The internal challenge of Christianity—a challenge we share with Jews and Muslims—is recovering the beautiful, inclusive complexity of our traditions from those like Piper who reduce people to being pawns in their theological games.

When misogyny is wrapped in theological justification, people are afraid to challenge it. Speaking as a man to men training for ministry, we need to be aware of how these dynamics operate to silence women and reinforce fears rather than moving the conversations forward. We are seeing a global groundswell of women's voices and women's leadership, women reclaiming their time and women refusing to act as objects of male desire. The Roman Catholic Church has a sophisticated, empathetic structure for justifying its stances concerning gender relations and ordination. Catholic women are deeply engaged in the leadership of the church, with many serving as academic leaders, seminary instructors, and close advisors to every level of church leadership, including Pope Francis. It is time for us to deepen cooperation in the area of gender justice so we can contribute to global change.

When you go into your new assignments, especially if it is into the hyper-local work of parish ministry, I urge you to maintain global awareness. You have the immense privilege of international travel and experience; you can serve as your congregation's window to the world. This global perspective will directly enhance your ability to nurture ecumenical and interreligious relationships in your ministry context.

The situation here in Jerusalem provides ample evidence that local issues have global implications. I will briefly address practical ecumenical and interreligious cooperation in relation to the three interlocking areas international law, global migration, and climate justice.

1. *International Law.* Wherever you serve, the stability and legitimacy of international law will be an issue of concern. The steps being taken by the United States, Russia, and smaller states like Israel to exercise sovereignty in ways that disrupt and sometimes break international conventions have broad, unintended implications. This is especially the case for people living under dictatorial and totalitarian regimes. Even as our churches work at regional and global levels, advocating for fair and stable legal and humanitarian structures, local ecumenical and interreligious alliances will likely become more essential for promoting the wellbeing of communities throughout the world.
2. *Global Refugee / Migration Crisis.* There are 65 million refugees in the world today. These are people displaced by famine, by war—people who bear the image of God. This figure is supplemented by a huge number of what can be called economic migrants. Because of its unique concern for demographic factors, the State of Israel, despite its relative wealth, welcomes none of these people into its borders. In the coming days, we will see if the Israeli government follows through on its promise of rounding up and deporting asylum seekers and economic migrants. You can be sure that other governments throughout the world—including the United States—will be monitoring the international response to see what they can do with undesirable, undocumented populations. Christians, alongside other religious communities, have an opportunity to speak out forcefully for the dignity of every human being, insisting that no person is illegal.
3. *Climate Justice.* As the international community continues to grapple with the best ways to assess and respond to the global challenge of climate change, the churches have an important platform to seek justice, especially for the most vulnerable. Climate change will continue to create more refugees and migrants, increasing strain on global systems. Many coastal communities will find themselves under water. While the wealthy will simply relocate, what will happen to those without economic means? Climate justice engages local and international systems of law and culture, seeking the dignity and wellbeing of the most vulnerable. Ecumenical and interreligious alliances facing these issues head-on will ensure that decisions are not informed by profit motives alone.

None of these global challenges can or should be faced by any religious community alone. But for collaborative efforts to be successful, we will need to follow the wisdom of moving “from conflict to communion,” especially as we consciously reconstruct the centuries of narratives we have told about our supposed religious opponents. Lutherans and Roman Catholics have, I hope, shown the way toward reconciliation for the sake of the world. Similar efforts must take root throughout Christian ecumenical efforts and within interreligious dialogues. Among other religions, we must start first with Jews and Muslims, taking responsibility for our Christian contributions to millennia of conflict and persecution, manifesting themselves today in anti-

Semitism and Islamophobia. As Lutherans and Catholics have found, the first step toward repairing the relationship is confession. Sincerity opens a world of new possibilities.

In conclusion, I want to again provide a word of affirmation for the program of study you are undertaking as you earn the Graduate Diploma in Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism. We live and work in a world of political forces that compromise the core values of all religious traditions, that seek to divide rather than unite, that encourage us to develop immoral perceptions of our neighbors.

But we are called to a different path. The message of the Gospel extends far beyond the complicated but improving relationship between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Christians. As disciples of Jesus—even if we follow in slightly different paths—we now freely affirm with another that we follow the One who has broken down the dividing wall” (Eph 2:14), the One through whom we have been reconciled to God and to one another, the One who has “entrust[ed] the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:19).