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TO: LWF member churches

Reformation Day 2013

God's Free Gift of Grace in Market-Driven Times

As the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 approaches, the question intensifies about the relevance of the theological insight that surfaced in those remote days. What is the meaning for today's people of the message that we are justified before God not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and what God does?

This question about the relevance of reformation after 500 years of history was the subject of intense reflection among members of a special committee of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) tasked with developing a conceptual framework for LWF's approach to the Reformation anniversary.

"Not for sale," was a phrase strongly emphasized in the final report of the LWF Special Committee on "Luther 2017 – 500 years of the Reformation," which was approved by the LWF Council in June 2013. The phrase links directly to Martin Luther's strong and firm stance on what had become subjected to trade, yet it actually escapes the control and dominion of human beings and cannot, therefore become goods to be exchanged in commercial relationships: God's abundant and overflowing grace that forgives and calls people into new life. What God has given for free through the works and merits of Jesus Christ can't be subjected to trade and profit making!

With this earnest word of protest, the joy and the freshness of the gospel shone anew on a multitude of people that was otherwise desperate for the evidence of God's favor and mercy, which they needed to apprehend for their broken and ambivalent lives.

Framed this way, the vitality of this core perspective of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as it unfolded in the 16th century, acquires breathtaking actuality. It challenges the constant and ongoing attempts to subjugate, control and trade what ultimately cannot be defined as a commodity, and should therefore never be subjected to trade. It questions the uncontested and prevalent market idolatry that is so fundamentally reshaping the value system of individuals and societies, undermining social cohesion and challenging financial and ecological balances.

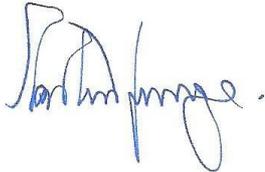
The afore-mentioned special committee offered three specific dimensions to illustrate the relevance of that medieval "not for sale."

- Salvation is not for sale: While there won't be any value in reediting old disputes of the 16th century between Catholics and Lutherans, which in any case have been substantially reframed after the signature of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999, the Reformation anniversary still offers a great opportunity for deep self-examination in view of ongoing trends that continue pushing religion into the market place. Indeed, people's questions and expectations have shifted in many respects today, yet the longing for wholeness among millions, their aspirations for a dignified life and the painful intuition of multitudes that only miracles can secure their prosperity, continue to nurture a flourishing religious market. The message of justification by faith alone is not self-evident and should never be taken for granted, even among churches in the Reformation tradition, as they too have their struggles in letting God's justice prevail over our human sense of justice. Salvation and wholeness, healed relationships, life in dignity, the longing for prosperity—none of these are for sale.

- Human beings are not for sale: Recent research publicized on the conditions of foreign labor force in big construction projects raises the appalling question: is slavery really over? Or did it not find other, more subtle ways to continue with its unacceptable practices of trading with the labor force, organs, children and women—human beings altogether? For hundreds of thousands, human trafficking continues to be a nightmare. The liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to these realities and to these people too, laying a foundation of solid values that affirm a clear stance: human beings, their rights and their dignity are not commodities to be traded. They are not for sale.

- Creation is not for sale: Admittedly, when Luther spoke out in the 16th century he did not think primarily about creation as something to be seen in the context of God's redeeming action. In those days, ecological challenges were not at the same scale or scope as they are today. During my recent travels to African LWF member churches I have become aware of the tremendous pressure for safe water, as well as of the ongoing selling or leasing of huge extensions of communal land. Water and land—goods which pastoralist communities were holding in common—are now moving into the market place. They have become commodities, pushing the communities to migration and urban slums. The Reformation reference to “not for sale” could become a strong contribution to the public and global discussion by reminding the human family about the very fact that there are dimensions and aspects in life and this world, which—for the sake of both eternal and earthly life—must never become commodities.

There is a liberating power in the message of justification by faith alone. It has the potential to reach far beyond the hearts of believers and the walls of the church. Yet, it will require the churches to be intentional in their pastoral and diaconal service so that the stories and experiences of women, men, youth and children as they undertake their life journeys are heard, and the freeing message can be received that not everything is to be sold.



Rev. Martin Junge
General Secretary

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