

## Opening Prayer

Oberkirchenrat Michael Martin

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

John 13:35 has been chosen to be the biblical theme of our consultation:

*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

How does the world know that we belong to Christ? There are many meaningful answers: We are recognized as Christians, because our worship is filled with the Holy Spirit. We are recognized as Christians when we live out diakonia in a way which makes a difference to the poor in our society. Certainly we are also recognized as Christians when we speak out against exploitation and injustice. In any case, we are taken note of as Christians when we proclaim the Gospel and preach about Jesus Christ.

Yet in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us about another important characteristic that distinguishes his disciples – their love for one another. The unity and solidarity among Christians characterizes them in a special way as Jesus' disciples. This communion among Christians fulfils the new commandment Jesus gives his disciples according to John - "love one another, just like I have loved you." A church's living communion guarantees its credibility before the world. And, even more importantly, living communion across church boundaries ensures Christianity's credibility before a world increasingly lacking in experiences of communion.

This brings us to the theme of our consultation – the communion among us. We want to work towards deepening our fellowship, strengthening our network, developing our partnerships. Together, we can look for responses to the challenges of globalization and secularism. Because we are credible whenever we witness to our faith together and stand up for each other.

Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John focuses on two of Jesus' disciples. A few verses before our theme, Jesus foretells his being betrayed by Judas. And after our verse, the focus turns to Peter, whose denial Jesus prophesies. We hear of two disciples, whose actions break up the disciples' unity, scattering them to the four winds when they are confronted with the cross.

Judas wants to challenge Jesus, see him seize power and overthrow the political status quo. And so he betrays Jesus. He is trapped in his overeager expectation and is therefore unable to hear and understand how Jesus brings about salvation. Judas

wanted to force Jesus into claiming power and may well have seen himself as thereby serving the reign of God. But he lost sight of communion. John depicts this by telling us how Jesus dips the piece of bread for Judas one more time and gives it to him as a sign of the self-sacrifice, which Judas is unable to understand by this point. Judas takes the bread and at this moment, we read, Satan enters into him. Thus, the communion is broken.

Then there is Peter, the disciple who swears he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus predicts that, at cock-crow, Peter will have denied him, that Peter's faith will fail him. And this is exactly what happens. But Peter will weep over his weakness, and his repentance will be the foundation upon which the communion of Christians is built anew.

The communion amongst us cannot be taken for granted and it is no cheaply given grace. Communion is threatened time and again and it continuously needs to be re-grounded in the faith, continuously needs to seek a shared witness to our faith, and continuously needs to make the effort of solidarity. Neither complacency nor fickleness will serve our Christian communion.

We in Bavaria have repeatedly looked at both: complacency and fickleness. And we asked ourselves what serves our communion with you, our partner churches, and where we might have made mistakes. We want working relationships with our partners that are based on equality, but it may be that we do not always succeed in realizing this aim. Whenever that is the case, we need to come together to discuss the reasons and think about solutions. In our own church's mission, we also depend on input and feedback from our partners. As churches we depend on each other to provide discerning partnership in the Spirit of Christ.

In our Synod as in the Church Council I, together with many others, have been emphasizing time and again that our worldwide communion is not some kind of accessory that we can afford to have while the times are good. Our partnerships are integral for our church being. Without these partnerships, our church would be incomplete, vulnerable, and fragile – it would be imprisoned in petty self-centeredness.

This consultation is intended to promote and deepen our communion. This is why the verse from John 13 lends itself to guide our time together. By the communion we live out together, we give witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This should encourage and urge us on in our partnership efforts.

Amen.