Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck at a ceremony marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Berlin on 31 October 2016

The fact that the reformation and the celebrations marking its anniversary move me most personally, as a Protestant Christian and as an erstwhile pastor, should not come as a surprise to anyone. However, I am speaking to you today as Federal President, and am giving expression to the fact that our society considers this, initially church, event to be extremely important. We are not mixing the church and state spheres in an improper way here, but rather the state is acknowledging that it itself, in its history and its early origins, was also shaped by the Reformation and its impact in a whole host of different ways. Our society as we know it today would not be conceivable without the Christian churches. And it is not conceivable without the Reformation.

This realisation can be made today without undercurrents of anti-Catholic sentiment. The bridges between the denominations are becoming ever more firm, and living communities and ecumenical practice have long been an everyday feature in countless places. The times when Catholics did not feel that they were being treated as equals – I am thinking of the Kulturkampf, for example – have, thank goodness, long since been consigned to the past.

At no other Reformation anniversary have there been so many people in our country who belong to a religion other than Christianity – or even no religion at all. All of these people now make up an intrinsic part of our country. They enjoy freedom of faith and conscience – and thus inalienable fundamental rights that would be barely conceivable without the catalyst that was the Reformation.

Christianity has undergone three periods of profound change – the Reformation, Enlightenment and criticism of religion. It has paid a heavy price since the advent of secularisation and the end of the ubiquitous people's church. Christianity has, at least for the most part, embraced the modern age, however. The alternative to critically

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reflected faith can quickly lead to fundamentalism, however – and we have witnessed how much hate and violence this gives rise to not only in centuries past, but also practically on a daily basis today.

This is why the Reformation is everyone's business; it has played an important role in shaping the history and destiny of many countries of Europe, as well as parts of the world beyond Europe, but especially our nation of Germany and our Scandinavian neighbours.

It is no coincidence that the Reformation was the first historical date to be remembered here on a wide scale and with an anniversary celebration under state auspices. In 1617, when its centenary was marked, this represented the beginning of the culture of remembrance that we find so self-explanatory today. And this first jubilee shows, along with the others, by the way, that an act of commemoration is, whether deliberately or not, always an act occurring in the realm of identity politics.

Just as there was a Protestant-triumphalist, anti-Catholic note to the celebrations of 1617, Pietists, Early Enlightenment philosophers and Orthodox Christians seized on the bicentenary in 1717 to promote their specific interpretation of the faith. Following the wars against Napoleon, Luther was, in 1817, transformed into a pioneering figure of nationalist self-assertion, while in 1917, as war raged, the emphasis placed on Prussian nationalism was practically unassailable. All of these interpretations of Luther, as one-sided though they were, were able to draw on actual, if not always the most important, parts of his life and work.

For instance, anti-Semites were able to claim Luther's anti-Jewish polemics for their cause. This aspect of his work, which has been the subject of exhaustive research particularly in recent years, should neither be overstated, nor should it be hushed up. This remains – although typical for the age – a dark chapter of his legacy.

In the context of the GDR's politics of history, we were party to the breathtaking transition from a negative image of Luther as a prince's servant and betrayer of the peasants to the attempt to reclaim the Reformation in the Luther Year of 1983 as the, so to speak, start of an early bourgeoisie revolution and the nucleus of Socialism on German soil.

This prosaic review of part of the Reformation's impact is therefore a lesson in the importance of self-critical circumspection. We too are, after all, children of our age – and our descendants will one day discover our contingencies and our blind spots. Nevertheless, we must, like the generations before us, ask what the Reformation means to us today.

Its far-reaching impact affects practically all areas of human endeavour and permeates the most personal way in which millions of

people lead their lives. How they think and feel, how they speak, what and how they believe, and how they express their beliefs. All of this is informed by the complex and multifaceted events that can be summed up by a single word: "Reformation".

The beginning to this story could scarcely have been any less remarkable. A young professor of theology formulates a number of trenchant theses. With his theses on the system of indulgences, however, Martin Luther called a key practice of his church fundamentally into question – a practice that was of great religious and cultural, as well as economic and political importance, and which played an important role for the people in their very personal spiritual lives.

In so doing, he had opened the door to a new world. However, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli – or indeed any of the other reformers in German-speaking and European countries, for that matter – had no idea of the radical social and political consequences that their struggle for a reform to faith and the church were to have. Instead, their focus was, above all, on the salvation of the soul, the right relationship with God and on Heaven or Hell.

Today, many of us can no longer imagine why anyone would bother to expend mental energy on such issues – and even stranger still for most of us are the agonies of mind and anxieties of conscience that plagued the people so incessantly at the end of the Middle Ages – and one person in particular: Martin Luther.

"How can I make sure that God shows me mercy?" – "What will God punish me for?" – "Where will I go when I die?" These extremely personal religious questions of people in spiritual agony – and the new answers to them – were what triggered these political, indeed world-historical, upheavals.

The fact that the reformers' ideas were able to develop such an unprecedented explosive force was certainly also due to favourable conditions such as the invention of printing, which helped to spread these new ideas in all directions so rapidly.

On the other hand, this explosive force can only be explained by the passionate search for the right form of belief, for the will to be devout in the proper fashion, which was the motivation of the majority of people at the time. When fundamental changes occurred with respect to this innermost raison d'être, then the other factors could not fail to be affected by this.

Allow me to turn to the central concept of freedom, for example. When Luther and the other reformers so strongly emphasised that man cannot receive the grace of God through servile obedience to the law imposed upon him from the outside, but through his voluntary commitment to the Gospel, then a fresh wind of freedom wafted into

this world – one that genuinely amounted to a wind of change. You could literally hear people breathing a sigh of relief as it dawned on them that their belief was not a matter that is decided by a church authority or its whims, but by their voluntary self-commitment to the word of God.

Luther himself personified the candour that is derived from this freedom. He retained this quality even in his dealings with the highest instances, the Diet and the Emperor. He was the embodiment of the freedom enjoyed by Christians. This freedom is, of course, never absolute nor is it anarchic, as it has sometimes been portrayed in political and cultural modernity. For Luther, the individual, through their very commitment to God and their trust in his grace, acquires the courage and freedom to lead their own lives – and thereby to help shape the world.

This then also gave rise to the call for political freedom. It did not take long for rebellious peasants in southwest Germany to seize on the new ideas. Since man was granted freedom and dignity by the creator himself, no one could take this away. And so they quite logically called for the abolition of serfdom.

The peasants also used Holy Scripture to support their cause. And they only allowed themselves to be disproved with arguments from the Bible. But Luther did not consider his message to be so directly political – he feared that this would simply lead to anarchy. And so he also fought against the rebels with – literally crushing – polemics. However, the discovery in the course of the Reformation of the freedom of the individual in particular, justified by the Bible, is part of Europe's long and often bloody history of the struggle for freedom. This discovery remained a dynamic driving force for creating, at long last, a society in which political freedom is guaranteed by the state and in which each individual is a legal person in their own right.

It was also, in the long term, an extremely effective catalyst for the history of emancipation that man now stood directly before God, without any intermediary. Priests and the church no longer stood between the individual and their God as a guardian, so to speak. This empowerment affected women and men alike and transformed stewarded laypeople into independent believers. This also had an impact on civic and state life. The call for democratic participation has its origins in the coming of age of the Reformation. This is a precious legacy.

Those who come of age with respect to their faith will be aware of the fact that they, and no one else, is responsible for their own life choices. "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise" – all of us recall these words that Luther is said to have uttered. The upshot is that individual responsibility always applies, even before the highest instances. This is not a question of limitless individualism that imposes its will and its

wishes at the expense of everyone else, but rather of conscientious self-commitment.

For just as freedom is bound to the word of the Scriptures, so the individual is bound to their conscience. Whether the voice of conscience is the voice of God is a question of personal religious conviction. But even without this conviction, this is one of the great treasures of humanity that were not invented by the Reformation, but which were brought into light once again, namely the realisation that the individual is, ultimately, only accountable to their conscience. This commitment to our conscience makes us free – free to lead an independent, responsible and conscientious life.

If freedom is bound up with the Gospel, then it clearly follows that the Bible should be accessible to all Christians, and to as many individuals as possible. Translations of the Bible into the vernacular began to emerge across Europe at that time. Some European national languages consider their founding document to be a Bible translation from the Reformation era, and Martin Luther's translation continues to have an impact on our German language to this day. And, to this day, this German is, including colloquial language, shaped by words, expressions and metaphors that he invented – a brilliant, creative artist, who, for all of his scholarship, possessed the ability, throughout his life, to be "guided by the tongue of the people".

Beyond Holy Scripture, the word is also the word of preaching and teaching, the word of academia and journalism. From the Reformation period onwards, people also began to live in a media landscape with a hitherto unprecedented wealth of publications. Words and manuscripts achieved pre-eminence not only in church services, but also in daily life.

European culture became a culture of books, words and manuscripts that everyone could share in. Language education was considered almost to be a religious duty. This helped to lay important foundations for reason and rational permeation of the world. After all, the ability to use language is also about the ability to formulate arguments, to engage in peaceful dialogue, to comprehend unfamiliar or new thoughts, to give complex expression to a complex reality.

Alongside the truth of the Gospel and the freedom that it granted, the most important word of the Reformation was probably "grace". Luther's overriding insight was that it was only by the grace of God that he would become a just and good person. This was, for him, the ultimate experience of deliverance, the salvation of his searching and often fearful soul.

Grace was a key word back then – now it is perhaps a foreign concept. And yet, or so it seems to me, grace is what we need more than anything else especially today. Grace first with respect to

ourselves so that we do not drive ourselves into a state of desperate exhaustion with constant self-invention and self-optimisation. And grace also with respect to our fellow humans, who are, at the end of the day, fallible and incomplete beings like ourselves and from whom we often expect perfection and flawless performance.

What is more, a demon of mercilessness, knocking others down, self-righteousness and contempt is abroad in our society, from Internet forums to political debates, that is highly dangerous for us all.

And no one can seriously claim that we are any less plagued by fears and dreads than the contemporaries of the Reformation, even if these fears no longer appear to us as demons or devils incarnate.

I hope that those for whom the Reformation is more than historical memory and for whom Christian belief plays an important role in their lives will, stemming from this belief, be able to stand up against merciless conditions time and again by providing active assistance, and being ready to change ourselves and the world. We need agents against fear also today. And, if necessary, also with the serene defiance to which Luther gave expression: "And though this world, with devils filled, / should threaten to undo us, / we will not fear, for God hath willed / his truth to triumph through us..."

Believing in God or in an undeserved divine grace is no longer a personal reality for many people. I hope that they will experience grace from their fellow humans from time to time and that they will treat others with grace. If people realise that they have been given a gift or have been supported or saved now and then in a way that defies rational comprehension, or when they are struck with amazement when something good happens that they did not work for themselves, then they have possibly experienced grace. The Latin for grace is "gratia". This is where the word "gratis" comes from – generosity and selfless giving. And the concept of "gracefulness", the lightness of relaxed being, is also derived from this word. Wherever there is gracefulness, grace will surely not be far away.

This is why we are now looking forward to commemorating the Reformation. Let us consider it to be a challenge of the present for our thoughts and actions. The Reformation precedes us with its passion for truth and freedom, and it is precisely for this reason that it is something that concerns us all – as individual humans trying to find our way in truth and freedom, as Christians for whose church the Reformation is not just a legacy but always a work in progress, and as citizens who, in this very spirit, remain bound to our society in constant readiness for renewal.