Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
"The 500th anniversary of the Reformation: Europe between unity and diversity" in the Christuskirche of the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Rome
on 8 October 2017
in Rome, Italy

I am delighted to be invited to the Eternal City, to the Papal City, to the heart of the Catholic world and for my first encounter with Pope Francis. And I am pleased during my visit to have the opportunity to exchange views with my fellow Evangelical Christians, including so many of my compatriots. And all this in a year which is of immense significance for German Protestantism.

I am very grateful to you for the warm welcome and I am pleased to join together with you as we contemplate the great phenomenon that was the Reformation and its significance for Europe back then and in the present day.

You know as well as I do that, throughout history, Germany's destiny has often been closely associated with the city of Rome and the Roman Empire. The oldest German cities were founded by the Romans, and many of our cultural pillars – from law to architecture and engineering expertise through to political institutions and ideals – have been shaped by Roman tradition. German emperors were crowned in Rome and the unique political and legal construct of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation bears witness to the German connection with Rome in its title. Therefore, it is no surprise that probably the most significant intellectual phenomenon in Germany, namely the Reformation, involved Rome.

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther, the monk and theology professor who was barely known beyond his narrow sphere of activity, published his 95 Theses on indulgences. This happened in the aspiring yet still small and sleepy town of Wittenberg, which was rather remotely situated in the Elector of Saxony's province, far from the European centres of the time, such as Paris, Rome and Cologne.

ADDRESS Bundespräsidialamt
11010 Berlin
TEL +49 30 2000-2021
FAX +49 30 1810200-2870
E-MAIL presse@bpra.bund.de
INTERNET www.bundespräsident.de

However, Martin Luther did not intend to vent some small or major grievances, or to criticise the misconduct of individual bishops, faculties or electors. Not at all. The target of his Theses was ultimately the heart of the Church itself. It was against the Pope, his policy of indulgences and the underlying theology. It was against the scaremongering of the papal legates who offered exemptions from eternal damnation in return for a fee. What it was against, in other words, was Rome.

While the origin of the Reformation was certainly in Wittenberg, the cause, not just to Luther, was to be found in Rome – and Rome was also the source of the Reformation's impact and explosive power. It is therefore appropriate that we commemorate the Reformation not just in Wittenberg and Eisenach, not just in Eisleben, Augsburg and Worms, and not just in Geneva and Zurich, but that the anniversary of the Reformation is celebrated here in Rome as well.

The Theses, which later became so famous and were originally formulated merely as a basis for theological debate, remained anything but a fringe event precisely because of their staunchly anti-Roman emphasis. In fact, they triggered an earthquake whose literally global historical impact we can still feel today, 500 years on. No area of life remained untouched by the complex phenomenon for which we use the simple term "The Reformation": politics and religion, culture and art, private lifestyles and social relationships. Nothing would be the same again. Everything was exposed to fundamental examination and criticism. Much of what emerged was new, and much was thought about for the first time and experimented with.

Some elements were tried out quite carefully at first – with bated breath, so to speak – as is so often the case with the unfamiliar, but much was also discovered and celebrated very quickly with great enthusiasm and a deeply devout passion: one could read the Bible, or hear it read, in one's own language; one could listen to comprehensible sermons; one did not have to invest money and endeavour to perform endless good deeds to make it to Heaven, but could trust in God's word and mercy; one's own conscience was stronger and more important than an elector's command or a priest's word; nuns and priests could get married and often lead an exemplary family life; there were hymns whose melodies touched people's hearts and whose lyrics expressed and therefore influenced their feelings and thoughts. This was all new and it stirred the hearts of the people, changing them profoundly and for all time.

Compared with the timescale of history hitherto, Europe was transformed virtually overnight. And never before in Europe's limited history had there been changes in politics and philosophy, spirituality and culture, mentality and media on such a scale and intensity. Incidentally, this did not just apply to the areas that became

Protestant. Protestants should remember that, at the latest with the Council of Trent, Catholicism also found new answers to the tremendous intellectual and institutional challenges of the time, to a great extent giving the Church an entirely different form.

Without a doubt, the Reformation was a giant leap in the mind-set of Europe. And although significant achievements of the modern era – such as tolerance, freedom of religion, equal rights and democracy – were in part still a long way off, one can still recognise, or at least sense, in the Reformation the first glimmer of European modernity.

But the question is: at what price? The unity of Latin Europe was torn apart once and for all, while violent uprisings and wars were played out almost all across the continent. An unprecedented form of fanaticism was taking hold. The then new media of books, brochures and leaflets provided the suitable means to denigrate ideological opponents in malicious caricatures and to discredit with slander. Brazen lies were the order of the day. The first taste of "fake news", so to speak. While the papal writings compared Luther and the like to wild boars that ravaged the Lord's vineyard, making clear that violent means could and indeed must be used to resist such elements, even the Reformation, where it prevailed, knew no mercy: neither for the so-called Papists, nor for the countless irretrievable treasures of traditional art and culture, nor for established structures of social cohesion.

If one can refer with great caution to the Reformation as the first glimmer of modernity, one can also to some extent see in it the roots of fundamentalist aberration and illiberality. Contemporaries already wondered whether what they were experiencing was a revolution or rather an apocalypse. No matter what else it represented, the Reformation was a generator of strong emotions, from the most tender piety through to the most terrible displays of disinhibition.

It was ultimately the Thirty Years War which brought unspeakable suffering and previously unimaginable cruelty mainly on German soil. This war has essentially never been erased from the collective subconscious and memory of us Germans. Its end in the peace treaties of Münster and Osnabrück represents one of diplomacy's greatest accomplishments and to this day can be cited as a model example of European peace policy. This peace was no labour of love for the contracting parties – but it was a victory for pragmatic reason. A peace forged by minds and the spirit of reason, to be followed only much later by a reconciliation of hearts and souls.

European peace policy sounds like a modern catchphrase but a vitally important one. Throughout its history, from ancient times to the present day, war, violent division and conquest have left indelible marks in Europe. Let's face it, when did European unity ever actually

exist? To be sure, the Pax Romana era of peace which began under Emperor Augustus was an era for which people long yearned. For centuries, the peoples of Europe remembered it nostalgically as the time when "peace reigned on the whole Earth," as an age-old Christmas carol goes. But this period of peace was not to last, breaking apart in various acts of division and to be destroyed by foreign onslaught.

Even when almost all of Europe had become Christian, the all-dominant religion was not strong enough to preserve European unity. The division into East and West, into Latin and Orthodox Christianity, was the first great rift after ancient times. This rift divided people for centuries and lingers to this day, not just in religious life, but also in politics. However, East and West belong together and Europe must breathe with both these lungs, as Pope John Paul II used to say.

This can only succeed in religious and political issues if all those involved act with genuine good will and see each other as genuine partners. Let's face it, Western arrogance and feelings of superiority, a tendency to lecture others and a know-it-all approach are the reality. However, on the other side, there is also a tendency towards obstinate pride and the insistence on national or regional characteristics, in which preserving identity is more important than any compromise or any steps taken towards each other. The current alienation processes within the Orthodox Church can be seen as further proof of this.

In Europe, we have created political structures and forums that allow us to conduct a dialogue between equals thereby to reconciling differing interests, on which deep historical experience has often left its mark. Even the rifts within Latin Christendom, especially those that resulted from the Reformation, appeared to be so unshakeable and so firmly cemented for centuries, indeed right up until a few decades ago, that it must seem like a miracle when we consider the situation we are in today. Here, the key term is reconciliation.

Recent decades have demonstrated that what seems impossible can become possible: reconciliation and peace. A peace and reconciliation not just of minds and reason, but also of hearts. These past few decades have shown this between the denominations of Latin Christendom, if we just consider that in the Reformation's heartland there are now not only joint religious services, but even the Ecumenical Kirchentag; that welfare, charity and other social work of the Churches takes place jointly as a matter of course; that, the two Churches provide joint religious education lessons, as for example in North Rhine-Westphalia; and last but not least, that here, in this Protestant Church in Rome, popes have come to visit and attended joint services.

You do not have to be content with progress made on ecumenical affairs. I, for one, am not. But we should not forget that, up until the

Leuenberg Agreement, the vast majority of Protestant Churches did not celebrate communion together either. And here we are only going back a good 40 years.

There have also been some initial steps taken on the path toward reconciliation between East and West – in the World Council of Churches, but also since the memorable kiss of peace between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras and, after almost 1000 years, the lifting of mutual excommunications.

Similarly, the great project that is European political unification is inconceivable without reconciliation. The European Union, which had its origins in effect in the boundaries of the former Carolingian Empire in Europe and developed further in a peaceful and ecumenical manner, so to speak, is naturally a very reasonable cause, the fruit of pragmatic reason and of sober economic, strategic and geopolitical consideration. But such a project can only exist in the long term if hearts and souls are committed. Feelings and attitudes are never of secondary importance. Everyone knows this from his or her own life decisions and experiences. But politically they have on occasion been underestimated or ignored. And only now, when so much in Europe is crumbling, wobbling and losing its bearings, is it becoming abundantly clear just how much is also dependent on mood and attitude. I am thinking here, you all know the examples, of the UK, Catalonia, even Poland and Greece and so on.

And we ourselves noticed at the very latest in our last elections the role played by the mood and innermost motives in the different cities and regions of our own country. Incidentally, it would be a disastrous mistake to simply call feelings irrational. As Blaise Pascal tells us, the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing. Politics that fails to consider feelings is perceived as cold and is rejected.

On the other hand, politics that reacts only to moods is unable to make its mark because cool reason is also required for constructive change. Europe is based on the reason of pragmatic steps and on the fact that it is a heartfelt mission for those who strive for reconciliation and understanding, balance and peace, rejecting hatred and division, anger and aggression.

It is probably true that there is no such thing as the aggregate state of a solid, unified Europe. It has never existed and it will presumably only ever exist as a goal, as a utopia that shows the way forward. But there is a tale of hope and encouragement, not least shown in the reconciliation history of once bitterly divided Christianity. Peace is a path, not an end in itself. And reconciliation is a process in which standstill means a dangerous step backwards. This tale of reconciliation between the denominations teaches us to seek the path of togetherness. Of course, this doesn’t mean relinquishing the claim to

truth, as feared by some who are primarily concerned about their own identity.

The same holds true for every area, not just for the interaction between denominations and religions: it is one thing to throw one's own presumed truths in each other's faces, but seeking the truth together is something quite different. That alone is helpful, that alone takes us forward, that alone moves us towards a common future.

In the course of ecumenical convergence, the term "reconciled diversity" was coined in recent years. As with everything, some criticism can be voiced. But I find the term appropriate. And I find that one could, with great caution and without overstretching it, apply it to the complicated entity of political Europe. Perhaps it would relieve some people of the fear that a large, all too powerful, centralised and uniform Europe would rob individual countries, regions and communities of their identities or dictate to them in such a way that they can no longer express themselves.

Perhaps "reconciled diversity" is the basis of a unity that is possible in Europe. On this basis, and only on this basis, can a shared European vision take root, or perhaps even a shared identity, which is what some young people mean when they say: "Europe is my second homeland". However, reconciling diversity will require constant diplomatic skill on a par with the work of Münster and Osnabrück in 1646/48, when the Reformation was finally recognised as an irrevocable political fact, and all across Europe there were moves to guide it onto a more peaceful path.

The Reformation was the phenomenon which triggered these considerations which in turn endeavoured to shed light on it at European level. The term "reform" or "Reformation" is one of the most commonly used, not to mention overused terms in European intellectual history. There is barely an era in which major or minor reforms were not attempted, from Charlemagne, who strived to reform the Roman Empire, to the religious movements, which all aimed to reform original Christianity, through to the Prussian reforms after the Napoleonic Wars, right up to today's economic and structural reform.

Nothing in Europe is, as it were, as enduring as reform paired with the sense that it is urgent and necessary. This knowledge can embolden and motivate us. Our Christian faith teaches us that the future is open! You can do something, you can change the world, you can improve people's living conditions. It is worth taking a stand for peace and reconciliation. This can encourage us now to play our part, whether in religious life or politics. To play our part to engage in form and to improve the situation as is necessary in our day and age.

However, as Christians, we are also allowed a degree of equanimity now and then in dealing with all the current challenges, as

expressed in many of the hymns of the Reformation. These hymns are perhaps its most beautiful legacy and the one which made the greatest contribution to interdenominational reconciliation. I believe the Catholic sisters and brothers find, just like us Protestant Christians, comfort and solace in lines such as these by Paul Gerhardt:

"He who gives to the clouds, air and winds

their way, course and path

will also find a way

where your feet can go."

Many thanks.