



*Bishop Kaisamari Hintikka's speech at a private audience with His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the feast of St Henry, 20 January 2023*

Your Holiness,

I wish to start our meeting by expressing the condolences of Archbishop Tapio Luoma of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland on the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word" (Luke 2:29). Our entire ecumenical delegation shares in these condolences. At the same time we thank Your Holiness for again welcoming Finnish pilgrims on St Henry's Day this year. Our delegation is more ecumenical than usual this year. In addition to Lutherans and Catholics, Orthodox and Methodists are represented.

With us, we bring you a small part of the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea is exceptional, because its water is low in salt and brackish, and its basin is very shallow. As an ecosystem, it is therefore especially fragile and vulnerable. Much work has been done to protect it. In its own small way our gift promotes the protection of the Baltic Sea. It is our hope that it also bears a message about the importance of the Baltic Sea and other waters for life.

Water links people in many ways. The Baltic Sea once connected the area now known as Finland to the Western world and the Catholic Church's sphere of influence. The first influences of Eastern Christianity arrived in our region by land; Western influences arrived by sea through trade and other interaction. Legend has it that St Henry, whose memory our delegation celebrates in our journey, also arrived in Finland by water. On the last leg of his journey he crossed the Baltic Sea.

The Baltic Sea has connected people and brought cultures together for generations. Across it new ideas and inventions have come. The sea has given a livelihood and food to many. Yet not everything that has arrived across the sea has been good. The sea has also brought disease, pollution or an enemy. War has been waged on the waves and beneath them, and today on the seabed as well.

The coastal states of the Baltic Sea have collectively succeeded in improving the state of our suffering shared sea. One of these countries, Russia, has been waging a war of aggression in Ukraine for nearly a year. Although the war's greatest crimes are inflicted on Ukraine and the Ukrainians, its effects are also felt in the Baltic Sea. The war has created new tensions there. It has also made it more difficult to care for the Baltic Sea's wellbeing.



Here on Europe's southern edge the important sea is the Mediterranean, which has always been a bridge, connecting and giving birth to new cultures. Christianity and many of the ideas that have influenced the entire Western world have crossed it. The Mediterranean Sea has not always brought only good to its shores: enmities have also been built over it. Today the Mediterranean Sea is also something that divides, a wall – and a grave for far too many people.

The account of creation in the Bible tells us that God wants the waters to teem with life. However, human activity has caused many waters to have become deserted instead. The whole of creation is groaning (Rom. 8:22). We must respond to its suffering with a change of heart and conversion and reconciliation. Reconciliation with nature requires moderation and a more sustainable way of life from individuals and human communities – including churches.

Water invites people to be reconciled. Clean water is essential for human wellbeing. Its lack gives rise to suffering and increasingly to unrest and conflict. Many are forced to leave their homes in search of clean or sufficient water. The lack of water is also used against civilians in wartime. In the hands of people water, a gift from God and a necessity for life, has become a tool of trade, power and violence.

In the water of baptism God gives us the gift of reconciliation, a new life in communion with Christ and his church. As you yourself have often reminded us, the water of baptism unites Christians across the divisions of churches and communities. We have all been baptised into Christ, and through Christ, the true vine, we have communion with each other. The water of baptism has also called us and carried us to this meeting.

Lutherans and Catholics have been in constant dialogue with one another for more than a century. The communion between us has grown significantly during this time. We have grown in better understanding of what it means to say that we are “part of the one Body of Christ, into which we are incorporated through Baptism” (Lund Statement).

Baptism has also been a central question in the latest phase of our shared journey in dialogue, manifested in the document “Baptism and Growth in Communion”. Based on this, it is meaningful that we can continue to work together and pray that we may achieve deeper communion and a stronger witness.

We pray that at the same time the common witness of all Christians will be strengthened, so that peace, justice and reconciliation will be a reality among people and in relation to creation.

Your Holiness, we also pray for you – and we ask you to pray for us too.