

*Remarks delivered by Bishop Bo-Göran Åstrand of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland to Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church on 19 January 2024.*

Your Holiness,

I would first like to convey the warmest of greetings from Tapio Luoma, Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. I would also like to thank you for welcoming Finnish pilgrims who tread in the footsteps of St. Henry. Our delegation is ecumenical. In addition to Lutherans and Catholics, it also includes representatives from the Orthodox Church.

Over the past few decades, the popularity of pilgrim walks has increased in the Nordic countries as well as in Finland. Santiago de Compostela is no longer the only destination of Finnish pilgrims, as Finns are now also setting out to other medieval as well as modern-day pilgrimage routes. One of the most important pilgrim trails is St. Olavsleden. It was named after the Viking king St. Olav who died in 1030 and was later canonised. The trail runs through the Nordic countries all the way to Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway. There is a Pilgrimage Centre in Turku Cathedral from where St. Olavsleden winds across the Baltic Sea to the Åland Islands and on to Sweden. This year, a new stretch of St. Olavsleden will be opened on the western coast of Finland, adding approximately 500 kilometres to the trail network. We are also pleased to see that pilgrim trails are being developed in the Orthodox world in the East and towards Novgorod.

We are already looking forward to the jubilee year of 2030, when pilgrims come together in Trondheim, Norway. Catholics as well as Lutherans will be united with many others in a shared celebration and in gratitude for God's gifts throughout our history.

Along with Saint Birgitta and St. Henry, St. Olav is one of the most important Nordic saints. There are two churches named after St. Olav within the Diocese of Borgå, namely the church of Nagu and the church of Jomala in Åland, and several other churches also carry items dedicated to him.

Today, the pilgrim paths and numerous medieval churches in Finland and on the Åland Islands bring Catholics and Lutherans together. After having abolished the pilgrimage tradition in the wake of the Reformation, the modern-day Lutherans are once again learning to value the pilgrim trails. A pilgrimage is both an external and internal journey. For most pilgrims, the goal is a church or a place where God's work has been revealed.

As Pope Benedict XVI said, "to go on pilgrimage really means to step out of ourselves in order to encounter God where he has revealed himself, where his grace has shone with particular splendour and produced rich fruits of conversion and holiness among those who believe." A pilgrimage can also open the heart and soul. As pilgrims, we understand that we carry the kingdom of God with us wherever we go: "Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2619).

The pilgrimage tradition is closely linked to medieval churches. For centuries, people have come to church with their lives, their joys and sorrows, and their questions and concerns. This is why we build sacred places. Under the arching church ceilings, the great questions of life become intertwined with mundane events and the story of God, love, and mercy. No measurements or scientific laboratory analyses will help us connect with the deeper dimensions of life. Only under the protective wings of a church can we begin to grasp the enormity, glory, and fragility of life. We carry ourselves, each other, and the whole world in songs, prayers, and in the celebration of the Holy Communion. In turn, God answers us through the mercy and compassion of Jesus Christ.

All churches are built to serve the Gospel, and they stand as a testimony to the kingdom of God and our Savior Jesus Christ. Many of the medieval churches in Finland and on the Åland Islands are rich in paintings and objects that help us understand both the content of the Gospel and the significance of tradition. This is why it is also important that we, as brothers and sisters united in Christ, can share the spirit of community in each other's churches when necessary. When the Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and free churches came together to pray for Ukraine and for peace at St. Henry's Cathedral in Helsinki, they conveyed a strong message to the world. And when the Catholic Diocese and parish of Helsinki held the Ordination Mass for Father Raimo in the Lutheran St. John's Church in Helsinki, it was a sign of cooperation toward a shared goal: advancing God's work. It is a richness to come together in each other's homes, show hospitality, and see all our churches as houses of God.

This week, we are celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Gospel for the week introduces us to a man hiking from Jerusalem to Jericho and to the good Samaritan. The story reminds us that we, as pilgrims, should not merely stay in the sacred places. Christ sends us out into the world, on all roads and paths. Christ is calling us. He is already there ahead of us. He is waiting for us among the sick, the poor, the lonely, and the outcast.

As pilgrims, we are called to walk this world together, and not only in reflection and prayer. We are called to walk this world to spread the message of mercy, redemption, and peace. After all, ecumenism is a joint testimony to the world, and it is spread through our actions. We are all called to welcome strangers, foreigners, migrants, refugees, and homeless people. Our community must be characterised by hospitality and solidarity. If our churches and cathedrals hold their doors open and foster a welcoming atmosphere, they become guesthouses for people who are in need of love, mercy, and new courage to live. By doing so, we can fulfil our shared duty as the disciples of Christ and as pilgrims waiting for the day when the kingdom of God is revealed in its full glory.

Your Holiness, we have noticed that you value moderation over exaggeration, and modesty over grandeur. That is why we come bearing two gifts, one slightly different and one simple. These gifts do not take much space, but we hope that they warm your body and soul and bring you both joy and comfort.

Our church has made a donation to Finn Church Aid. Through this donation children in a village in a vulnerable area receive 100 blankets. These blankets will warm frozen children. Our second gift is a pair of gloves embellished with St. Olav's emblem. May they keep your blessing hands warm in this frozen world that needs to hear about God's love, peace, and redemption. May God bless you and guide you every day. We are united in the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ.