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GERMAN BISHOPS'
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The spoken word prevails!

Sermon
held by Bishop Dr Michael Gerber
Vice-President of the German Bishops' Conference
in the Ecumenical service on the occasion of
the 75th anniversary of the Basic Law
on 23 May 2024 in Berlin

Ladies and Gentlemen!
Dear Sisters and Brothers!

“Conscious of their responsibility before God and man, Inspired by the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe, the German people, in the exercise of their constituent power, have adopted this Basic Law.”

What was formulated 75 years ago considering the terrible catastrophe of National Socialism and the Second World War is precisely today the foundation for the future of our country and – more broadly – our continent.

The term “responsibility” plays an essential part in this context. Our faith is first and foremost based on trust in God and God's view of us humans, His creatures: Jews and Christians share the conviction that their own actions are to be seen as a response. The holy scriptures of Israel and the Church speak in many places of a recurring basic experience: people or even entire groups, especially the elites of the people, have failed in the worst possible way, with all the consequences that this can have. And yet – often after much effort and great suffering - the people are given a new beginning.

Measured against the previous transgressions by representatives of the people, this new beginning is interpreted as an undeserved gift. Those who believe interpret it as grace.

After 1945, we were given an undeserved new beginning with the opportunity to live in peace and freedom on the territory that would later become the Federal Republic of Germany. In view of the unspeakable atrocities committed by the

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Germans immediately before, this was anything but a matter of course. The developments in the then Soviet occupation zone in particular showed the Germans in the West how little they could take their newly acquired freedom and economic upturn for granted. The governments of the peoples of Western Europe in particular, who had experienced unspeakable suffering at the hands of the Germans in two world wars, gave each other an immense amount of trust very soon after the end of the war. So, two things came together: on the one hand, the great challenge of the German people to rebuild their own country politically, economically and culturally – and on the other, the trust and active help of the victorious Western powers and soon-to-be allies on both sides of the Atlantic.

In view of the social dynamics of our day, we are challenged to understand freedom and peace in our country as a gift and an obligation, while following in the footsteps of the mothers and fathers of the Basic Law and the faith of Israel and the Church. What we have today was largely presented to us as a gift and at the same time obliges us to preserve it. In this sense, I interpret the second part of the first sentence of the preamble: "...to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe ...". Every society shows a truly human profile where it takes into account those who cannot adequately care for themselves within and beyond its borders. It was precisely this concern of others for our country that characterised the birth of the Federal Republic, and so the awareness of a responsibility for those who need help within and beyond our borders is part of the DNA of the Basic Law and our country.

However, the new beginning after 1945 was not to be understood as drawing a line under history. We must understand the "awareness of responsibility" – as the mothers and fathers of the Basic Law once did – as a responsibility with regard to history and, in our case, precisely as a responsibility in the face of National Socialist tyranny and the world war initiated by Germany. Here, too, we find a remarkable parallel in the scriptures that Jews and Christians share to a large extent. The people's leaders are scrutinised very critically and the consequences of their failures are clearly named. Jews and Christians understand history, if they do not deviate from their own heritage, never as a mere story of victory and success. It is always also a history of suffering and guilt, which they can never forget completely.

Our constitution and the decades since the Basic Law came into force are inconceivable without this critical view of our own history. We have painfully learnt to take this critical and differentiated look at our own history. This is different from the way in which history in Vladimir Putin's Russia is being rewritten, for example, where dark episodes and crimes committed are being negated: So, we realise anew that there are fatal consequences if our view of our own history is manipulated. Where history is understood as something that cannot be manipulated after the event, but rather as something that cannot be influenced, indeed as something that is critical and prophetic in its meaningfulness, it can be an essential guide to the future. Voices that want to relativise our responsibility today in view of the history of 13 years of Nazi reign of terror are once again becoming louder. This is countered by the impressive warning in the Book of Deuteronomy: "Think back on the days of old, reflect on the years of

age upon age. Ask your father and he will inform you, ask your elders and they will tell you.”
(*Deut 32:7*)

Now, we in Germany are facing a special challenge. Soon, the last voices of the witnesses to the horrors of National Socialism will remain silent forever. This means that for the first time since the Second World War, a generation of young people is growing up in our country who no longer have the opportunity to have direct contact with the primary contemporary witnesses. It makes a difference whether our responsibility to history can only be approached through data and documents, or whether this history can also be encountered through faces, emotions and vital interpersonal relationships.

Our constitution bears witness to the fact that responsibility before history has not only an individual, but also a structural and institutional dimension. The question of the personal responsibility of the perpetrators of the Nazi regime has challenged the young Federal Republic for decades. At the same time, the mothers and fathers of the Basic Law critically reflected on the structural causes of the Weimar Constitution that led to the catastrophe of the so-called Third Reich. The question of power and the separation of powers, like the question of social justice, is not only a question of individual ethics, but also has an essential structural and social component. Thus, important impulses from the social doctrine of the two churches influenced the creation of the legal prerequisites for what we consider to be a social market economy. This seems to have deeply influenced our culture. To be able to fulfil on an international level in society and the Church what the preamble to the German Basic Law has given us as a lasting obligation, that is to say “to promote world peace in a united Europe”, we must make our voices heard against the background of our experience, whether in the civil or religious sphere, precisely where we identify structural causes of oppression, discrimination and suffering. We are called upon to do this in both national and international discourse.

“Conscious of their responsibility before God ...” – these are the first words of our constitution. In the spirit of what we have just reflected on, the first words of the Basic Law can make us aware of our shared responsibility in our country, regardless of whether we belong to a religion or which political convictions we share. It is the responsibility for the inviolability of human dignity, the responsibility in view of the prophetic-critical dimension of our history and the challenge of assigning individual and communal-structural responsibility to one another in an appropriate manner. Let us face up to this task and may the Lord guide our feet into the path of peace (cf. *Luke 1:79*).

Amen.