

Respected Moderator Most Reverend Thomas K. Oommen,
respected Deputy Moderator Right Reverend V. Prasada Rao,
respected General Secretary Dr. Rathnakara Sadananda,
respected Bishops of the Church of South India,
respected Delegates from the Dioceses,
dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Thank you so much for your invitation to present a Bible Study this morning on the theme of your Synod "Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality". This is a very great honor for me, and I appreciate it very much. For many years I have attended your Synod whenever I could, and I know how important to you the common ecumenical witness in the world and to the world is.

But first I would like to bring you greetings of the Presidium of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity - the EMS - and its President, Rev. Klaus Rieth and his deputy, Rev. Dr. Habib Badr from the National Evangelical Church of Beirut. Together we three form the Presidium and represent the EMS in the periods between the meetings of the Mission Council. I also bring warm greetings from the EMS secretariat from Dr. Kerstin Neumann as acting General Secretary. From 1st of April on the newly elected General Secretary Rev. Dr. Dieter Heidtmann will take over his new position. And I'm happy that Rev. Solomon Paul Benjamin as East Asia and India Liaison Secretary of EMS (based in Stuttgart) and Rev. Dr. Praveen Perumalla as India Liaison Secretary of EMS (based in Chennai) are with me these days.

As ecumenical liaison officer of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau, I also bring you the warmest greetings from Church President Dr. Volker Jung and the members of the Church Board. For many years now my church has a close partnership with the dioceses of East Kerala, Krishna Godavari and the Henry Martyn Institute in the South of India and with the Diocese of Amritsar in the North.

Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality

A Bible study on Acts 10,34-36 during the 36th Session of the Synod of the Church of South India

The theme you have chosen for the 36th Session of the Synod of the Church of South India "Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality" is a very prophetic and visionary one and a challenging theme especially in these days.

When we look into this world and into our own societies in Europe, in Germany or here in India, we are far away from communities that are oriented towards love and equality.

In Europe and in Germany we are arguing about the right way to deal with refugees - even though we know that God's kindness to humanity is also meant for them, people who mostly flee out of desperation and fear for their lives. Although climate researchers call us that it is the eleventh hour, the absolute last moment. But we are still struggling for the right way to save this globe, the inhabited earth of God, from a climate catastrophe and to leave something of it for our grandchildren to survive. In Europe, we argue whether we as a community are going into a common future or whether we follow nationalistic arguments "my nation, my community first". And also in Germany we are far from the fact that all people - young and old, rich and poor, women and men, people with disabilities, people of different orientations - have the same participation in the community and "might have life in abundance" (John 10:10). And here in India you have your very own challenges when it comes to the peaceful coexistence of the different social groups, the different cultures of this country with the very different languages, the different religions and casts. And this struggle, this quarrelling, when it is about peace, about justice in a comprehensive sense and about the integrity of creation reaches all the way into our own Christian communities.

When I look at the denominational fragmentation in our own Christian community in Germany but also worldwide, I feel that we are far away from a koinonia of Love and Equality. In Germany alone - the land of the Reformation - it took until 1973 for a church fellowship to become possible between the Lutheran, Reformed and the United Churches that emerged from them, as well as the related pre-Reformation churches of the Waldensians and the Bohemian

Brethren! Only since that time we in Protestant Europe have pulpit and altar fellowship. We make a lot of efforts in interdenominational cooperation with one another and in everyday life, but when it comes to local community in the congregations or ecumenical projects such as the Ecumenical Church Convention 2021 (Ökumenischer Kirchentag) in Frankfurt, we realize how far we are from a Community of Love and Equality. So, with the theme of the 36th Session of the Synod of the Church of South India you have named the core of the challenges of our time!

The Greek word Koinonia (κοινωνία) - the Latin equivalent is Communio - means "community through participation". The word is regularly used in the New Testament to describe both being one in Jesus Christ through baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as to describe the relationships within the church determined by this. And this community has no barriers: no cultural, no national, no social barriers, and no barriers of gender or caste!

One of the key New Testament texts on this subject can be found in chapter 10 of Acts. It is the story of the Roman centurion Cornelius and his baptism by Peter.

In this story two men from completely different cultural contexts meet each other. Their path has brought them together in a miraculous way. What happened to them changed not only their lives, it changed not only their faith, it changed world history. We are witnessing the emergence of Christianity as a global religion.

The one man was Peter. We know him as a fisherman from the Sea of Galilee and disciple of Jesus. Peter was one of the twelve apostles who walked with Jesus through Galilee. He had a special relationship of trust with Jesus, and he was also present at the violent end of Jesus. Peter was one of the first witnesses of the resurrection; he was considered a pillar of the post-Easter community that developed towards Christianity. Even the apostle Paul deliberately coordinated his mission with Peter, because his judgment had great weight in the congregation in Jerusalem.

The other man was called Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion stationed in Caesarea with his hundred men. Caesarea is located at the Mediterranean Sea, at times the city had up to 120.000 inhabitants. At the time of Peter and

Cornelius it was the residence of the Roman procurator. Cornelius, it is reported, had contact with the Jewish community in Caesarea. He belonged to the so-called God-fearers. They were in sympathy with the Jewish religion because they were impressed by the age, the high ethos and the monotheism of Judaism. However, they shied away from the complete conversion to Judaism; we do not really know the reasons for that. But even without complete conversion they worshipped the God whom the Jews also worshipped as the one God who created heaven and earth. They kept the Ten Commandments and gave alms to needy people.

One such sympathizer was Centurion Cornelius. One day Cornelius had an apparition in the afternoon. An angel entered his room. He addressed him by name and explained that God had heard his prayers. Cornelius was initially frightened, as is the rule when meeting angels. But the angel placated him. He asked Cornelius to send people to the town of Joppe. There was a man named Simon Peter, who he should send for him. Cornelius may have been perplexed by the miraculous instruction, but he followed the suggestion and sent three men to Peter.

At the same time Peter was in the city of Joppe. The delegation of Cornelius was still at the gates of the city when Peter went up to the roof of the house at noon to say his noon prayer. After the prayer he wanted to eat, but this did not happen at first, because Peter had a vision. He saw heaven open and something like a big tablecloth came down from heaven. It sank to the ground in front of him. The tablecloth was teeming with animals, and he was disgusted by them. According to the rules of the Jewish religion, they are unclean, inedible and not approved by God for human consumption. From childhood, Peter had learned to keep away from such animals and to detest them. He was hungry and in front of him was a cloth with noisy animals, which were forbidden for him. But it got worse: From heaven the divine voice resounded and urged Peter three times to eat from the animals. Peter steadfastly refused! The vision culminated in the statement: "What God has made pure, call it not forbidden." With this the vision ended and the cloth disappeared again into heaven. Peter remained confused and puzzled as to what the vision was supposed to mean.

At that moment the delegation of Cornelius stood at the door and asked if Simon Peter was a guest here. Peter was still confused and did not know what to do. Then the Holy Spirit helped again and explained to Peter that he had sent the delegation and that Peter should receive them. Then the invitation to come to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius was extended.

Although Peter, as a Jew, was forbidden to associate with unbelievers like the Romans, he followed the messengers that Cornelius had sent. Of course, only after God had urgently instructed him to go along. Meanwhile, Cornelius had invited his Roman relatives and friends, who were expecting Peter and wanted to hear what he had to say. Peter's central statements, the author of the book of Acts Luke describes it this way (Revised Standard Version):

[34] Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality,

[35] but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

[36] You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

But this is not enough. Luke further reports how in the house of the Roman Cornelius a second Pentecost miracle took place and the Holy Spirit was poured out on all those present and made them speak in tongues. Despite the horror of the Jewish Christians who had traveled with Peter, Peter then baptized Cornelius and his friends and relatives. At the following apostles' council in Jerusalem, Peter had to justify himself. But after his report he finally found agreement to carry the message of Jesus to all nations.

Once again back to the key passage, the beginning of the so-called sermon of Peter, from Acts: *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality!"* That means: God does not practice favoritism; he does not favor! God judges without prejudice! By people - in the original Greek "ethnos" - we mean in the modern sense of the word the belonging to an ethnic group or what is considered to be an ethnic group, such as the Jews or Samaritans. God therefore looks at the individual, regardless of ethnic group or status or even wealth.

God is therefore impartial. He does not judge by appearance. He is not fooled by appearances. He looks at the heart with 1 Samuel 16 - that is, in the Old Testament, the place of understanding and decision. He applies two standards: fear of God and justice, which are inseparable.

In Luke, as in the Old Testament, faith and justice are two sides of the same coin. This can be seen in the work and speech of Jesus, through whom we see the Father, whose identity we recognize through Jesus.

When Luke reports further "*he sent the message to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all*", then Jesus Christ becomes the medium, but he is Lord overall. The consequences of this section of the Bible are radical: God is basically the same for all people. Christianity is not only good news for members of the Jewish community, but for all people.

It is this event that establishes a Christian universalism, even if it is already laid down in the Old Testament. Without this event there would be no pagan Christians. We as Christians would not exist in Germany and you as Christians would not exist here in India. With a quotation from the Protestant theologian Christoph Dinkel, he said: "We are witnessing the emergence of Christianity as a global religion". In short: It is God's anti-discrimination law.

This fundamental equality of all people before God is central to our faith. The equal dignity of all people as God's image from the Old Testament, this essential of the Christian image of man, is realized here in church history. It is the desire for this same dignity, for human rights, which again and again urges Christians to interfere.

This is only possible by constantly crossing and overcoming borders - cultural, religious and national borders. In the light of Jesus' message, the first Christian community in Jerusalem dared to cross such borders and opened itself to people who had been pagans until then. The story of Peter and Cornelius tells that this was not an easy step, but on the contrary a very difficult and controversial path. The story of Peter and Cornelius documents this difficult process of overcoming borders.

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality!" On this background of Peter's experience and on the basis of the central insight of faith connected with it: the

topic of this synod "Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality" opens up in a fundamental way and can be further developed in three levels of action:

Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality

- in our own community as a church;
- in a community of churches of different confessions;
- in our multicultural and multireligious societies and in this world.

Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality in our own community as a church

I still remember very well my first parish after my ordination as pastor of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau. It was a parish on the outskirts of the city of Giessen. Giessen had about 70,000 inhabitants at that time and is located about 60 km north of Frankfurt. The congregation includes people of very different social backgrounds and with very different income levels: Teachers, judges, city officials, craftsmen, people with a migration background, but also people with very little income. A special group lives in a small quarter of the district: we call them the travelling people. They are descendants of the gypsies. They speak their own dialect, earn their living as carny (showmen) and travel from fair to fair in the area. Many of them are very pious people and are members of the congregation. The prejudices they are exposed to in society are also encountered in the congregation. At that time, it was not easy to open the kindergarten of the congregation and the weekly offers of the congregation also for these people. The everyday life of the church often reminded me more of the experience described by the Apostle Paul in his letters to the congregation in the city of Corinth. Very different groups with different cultural and social backgrounds had formed in Corinth and were arguing and fighting about the right way. They separated from each other and even at the Lord's Table they seemed to follow different paths. There were group formations and arguments between the rather rich and the rather poor church members. The authority of Paul was also questioned.

Paul had learned from Peter and made clear in his letters and visits: the fundamental equality of all people before God - despite all the diversity. Paul called for mutual consideration and sketched the image of one body in Christ with the different members. Each member has its own strengths and weaknesses, its own tasks. And when one member suffers, all the others suffer

with it. This picture of a body with many different parts makes clear what it means to be on the way to a Community of Love and Equality. This community does not come about by itself. In the daily life of the congregation it is always endangered. You certainly experience this in the congregations of your Dioceses, and you know how difficult it is to overcome social, cultural and caste differences. But it is the mission that we must not lose sight of if our congregations are to become a place where this Koinonia of Love and Equality can be experienced.

In my following passage I will now look beyond congregations and our own inner-church togetherness. Our ecumenical cooperation with one another is also under the vision and claim: Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality.

Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality in a community of churches of different confessions

On 27th of September 1947 – one year before the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam was founded – the whole Ecumenical Movement looked with great expectations to India following the union ceremony of your Church at St. George's Cathedral in Madras | Chennai. It was a month after India achieved its independence from the United Kingdom. As Congregational Presbyterians, Reformed, Anglicans and Methodists you joined as one church – the Church of South India! For all the people in the ecumenical movement it was, and it still is a landmark in the ecumenical movement. I am convinced that the inspiration for your Church at that time was born from ecumenism and inspired by the words of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospel of John (17.21): „That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You. May they also be one in Us, that the world may believe that You have sent Me.“ That they all may be one is part of your CSI Logo and your motto till today!

I had already mentioned it at the beginning of my Bible study: as Lutheran, Reformed and United Protestant Churches in Europe, it took us until 1973 to come to a church communion. From 12-16 March 1973 the final text of the Concord of Reformed Churches in Europe (Leuenberg Agreement) was worked out at the Leuenberg near Basel and handed over to the participating churches. It ended the schism between the Reformed and Lutheran churches and established church communion among us in Europe. In the Leuenberg

Agreement the participating churches found a fundamentally common understanding of baptism, the Lord's Supper and the gospel and declared the mutual condemnations of the Reformation to be no longer valid today. They mutually recognized the ordinations, declared pulpit and altar fellowship and committed themselves to the realization of church fellowship in witness and service.

This was an important step towards a more credible witness as Protestant Christian churches on our way towards a Koinonia of Love and Equality. Helpful was an understanding of church fellowship that expressed the character of "reconciled diversity". Reconciled diversity - that means to keep the balance between reconciliation, which frees us not to see our Christian brothers and sisters with their different coinages, tendencies and convictions as opponents. And on the other hand, diversity that does not level and does not confuse unity with uniformity.

Reconciled diversity: this gift of God could be a model that helps to explore the depth of the common ground between the Churches and denominations. And at the same time to hope for the spirit of reconciliation which binds us together across all denominational boundaries for the service to and in the world.

In 2021 we - the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau and the Catholic Diocese of Limburg - invite the German Ecumenical Church Convention (Kirchentag) to Frankfurt. We have been preparing this together, both Catholic and Protestant, for a year now. We experience again and again how different we are to each other; we learn to deal with these differences respectfully and we have the goal of presenting ourselves with common programs and projects and to overcome the differences. This also includes the question if it could be possible to share holy communion. A top-class and interdenominational theological working group published the document "Together at the Lord's Table" a few weeks ago. The working group concludes: "Experience suggests that the experience of Eucharistic communion in the celebration of Holy Communion is also a source of hope on the way to the goal desired by God: the full visible unity of the Church in the presence of the Kingdom of God.

In the further preparations we will now examine how this can be made visible during the Ecumenical Kirchentag and how the mutual invitation to the Eucharistic celebration of the respective other denomination is possible.

Overcoming borders and giving the fellowship of churches a visible expression also internationally is what we are trying to do together as the Church of South India and the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau together with 23 churches and five mission societies in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe as EMS – Evangelical Mission in Solidarity. Together we build a Christian community and work to enhance the living conditions worldwide. We are inspired and bound together by faith in Jesus Christ and set our hopes on the kingdom of God. We meet people different from ourselves in a spirit of openness and respect. Together we are committed to the right to life and, in particular, to the rights of those who are vulnerable, poor and excluded. We are aware of our theological, spiritual and cultural differences but they are not separating us. Instead we promote a respectful encounter over all these borders. We learn from each other and with each other, we take decisions in common and try to share our resources. Our aim is to live a vivid and solidary partnership as a witness to our respected societies and the world.

It was a difficult and long way to overcome the former separation into partner and member churches. Only in 2012 a new constitution for the EMS has succeeded and now we are an association only of members with equal rights. "Internationalization" is still one of our main objectives for the future. It is still a hard way to go. Therefore, the theme of your Synod is challenging us as EMS Community and is reminding us to take up the necessary steps towards a koinonia of Love and Equality.

Towards A Koinonia of Love and Equality in our multicultural and multireligious societies and in this world

If we recognize Christian universalism as it is laid out in the encounter of Peter and Cornelius and the fundamental equality of all people before God as a fundamental standard for our acting as congregation and as church, then this has relevance beyond us as Christian communities. It has an impact in our respective societies and in the world. It affects our economic activity, our consumption and production. It affects our dealings with people of other faiths

or other social origins as well as our dealings with foreign cultures and world views. The opportunity and the right of all people to dignity are based on equal access to global common goods, which have been given to us and cannot be multiplied by human performance.

Since God's good creation belongs to all people equally, no one has the right to appropriate more of it than his own equal share. It is certainly not compatible with a Christian universalism of equal dignity that the privileged should also harm the weaker ones. For from a Christian point of view there is no right of a part of human beings to put their dignity above that of our neighbors.

All this must be taken into consideration when we bring our Christian hope of a Koinonia of Love and Equality into this world. Our life in the congregations and our cooperation as churches can become a model in this respect. With the baptism of Cornelius, Peter crossed a decisive boundary and opened the way of Christianity to a universal religion. Today we bring this vision of a Koinonia of Love and Equality into our respective societies. We are aware of our own limitations and how difficult it is in everyday life to live up to this vision. But the message of Jesus Christ strengthens us to stand up for it again and again. For where we treat people as creatures of equal dignity, there is God.

For this purpose, the Spirit of God strengthens and accompanies you here in the Church of South India, us in the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau, and us together in the International Fellowship of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).

Amen!