

**Speech – Advent Reflection**  
**Tallinn Cathedral**  
**December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018**  
*Archbishop Urmas Viilma*

**Honourable Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Brothers and Sisters!**

**Introduction**

Yet another year of the Lord is coming to an end. Certainly there has been a lot that is worth bringing along into the coming year. There are things to ponder upon in our hearts with joy, but there are also things that leave us with sorrow or maybe even bitterness. We often think that we have done everything in our power for those moments of joy and beauty to be more abundant – but those others, they are the ones that have managed to spoil what is good and beautiful. Sometimes it helps to take a good look in a mirror in order to see ourselves as others see us. The end of the year is just the time to look back and also to see ourselves in a mirror.

**Christmas scene with migrants**

The Nativity scene in the churches, at city squares, on postcards and shop windows belongs to the traditions of the Advent season. Someone once wittily said that if we were to eliminate all the Jews, Arabs and refugees from the Christmas scene, the only ones left there would be the animals. Keeping this in mind, we are brought straight to the hottest topic from the last week, namely the UN compact for migration. On the Monday when the parliament of our country discussed this issue at Toompea, the parliament of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, i.e. our General Synod, had come together for a session. In my sermon at the opening service, I expressed as the leader of our church the church's position on this issue as follows: „ *Our task as the church and as Christians is to see behind all politics, compacts and agreements human beings – to see them as neighbours in the need of help. As neighbours we must recognize Christ in them. It does not mean that by choosing the one side, we automatically also choose the mass-immigration, or by choosing the other side, we select whom to support according to their religious or national affiliation. We must be on the same side with Christ.*”

Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church through the Lutheran church in exile was one of the founding members of the Lutheran World Federation in 1947. Today, 148 Lutheran churches from 99 countries with more than 75,5 million members belong to this community of worldwide communion of Lutherans. The Lutheran World Federation was founded after the Second World War in order to help solve the refugee crisis in Europe, in which also about 70 000 Estonian refugees were involved. In 1947, one of every six refugees in the world was a Lutheran. Therefore, the question of refugees is still today very close to our hearts as Lutherans. Though it is not common knowledge in Estonia, the Lutheran World Federation is the organization, which after the Second World War helped tens of thousands of Estonians from European refugee camps to find first jobs and homes in safe countries in the world, including Canada, USA, and Australia. The Lutheran World Federation is to this day one of the main partners for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in different ways reaching up to 2,3 million people in refugee camps in South Sudan, Burundi, Northern Iraq, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Syria and Jerusalem. This context is important in order to shine light on the family into which also the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church belongs. Yesterday in Brussels, the first Vice-President of the European Parliament Mairead McGuinness was presented the Christmas Statement by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe and the Conference of European Churches, where

the nations and the people of Europe, political leaders and churches are called on not to become indifferent to the suffering of others, but instead to cherish the dignity of those who need our help and recognize that welcoming the stranger is part of our Christian and European heritage. More than 30 leaders of European churches and ecumenical bodies have endorsed the statement, among others the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church of Estonia Stephanos and myself, as the Vice-President of the Lutheran World Federation and the Archbishop of the EELC. Our immediate contribution to this immense and noble work may be as a drop in the ocean, nevertheless it does not diminish the weight and scale of the values we believe in.

### **Church cares**

Church cares and does not question helping those in need because of their nationality, faith or any other distinct features. We try to help by using the skills and resources available to us. Several of our congregations serve and work regularly with the people with intellectual disabilities, street children, homeless and unemployed. Several of our congregations run soup-kitchens and daily distribute clothing and food items to families with low income. In addition to material help, the family centers of the church also offer family counselling and help for those suffering because of violence in close relationships. We also must mention the work with the elderly and people with dementia in the EELC Diaconal Hospital and nursing homes. Several our congregations offer childcare or kindergarten services. In addition to this, there are Lutheran primary and basic schools, the oldest private university the Institute of Theology of the EELC, where alongside pastors also pastoral care specialists for hospitals and care institutions are being educated. Beside all this, regular children and youth work takes place in congregations, involving more than 4000 children and young people. As we are entering into the year of the Song Festival Jubilee, it is good to remember that in the 170 choirs of our congregations sing more than 2300 singers. In the daily work of the EELC congregations, more than 5000 volunteers are regularly involved. In the basic work of the church – worship services, services on special occasions, also concerts – over 700 000 people participate every year. Church proclaims the word of God and ceaselessly does caritative and diaconal work. Unfortunately, the information about these activities usually does not make the headlines of the mainstream media publications, as there is no intrigue involved in this work. There is no intrigue in love. Love by nature is self-giving, not self-imposing.

### **Every human soul is valuable, also for the survival of the nation**

When we talk about migration, we cannot overlook the question of people leaving Estonia. The prognosis for the Estonian population until the year 2060 shows ongoing and sad tendency towards the diminishing of the population. Although already now more people have voluntarily left the newly independent Estonia than escaping the violence during the Second World War, according to the EU statistics agency Eurostat, the Estonian population will keep diminishing during the coming 40 years by another 200 000 people. This diminishing is due to very low birth rate as well as emigration. In this reality, all means and measures must be applied quickly for appreciation of every human being, small or grown-up.

In this context is the question about when does the human life begin a very complicated one, and it also creates tension and oppositions – what about human rights, where is the boundary for the parents', state's or medical decisions when deciding about the life of an unborn child.

Thinking about the high number of – for very different reasons – unborn children, which fortunately is diminishing, I am thankful that in Estonia it is allowed to actively implement all medical help for saving children born already on 22<sup>nd</sup> week of gestation. In Estonia, 5,5% of children are born prematurely, in Europe 10%. Very small premature babies, whose birth weight is under 1500 grams and who are born before the 32<sup>nd</sup> gestation week, make about 1% of all the

births. Actually these percentages are not important. If even only one of these really little ones grows up to be an adult, we have taken a great step towards valuing life. Every human soul is of value!

Caring for people and valuing their life and health, we must notice and react to every violent act against people in close relationships around us. Especially on the occasion of violence directed towards children and women. In this connection, we need to lift up the selfless work of the first aid teachers in order to educate and train people for keeping and valuing life. Every year 1000 people could stay alive if those around them dared and knew how to give elementary level first aid to their neighbour. Noticing and taking responsibility for a friend, acquaintance or even a stranger would help lessen the amount of children, youth and adults who have been caught in a life-threatening situation because of alcohol and drugs. The same is true also about noticing those, especially men, who are deeply depressed and suicidal. Pastoral care workers, taught by the institute of the church, as well as the chaplains in the army, police force and prisons, work daily with these issues. If in cooperation with the state we could create the chaplain system also for the medical and care institutions, many people would be happier at least during some of the difficult moments of their life.

### **Personal contribution to the growth of the nation**

Concern for the diminishing of the population made me think how could the church or even me personally as the head of our church give a feasible input into the solving of this problem. I can do what I have been called and ordained to do. I see that here and today it is an appropriate place to give a pledge that, starting in the year 2020, I am ready to personally baptize during the following five years every child who is born into their family as a third child and every next child. And then – why not have all their family baptized, if need be, including parents and grandparents. How exactly this could happen – I still have time to think it through and include other pastors to think along. If this promise could encourage even one family to have more children, I personally would be very happy and thankful to God.

### **Renaissance of the sacred buildings in Tallinn**

The ending year has been remarkable considering the fate of several sacred buildings. The Cathedral of Tallinn, which was built about 800 years ago, is finally in the ownership of the congregation, as the city government decided to hand over the church to the congregation last spring. The city of Tallinn is due our thanks for supporting the building of the Mustamäe church, building the Bishop's garden next to the Cathedral, as well as supporting several other churches in Tallinn. In the situation where the state-funded programme for the restoration of sacred buildings lives its last year, the programme "The Renaissance of Churches" is being born again in Tallinn.

### **Almost half a hundred new and renovated churches in Estonia in 30 years**

During decades, tens and tens of churches have been renovated and fixed with the help of the state and municipal governments. While the rest of Europe is talking about closing and even selling of the church buildings, in Estonia a silent but consistent renaissance of churches has been happening. It came as a surprise also for me, but when counting the churches and sacred buildings that have been renovated and reclaimed in past 30 years, I got to almost half a hundred. In the ending year, we have re-consecrated the chapels in Naissaare and at the cemetery of the Estonian Defence Forces and recently, as a new building, the chapel of the new Tallinn prison was consecrated. We cannot keep silent about the reclaiming and conserving of the Narva Alexander Church as a multifunctional building, after the bankruptcy of the congregation. Construction of the new Saku church is starting and making projects for Saue and

Jõgeva churches are in progress. In couple of years, we can already speak about 50 newly reclaimed Lutheran churches in Estonia. If we add here the churches of other denominations, which are also about 50, then it seems that the widespread legend of Estonia as a church-distant nation is quite hard to believe. If the heated and tension-filled question of the compensation for the Niguliste church could still this year get a positive solution, as we do hope it does, then the Niguliste church will be the first renovated and usable historical sacred building belonging to the Lutheran church about which we can then say that its fate was to be sold – but not even that on the initiative of the church. The renovation of all these almost half a hundred churches and other sacred rooms has happened in the cooperation of the church, the state and the local municipal authorities. According to the calculations for the last 5 years, with the help and support of the church, congregations, partner congregations and aid organizations abroad, private donors and congregation members we have invested into our historical sacred buildings about 10 million Euros.

### **Ethical wealth?**

All these buildings and renovations of the churches have happened regardless of the very limited resources of the congregations. The economic growth of the recent years has fortunately created new possibilities for renovation and building of several churches. At the same time, does the economy have to grow incessantly? Is it necessary and ethical? Reading the news that the eight billionaires of the world together have the same amount of the wealth as half of the world's population, then I ask – where is the limit? In my assessment, we all have to set a limit to our needs and wants. The rest is for contributing to the society, for example as charity. A good example here is the EELC Support Foundation, which was established by several renowned Estonian entrepreneurs with the purpose to offer people an opportunity to do good.

### **Consumer ethics**

Many people do not make the link between their personal consuming habits and ethics, especially environmentally friendly way of life. Allegedly, the world's meat production produces multiple times more greenhouse gases than all the transportation business put together. If we keep eating meat with the same gusto, the goal set by the Paris climate agreement to lower the world's temperature by 1,5 C° is simply not possible. We should intentionally change our *ego*-centered thinking into *eco*-centered thinking in order to live ethically and sustain the environment also for the generations after us. A good friend of mine suggested to rather bring an ugly and shabby tree home for Christmas, in order to sustain trees that are beautiful and could grow, having more life force in them. Big changes start with little but deliberate decisions.

### **The social responsibility of the church**

During the passing year, the Estonians had a second time in the recent history the opportunity to greet the Pope of Rome in their homeland. I remember what Pope Francis said during the ecumenical youth meeting: *“Christian life is our life and our future and our hope! It is not a museum.”* It stuck in my mind, because I often experience, how the church and Christianity are being pushed into the past, into the history, locked up in a museum. But the church and the faith have an active present and hope-filled future. A week ago, the General Synod of the EELC approved the strategy of the Lutheran church for the next ten years. In the vision chapter of this strategy we read: *“The free people's church has social responsibility. The church as a communion of believers is centred around the worship service – our appeal to the shared and public gospel in word and sacrament. Our communion is based on the renewing and reconciling power of God's love. It encourages us to look at the surrounding creation and all fellow human beings through eyes of love and, in particular, to notice, comfort and support those who are weak, ailing, in distress or*

*excluded. The church must help them make their voice heard. Speaking up for social justice, peace and care for creation is a part of what it means to be a church and to be a Christian.”*

The events during the last weeks in Estonia and elsewhere in the world confirm that the leaders can build but also destroy. The message can be good, but delivering it in a heartless way can bring on the opposite result from that desired. To go too far – to be out of line – is always easy, to stay inside the lines is much more complicated. But in a world with no lines, no limits, there is no peace, it is governed by fear. Fear is not a good adviser neither for the present, nor for the future. Instead of fear we need peace, which does not mean merely the absence of opposition, but is something tangibly present, with us. If we get this peace, then we can build bridges over borders, fences and chasms. Such a bridge is love that was revealed in a baby born in Bethlehem at Christmas night. God became man. Jesus Christ became a bridge between heaven and earth, eternal and temporary. His love has opened a way for us onto this bridge, and we can take there with us all, whom we touch with the Christian love for neighbour.

I thank all of you who have accepted my invitation and participate today in this advent reflection and reception. I wish you a beautiful beginning of the Advent season, peace into your hearts and souls and God’s abundant blessing!