Sermon on October 3, 2011 at Iringa, Tanzania
by Bishop Dr. Markus Dröge
at the
International Conference on
"Witness, Discipleship and Martyrdom –
the Legacy of Gudina Tumsa in Africa"

at Tumahini University, Iringa Diocese, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace be with you and peace from God our father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

I

Brother Roland Herpich and I, we are very happy to be here with you today. I feel deeply honoured to be the preacher for this opening service of the Conference on "Witness, Discipleship and Martyrdom – the Legacy of Gudina Tumsa in Africa". Rev. Gudina Tumsa was pastor and general secretary of his church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, from 1966-1979, when he was murdered by the socialist military dictatorship. He was a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a martyr in revolutionary times. He lived his life under the Biblical truth: "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

Therefore I have chosen as Biblical Text for this sermon Acts 5:29 "We must obey God rather than men".

II

In 1975, he wrote a detailed Memorandum to the leaders of his church concerning the challenges facing his church. In the magnificent final passage of the memorandum he summarizes its essence as follows:

> "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's power to save everyone who believes it. It is the power that saves from eternal damnation, from economic exploitation, from political oppression, etc. Because of its eternal dimension the Gospel could never be replaced by any of the ideologies invented by men throughout the centuries. It is the only voice

> telling about a loving Father who gave his Son as a ransom for many. It tells about the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. It is the Good News to sinful man, the only power to save mankind from its sinfulness. It is too powerful to be compromised by any social system. It is too dear a treasure to be given up (Matthew 13:44). Nationalism has its own place, but it can never replace the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

This final passage is like an exposition of St.Peter's and the apostles' answer to the council and the high priest who challenges them with the question why they continue to preach Jesus Christ although they were prohibited to do so: "We must obey God rather than men." And they were ready to face the consequences.

And this is what Gudina Tumsa must have had in mind when he concluded his memorandum with the sentence:

> "I hope and pray that the ECMY (the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus) will be able to make the right decision at this critical moment in her history."[1]

I assume that with these words he also preached to himself, since he had the extremely difficult task to be a leader of his church in radically changing times. Of course, he did not yet know that he would have to go the way of martyrdom. But he probably felt that this might be the final consequence of obeying God rather than human beings.

III.

It is more than 32 years ago that Gudina Tumsa at the age of 50 was murdered on July 28, 1979, by the socialist military dictatorship on the order of the dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, the same evening on which he (together with his wife) was arrested for the third time after giving a Bible Study in a church in Addis Ababa. His wife was released (and later imprisoned for 10 years), but he was executed the same night, one day after the Orthodox patriarch. Why?

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[1] Memorandum to Ato Emmanuel Abraham, President, ECMY (at that time the church was not yet allowed to call itself Ethiopian), Conclusion, 1975, Witness and Discipleship (WaD), Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution – The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa, WDL-Publishers, Hamburg, 2nd ed., 2007 p.76

- Gudina resisted the wish of dictator Mengistu to instrumentalize him for the regime wanting to send Gudina on a propaganda tour to Europe where he was to declare that there was religious freedom and no persecution of religion, when in fact hundreds of churches were closed and thousands of Christians, including many pastors, put in prison, tortured and killed.
- Gudina being an Oromo was also reproached with cooperating with the Oromo liberation movement (the Oromo are the most numerous people of Ethiopia, about 35 million of 85 million inhabitants). In particular Gudina was suspected to support the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front[2]). This he denied: "I have never taken active part in OLF, but I follow developments."
- He was also harshly criticized for founding in 1976 a Council for the Cooperation of the Churches in Ethiopia, which was considered an independent institutional power base, because it was an organization not controlled by the ruling party and the government.

Indeed, Gudina practiced active nonviolent resistance just like the apostles in Jerusalem who did not cease preaching about Jesus. "We must obey God rather than men."

A few days before his abduction and assassination, Gudina Tumsa expressed his spiritual last will in "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society":

> "As someone has said [I.e. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in "The Cost of Discipleship"], when a person is called to follow Christ that person is called to die. It means a redirection of the purpose of life, that is death to one's own wishes and personal desires and finding the greatest satisfaction in living for and serving the one who died for us and was raised from death (2 Corinthians 5:13-14)."

President Nyerere had been ready to help him into exile. But Gudina Tumsa refused to leave his country in order to save himself.

In fact, he obeyed God rather than men: In the last paragraph of his last will he states crystal-clear that for the sake of his people he was ready to transgress the laws of an Ethiopian state

[2] Newly founded in 1976 by his brother Baro.

based on fundamental injustice and thus face death if unavoidable.

> "It has been stated that a Christian is a citizen of a given country and as such under the laws and policies of that country. Because he is under the laws of the country of which he is a citizen, it is his duty to pray for the peace of that country and cooperate with his fellow-citizens for its well-being. The only limitation to his cooperation or obedience to the laws of his country is if he is commanded to act contrary to the law of God (Acts 5:29)."[3]

IV.

For many years, his church has had problems to identify with him. He was considered too political, somebody who was murdered because of his political views and actions – not because of his belief in God. Until today the church feels challenged by Gudina because of his deeply political understanding of the word of God. Thus he is both an uncomfortable thorn in the flesh and at the same time highly relevant for the contemporary witness of the church in each specific indigenous context.

> "In our case", Gudina said, "theology must grow out of concrete daily experiences, from our dealing with the ordinary affairs of life as we experience them in our situation, in our cultural setting, in our economic life, in our political experience and in our social practice".[4]

Gudina Tumsa sharpens this insight into one of his most challenging, somewhat shocking statements. He maintains that a life which denies the political dimension is not worth living because it cuts off a decisive aspect of human life:

> "Wholistic Theology is an effort in rediscovering total human life. Apolitical life is not worthy of existence, uninvolvement is a denial of the goodness of creation and of the reality of incarnation. … The history of the people of God in the Old Testament starts with the liberation of a group of slaves from oppression. Nothing is more political than this Biblical narrative. In our continent what is prevalent is the basis to define economic policy, agricultural development, foreign relations – 'Politics decides who should die and who should live.' African theology should develop a political theology relevant to the African political life."[5]

V.

[3] The Role of a Christian in a Given Society", WaD, 1975, p.11f
[4] (Memorandum, July 1975, § 9, WaD, p.69)
[5] (Memorandum, §10 Wholistic Theology, 1975, WaD, p.70)

Right now, this passage seems more relevant than ever in the present situation of drought and famine at the Horn of Africa when political actors decide whether or not people in Somalia, Ethiopia or Kenia receive aid or are forced to flee or are even deprived of their last belongings or have to make the heart-rending decision whether or not to let some of their children die of starvation in order to save at least a few of them. This cruel dilemma of ethical choice calls us to resist developments in the economic and the political sphere which lead human beings towards death and destruction.
Gudina expresses that there is a basic Christian truth which demands a contemporary, relevant confession of faith:

> "It's impossible for an African to divide the secular from the religious, mind from body, faith from development. Confessio Augustana [the basic confession of the Lutheran churches] was relevant to the needs of the reformers. African churches of our time have to develop a "Confessio Africana", a confessional stand relevant to African social, political and ideological reality."[6]

In many African states of his time and of our time, as well, all kinds of dictatorships have been oppressing their people. Elites, ethnic groups, clans and war lords together with economic and political actors from outside have been exploiting the resources and the people of African countries. Being aware of this, the question of resistance comes up: Don't we need to obey God rather than men?

VI.

To be sure, not only Africans have to think about a new confession beyond the Confessio Augustana, relevant to the social, political and ideological reality. Also we from Europe or from North America. But what kind of tradition do we have in formulating new confessions?

- During the Nazi years, the Barmen Theological Declaration of the Confessing Church of 1934 was a valid statement of the basis of our faith, but it came too

[6] (Gudina Tumsa 1975, in Eide, Integral Human Development, in Life and Ministry, p.37)

early to be able to say something about the discrimination of the Jews. Nor could it yet speak to the systemic crime of extermination and concentration camps, nor to the upcoming war of aggression and annihilation.

- In the other totalitarian states of the Communist era with brutal oppression of people and systematic violation of human rights, also through the omnipresent secret service spying on people, no attempt at writing a relevant confession was made, as far as I know, not in East Germany (the GDR) nor in any of the countries of the Soviet block.
- In South Africa, during the Apartheid era of denying the black majority basic human rights of political participation and human recognition, it was absolutely clear that obeying God rather than man-made unjust laws had to lead to political resistance. In other African countries this has been equally clear.

In Tanzania, we do not dare to assess from outside at what time such a decision might have come up. During the time of putting into practice “ujamaa” with strong pressure on the people, in the 60s and 70s, I hear, there may have been such a time. But you know much better.

VII.

In our contemporary globalized world we also need to ask ourselves who is a witness and disciple of the kind of Gudina Tumsa. And what would be the relevant confession in our global social, political and ideological reality?

The witness and martyrdom of Gudina Tumsa, and his life in obedience to God rather than to men, may be a valid opening up of such questions and an impulse to think about a relevant contemporary confession.

For: At all times and in all places we are called to obey God rather than men.

Amen.