Dear participants of the “Intercontinental Academia on Human Dignity”,

On behalf of our rector, Professor Gerhard Sagerer (who is on vacation and) sends his warmest greetings, I welcome you all to Bielefeld University! My name is Martin Egelhaaf, I am Vice-rector for research, young researchers and equal opportunities. Being responsible for research at this university it is indeed a great pleasure for me to receive and greet such a truly international as well as interdisciplinary group of researchers. But I also enjoy seeing you here beyond my official role too.

Science today is an international endeavor. This is all the more true for the theme you have chosen for this academia: “Human Dignity” – the idea that all human beings have an innate right which needs to be valued and respected. A right so fundamental and plausible to our common sense that we almost instantly agree with it. But when we take a closer look it raises plenty of complex questions and - causes a great many debates touching on concepts of various academic disciplines. Against this background it seems only logical and adequate that an international and culturally diverse group bringing together different professional expertise as well as experience of life shall discuss and work on the intricate and important questions evolving when “Human Dignity” faces reality.

Being a neurobiologist I can easily think of critical questions my own discipline has been confronted with. I only want to name but a few of these:

- At which point in the development of a human being’s life does its “innate” dignity emerge?
- Does research on embryonic stem cells contradict human dignity?
- Having a look at the end of life: What does “human dignity” mean at the end of a human being’s life? What does it have to say to the donation of organs? and so on, and so on.
It is not my job to dig deeper into this here as you are the experts who will dedicate a good portion of your time and enthusiasm into study and debate of theoretical and practical aspects around human dignity.

Maybe I could rather take this opportunity to say a few words about Bielefeld University and the Center of Interdisciplinary Research where you will work and live during the coming ten days. The university was founded in 1969 with an emphasis on research, and in particular on interdisciplinary research. One year earlier the Center for Interdisciplinary Research had already been founded. It is something like the germ cell for the university. The sociologist Helmut Schelsky, who founded the Center for Interdisciplinary Research – which we often call by its abbreviation ZiF – was convinced that working beyond the boundaries of disciplines and the exchange between disciplines was crucial to scientific progress. For more than 40 years the ZiF has welcomed scholars and research groups like yours following its mission “to encourage, mediate and host high level interdisciplinary exchange”.

Starting from ZiF the interdisciplinary impulse has been carried forth into the university’s main building, and reinforced by the latter’s architecture: Nowhere else in Germany you will find a university in which practically everything has been placed under one roof. This ease of communication has decisively contributed to dialogue across disciplinary boundaries not only among scientists, but among students too. – I hope you feel that with your group and the scope of your work are at the right place and I wish all of you a great experience here with intriguing discussions and insights as well as a pleasant stay. Hopefully, your agenda will also let you some time to explore Bielefeld and air your brain taking a walk through Teutoburg Forest.