

## **The present situation of the national commissions and the European network**

*H. E. Msgr. Gérard Defois*

*President of the European Network of Justice and Peace Commissions*

Eminence,  
Excellencies and brothers in the episcopate,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

As we are here you to meet you nearly a year has gone since you expressed the wish to organize a meeting between the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and our European network, so that we can get to know each other better. So here we are assembled, and I would like to express, in the name of us all, our deep-felt gratitude to you for having made this meeting possible. It is an encouragement for us in our work, and it will surely strengthen the bonds between us.

It is my task to present to you what our network is today. Allow me in doing so to make a short detour through history.

### **A bit of history**

Following the publication of Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, the bishops' conferences in Western Europe wanted to get involved in the dynamic of Justice and Peace by creating, in their turn, commissions on a national level.

From 1971 these commissions in evolution felt a need to establish links between themselves in order to exchange experiences and put co-operations in place. With the end of the cold war a new phase opened up. The fall of the Wall allowed a work of approaching the peoples of Europe to start, and the Justice and Peace commissions did not shy away from their responsibility. They gave their support, including financial support, to the bishops' conferences that wanted to establish their own Justice and Peace commissions. On the suggestion of Cardinal Etchegaray, your predecessor, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions was born and welcomed the new structures in its midst.

Today there are 30 commissions who constitute the richness of our network. Each one has been wanted and created by its bishops' conference contingent on its particular situation on a national as well an ecclesial level. Therefore:

- certain commissions are made up exclusively of bishops, other exclusively of lay persons, other again are a mix of the two;
- certain commissions are sections of their bishops' conferences, fully integrated in the organizational chart, other have the statute of organizations all the while being accompanied by a bishop, other still have the double statute;
- some commissions work more on international questions, other devote themselves to the national situation;

- sometimes there exists one single structure on the national level, in other cases the national commissions lead a network of diocesan commissions.

But all these structures are light and in many cases they rest exclusively on a voluntary basis. Still, despite the differences there are strong convergences that assemble them and make them specific actors of the life of the Church.

### **Actor in the Church**

What makes union of our commissions and our network is the shared concern to be an actor on the social teaching of the Church, be it through education, formation or the translation of the compendium. These last months our commissions have thus contributed widely to the reception of the last social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

The same concern to spread the ideas of the social teaching of the Church is very much part of the work of our commissions, as they speak up before our public authorities and the elected persons part of them in order to convey to them our values. Our specific place in the midst of our churches permits us to enter into a dialogue with society, to go to the frontiers in order to approach those who seem to be far away from us, with the desire to incarnate the Gospel in the life of the society.

Actors in the Church, our commissions are very much that, as they contribute to the regional synods, alert to translate their own actions along the recommendations of the synod fathers.

Actors in the Church, our commissions are just that, as they time and time again defend the dignity of every human being. This is, if you allow me the expression, the heart of our mission. Each commission ascertains this battle according to its own competences, to its history, to the context in which it displays its reflection and its action. Development, human rights, disarmament, ecology, trafficking of human beings, social justice, migration, and living together are but some of the subjects dealt with.

Actors in the Church, not least, in the collaborations that our commissions have put in place with other actors of the Catholic Church – COMECE, CCEE, and also the agencies for development – Caritas, CIDSE, and the organizations for the defense of human rights, and with the Justice and Peace commissions of the orders and congregations, not forgetting the ecumenical and inter-religious connections that they entertain.

This may appear much for the structures that I just defined as “light”. But this is, paradoxically, exactly what lets these structures be responsive, close to the ground and to perfectly know the social and ecclesial fabric in which they intervene. (...) We have been able to certify this during the last ten years, while developing our contacts on the ground with the people that we have met in order to know, on the part of those actors, what they live and to support their projects. It was one of our main points of our presidency.

This expertise in the midst of the Church has furthermore been recognizes, as secretaries general of the national commissions have been members of the Pontifical

Council for Justice and Peace, and two of them here present – Victor Scheffers and Axelle Fischer – were invited to be auditors in the recent Synod for Africa.

This said, our commissions do not lack challenges for the future. Important issues lie before us. But the most immediate challenge to take on lies without a doubt within our Church itself.

### **Challenges within the Church**

All commissions recognize that their work, and more widely the entirety of the social teaching of the Church, is very often neglected by the People of God. More, to this lack of information often a lack of interest for the social teaching of the Church adds itself, which sometimes manifests itself even in the national structures consigning the Justice and Peace commission to a lower level, or sacrificing them when arbitrations, especially financial, are in question.

There is a certain mistrust when it comes to socio-economical-political questions, which develop in our Christian environment and that I have been able to notice in my meetings with business leaders speaking of *Caritas in Veritate*. These questions should not be of concern of the Church, who should concentrate itself on the new evangelization. But that it to forget too fast the position taken by the Synod of Bishops of 197, which affirmed that questions relating to Justice and Peace are constituent to evangelization (§6). This position was reaffirmed by Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* as he wrote: *Testimony to Christ's charity, through works of justice, peace and development, is part and parcel of evangelization* (§15), which cannot do else but encourage us

More than ever, in a world that is at the same time globalized and divided, questions of Justice and Peace belong to the very heart of evangelization and pose questions about what contacts to entertain with the new Council to which the holy Father recently entrusted this essential mission of the Church, as well as to the upcoming Roman synod consecrated to this question.

### **Justice and Peace Europe**

As you have already understood, it is the entire richness of the national commissions that is shared within our European conference. Justice and Peace Europe is, in fact, not a supplementary entity that controls the national commissions. Justice and Peace Europe has no other end than to develop the synergies between the national commissions, so that also a European level the Gospel may be heard in the public debate.

The ties between the commissions of our European network propose a strong sign in the midst of the process of reconciliation in Europe, of the necessary liaisons to realize, which remain a major challenge for the future and the peace of the continent.

And this is the major object of the international workshop that we organize every year in close collaboration with the commission that welcomes us. We learn much from what goes on the ground. It is important to hear the calls for reconciliation when they are heard in Prague, in Kosovo, in Ukraine and in Belfast. To go out and meet those who are excluded, those who are broken, is a way to contribute to the fall of all the

walls that separate us – on the very ground, yes, but also in our heads. In Belfast our experience was with the victims of each of the communities, in Ceuta with the sub-Saharan migrants, in Prague with the Rom, and in Lviv with the victims of trafficking.

These actions may seem modest, and they are. But it is all about being a fraternal presence in the name of Christ sometimes, a simple testimonial of Mercy. This very presence pronounces itself through the fragility and the force of these symbolic actions – a moment of inter-religious prayer in Chernobyl, a moment of silent prayer in Palermo or on the beach of Algeciras in memory of all the migrants who have disappeared at sea, or a yet again moment of silence in front of the Lithuanian parliament.

Our concerted actions allow us also to reinforce each one of our commissions on its very own terrain. As we invest ourselves all together, during the very same period, in an action directed towards our political leaders insisting that the battle against poverty should be intensified or that the economic crisis is not a reason to dismantle our solidarity with the most poor in our societies, our word carries weight. As a commission welcomes its European partners for an experience of exposure and dialogue among families touched by blood feud in Albania, trafficking in Ukraine or, as soon, among immigrant families in the suburbs of Paris, we gain credibility and visibility on a national as well as European level.

It is these concerted actions that permit us make the voice of the Gospel heard in the international corridors of power. That is what lets us be present at the Council of Europe with a participatory status. It is also what lets us have credibility in our contacts with European institutions.

Our European networks opens also for contacts outside Europe. A good number of our commissions have contacts that date back many, many years with counterparts on other continents. Together we enlarge our horizons, renewing the intuition of Schuman of a Europe that acknowledges the development of all nations as a moral priority. But foremost we answer to the mission given by the Church to develop all men and all of man (PP). During the encounter in The Hague last year, which was a follow up to the Synod of Africa, our concern and investment in the questions of migration was one illustration.

This is, through some brief mentions, what the European national commissions and the Conference that unites them are and do today. But the presidents of our commissions may give you more information about the fruits of our co-operation in a couple of moments.

## **The future**

To sum up I am convinced that in a globalized world as ours it is today impossible to function but in a network. Our Conference exists and has gained experience, but we need to develop further. This meeting is a possibility to do so.

All our commissions wish that our ties with the Pontifical Council should now be reinforced as a platform for discussion, as a support, as a place of exchange for the worldwide network. And in this sense they are all ready to support your activity also.

One more time, dear Cardinal Turkson, in the name of us all here assembled, I want to express our gratitude for your interest, for welcoming us and for your support.