



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

## THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

*"Dignity – Freedom – Human rights", absolute values or product of culture expressed by political will in laws, as well as in courts' decisions? Are they always soundly interpreted or linked with desirable developments at the EU level? An event in Cracow (Poland) organised in partnership with COMECE tackled this topic also with reference to life protection, family and the refugee crisis.*

Last 25-26 September, the city of Cracow hosted the fifteenth edition of a series of annual conferences on the role of the [Catholic Church in the process of European integration](#). The theme was *"Dignity – Freedom – Human rights"*. The initiative is also based on the desire of the Church to bring its specific contribution into the EU debate on the basis of Article 17 on the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU<sup>1</sup>. The COMECE (*Commission of the Episcopates of the European Community*) was represented and reaffirmed its willingness to continue its long-standing partnership with the organisers of the event (*Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Poland and Robert Schuman Foundation in Luxemburg*). The Conference also featured the warm presence and address of the Archbishop Metropolitan of Cracow, Card. Stanisław Dziwisz. Members of the European Parliament from the European People's Party - another partner of the event - also actively participated and intervened as speakers. Three workshops held on the topics *"Dignity: existential, personal value or legal category?"*, *"Freedom: limits of freedom or freedom without limits"* and *"Human rights: sources and scope in the Christian interpretation and in the EU"* allowed the participants to deepen the discussion of this year's theme.

In relation to this year's theme, the focus of debates and interventions was placed on key elements such as: protection of life from conception until natural death, marriage and family, migration and asylum, the concept of human dignity from a Christian perspective, freedom of religion, Christian-Muslim relations in Europe and in the Middle-East. The three terms chosen for this year's conference (dignity, freedom, human rights) are often referred to at the EU level, but not always soundly interpreted or linked with desirable developments. The starting point of the reflection was that while there is no doubt that the attitude to human rights is derived from the vision of the dignity and freedom of every human being, the difference in the understanding of such rights in Christianity and by the European Union is at times quite evident. Whereas from a Christian perspective, human rights are based on natural law and on human nature as created, at the EU level they are often seen as a product of culture and expression of the will in law-making and in the jurisprudential process. The latter approach can lead to human rights being dependant on the current socio-political tendency

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<sup>1</sup> *"Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations".*

and not having either an absolute value or certainty, or worse, being subject to possible reductions or even withdrawals.

During the two-days event, the need to found human rights on a sound concept of human dignity was stressed. The problematic aspect was seen not in the element "rights" but in the element "human". What is "human" and what is not? Reflections also focused on the Christian roots of Europe and on their role in ongoing EU policies and debates.

A tension was highlighted between two approaches to freedoms and human rights: the one based on natural law and on human dignity and the 'autonomist one' (whereby the highest human right is the one to 'choice'). In this second interpretation, the autonomy of the individual is seen as prevailing, even when adult aspirations run counter to the rights of the child.

Both with regard to the protection of human life and on marriage and family, the risk was stressed of a possible 'competence creep' by the EU, as well as in the pressure applied on matters outside the competence of the Union by the European Parliament. Reference was also made to the intersection of EU and Council of Europe's actions in these areas.

Lebanon was indicated by the Maronite Patriarch of Antiochia, Card. Béchara Boutros Rai OMM, as a model of coexistence and collaboration between Christians and Muslims for the whole Middle East. However, this balance is in danger because of the massive influx of asylum seekers and migrants from Syria and Iraq. As for Europe, discussions also concentrated on the impact of the increasing Muslim presence on the future evolution of freedoms and human rights. The dramatic situation in Ukraine was also tackled, with interventions that highlighted the need for the EU to play a decisive role.

The issue of the migration/asylum crisis was presented by Mr. Rocco Buttiglione as the main priority in the field covered by this year's event. Mr. Buttiglione stated that Italy and other EU border countries were left alone for quite some time and that only when migrants and asylum seekers started to go through the Balkan route towards certain North of Europe states, the problem truly became "European". An absence of an effective policy response will lead to an even greater influx. Mr. Buttiglione highlighted that saving lives in the Mediterranean and letting migrants and asylum seekers in must be the first step, to be followed by clear assessments on who can claim asylum and who should be sent back (hence the need for well-crafted readmission agreements). He also criticised the idea that the current influx might lead to an 'islamisation' of Europe, as many of the persons coming to Europe are Christians. Mr. Buttiglione referred to the importance of 'intelligent generosity' (as with the "Marshall Plan" or the bold EU enlargement to the East). For Mr. Buttiglione, "religious dialogue" should focus on concrete issues and be open, including on respect of human rights of Christians in the Middle East. The deterioration of relationships of Europe with the U.S. was also pointed at as one of the causes of the current crisis: TTIP goes beyond commerce and is an opportunity to relaunch the cooperation. Finally, on Russia Mr. Buttiglione stressed that Europe must be able not only to be strong (e.g sanctions) but also to 'talk'.

*Irmina Nockiewicz, Alessandro Calcagno (COMECE Secretariat)*

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