



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

“RESCUE THE WEAK AND THE POOR” PSALM 82:3

- COMECE STATEMENT ON POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN EUROPE -

Care and respect for the poorest and most vulnerable persons in a society are the basic criterion for social justice. The Bishops of COMECE note that, in a European Union founded on Christian values, almost a quarter of the population still lives at risk of poverty and social exclusion. We believe it is our duty to call for an integrated approach to combat deprivation and social exclusion. Only a close complementarity of policies in all relevant fields at all levels can eliminate the structural causes of poverty and promote the integral development of every member of society, including the most vulnerable.

The economic and financial crisis has left a deep mark on the European integration process. The firm belief in a Europe growing together has been shaken as Member States have started to diverge in their economic and social development. Income inequality is growing in most of the countries and the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased from 116 million people in 2008 to 123 million in 2012¹. While the figures have slightly declined since then, they continued to grow in the countries most affected by the recession. This shows that the poorest pay the consequences of a crisis caused by speculation, greed and the lack of regulation of the financial markets.

Catholic Social Teaching defines poverty mainly as the outcome of structural barriers that limit people's choices and restrict their personal development and their freedom to live in dignity. It not only refers to a lack of financial resources, but also to a multifaceted set of phenomena covering all aspects of life that impede peoples' development such as environmental degradation and insufficient access to education, social services and energy.

Poverty in the midst of our affluent societies

In today's Europe, poverty has many faces. Through the crisis, it moved from the periphery to the very heart of our societies.

1. **Children** are nowadays the group most at risk of poverty in the EU.² Still too many are stuck in the social class they were born in and, due to a limited access to education, are often denied the possibility of lifting themselves out of poverty. In times of population decline, it is unacceptable that our society does not adequately support child rearing and exposes large families and single parents, especially women, to this high risk of poverty.
2. **Young people** are affected by high unemployment and adverse economic conditions. As stated by Pope Francis, they are “*the catalyst of change and transformation*”³ in Europe, but many of them have to start their lives in uncertainty and frustration.
3. A persistent high number of EU citizens belong to the group of **long-term unemployed** that have to cope with a lack of perspective and self-esteem.
4. Employment alone no longer protects EU citizens from deprivation as **in-work poverty** and precarious working conditions are on the rise. An increasing number of people is denied a fair and just remuneration which would allow their families to live in dignity.

¹ Eurostat, *People at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion* (2016), <http://bit.ly/1B6nS7r>

² Ibid., *Children at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion* (2016), <http://bit.ly/2d0Oe7o>

³ Pope Francis, *Acceptance address on the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize* (2016), <http://bit.ly/24BFExe>

5. **Social groups facing discrimination**, sometimes in multiple forms, are at a persistently high risk of poverty and social exclusion. Vulnerable and marginalized people seeking protection in our community – such as refugees and asylum seekers but also groups such as the Roma community – are deprived of their social development.

A need for an integrated approach

We encourage the European Union and its Member States to develop together with civil society and church actors **an integrated approach to combat poverty and social exclusion in all its forms**.

In line with the United Nation's SDG Agenda⁴ and its primary goal of poverty eradication through sustainable development, such an approach should be **directed towards the common good, respect the dignity and promote the integral development** of each human being. Based on the Church principles of **preferential option for the poor**⁵ and **common responsibility to care for our neighbour**, the most vulnerable should be at the core of EU, national and local policies. This will ensure that nobody is **hindered** in the moral claim for full participation in society and that everybody takes moral responsibility for **contributing** to the community development.

To this end, the principles of **solidarity** and **subsidiarity** should guide the role of each actor within the EU.⁶ A fair expression of both principles will ensure that decisions on legislation, policies and resource allocation will be made at the most local level possible, but at the highest level necessary.

The economic and financial crisis revealed that one single nation is no longer equipped to face the pressing economic and social challenges of our interdependent global economy. Since companies operate across borders, national governments should at least cooperate at European level in their regulatory, social and tax policies. Pope Francis calls for “*moving from a liquid economy to a social economy*” in Europe⁷ and stresses specifically the concept of the **social market economy**⁸, which is an objective of the EU treaties⁹. Recalling our declaration “*A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility*”¹⁰, we renew our support for a model that links the principle of a free market with the precepts of solidarity and with mechanisms to serve the common good. In a world “*where everything is connected*”¹¹, social market economy can be the basis for an “**integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature**”¹².

Recommendations: Towards a community of solidarity and responsibility

1. **Promote integral development.** The vulnerability of the poor and future generations to the impact of climate change entails heavy ethical and moral responsibility.¹³ The EU should strictly adhere to the climate and poverty targets of its Europe 2020 strategy and place the Sustainable Development Goals at the centre of a new agenda for 2030. In this respect, the regular monitoring of the Strategy in the European Semester should not disregard social and environmental indicators. Furthermore, we encourage the EU to further promote alternative consumption and production patterns and strive to reassess our value systems and understanding of development.
2. **Ensure policy coherence.** According to Article 9 TFEU¹⁴, the EU shall consider requirements of the fight against poverty and social exclusion when defining and implementing its policies and activities. Future policies, especially within the framework of the European Semester and with regard to fair taxation, should therefore be formulated and implemented so as to help remove the structural causes of poverty.

⁴ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a universal and integrated development agenda adopted in 2015 by all UN countries. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); cf. <http://bit.ly/1Kjkn0B>

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), 42, <http://bit.ly/1WJB2EX>

⁶ Oswald von Nell-Breuning, *Baugesetze der Gesellschaft* (1968)

⁷ Pope Francis, *Acceptance address on the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize* (2016), <http://bit.ly/24BFExe>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. Art. 3 Treaty of the European Union (TEU)

¹⁰ Cf. <http://bit.ly/2cFWwRE>

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), 91, <http://bit.ly/1Gi1BTu>

¹² Ibid., 139

¹³ Cf. Pope Francis, *Message of Pope Francis to the COP22* (2016), <http://bit.ly/2f11EjA>

¹⁴ Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

3. **Rebalance economic interests with social rights.** The EU and its Member States should ensure that the proposed initiative of a European Pillar of Social Rights and its idea of renewing social convergence on the basis of common adequate social standards will be as comprehensive as possible and supported by concrete implementation measures in order to halt growing inequalities.
4. **Uphold adequate working conditions.** Pope Francis reminded us to promote policies that create employment and also ensure proper working conditions.¹⁵ While we acknowledge that the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative have helped to create jobs among the young, we encourage the EU to monitor their long-term impact and to link the initiatives with targeted investments in the business sector of poor regions. The EU and its Member States should likewise ensure that workers are not denied their legitimate rights to just working conditions and a remuneration that “*will give them and their families a decent standard of living*”¹⁶. We therefore recommend the EU to strengthen its labour legislation and to promote, at the international level, a better implementation of the *UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*¹⁷.
5. **Recognise families as key actors in the society.** Children living in poor households are exposed to significant obstacles that limit opportunities from early childhood. We recommend ensuring equal access to education and to support single parents and poor as well as large families. Since family is the first resort in difficult situations, the EU should pay special attention to them, ensure their unity, and promote family-centred policies.
6. **Foster dialogue and cooperation.** We invite the EU to foster dialogue and cooperation with all relevant actors. Such a dialogue should involve Churches and their organisations, but foremost give priority to the poor that should never be seen “*as a problem, but as people who can become the principal builders of a new and more human future for everyone*”¹⁸.

Combining these actions can bring about the changes needed to revive the idea of a Europe growing together. Placing the people and especially the poor at the core of its policies could make our societies not only more inclusive, but also more resilient to future crises. In a globalised economy, it will contribute to our common endeavour to “*establish a political, social and economic order, which will growingly serve man and woman and help individuals as well as groups to affirm and develop the dignity proper to them*”¹⁹.

The COMECE Bishops, 12 December 2016

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Address to the European Parliament (2014)*, <http://bit.ly/1TEvW7l>

¹⁶ Cf. European Social Charter (revised) (1996), Art. 4 (1)

¹⁷ Cf. <http://bit.ly/2d9Ipx>

¹⁸ Saint John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace (2000)*, 14, <http://bit.ly/2fphnGc>

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), 9, <http://bit.ly/1mUu1K>