

Conference “Shaping the future of Work”

Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)

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1305 words

Your Eminences,

Excellences,

Representatives of the European institutions,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege to be with you today. Let me thank in particular Frère Olivier Poquillon, General Secretary of the COMECE, for the kind invitation to take part in your discussion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Anticipating what lies ahead is inherent in human nature. That is the way humanity has developed and achieved real progress. At the same time, we have to live in the present and sometimes, simply take a seat back to reflect on what is happening in the world, in which direction and what the implications are.

The turn of the 19th Century was one of such moments that needed great vision to find *“some opportune remedy for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class”* to quote the words of the Encyclical *“Rerum Novarum”* of 1891. The immediate aftermath of the Great War was another turning point with the creation of the ILO in 1919 and the inclusion of our Constitution into the Chapter 13 of the Versailles Treaty.

Today, after a century of radical changes and political convulsions, the ILO Constitution remains among the rare provisions of the Versailles Treaty not to have been disavowed by history. May be because the ILO founders made some successful gambles in standing for universality, tripartism, dialogue and persuasion. In other words, they chose reformism, largely inspired by the Christian trade unionism (cf. Luc Cortebeeck).

In March 1919, the Christian trade union Congress met in Paris and adopted a resolution mentioning the need, not only to create an international labour institution, but also to include specific labour provisions in the future Peace

Treaty. Needless to say that this approach was directly in ideological competition with the revolutionary model.

Two weeks ago, our Director General was in Paris for the Centenary of the 11 November armistice. The world and Europe are today at a turning point of history. Over the last years, we have all felt the need to better understand the nature, scale and potential effects of the changes that are happening in the world of work. This is the “raison d’être” of the Future of Work Initiative, based on the genuine approach structured around the cause of advancing social justice through social dialogue and tripartism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The times in which we live are indeed fascinating and in many ways exciting, but they are also fuelling uncertainty. In particular, globalisation has only partially succeeded in reducing poverty and has contributed to increased imbalances everywhere, between and within countries.

In their 2016 Declaration adopted in Havana, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill echoed this reflection by recalling that “the unrelenting consumerism of some more developed countries is gradually depleting the resources of our planet. The growing inequality in the distribution of material goods increases the feeling of the injustice of the international order that has emerged.”

Yes, rapid changes in the world are putting pressure on already challenged labour markets and the social fabric of many countries. Societies are experiencing fundamental changes, driven not only by technological advances,

but also by demographic and climate change. The development of new or non-standard forms of work change the very concepts of work and employment relationship.

These changes risk exacerbating job polarization, widening wage inequality and poverty. Today, almost 200 million people are out of work worldwide. Informality and inequalities, including wage inequalities, are growing everywhere. Working poverty remains a reality for 700 million workers. In the EU, more than 20 per cent of population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2016.

That is why, likewise the times when the *Rerum Novarum* was issued, changes are also fuelling fear – not only fear of losing your job and your salary, but of a dehumanisation of the world of work due to increasing use of robots, artificial intelligence and genetic engineering.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is of course not the first time in history that humanity is confronted with changes. However, current challenges are going to go far beyond the question of whether technological progress is going to create or destroy jobs. I would say that it is not only a question of society that is at stake. It is quite likely to be a question of civilisation. It is literally a new “work order” that is emerging. Its implications, including its moral and ethical implications, are extraordinary challenging, especially for a value-based and standard-setting organisation like the ILO.

That is why the involvement of all religious organisations is so crucial. You rightly entitled your report: we are here to discuss how to **shape** the future, to reflect on the future that **we want** – in other words, the society and the world in which **we want** to live. Words matter. We cannot just wait for the events to happen. As rightly recalled in the April Conclusions of the CALL (Church Action on Labour and Life) of the Conference of European Churches on Digitalisation and the Future of Work, human beings were created as “Co-Creators” of God, “as workers together with Him” according to Saint Paul (2nd letter Corinthians). This implies being fully accountable for what we contribute to create, the future that we are forging and its consequences.

New models will be needed, including new development paradigms, economic models and instruments to monitor progress towards the achievement of economic and social goals that take full account of the freedom, equity, security, and dignity of human beings. In this regard, both the European Pillar of Social Rights and the UN 2030 Agenda are powerful instruments at the service of people and of the future.

By putting people’s aspiration to decent work for all at the centre of the 2030 Agenda, the international community has recognized the need for “an integral and solidary humanism” as spelt out by the social doctrine of the Church and for the longstanding ILO’s stand that decent work is both a catalyst for development and a central objective of sustainable development. In his Encyclical “*Laudato Si*”, Pope Francis calls for bringing the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development. This corresponds to the first recommendation of your report “Shaping the Future of Work”.

Similar values and messages will be at the heart of the report of the ILO high-level global Commission on the Future of Work to be launched on 22 January 2019. As you may know, this Commission has worked for more than one year under the co-chairpersonship of the Swedish Prime Minister Löfven and the President of South Africa Ramaphosa. Its report will kick-off our Centenary celebrations, which reflections will culminate at the International Labour Conference in June next year. The ambition defined by our Director-General “is not to mark the ILO’s Centenary in a purely ceremonial way, but with a process that will help to guide its work for social justice into its second centenary”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Next year, we will also mark the 50th anniversary of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the ILO. In the acceptance speech, David Morse, the ILO Director-General at that time, expressed an idea that echoes our today’s discussions and remains fully valid for the future, I quote:

“Our Constitution itself places upon the ILO responsibility for ensuring that conditions are created in which human beings can pursue **both their material well-being and their spiritual development**”. I believe that our response to this fundamental mandate must be greater in the future. That is what the social dimension of the ILO’s greater objective means.”

Thank you very much