



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

At the beginning was the Idea, the grand plan for peace of the Founding Fathers of Europe – actually building this area so often dreamed about of reconciled nations, joined together by consensus with due consideration for their own peoples and the Christian values that unite them. But the road to achieving this Idea was not always smooth and trouble-free. The Church offered her support to the building of Europe as it took its very first steps. In 1950 Pope Pius XII welcomed the Schuman Declaration with enthusiasm and in 1957 he hailed the signature of the Treaties of Rome as “*the most important and significant event in the modern history of the Eternal City.*” One year earlier, the Archbishop of Strasbourg had invited the Jesuit Fathers to monitor the work of the Council of Europe in order to keep the Church bodies informed. In 1963 the Catholic Information Office for Europe opened an office in Brussels, located close to the European institutions. In 1970 an Apostolic Nuncio to Brussels was appointed by the Holy See and in 1976 the very first outline of a collective movement of bishoprics ended up as the creation of a Catholic Pastoral European Information Service (SIPECA). This forerunner of COMECE was mandated to keep the Bishops’ Conferences informed of progress being made in the European Communities.

The little COMECE ...

In 1979, the European Parliament’s first elections with universal suffrage opened up new horizons. The Bishops’ Conferences focused their attention on the European Community. On 3 March 1980, with the approval of the Holy See, a college of bishops created COMECE to monitor and provide assistance in European policy-making. This was organised with great daring in the spirit of the Vatican II Council and following the principle of supranationalism.

Once established in the avenue Père Damien at the SIPECA offices, COMECE began to explore its new environment. Helped by collaboration with the Apostolic Nuncio and by the experience of pioneering Catholic organisations in Brussels such as OCIPE (the Jesuit European Information Office), the Secretariat focused first of all on its information provision mandate by publishing a bulletin called *l’Europe au fil des jours* and conducted a pastoral reflection specifically on European issues. Some contacts were made with the European Parliament, and an early form of dialogue was established with the European Commission. The Presidents and General Secretaries during the first decade of COMECE - Cardinal Hengsbach (Essen), Mgrs. Hengen and Brand, and Father Huot-Pleuroux - laid the foundations of an organisation that was destined to change constantly, in line with the changing European institutions to which it was providing assistance. But it was at the turn of the 1990s, just when international capitals were undergoing change, that COMECE began to realise just how large its mandate was.

...grows up

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the upheaval in the institutions foreseen by the application of, first the Single European Act, then the Treaty of Maastricht, obliged the new European Union to rethink its identity and the meaning of its construction. Jacques Delors’ instinct led him to call upon the Churches, among other *instances de sens*, to take part in the European debates. A dialogue – chaotic at times, but no less rich for that – was started up between the competent religious bodies and successive Commissions. There COMECE took its seat at the table, becoming increasingly active

over the years. Under the aegis of personalities such as Mgr Homeyer (Hildesheim), President from 1993 to 2006, and Mgr Treanor, General Secretary from 1993 to 2008, COMECE underwent some deep-seated changes in its organisation and operating methods. To provide a better response to the increasing number of legal issues posed by the European Institutions to the Churches, the Secretariat raised its staffing level, anticipated the various EU enlargements, intensified its information work through *Europe-Infos*, its new bulletin, and developed its expertise not only in pastoral but also in legal matters.

In addition to its dialogue seminars with the Commission, COMECE and European Ecumenical Commission for Church & Society (EECCS), and later with the CEC's Church and Society Commission, developed a tradition of meeting every new President of the European Council since 1997. Thus it finds ways to assist in EU policy-making by making contributions of substance and relevance, drawing inspiration from the Church's Social Doctrine. From the preparation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights to the Treaty of Lisbon, COMECE has been active on all fronts. It issues forceful reminders of the Christian values of a European civilisation that is open to the world, taking care of the common good and the dignity of each individual as a whole human being. Finally, it promotes a relaxed dialogue between faith and politics. Confronted with changes in the religious dimension of Community law, COMECE advocates the idea of a healthy cooperation between the Churches and the Member States with, as guarantee, the inclusion in European texts of statements of the principle of solidarity and the recognition of the contribution of the Churches to the building of Europe. COMECE's voice is certainly heard: Article 17 of the Treaty of Lisbon, taking up Declaration No. 11 of the Annex to the Treaty of Amsterdam, recognises, through consultation with the Churches and religions, the positive and vital role of the latter for society.

Over the years, COMECE has been able first to monitor and later to assist European policy-making. Now, it can take up positions ahead of events with considerable legitimacy, placing trust in the European idea that it has been supporting for thirty years, in communion with the whole Church.

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