



COMECE

Annual Report

2020

40th
anniversary
edition



The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences
of the European Union

COMECE

ANNUAL REPORT 2020



The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences
of the European Union

Foreword

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the European integration came as a peace process that would benefit the peoples of the old continent and the world. COMECE was founded on 3 March 1980, as the Catholic Church's response to accompany this process.

From the day of its foundation, COMECE has been present in the 'communion' and pacification of the European continent as an actor of dialogue, stimulating European institutions to adopt policies in favour of the Common Good and centred on the human person.

In the past decades, European institutions have changed, grown, and matured as a result of increased European integration: adoption of a single currency, geographical enlargement, acquisition of new competences by the European Union, amongst others.

During this time, COMECE has also grown. Our Assembly has expanded, welcoming the Bishops' Conferences of the new EU Member States, which have enriched, with their sensitivity and experiences, the Church's dialogue with the European institutions.

COMECE has gradually strengthened its statute, promoting and increasing its Secretariat's technical contributions towards EU policies, implementing modern communication and interacting more intensively and regularly with the Holy See and other Catholic and ecumenical partners.

If European institutions and COMECE have grown hand in hand, the same can be said of their dialogue. Initiated informally in the 1980s, the EU dialogue with Churches was recognised under Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - which came into force in 2009 with the Lisbon Treaty.

2020 has been a difficult year. In January we witnessed the last painful strains of Brexit. In this regard, we called on all parties to work together, to ensure that the UK's exit from the European Union was carried out in the most responsible way possible, protecting the fraternal bond between the peoples on both sides of the English Channel.

In March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic shook the world. Unprecedented and totally unexpected, it has caused death and suffering in every corner of Europe and the world, from the largest metropolis to the most remote refugee camp.

With its pall of fear, the pandemic paralysed our societies, inviting us to reflect on the need to adopt a just and sustainable recovery. The aim is not to return to our former lives, but rather to promote a real conversion of lifestyles, for a more equitable, solidarity-based, and environmentally friendly society.



2020



2009-2020



1980-2009



H. Em. Jean-Claude Cardinal Hollerich sj, Archbishop of Luxembourg and President of COMECE.

However, it does not end there. The pandemic, has in fact made the need for greater coordination at European level even more evident. After a late and hesitant start, the institutions of the European Union have reacted decisively, within the scope of their competences, to counter the effects of the pandemic.

Through COMECE, the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, have invited the European institutions and Member States to engage in a fraternal dialogue, to find creative and concrete solutions in solidarity against the dramatic socio-economic effects of the pandemic. We believe that instruments such as 'Next Generation EU' have been a historic response for Europe, living up to the project conceived by its founding fathers after World War II.

It is important that this experience becomes the beginning of a path to solve all future crises, ensuring that we leave no one behind and especially that we do not forget the most vulnerable, starting from them to shape a socially just future.

The Conference on the Future of Europe could be a great opportunity to take stock of the current situation, bringing Europe closer to its citizens and valuing the peculiarities of each person and all peoples in a context of common responsibilities.

For forty years, COMECE has promoted European policies in favour of the Common Good and will continue to do so in the years to come. We seek for a Europe that - quoting the Holy Father Francis in his letter on Europe in occasion of COMECE's 40th anniversary - is "a friend to each and all, [...] a family and a community, [...] inclusive and generous, [...] marked by a healthy secularism, where God and Caesar remain distinct but not opposed".

Jean-Claude Card. Hollerich S.J.
President of COMECE
Archbishop of Luxembourg

“I dream of a Europe...”



Pope Francis receives the COMECE 40th anniversary book as a gift from Cardinal Hollerich, President of COMECE, during an audience in June 2021.

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), Pope Francis delivered a special message on Europe. On October 27th, 2020, the Holy Father wrote a letter to H. Em. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness, prior to his participation in the 2020 Autumn Assembly of the Bishops of the European Union.

“What kind of Europe do we envision for the future?” asked the Pope. It is a question of vital importance, which was already at the center of the event *(Re)thinking Europe*, organised by COMECE and the Holy See in the Vatican in October 2017.

“Europe, find yourself! Rediscover your most deeply rooted ideals. Be yourself! – exclaims the Holy Father in his letter, echoing the famous cry of

Saint John Paul II uttered in Santiago de Compostela in 1982 – *I dream of a Europe that is a family and a community, [...] a Europe that is a friend to each and all, [...] a Europe that is inclusive and generous, [...] a Europe marked by a healthy secularism*”, continued Pope Francis.

With his letter, Pope Francis defines his vision of Europe. It is a call on all of us to rediscover the path of fraternity that inspired and guided the founders of modern Europe. His Holiness' words encourage the Church in the EU not to restrict her mission to the private sphere because “she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the building of a better world”.

A few days after the publication of the Pope's letter, Cardinal Parolin joined the COMECE Bishop Delegates gathered in their Autumn Assembly. The event was all but traditional. Indeed, as the COVID-19 pandemic was wreaking havoc in the continent, the COMECE Assembly was held online.

Despite the technical challenges, Bishops from all across Europe had the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the Secretary of State of His Holiness, who addressed some of the EU's most pressing challenges mentioned by the Holy Father in his letter.

The Catholic Church has closely accompanied the European integration process since its beginnings. “*The establishment of COMECE in 1980 – he stated – was a tangible sign of the importance attributed by the Holy See to the activities promoted by the European institutions*”.

In a historical moment in which Europe is called to rethink its identity and values, as well as to reduce

the distance between the EU institutions and its citizens, the Cardinal assured that the Church will continue giving its contribution towards policies serving the Common Good and which are centered on persons, families and communities.

The Church's contribution is even more crucial today, as we are in the frontline of the long and arduous recovery process from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This time should be seen as “*an occasion to build a fairer and more solidary Europe*”.

Following this same line of thought, there is also the “*Regaining hope and solidarity*” statement elaborated by the Presidents of EU Episcopates – gathered by COMECE for the very first time in November 2020.

Bringing the richness of their national contexts, they restated the Church's full commitment to the construction of Europe. While highlighting its founding values of “*solidarity, freedom, inviolability of the human dignity, democracy, rule of law, equality and defense and promotion of human rights*” they reminded all of us the peace and prosperity brought to our continent by the European project.

In light of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, enshrining an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions Churches and religious association or communities, the Bishops restated that the Catholic Church in Europe “*strives to build a universal fraternity that leaves no one out*”.



Cover of the book “I dream of a Europe...” elaborated in 2020 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of COMECE.

The letter of Pope Francis, the speech of Cardinal Parolin, the statement of the Presidents of EU Episcopates, and the letter of H.E. Monsignor Alain Lebeaupin - whom I thank for his extraordinary work as Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union in the year 2013-2021 - are four historical documents witnessing the support of the Catholic Church for the European Union and its willingness to improve this project for peace and fraternity, making it a positive example for the rest of the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jean-Claude Hollerich".

Jean-Claude Card. Hollerich S.J.
President of COMECE
Archbishop of Luxembourg

40 years of history 1980-2020

Since the creation of CCEE in 1971, the question of a more inter-active engagement with the EEC persisted within the CCEE net-work. The new *community* method envisioned by the treaties of the European communities and the east-west division of Europe made this a complex question.

Discussions between 1978-1979 involving the Secretariat of State, Archbishop Iginio Eugenio Cardinale, Apostolic Nuncio in Brussels, Dr Ivo Fürer (CCEE) and others, led to the decision to establish the Commission

of the Episcopates of the European Communities (COMECE).

The COMECE secretariat would continue the information service (SIPECA) established in 1976 under the aegis of the Apostolic Nunciature in Brussels.

The inaugural COMECE plenary meeting took place on 3 March 1980. Bishop Hengsbach (Essen), later Cardinal, was elected President. Monsignor Paul Huot-Pleuroux, second secretary at CCEE, was appointed Secretary General.



Plenary Assembly 1990, with COMECE President, H.E. Mgr. Jean Hengen (Luxembourg).

The initial membership, which included delegate bishops from the then nine member states of the EEC, would grow with each subsequent enlargement of the EU. Observer status was also provided for *ab initio*.

Over the years and especially in the aftermath of the Single European Act and the Treaty of Maastricht, the evolving political context in the EU required an aggiornamento of COMECE's *modus operandi*. Commissions and Working Groups were then established with a focus on specific EU policy fields, with competent persons as members, appointed by the member Bishops' Conferences. The expert support the secretariat staff in the analysis of draft EU policies.



COMECE Standing Committee in April 1983. From left to right: Fr. Paul Huot-Pleuroux (General Secretary), H.E. Mgr. Cahal Brendan Daly (Vice President), H.E. Mgr. Franz Hengsbach (President), H.E. Mgr. Jean Hengen (Vicepresident).

They also strengthen the link between COMECE and their episcopal conferences. Since its inception, COMECE has accompanied four major phases in the evolution of the Euro-pean project:

- the completion of the Single Market;
- the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Euro-peanisation of the EU;
- the process of political integration;
- the post 2008 financial crisis and the re-thinking of the EU's identity in the current global context.

Now in 2020, under its seventh President, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, COMECE continues to pursue its mission on behalf of the Church vis à vis the European institutions in cooperation with the Apostolic Nunciature to the EU, other European Catholic organisations, its ecumenical partners, whilst also linking with academia and European think-tanks.



H. E. Mgr. Noel Treanor
Vice President of COMECE
Bishop of Down and Connor (Ireland)



Social Congress "Europe's responsibility for global development", 2000.
From left to right: COMECE President H.E. Mgr. Josef Homeyer (Germany), Commission President Prof. Romano Prodi (Italy), Vice President H.E. Mgr. Adrianus van Luyn (The Netherlands).

DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHURCHES AND THE EU, UNDER ARTICLE 17 TFEU

"[it is important to work to make Europe] a place where it is possible to profess one's faith publicly and make one's contribution to the good of society as a Christian."

Card. Pietro Parolin

During 2020 COMECE maintained an active dialogue with the EU institutions, also under the legal basis provided by Article 17 TFEU.

The provision states that "Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these Churches and organisations".

At the level of the European Parliament, COMECE was grateful for the work done by Vice-President Mairead McGuinness, who was succeeded by Vice-President Roberta Metsola as responsible for dialogue with Churches and religious associations or communities, as well as with philosophical and non-confessional organisations.

Cooperation with the European Commission dialogue coordinator continued in a fruitful way, with periodical exchanges on current issues.

In the context of the publication of the EU Stay Safe Strategy (December 2020), COMECE stressed the importance of pre-consulting Churches and religious communities, especially when references that also concern religious matters are being considered in EU documents.

Dialogue initiatives are carried out whenever possible ecumenically, in partnership with the Conference of European Churches (CEC). One key example is the meeting with each rotating EU Presidency: a long-standing tradition which was also continued in 2020.

Meeting with the Croatian Presidency of the EU Council

On 20 January 2020, an ecumenical delegation of COMECE and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) met with Mr. Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, to exchange on the priorities of the Croatian Presidency of the EU Council.



MEP Roberta Metsola, Vice President of the European Parliament and new responsible for Article 17 TFEU dialogue.



The COMECE-CEC delegation during the meeting with Mr Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia.

The participants stressed that supporting people, families and communities in facing digitalisation and demographic challenges in Europe is key to reinvigorate citizens' trust in the EU. During the meeting, the President of COMECE referred to Churches' concerns on existing divisions in Europe. He underlined the important mediating role of Croatia, stating that *"dialogue and mutual respect are crucial values that need to be upheld in order to overcome divisions"*.

COMECE and CEC welcomed the commitment of the Croatian Presidency of the EU Council to foster community-building through sport, culture and education.

Meeting with the German Presidency of the EU Council

In the context of the German Presidency of the EU Council, on 27 October 2020, COMECE and CEC had an online meeting with Mr Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office. The ecumenical delegation presented reflections, proposals and policy recommendations, addressing pressing matters for the EU Presidency such as the COVID-19 recovery, the climate crisis, migration and asylum policies and the Conference on the Future of Europe.

EU high-level meeting with religious leaders "The European Way of Life"

On 27 November 2020, H.Em. Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, President of COMECE, together with other Church and religious leaders, met with EU Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas and with EP Vice-President Roberta Metsola for the annual summit of EU institutions with high-level religious representatives. The meeting was held in a digital format and provided the opportunity to exchange on the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, the proposed EU Migration and Asylum Pact, the fight against terrorism and prevention of radicalisation. Participants agreed that such issues can only be addressed by working all together, promoting the vision of a reconciled, united, democratic and hospitable Europe that ensures freedom and fundamental rights for all.



The ecumenical COMECE-CEC delegation meets with Mr Michael Clauss, Ambassador at the Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU (7 July 2020)



Meeting between the COMECE-CEC ecumenical delegation and Mr Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office (27 October 2020)



Dialogue meeting with European Commission's Vice President Margaritis Schinas. (27 November 2020)

Dialogue Seminar at the European Parliament "The European Green Deal – Preserving our Common Home"

On 28 January 2020, COMECE facilitated the participation of Rev. Fr. Augusto Zampini Davies, from the Vatican Pontifical Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, to the dialogue seminar organised by the European Parliament on the European Green Deal. Rev. Zampini Davies pointed out the need to pass on the relevant ambitions beyond Europe and feed into global solutions.

Dialogue Seminar at the European Parliament "COVID-19 Implications for the future"

On 15 July 2020, Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, General Secretary of COMECE, participated in a dialogue seminar hosted by David Sassoli and Mairead McGuinness, President and Vice-President of the European Parliament respectively, about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our societies. Fr. Barrios Prieto: *"we all learned important lessons from these hard times, such as the unity of all of us as human beings and that we belong to the same family"*. The COMECE General Secretary concluded his contribution emphasising the need to express and concretise solidarity, *"not pointing fingers at each other, but helping each other"*.

COMECE and CEC pray for Christian Unity at the European Parliament

On 22 January 2020, COMECE and CEC celebrated together an ecumenical prayer at the European Parliament on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The prayer was hosted by MEP Peter van Dalen and was led by Br. Alois Löser, Prior of the Taizé Community. The event also featured contributions from the COMECE and the CEC Presidents, who prayed together so that divisions can be overcome, and reconciliation may be fostered across Europe.



On the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, COMECE and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) celebrated an ecumenical prayer at the European Parliament. (22 January 2020)



Rev. Fr. Zampini Davies sharing the contribution of the Catholic Church on the EU green deal. In the photo also EP Vice-President Mairead McGuinness.

*“Let’s welcome migrants
with humanity and solidarity.
Let’s give them a place at our table.”*

Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ

MIGRATION & ASYLUM

A new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was proposed by the European Commission in September 2020. Characterised by a pragmatic approach, the proposal had the aim of obtaining the widest possible consensus to rebuild trust among EU Member States and citizens alike.

Despite some positive elements, the COMECE Working Group on Migration and Asylum expressed concerns on the fate of migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach the EU shores, as well as on the prevalence of fundamental rights of immigrants and asylum seekers at all stages of the procedures. COMECE is also concerned about those migrants who become victims of human trafficking and called on the EU and its Member States to upgrade their efforts to combat this crime.

An Action plan on Integration and Inclusion for the period 2021-2027 was also proposed by the European Commission, a topic which was addressed by COMECE in its contribution to the related public consultation in October 2020.

In accordance with FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, the number of irregular border crossings along the EU’s external borders fell 13% in 2019, in large part due to the



Migrants on a small dinghy in the Mediterranean Sea between the northern coast of Africa and Sicily.

© Picture-alliance/Schmid/SOS Mediterranee

impact of COVID-19 restrictions put in place by various countries. This was the lowest number of irregular border crossings since 2013.

While promoting the welcoming, protection, promotion and integration of migrants in the European Union, COMECE highlighted the importance of working in ensuring the primary right of persons and families to stay in their home country. In this context, COMECE and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), published on 10 June a contribution on the future of EU-Africa partnership, expressing the need to address the root causes of forced migration in order to make real their inalienable right to remain in their home country to live in security and dignity.

As member of the Christian Group on Migration and Asylum, composed of Catholic and other Christian Brussels-based organisations, COMECE contributed to the discussion on the key aspects of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed in September 2020 by the European Commission, expressing the need to enhance solidarity, responsibility and protection of human dignity and fundamental rights.

The mentioned EU Pact was also a matter of discussion and analysis in meetings held with the Migrants & Refugees Section of the Holy See.



© Photo: Georg Gassauer/ Shutterstock

A view of part of the Moria Refugee Camp, Lesbos, after the fire.

Contributions

20 February
Letter on the transfer of asylum seekers from Greece, by the President of COMECE, the Under Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and the Almoner of Papal Charities.

24 April
Statement of the Secretary General of COMECE on the situation in the Mediterranean Sea.

11 September
Statement of the President of COMECE on the tragedy in the Moria camp, urging the EU and its Member States to act more swiftly and firmly to finally make the relocation of asylum seekers from the Greek islands a reality.

26 September
Statement of the President of COMECE on the eve of the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

16 October
Statement of the Secretary General of COMECE on the eve of the EU Anti-Trafficking Day.

16 October
COMECE contribution to the European Commission public consultation on integration of migrants.

16 December
Statement by the COMECE Working Group on Migration and Asylum on the proposed EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Events

20 February
Cardinal Hollerich calls on EU Bishops’ Conferences to launch relocation projects for refugees in Greece

23 September
Participation in the roundtable on “Refugee Conventions in the Shadow of COVID-19 Pandemic” held by the Hungarian Institute of Migration.

21-22 October
Participation in the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung’s Experts workshop on Migration and Asylum held in Thessaloniki, Greece.

19 November
Participation in the workshop “Survivors. The possible integration”, organised by the Ass. Com. Papa Giovanni XXIII.

Working Group on Migration and Asylum

Chaired by the General Secretary of COMECE and assisted by the Secretariat’s legal advisor on this matter, the Working Group is formed by experts delegated by the EU Episcopal Conferences. Other Brussels-based Catholic organisations are also invited to take part and contribute to the meetings. During 2020, the Working Group gathered three times (18 June, 5 October, 16 December) to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of migrants and refugees and the proposed EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

President: Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto

Secretary: José-Luis Bazán



A screenshot taken during the COMECE Working Group on Migration and Asylum held in digital format on 18th June 2020.

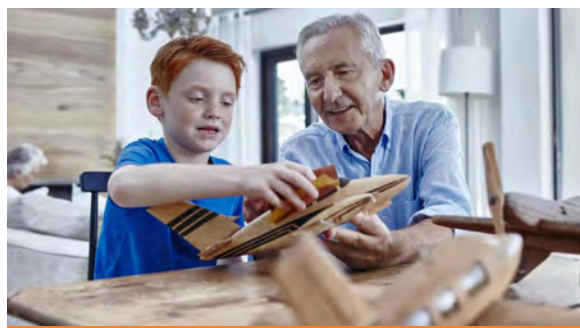
“[...] the pandemic has undoubtedly affected all of us, putting a strain on every sector of society and the economy.

Vulnerable people should come first [...]”

Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto

ETHICS, RESEARCH & HEALTH

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the general awareness on the social nature of human beings and their need for human relations. In the context of this historic circumstance, COMECE has strongly called on the European Union and its Member States to express and concretize solidarity, responsibility, and justice through their policies and to accompany them with a sustained discourse on social ethics.



COMECE promotes the idea to see the elderly as an integral part of the family, a source of support and encouragement for the younger generations. Image taken from the web

Care for the Elderly

According to the EC report “*The impact of demographic change in Europe*”, by 2070, 30% of people in Europe are estimated to be aged 65 and above. In collaboration with the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE), COMECE established an *ad-hoc* working group for the elaboration and release of the reflection paper “The Elderly and the Future of Europe – Intergenerational solidarity and care in times of demographic change”.

Conceived as a contribution to the “*Green Book on Aging*” of the European Commission, the COMECE-FAFCE publication encouraged all political and social actors to see the elderly as an integral part of the family, a source of support and encouragement for the younger generations. Thus, emphasizing that “*the elderly cannot be separated from society and relational networks*” and recommending to national governments to make use of the resources of the proposed EU Recovery Plan for investing in intergenerational relations and in new structures of solidarity.

Digital Ethics

On February 2020 the European Commission published the “*White Paper on Artificial Intelligence – A European approach to excellence and trust*” as one of the main pillars of the future digital strategy of the Commission towards a digital transformation benefitting the people. A few months after, in June 2020, COMECE contributed to the EC public consultation referred to the above-mentioned White Paper, underlying the necessity of establishing a sustained social ethics discourse to accompany the political discussion on regulating Artificial Intelligence (AI). COMECE introduced this approach during the Annual Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life held in Rome.



Mgr. Vincenzo Paglia, President Pontifical Academy for Life, and David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament. Photo taken during the Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, February 2020.

Financial Ethics

Due to the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, general questions related to the ethics of finance became even more essential for the socio-political discussions taking place within the EU institutions and in the Member States.

The ethical dimension of finance, often downgraded and marginalized, is now finally considered key to address the main challenges of our societies. The array of which includes those in the field of sustainability, technology, financing investment duties and the general political perspective of a just transition to a more social and sustainable Europe. Within this framework,

COMECE set up an *ad-hoc* working group chaired by Prof. Paul Dembinski, director of “*Observatoire de la Finance*” (Geneva), with the aim to draft a progress report that addresses some of the most essential questions of financial ethics.

EU Health Policy

All throughout 2020, the health sector remained at the frontline in the fight against Coronavirus. Health systems, hospitals, health workers and volunteers, research labs and pharmaceutical companies were all sharing the same struggle: fighting a new virus, acting as a barrier, saving lives while gaining time.

Since the very beginning of the pandemic, COMECE highlighted the need to strengthen the cooperation between the institutions of the European Union and the Member States to ensure affordability, sustainability and security of medical and pharmaceutical supply whilst building a strategic resilience based on the principles of solidarity and justice.

Once the European Commission presented the European Vaccine Strategy aiming at ensuring the production of qualitative, safe, and efficacious vaccines, the COMECE Working Group on Ethics called for available, affordable, and accessible vaccines, especially for elderly people, ill persons, and health workers. We also encouraged the EU institutions to monitor the complex political process of the production of COVID-19 vaccines. The vaccinations have to be available as a common good. Also for all vulnerables outside of the EU.



Anti-COVID vaccination in Europe.

© Photo: Ground Picture/Shutterstock

Contributions

6 April

COMECE document listing the main EU measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

14 June

COMECE contribution to the public consultation “Consultation on the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence - A European Approach”.

30 November

COMECE contribution to the public consultation on “Rural development – long term vision for rural areas”.

3 December

COMECE- FAFCE reflection paper on “The Elderly and the Future of Europe”.

14 December

COMECE contribution to the public consultation on “Roadmap Green Book on Aging”.

Events

12 June

Meeting of the *ad-hoc* Working Group “Care for elderly people”.

7 September

Meeting with members of the cabinet of European Commission’s Vice-President Dubravka Šuica on the role of the elderly. Event co-organized with FAFCE.

17 September

Meeting with Katharina von Schnurbein, European Commission’s Coordinator on combating antisemitism. The meeting focused on “Ethical challenges of Antisemitism”.

2 October

Meeting of the Assembly of the Working Group on Ethics.

28 October

Meeting of the *ad-hoc* Working Group on Financial Ethics.

2 December

Second meeting of the *ad-hoc* Working Group on Financial Ethics.

Working Group on Ethics

The Working Group is composed by experts delegated by the EU Bishops’ Conferences. The moral theologian Prof. Antonio Autiero advises the group as a moderator. The Assembly of the Working Group meets once a year. Members met on 1st of October to discuss the ethical challenges of EU health policy in times of COVID-19. In this context they prepared the reflection paper “The Elderly and the Future of Europe”. Two *ad-hoc* working groups were additionally established: on “Care for elderly people” and “Financial ethics”. This setting aims to follow relevant EU discussions and, with the advice of external experts, to prepare publications on current and future topics.

President: Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto

Secretary: Friederike Ladenburger



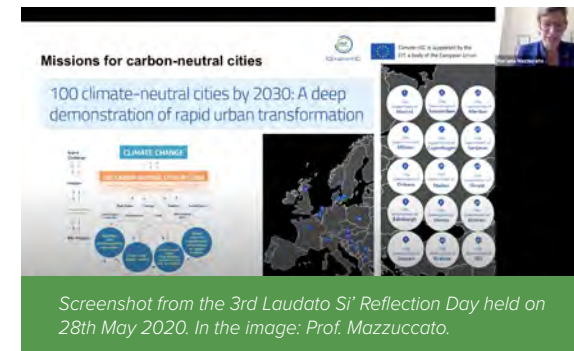
The Assembly of the COMECE Working Group on Ethics. (Photo archive, October 2019)

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“We have to think about the world after the pandemic: what could this world be?”

Mgr. Bruno-Marie Duffé

ECOLOGY & SUSTAINABILITY



Screenshot from the 3rd Laudato Si’ Reflection Day held on 28th May 2020. In the image: Prof. Mazzuccato.

This cross-cutting dossier concerns issues affecting different policy areas: agriculture, industry, energy production and consumption, transport, housing, consumer behaviour, etc.

he principle of sustainability can best be described by Kate Raworth’s economic model: a way of behaving that considers the carrying capacity of our planet, its resources, and its limits, on the basis of human wellbeing, social compatibility and justice.

This model is similar to the concept of “integral ecology” proposed by Pope Francis in his 2015 Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’. In this sense, “integral ecology” and its interdisciplinary nature, is also the approach of the “European Green Deal” (EGD), which the European Commission presented in December 2019.

This EU initiative is an attempt to coordinate a whole series of policy areas that have so far been developed rather independently from each other, with the objective of achieving the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015.

Due to the Corona pandemic, the European Green Deal was supplemented by a reconstruction plan called “Next Generation Europe”, which is to ensure that the post-pandemic recovery of the EU economy does not counteract the goals set in the EGD, but supports them.

In 2020 COMECE has been involved in several initiatives strengthening the cooperation between Church actors in the field of Integral Ecology and promoting joint work with the institutions of the European Union in the field of sustainability. Concretely, this includes the following projects:

The European Laudato Si’ Alliance

COMECE co-founded the “European Laudato Si’ Alliance” or ELSiA, a joint venture of Church institutions and various Catholic organisations that are joining forces in Europe to promote climate and social justice.

Highly inspired by the Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of Pope Francis, this alliance brings together: the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the EU (COMECE), Caritas Europe, the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM), the International Family of Catholic Social Justice Organisations (CIDSE), the Jesuit European Social Centre (JESC), and Justice and Peace Europe.



Mgr. Bruno Maria Duffe, Secretary of the Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. He participated in the 3rd Laudato Si' Reflection Day. Photo: M. Migliorato / CPP / CIRIC.

As a joint activity, ELSi'A organised the 3rd Laudato Si' Reflection Day on 28 May 2020, entitled "How the Encyclical Laudato Si' can steer the EU's role in a just recovery after the COVID-19 crisis". The virtual event included the participation of Mgr. Bruno Marie Duffé (Secretary of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development), Prof. Mariana Mazzucato (UCL – London), and the two MEPs Patrizia Toia and Lukas Mandl.

Integral Ecology for Sustainable development

In order to root practical advocacy work in the field of sustainability and integral ecology on a solid scientific foundation, COMECE participated in the project "Integral Ecology for Sustainable development", organised by KU Eichstätt, the Pontifical Gregorian University, the University of Passau and the Association of German Scientists (VDW).

In this context, COMECE supported the Interdisciplinary Seminar "Integral Ecology for Sustainable development. Perspectives from different disciplines", which took place on 14-15 February 2020 at the KU in Eichstätt.

Integral Ecology & New Enlightenment

COMECE contributed also to the International Workshop "Integral Ecology & New Enlightenment", which was organised as a webinar by the

Pontifical Gregorian University, KU Eichstätt and the VDW on 22-23 October 2020. This workshop was part of a series of events preparing a major symposium on "Integral Ecology" to be held in Rome in 2021 or 2022.

Faith, Science and Youth

In view of the Climate Ambition Summit held on 12 December 2020, COMECE, together with the Holy See's COVID-19 Commission, CIDSE, CAFOD, Caritas Internationalis and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, held a webinar entitled "Faith, Science and Youth: A call for an ambitious climate summit". During the event, faith, science and youth leaders called on the participants of the Summit to deliver on their pledge to commit to ambitious climate goals.



Poster of the event "Faith, Science and Youth", calling on governments to raise their ambition for tackling the climate emergency. The event was co-organised by COMECE in the context of the COVID-19 Vatican Commission, and it was held on 12nd December 2020.

Supporting Rural areas

Advocating an integral approach in the future development of rural areas – that considers the pluriformity and multifunctionality of those areas – was also the key message of COMECE's contribution to the consultation of the European Commission on the "Long term vision for Rural Areas" in November 2020.

"Defending fundamental rights demands courage and determination."

Mgr. Theodorus C. M. Hoogenboom

LEGAL AFFAIRS & FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Freedom of religion was a key reference point for COMECE activities in 2020 for the field of Justice and Fundamental Rights. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right that has been at the core of numerous COMECE contributions such as COVID-19 related restrictions on worship, data protection, and anti-money laundering policies. In the priority area of data protection, the GDPR review provided a context for continued dialogue and internal reflection.

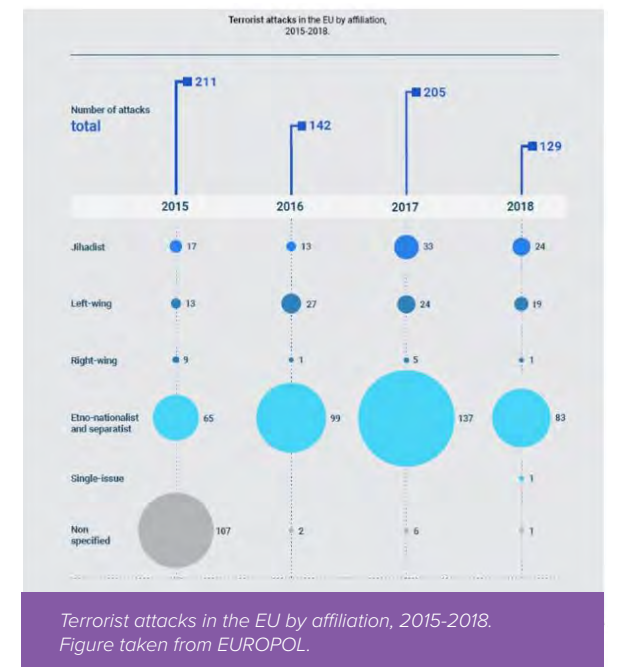
Protection of places of worship was also an important focus: the timeliness and urgency of the EU's commitment was dramatically highlighted by the Nice attack in October.

The impact of EU jurisprudence on Church activities led to a successful visit of dialogue with the Court of Justice of the EU: non-discrimination was a central concern, especially regarding provisions addressing Churches.

Protection of places of worship in the EU

COMECE was involved in intense exchanges with the European Commission on how to ensure better protection of churches and other places of worship from security threats. Dialogue concerned

the devising of EU funding opportunities and, more generally, EU support, also in view of the future drafting of Guidelines. COMECE spread through its network information on EU funding opportunities: this led to a successful initiative, accepted for funding starting from 2021, with an element of inter-religious cooperation. Increased risks concerning security of places of worship have created awareness on the need to act both on the side of Churches and religious communities and of public institutions.



Protection of personal data

While the review of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) did not lead to any changes to the text, COMECE was able to raise several relevant points in a written submission: how to better address parental consent, protection of sacramental records from erasure, ensuring proper safeguard of Church internal rules. COMECE also stressed that data subjects' rights are not absolute and cannot prejudice the position and legitimate activities of data controllers.

The second meeting of Bishops' Conferences Data Protection Experts took place on 19 May 2020 and was devoted to an internal reflection on the current state of play and main emerging issues. COMECE also contributed to the annual report of the European Data Protection Board.

Protecting children and their rights

In the context of the strong focus placed on the topic by the EU institutions, COMECE provided a wide-ranging contribution addressing elements such as better protecting children in the online

and offline environment, protection of their data, risks of online connected toys and games, disability, family law issues.

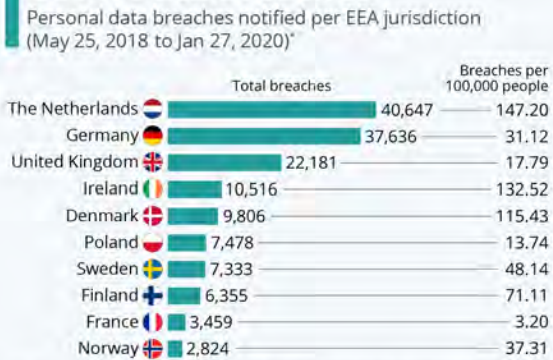
COMECE tackled this dossier on the basis of the guiding principle of upholding the best interest of the child, and underlined the importance of combining it with the rights of parents. COMECE will continue its dialogue with the European Commission in 2021, when a new Strategy on the Rights of the Child is planned. On child sexual abuse, COMECE exchanged with the Commission, particularly on its intention to support EU Member States in training different actors, including religious institutions.



Screenshot of the Legal Affairs Commission exchanging on the rights of the child. The meeting was held online on the 3rd of December 2020.

© legal-protection-children

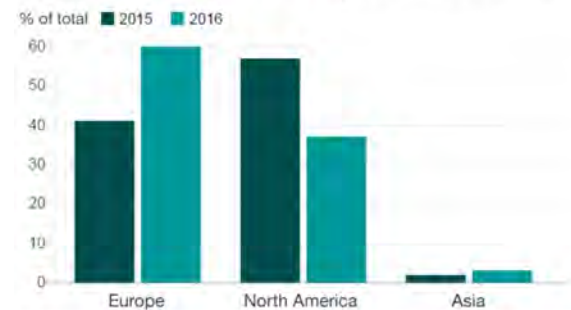
The Countries With The Most GDPR Data Breaches



The Countries with the most GDPR Data Breaches. Figures by Statista.

Where online child abuse images are hosted

Europe has overtaken North America as the continent hosting the largest number of child sexual abuse images and videos on the web



Where online child abuse images are hosted. Figure by IWF, infographic by BBC.

Contributions

21 February

Contribution to the Annual report of the European Data Protection Board 2019.

28 April

Contribution to the consultation on the Evaluation and review of the General Data Protection Regulation.

17 July

Contribution to the consultation on an Action plan for a comprehensive Union policy on preventing money laundering and terrorist financing.

7 December

Contribution to the consultation on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024.

Events

31 January

Visit of the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission to the Court of Justice of the EU.

19 May

2nd annual meeting of Data Protection Experts of EU Bishops' Conferences.

Legal Affairs Commission

The COMECE Legal Affairs Commission is presided since 2014 by H.E. Mgr. Theodorus C.M. Hoogenboom (Dutch Bishops' Conference) and meets twice a year, gathering legal experts mandated by the EU Bishops' Conferences.

The Commission focuses on legal questions related to files such as Article 17 TFEU, non-discrimination in and outside employment, data protection, freedom of religion inside the EU, rights and protection of children, anti-money laundering policies.

President: Mgr. Theodorus C.M. Hoogenboom

Secretary: Alessandro Calcagno



During the 2020 lockdown, faithful from across the EU were not able to attend mass.

© Photo: MikeDatta/Shutterstock



A group photo of the members of the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission held at the COMECE Secretariat on 5th of March 2020. The meeting was chaired by H.E. Mgr. Hogenboom.

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“Europe must show solidarity with people in need, especially those affected by the COVID-19 crisis, in the spirit of the Founding fathers of Europe [...]”

Mgr. Antoine Hérouard

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Following its January 2020 Communication ‘A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions’, the European Commission launched a number of actions to put forward Social Europe. In March, the COVID-19 pandemic struck worldwide, causing tremendous human tragedy, and impacting our society and the economy as a whole. The EU reacted with the largest recovery plan ever seen in our History.

Against a “culture of waste” and “indifference”, Pope Francis called on numerous occasions for integral ecology and fraternal unity in Europe and in the world. The COMECE Social Affairs Commission insisted on the need to put ecological, social and contributive justice at the heart of the recovery to leave no one behind. After long-lasting negotiations at the EU-level, the year ended with the final adoption of the EU long-term budget 2021-2027, a sign of solidarity for people who suffered the most from the crisis.

Youth policies: The call for integral ecology

Launched in April 2019, the COMECE Youth Platform gathers over 10 European catholic youth networks and provides a space to share good practices, opportunities for training and capacity building, as well as to strengthen synergies in our advocacy work for the Common Good. In light of the ongoing environmental crisis and inspired by Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* Encyclical Letter, members of the Platform highlighted the importance of conversion and solidarity, listening both to the “cry of the earth” and to the “cry of the poor”.



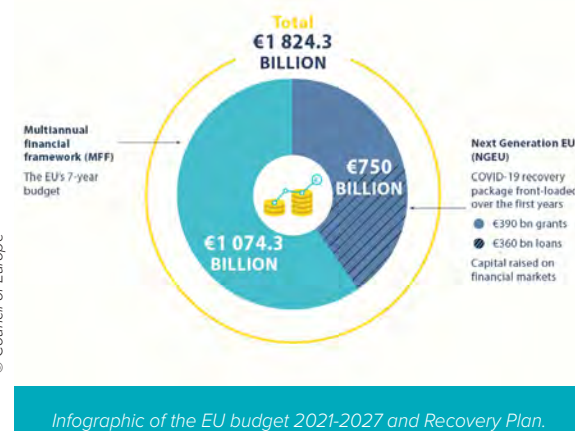
The Platform developed a particular interest on the European Green Deal to support the ecological and social transitions while recovering from the COVID-19 crisis and prepare a better future for the next generations. After a meeting with the Cabinet of the European Commission’s Vice-President Frans Timmermans, the Platform is now working on an inter-faith youth initiative on the Green Deal, foreseen in Autumn 2021.

COVID-19: The call for a just recovery

In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, on 27 May 2020 the European Commission put forward a proposal for a major recovery plan. Amounting €1.8 trillion, it will be the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget. The EU recovery plan is based on the EU long-term budget (€1.074 trillion), boosted by NextGenerationEU (€750 billion), a temporary recovery instrument to help repair the immediate economic and social damage of the pandemic.

In the statement *Let Europe recover through justice*, released on 28 May, the COMECE Social Affairs Commission, inspired by Pope Francis’ call for fraternal unity, urged the EU and its Member States to work toward “an agreement that helps Europe to recover through ecological, social and contributive justice”. The Commission met on 30 November 2020 to assess the socio-economic

© Council of Europe



implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and explore possible ways for a full and fair EU recovery in light of Pope Francis’ call.

European Pillar of Social Rights

In the midsts of the COVID-19 pandemic and transformative changes in the labour market, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in a coordinated manner across EU social policies is now more important than ever to reinforce Europe’s social market economy, and ensure just transitions for all. COMECE contributed to the European Commission’s consultation on the implementation of the EPSR and made five recommendations, some of which were reflected in the Action Plan presented in March 2021.

As founder and permanent member of the European Sunday Alliance, COMECE is raising awareness of the unique value of a day of synchronized free time. As an Alliance, we contributed to this consultation and called on the European Commission to support implementing principles 9 (work-life balance) and 10 (healthy and safe work environments) of the Pillar by tabling a proposal for a directive on a right to disconnect which includes a right to a common day of rest. This day would enhance the sense of community in our society and give the space needed to experience social friendship and fraternity as members of one human family.



© Social Platform

Future of Work

In-work poverty is on the rise in the EU, reaching almost 10% of workers. The share of low-wage workers and wage inequality have increased. The COVID-19 crisis particularly affected low-wage workers. On 28 October 2020, the European Commission proposed an EU Directive to create a framework to improve the adequacy of minimum wages and the access of workers to minimum wage protection. In this context, the COMECE Social Affairs Commission held a debate on 1st December 2020 with delegates from the European Commission, the European Trade Union Institute, and UNIAPAC, stressing the need to ensure decent working conditions while reducing in-work poverty in order to preserve human dignity and promote a sustainable and inclusive economic recovery.

The COMECE Commission also invited Eurofound to reflect on how to respond to challenges in the area of the future of work, especially those caused by the digitalization of our economy, and to ensure better working conditions for all, including platform workers. The COVID-19 pandemic brought more awareness on the right to disconnect with increased teleworking. Adapting existing rules to the new world of work is necessary, and people in new or non-standard forms of work should not be left behind. In 2021 the COMECE Commission will be working on a European Commission's initiative on Platform workers to improve their working conditions.



In the following up of the Reflection on the Future of Work, on 27-28 January 2020 COMECE hosted a 2-day capacity-building gathering Catholic-inspired organisations to discuss possible ways to improve people's working conditions in the global value chain.

Contributions

30 November

Contribution to the European Commission Public consultation towards implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.

30 November

Contribution of the European Sunday Alliance to the European Commission's consultation on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

26 October

Statement of Bishop Hérouard, President of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission, at the Catholic University of Portugal on "Europe in the Fair Ecological Transition".

28 May

Statement of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission: "Let Europe recover through Justice".

6 April

Publication of the list of main EU solidarity measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

10 March

Recommendation paper on "Inclusive Youth and Education Programme".

Events

27-28 January

Catholic NGOs and COMECE on human rights violations in a globalised economy.

4 March

Conference to present the recommendation paper for a more inclusive EU Youth & Education Programmes. Event organised by COMECE Youth Platform members, Don Bosco Youth-Net, together with Caritas Germany and the Bavarian Youth Council.

10 July

Meeting of the COMECE Youth Platform with the Cabinet of European Commission's Vice President Frans Timmermans on the European Green Deal. Focus on youth participation, the future of Education, youth mobility, the changing world of work, and climate justice.

16 September

Meeting of the COMECE Youth Platform: debrief on the meeting with the Cabinet of EC Vice President Timmermans.

22 September

Meeting of the European Sunday Alliance Steering Group. Developing advocacy activities to promote a common day of rest in the EU."

16 November

The COMECE Youth Platform reflected on future projects, including an interfaith youth initiative on the European Green Deal.

27 November

Meeting of the European Sunday Alliance Steering Group. Review of the joint contribution to the European Commission on the European Pillar of Social Rights ahead of the launch of its Action Plan".

17 December

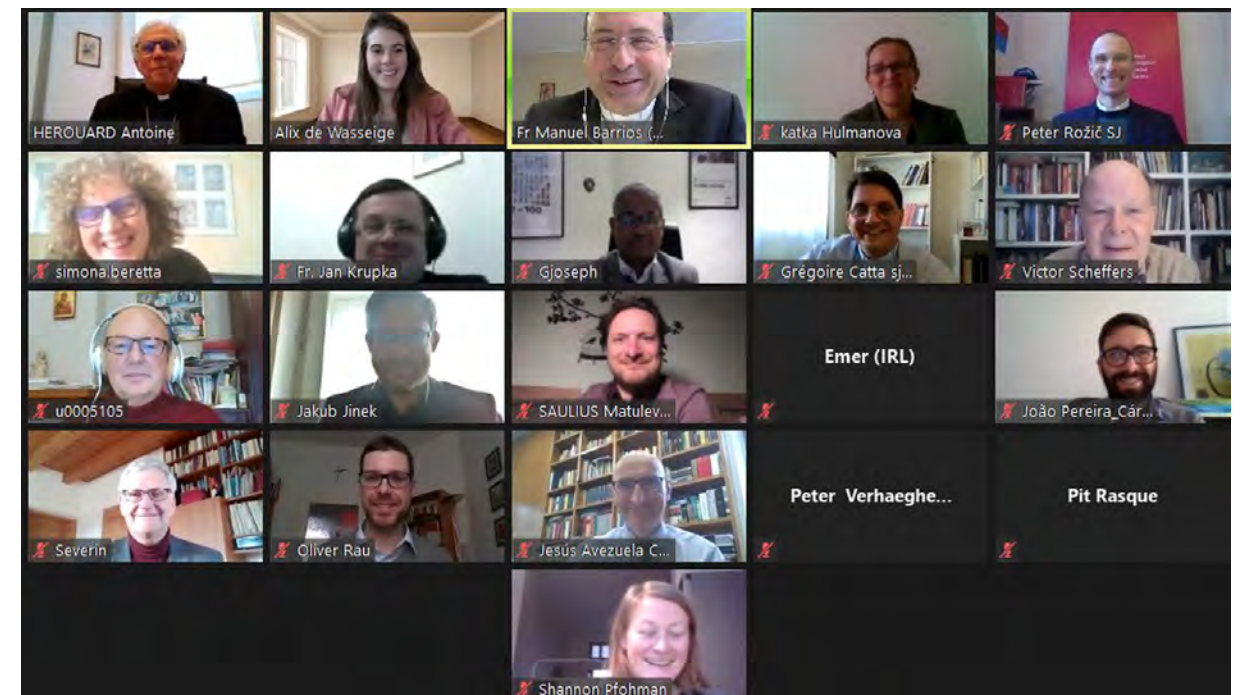
Meeting of the European Sunday Alliance Steering Group. Preparing a video campaign and a joint statement in view of the of the International Day for a work-free Sunday".

Social Affairs Commission

The Commission monitors and prepares statements, contributions and activities related to EU social and economic policies. Under the chairmanship of Mgr. Antoine Hérouard (France), the Commission met on two occasions (May and November/December) to analyse the EU recovery package and reflect on ways to reconcile the digital, ecological and social transitions to the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, to discuss on the challenges in the area of the future of work and to promote ecological, social and contributing justice.

President: Mgr. Antoine Hérouard

Secretary: Alix de Wasseige



Screenshot of the Social Affairs Commission gathered in a digital format on 30 November and 1 December 2020.

“The European Union is presently facing an epochal challenge, on which will depend not only its future but that of the whole world [...]”

Mgr. Rimantas Norvila

EXTERNAL ACTION

Pope Francis has repeatedly encouraged efforts to prepare the post-COVID-19 future, one that is characterised by more solidarity, justice, trust, peaceful cooperation, and the care for Creation.

In the spirit of the recent Papal Encyclical Fratelli tutti, COMECE focused its EU External Affairs advocacy initiatives in 2020 on the Union’s role in the promotion of a true global community based on multilateral dialogue and cooperative partnerships.

For a people-centred, just, and responsible EU-Africa partnership

Africa is Europe’s natural partner. Our relationship is marked by a shared history, geographical proximity, and strong socio-economic ties. As the leaders of the European Union and the African Union were preparing for their 6th joint Summit, COMECE, together with the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), elaborated a contribution on the future EU-Africa partnership.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating consequences, the Presidents of COMECE and SECAM, respectively H.Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ and H.Em. Card. Philippe Nakellentuba Ouédraogo, expressed concern for the most vulnerable persons and families on both continents. They encouraged European and African policy-makers to orient their work on the principles of human dignity and solidarity, with an emphasis on the preferential option for the poor and the care for Creation.

Together with its Catholic partners, COMECE also hosted a webinar on the role of local communities in fostering human security and resilience in the future EU-Africa partnership, highlighting the need for placing persons, families, and communities at the centre of development and peace policies.

In cooperation with different faith communities from Europe and Africa, COMECE has also launched a series of dialogues on how food security could be enhanced in the future EU-Africa policy framework, by involving local actors in the creation of sustainable food systems.



COMECE President H. Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ and H. Em. Card. Philippe Nakellentuba Ouédraogo, during an on-line exchange on the EU-Africa partnership. (10 June 2020)

Orienting the EU towards promotion of human security and peace

In mid-2020, the EU has launched the reflection process on a “Strategic Compass” for its security and defence policy. In view of enhancing the protection of citizens against emerging security challenges and contributing to a peaceful resolution of crises in the Union’s neighbourhood, the EU aims to define its strategic objectives in consultation with Member States by early 2022. COMECE has been advocating that these long-term goals be oriented towards human security and sustainable peace, by pursuing an integral approach across different policy areas and engaging with a broad range of stakeholders, including religious actors who can provide important contributions to conflict prevention, mediation as well as reconciliation.



COMECE General Secretary, Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, with a delegation of the Albanian Bishops’ Conference and high-level EU representatives. (3-4 February 2020)

In the context of fostering stability in the South-East Europe region, a delegation of Albanian Bishops addressed with high-level EU representatives, the positive contribution of Church actors to the process of European integration. The meeting, held in February 2020, was facilitated by COMECE.

“For a people-centred, sustainable and multilateral EU Arctic policy”

Being home to over four million people, including over 40 different indigenous ethnic groups and half a million EU citizens, the Arctic region is being increasingly recognised as central to human and planetary survival, while becoming a focal point of economic and geopolitical competition. In the context of the current developments impacting this region, the European Union launched a review of its Arctic policy framework to address the interconnected ecological, socio-economic, human rights and geopolitical challenges.

Participating in the pertinent EU public consultation, COMECE, together with Justice & Peace Europe, elaborated a contribution in dialogue with regional Church actors. We urged that the human dimension should have a stronger articulation in the future EU-Arctic partnership including health, safety and socio-economic empowerment of local communities and migrant workers present in the region.



Eskimo woman wearing traditional clothing.

Cooperation with the Vatican COVID-19 Commission

COMECE has taken an active part in the Security Taskforce of the Vatican COVID-19 Commission initiated by Pope Francis to express the Church's concern for the human family facing the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborate proposals for new approaches to socio-economic and political questions. COMECE has provided regular analysis from an EU perspective and discussed pertinent policy recommendations with leading Church and academic actors from all over the world on issues such as cybersecurity, peacebuilding, and nuclear disarmament. In its intervention at the Vatican-sponsored digital event on "A world free from nuclear weapons", COMECE encouraged the EU to play an active part in creating the conditions for a more peaceful world by opening new ways of dialogue and cooperation to advance global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.



A COMECE representative during the digital event held by the Vatican, "A World free of nuclear weapons". (16 December 2020)

Contributions

1 February

"Brexit will not succeed in shattering the EU-UK fraternal relations", statement of the COMECE Standing Committee on Brexit.

10 June

"Justice shall flourish and fullness of peace for ever", joint COMECE-SECAM contribution in view of the 6th EU-Africa Summit.

22 June

"U.S. and European Bishops Offer Prayers for U.S. - Russia Arms Control Meeting", joint statement of H.E. Mgr. Rimantas Norvila, President of the COMECE Commission on the EU External Relations, and Bishop David J. Malloy, Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace.

6 July

"Now more than ever, we need mandatory supply chain due diligence to stop corporate abuse and guarantee global solidarity", statement co-signed by H.Em. Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, President of COMECE, and other Bishop Delegates to COMECE.

13 November

"Let us listen to the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth", joint COMECE-Justice & Peace Europe contribution on the future EU Arctic policy.

Events

23 January

Dialogue meeting between Churches, faith-based actors, as well as international and European policy-makers. The event was organised by COMECE and Caritas Europa and focused on ways to enhance the partnership among actors working in the field of human development.

3-4 February

Study visit of Albanian Bishops to Brussels and dialogue meetings with high-level EU and Church representatives. The visit was organised by COMECE in the context of contributing to the EU enlargement policy.

8 July

Inter-faith and inter-continental online dialogue on food security in the future EU-Africa partnership, organised by COMECE together with other faith actors.

15 October

Webinar "Fostering human security and resilience in the future EU-Africa partnership – The role of local communities", organised by COMECE and its Catholic Brussels-based partners.

16 December

Vatican-sponsored webinar "A world free from nuclear weapons" with Church and academic leaders. The event featured the COMECE contribution on a European perspective on nuclear disarmament.



Due to oil extraction activities around the world, more and more natural environments are being polluted, damaging local communities, together with fauna and flora.

Commission on the External Relations of the EU

Under the chairmanship of H.E. Mgr. Rimantas Norvila (Lithuania), the COMECE Commission on the EU External Relations gathered online on 29 September 2020 to discuss the Union's priorities on the global stage during the COVID-19 pandemic together with EU and Church representatives. In an exchange with members of the European Parliament, the COMECE Commission stressed the need for a people-centred and value-based approach to the EU's humanitarian, development, trade, and security policies, which has become even more urgent due to the socio-economic impact posed by COVID-19.

The Commission provides a Catholic contribution to policies in areas of EU's External Action, such as Security & Defence, Sustainable Development, Neighborhood, Human Rights and Trade.

President: Mgr. Rimantas Norvila

Secretary: Marek Misak



Meeting of the COMECE Commission on the External Relations of the EU held in digital form. (29 September 2020)

“Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past, it is [...] a living, dynamic and participatory present reality.”

Pope Francis

EDUCATION & CULTURE

Since September 2020, COMECE has become more engaged with EU policies on Culture and Education than ever before. The focus has been to monitor current policies at EU level while reinforcing our network and cooperation with the EU Bishops’ Conferences.



Screenshot of the digital meeting of culture and education experts of the EU Bishops’ Conferences gathered for the first time by COMECE on 4th of December 2020.

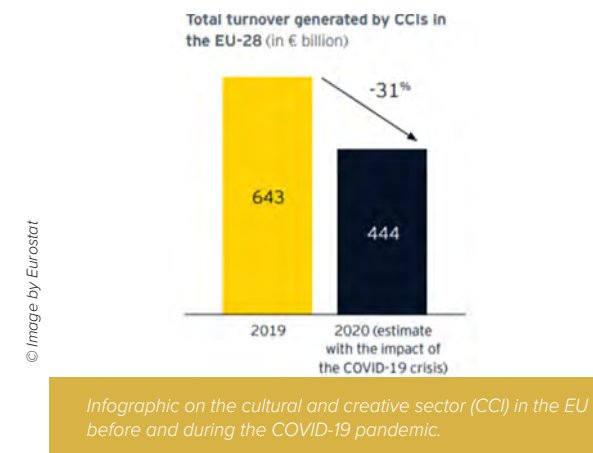
In view of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and in light of Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* and the *Global Compact on Education*, COMECE promoted an integral and inclusive education for all and a culture of encounter. Part of the work was also carried out in collaboration with other faith-based and non-faith-based organisations on shared topics of interest and for the promotion of the Common Good.

Promoting integral and inclusive Education for all

COMECE followed various policies and initiatives promoted by the EU institutions, particularly the European Education Area, digital education and various aspects of the European Skills Agenda, Vocational Education and Training and the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme. In this respect, COMECE published, together with its partners, *Recommendations towards inclusive Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes*.

COMECE also focused its work on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. In October 2020, Pope Francis promoted the *Global Compact on Education* where he spoke of an “educational catastrophe” caused by the health and social crisis. The result? 1.6 billion learners forced to stay home from school at the beginning of the pandemic and around 24 million pupils expected to drop out of school in the future.

Gathered for the first time in December 2020 in a virtual meeting, COMECE brought together a group of Experts on Culture and Education of the EU Bishops’ Conferences to listen to the voices and concerns of the EU Episcopates. During the meeting, participants exchanged on questions related to Religious Education, cultural dialogue, and religious heritage. COMECE will closely follow the next steps of the EU institutions in such areas and will work with its partners to promote the vision of the Catholic Church in the area of Education.

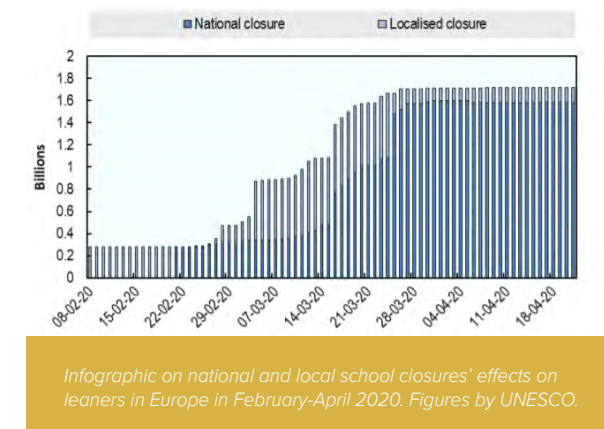


Culture for dialogue and ecological conversion

COMECE monitored the EU culture-related policies, especially the Creative Europe Programme, which was allocated an increased budget of €2.4 bn for the next 7-year term, contributing to meet the needs of the Cultural and Creative Sector, heavily hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (see below).

In the last months of 2020, COMECE welcomed the European Commission’s initiative of the New European Bauhaus. Its aim is to make the European Green Deal closer to European citizens through a cultural movement that stems from the ideas, projects and experiences of all EU stakeholders. The interdisciplinarity of the Commission’s initiative calls for a cultural change that affects all dimensions of our lives, starting from the places in which we live, to find innovative and creative ways to increase the sustainability of our lifestyle.

COMECE will keep on following the implementation of the *Creative Europe Programme*, the *New European Bauhaus* and, in light of Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter “*Laudato Si’*”, work to foster an integral ecology for the care of our common home through the inclusion and participation of all. Meanwhile, in order to intensify its actions on cultural and religious heritage, COMECE will work with the EU Bishops’ Conferences and their experts on promoting Christian heritage and a culture of openness and dialogue in the EU diverse cultural landscape.



Contributions

4 March

Recommendations towards inclusive Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes.

Events

4 March

Working Lunch presentation of recommendations on “*Inclusive Youth and Education Programmes*”. Organised together with Don Bosco Youth-Net, Caritas Germany, and the Bavarian Youth Council.

4 December

Virtual meeting with Experts on Culture and Education of the EU Bishops’ Conferences.

“Religious freedom is a fundamental right and a core value of the EU, which is under threat in many parts of the world”

Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the right to freedom of religion is facing new challenges in the world and its public expression is undergoing more oppressive restrictions.

COMECE has been active in denouncing attacks against religious freedom and religious communities - in Mozambique, the Sahel Region, West Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East - to the EU institutions, including the EEAS and the EU Representative on Human Rights.

Islamic terrorism is gaining momentum in Nigeria, with a risk of destabilisation of Western Africa. In Northern Mozambique a jihadist movement is attacking civilians, including Christians, and it could also heavily impact the neighbouring countries.

On the other hand, as denounced by the Holy See, new trends that undermine religious freedom have emerged, in particular certain ideological interpretation of human rights. The EU should give centrality to the protection and promotion, in its integrity and all its dimensions, of this cornerstone freedom in its external policies, including its development and cooperation work.



Christian women praying at the Holy Dormition Pskov-Pechersky Monastery.

© Photo: Alexander Gafarro/Shutterstock

The EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion's mandate came to term in October 2019 and the post remained vacant during 2020. COMECE called the EU to reinforce the mandate and resources allocated to this mechanism.

Nigeria

Following a call of COMECE to the international community on May 2020 to stop the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, H.Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, President of COMECE, expressed his solidarity to the persecuted Christian communities under threat by terrorist groups - mostly, Boko Haram and jihadist Fulani militias.

Moreover, the Joint Statement of the Presidents of COMECE and SECAM in view of the 6th EU-Africa Summit (10 June), urged the EU to “*abstain from promoting concepts and practices which are not in line with internationally recognised human rights and dignity, and that contradict the identity, religious beliefs, culture, traditions, values and life of local communities in African partner countries*” and “*to ensure the fundamental right to religious freedom*”.



Christians praying in Anambra, Nigeria.

© Photo: Gpallord-Creativity/Shutterstock

Burkina Faso

In a similar context marked by an intense jihadist activity carried out particularly against Christians, COMECE called on the EU to support the country's authorities, as well as Churches and religious actors, to enhance mutual respect between all communities and prevent clashes and conflicts. Echoing the message of the Bishop of Dori, COMECE denounced the systematic elimination of the Christian presence in some parts of the country.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Since September 2020, the region has been repeatedly experiencing renewed waves of violence, leading to the loss of lives of many civilians and to the destruction of homes, basic infrastructures, and places of worship.

COMECE expressed concerns about the situation in the South Caucasus, currently marked by fragile truces interrupted by armed clashes, causing not only grave material damage, but also spiritual suffering. In this context, COMECE appealed to the EU to ensure the protection of places of worship and the safety of all local communities.

EU's Eastern partners

As part of the COMECE contribution to the EU public consultation, COMECE urged the European Union to work together with the six regional partners to ensure religious freedom by protecting and promoting the rights of all ethnic and religious components present in the region on the basis of the concept of common citizenship. According to COMECE, the future Eastern Partnership should protect religious heritage and ensure religious and cultural diversity, as well as supporting religious actors in areas such as education, healthcare, and humanitarian aid, including access to EU funding.



Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

© Photo: murattelloglu/Shutterstock

Turkey

Following the decision of the country's highest administrative court, the Council of State, to allow the change of status of World Heritage Monument and former Basilica Hagia Sophia from a museum to a Muslim temple, COMECE released a statement considering the decision as a "blow to interreligious dialogue". According to a 2019 European Commission report, Turkey has "a serious problem", particularly in relation to hate speech and threats directed against national, ethnic, and religious minorities.

Middle East

After more than 10 years of bloody conflict, the situation has become unsustainable for the people in Syria. Humanitarian actors, including Churches and religious communities, are facing enormous obstacles to carry out their activities due to the sanctions imposed upon the country by the European Union and other international actors, making it hard to import medical equipment and medicines and to receive financial transfers.

In the context of the deadly explosion occurred in the port of Beirut in August 2020 and the deep economic and institutional crisis that's been marking Lebanon for the past few years, COMECE urged the EU to continue working with the government and its people, including local Churches and religious communities, so as to overcome the current critical situation, improve the wellbeing of the people and ensure religious diversity - inherent to the identity of the country.



Contributions

17 February

Interfaith Meeting of Sant'Egidio.

20 May

Letter to the President of the European Commission requesting the renewal of the EU Special Envoy on Religious Freedom in third countries.

2 July

COMECE President's letter of solidarity with the Christian communities in Nigeria.

7 July

Participation in the CEC Summer School on Human Rights. Focus: rights of minorities in times of COVID-19.

16 July

Statement of the Secretary General of COMECE on the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

17 July

Meeting with the EU Representative on Human Rights to discuss common human rights concerns, including religious freedom in third countries.

30 July

G-20 Interfaith Forum, European Regional Consultation, Key-Expert and Contributor to the Final Recommendations.

Events

23 January

"Dialogue on EU Partnership with Churches for Development", co-organized with Caritas Europa.

11 November

Conference on "Humanitarian exceptions to EU sanctions against Syria: why they don't work out?" held at the European Parliament by COMECE, along with the EPP Unit on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, CROCEU and CEC.

COMECE ASSEMBLIES

and other major Bishops' meetings

Spring Assembly, 25-27 March 2020 (cancelled)

In the context of the 40th anniversary of COMECE, the Spring Assembly of EU Bishops was to celebrate the special occasion with a reception with the participation of H. Em. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness, and Ms Mairead McGuinness, Vice-President of the European Parliament and responsible of Article 17 TFEU for the same institution.

In light of the Coronavirus outbreak and in order to uphold the precautionary measures recommended by health authorities to limit the spread of the virus, H. Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, President of COMECE, in concertation with the Standing Committee, decided to cancel the Assembly and postpone COMECE's anniversary celebration event.



Screenshot taken during the intervention of Cardinal Parolin in the COMECE Autumn Assembly, which was held in digital format.

Autumn Assembly, 28-29 October 2020 (on-line)

Considering the worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to avoid large physical gatherings, the Autumn Assembly took place for the first time in digital format. In this setting, H. Em. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of His Holiness, joined COMECE's Bishops and addressed them on the crucial role of the Catholic Church in Europe, exchanging on some of the EU's most pressing challenges. On the eve of the Assembly, Pope Francis wrote a letter to H. Em. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of his Holiness, defining his vision of Europe, calling on all of us to rediscover the path of fraternity that inspired and guided the founders of modern Europe.



Screenshot taken during the Autumn Assembly. In the picture: COMECE bishops and members of the Secretariat.

Meeting of the General Secretaries of EU Bishops, 30 January 2020

For the third consecutive year, the General Secretaries of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU gathered in Brussels to nurture their effective cooperation with COMECE in view of a strong contribution to the dialogue with the EU institutions. Participants analysed the new setting of the European institutions following the last EU elections held in May 2019 and exchanged on the working programme of the Von der Leyen's Commission, with a particular focus on migration and asylum, youth policies and external relations of the EU.



Sr. Anna Mirijam Kaschner, General Secretary of the Scandinavian Bishops' Conference. Photo taken during the meeting of the General Secretaries of EU Bishops held at COMECE.

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Meeting of the Presidents of EU Bishops, 30 September 2020

Upon COMECE initiative, EU Bishops' Conferences Presidents gathered for the first time in digital format, to exchange on the most urgent EU-level challenges. Their discussion focused on the EU Pact on Migration proposed by the EU Commission and on the Recovery Fund. The meeting put the bases for the message "Regaining hope and solidarity", which was released in November 2020 and which calls on the EU and national governments to face the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery plan in solidarity and hope, in unity and dialogue, with trust and responsibility.



General Secretaries of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU gathered in Brussels.

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Screenshot of the digital meeting of the Presidents of the EU Bishops.

COMECE PRESIDENCY

According to the statute of COMECE, the Presidency is composed of a President and four Vice-Presidents elected by the COMECE Assembly from among its members. They are representatives of the geographical distribution of the Episcopates of the European Union. Their mandate lasts for a period of five years and is renewable only once.

The current Presidency:

- President: Card. Hollerich (Luxembourg)
- First Vice-President: Mgr. Crociata (Italy)
- Vice-President: Mgr. Treanor (Ireland)
- Vice-President: Mgr. Vokál (Czech Republic)
- Vice-President: Mgr. Overbeck (Germany)



Card. Hollerich (Luxembourg)



Mgr. Crociata (Italy)



Mgr. Treanor (Ireland)



Mgr. Vokál (Czech Republic)




Mgr. Overbeck (Germany)

BISHOPS DELEGATED TO COMECE


COMECE members are the Episcopal Conferences in the EU. Each member Bishops' Conference appoints a delegate Bishop to the Assembly of COMECE. A single Bishop represents Denmark, Finland, Island, Norway and Sweden.

H.E. Mgr. Lodewijk AERTS

 Bishop of Bruges (Belgium)




H.E. Mgr. Virgil BERCEA

 Bishop of Oradea Mare/Gran Varadino (Romania)




H.E. Mgr. Nuno BRÁS DA SILVA MARTINS

 Bishop of Funchal (Portugal)




H.E. Mgr. Mariano CROCIATA

 Bishop of Latina (Italy)



H.E. Mgr. Ferenc CSERHÁTI

 Auxiliary Bishop of Esztergom-Budapest (Hungary)




H.E. Mgr. Joseph GALEA-CURMI

 Auxiliary Bishop of Malta (Malta)




H.E. Mgr. Adolfo GONZÁLEZ MONTES

 Bishop of Almería (Spain)




H.E. Mgr. Jozef HAL'KO

 Auxiliary Bishop of Bratislava (Slovakia)




H.E. Mgr. Antoine HÉROUARD

 Auxiliary Bishop of Lille (France)




H.E. Mgr. Jean-Claude HOLLERICH

 Archbishop of Luxembourg (Luxembourg)




H.E. Mgr. Theodorus C.M. HOOGENBOOM

 Auxiliary Bishop of Utrecht (The Netherlands)




H.E. Mgr. Vjekoslav HUZJAK

 Bishop of Bjelovar-Križevci (Croatia)



H.E. Mgr. Philippe JOURDAN

 Apostolic Administrator of Estonia




H.E. Mgr. Czesław KOZON

 Bishop of Copenhagen (Nordic Bishops' Conference)




H.E. Mgr. Manuel NIN, O.S.B.

 Apostolic Exarch to the Greek Byzantine Catholic Church (Greece)




H.E. Mgr. Rimantas NORVILA

 Bishop of Vilkaiviškis (Lithuania)




H.E. Mgr. Franz-Josef OVERBECK

 Bishop of Essen and Military Bishop (Germany)




H.E. Mgr. Christo PROYKOV

 Apostolic Exarch of Sofia (Bulgaria)



H.E. Mgr. Youssef SOUEIF

 Archbishop of the Maronites (Cyprus)




H.E. Mgr. Zbignevs STANKEVIČS

 Metropolitan Archbishop of Riga (Latvia)




H.E. Mgr. Janusz STEPNOWSKI

 Bishop of Łomża (Poland)




H.E. Mgr. Franc ŠUŠTAR

 Auxiliary Bishop of Ljubljana (Slovenia)



H.E. Mgr. Noel TREANOR

 Bishop of Down and Connor (Ireland)



H.E. Mgr. Jan VOKÁL

 Bishop of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic)




H.E. Mgr. Ägidius Johann ZSIFKOVICS

 Bishop of Eisenstadt (Austria)




Observers

H.E. Mgr. Markus BÜCHEL

 Bishop of St-Gallen (Switzerland)




H.E. Mgr. Hugh (Edward) GILBERT, O.S.B.

 Bishop of Aberdeen (Scotland)




H.E. Mgr. Stanislav HOČEVAR

 Archbishop of Belgrade (Serbia)



H.E. Mgr. Nicholas HUDSON

 Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster (England and Wales)



SECRETARIAT STAFF

The Secretariat ensures the continuity of COMECE's work. Its headquarter is in Brussels. A small team monitors and analyses developments in EU policies and initiatives and strives to contribute to the relevant processes. The Secretariat reports to the Standing Committee and the Assembly.

FR. MANUEL ENRIQUE BARRIOS PRIETO
General Secretary

ALESSANDRO CALCAGNO
Assistant General Secretary and Legal Advisor for Fundamental Rights and Article 17 TFEU issues

MICHAEL KUHN
Senior Advisor in charge of Ecology & Sustainability

JOSÉ-LUIS BAZÁN
Legal Advisor for Migration and Asylum, and Religious Freedom

FRIEDERIKE LADENBURGER
Legal Advisor for Ethics, Research and Health

MAREK MISAK
Policy Advisor for External Relations

ALIX DE WASSEIGE
Policy Advisor for Social & Economic Affairs and Youth Policy

EMILIO DOGLIANI
Policy Advisor for Culture and Education

STEFAN LUNTE
General Secretary of Justice & Peace Europe

MAUD OGER
Assistant to the General Secretary

ALESSANDRO DI MAIO
Press & Communications Manager

CAROLINA DUCOING
Office Manager

ALBERT AREVALO
Support staff

CYNTHIA QUIJANO AQUINO
Support staff

OLIVIER COEVOET
Volunteer

The COMECE Bishops and Secretariat wish to thank **Markus Vennewald** for the work he has accomplished.

The Secretariat thanks the voluntary intern that assisted in the course of the year:

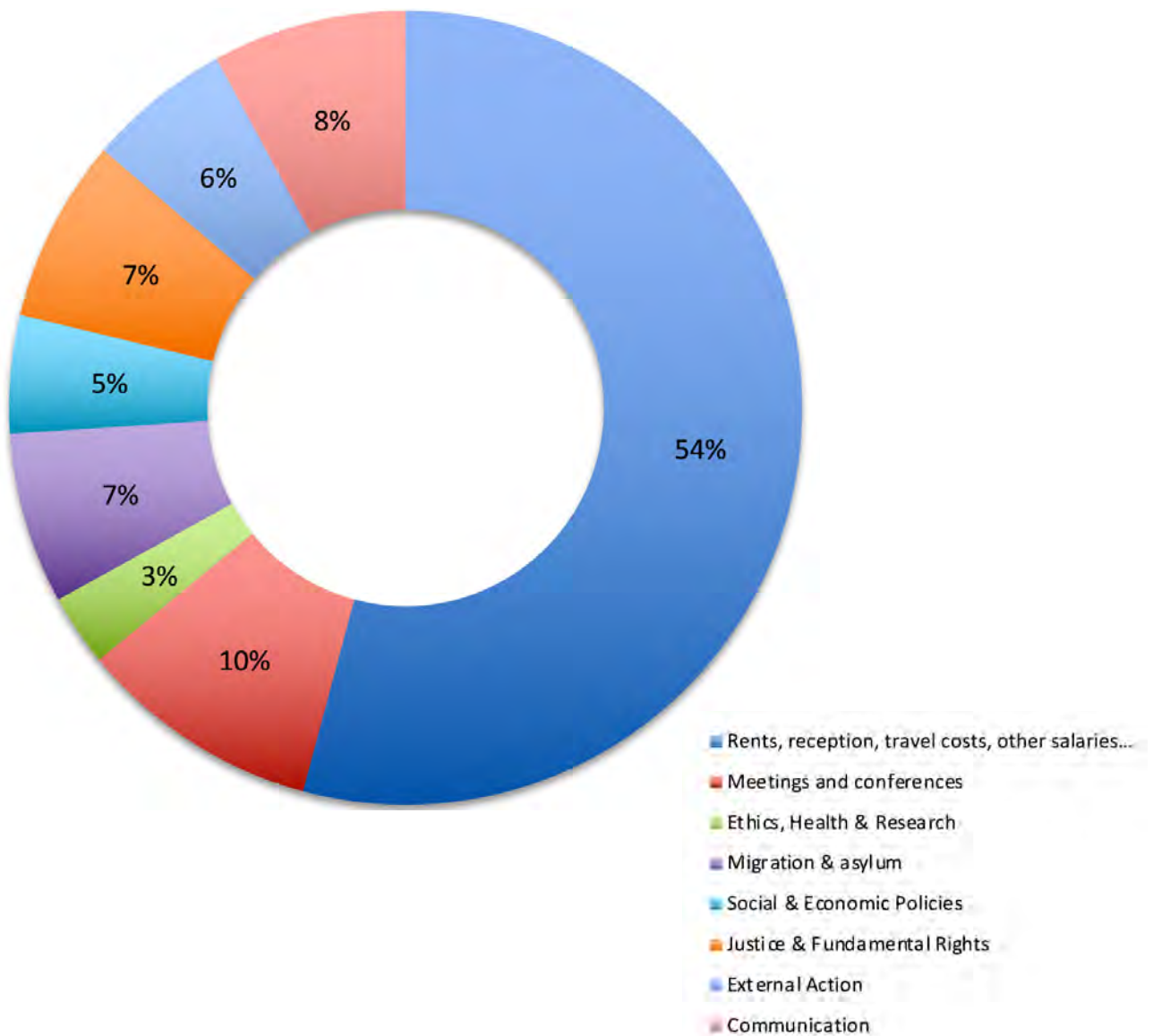
Marta Fernández de Córdoba Botia (Spain)

FINANCES

Total expenditure: **1.028.312 €**

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www.comece.eu

19, Square de Meeûs, B-1050 Brussels

Tel. +32 (2) 235 05 10

Fax +32 (2) 230 33 34

Mail: comece@comece.eu

