



LET EUROPE RECOVER THROUGH JUSTICE

Reaction of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission to the proposed recovery plan

“At this moment in which unity is very necessary between ourselves and between nations, we pray today for Europe, so that Europe might succeed in creating this fraternal unity dreamt of by the founding fathers of the European Union.”

Pope Francis, Mass at Casa Santa Marta, 22 April 2020

The European project is the visionary response to the human tragedy of a brutal war. A strong sense of belonging to each other and a clear vision served as inspiration for the founding fathers to create a community that today has become the EU. Today, amidst a new tragedy - the COVID-19 pandemic - we call the EU to renew the spirit of solidarity and to agree on a recovery plan that puts the question of justice at its centre.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have hit the European Union unexpectedly and brutally. The sudden outbreak has exposed our vulnerability to public health crises as well as the fragility and weaknesses of the EU to act in times of crisis.

The failure to show solidarity, the unilateral border closures and the self-centric actions by members states in March have caused disappointment amongst many citizens about the European project. While the consequences have revealed the deficiency of the EU to live up to its values in times of crisis, the recovery plan, as recently proposed by the European Commission, sets out a clear perspective for a Europe that aims to grow united. A swift agreement on an ambitious recovery plan would be a visible sign that the EU and its member states have returned to the track of solidarity. It would complement the many immediate initiatives that the EU has taken in response to the crisis, including the first rescue package, the sudden reactions of the European Central Bank and the joint roadmaps for recovery and the lifting of COVID-19 containment measures.

The idea for a recovery instrument that enables the EU Commission to raise 750 billion euros in the capital markets to be allocated to member states in need through grants (500 billion euros) and loans (250 billion euros) follows the call of Pope Francis’s Easter Message in April for *“further proof of solidarity, also by turning to innovative solutions”*¹. While we welcome the Franco-German initiative that already expressed its support to the idea, we call for a swift agreement among member states and the European Parliament on the recovery plan and the

¹ Pope Francis (2020) – Urbi et Orbi Message – Easter 2020:

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html

next multiannual financial framework (MFF). While the discussion should be directed to **the common good and guided by a spirit of solidarity**, the EU should aim for an agreement that helps Europe to recover through ecological, social and contributive justice.

- **Promote ecological justice:** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed both our dependence as well as our disastrous impact on a heavily fragile eco-system. A virus that causes a lung disease made us realise that we cannot live healthy on a sick and polluted planet. At the same time, the pandemic has shown us that it is not too late to act: pictures of less polluted water sources throughout European cities and scientific findings on a decrease in pollution are proof of the negative effects of humanity's industrial footprint.

The latter should encourage us to go beyond our current ambitions on the care of our common home. We should acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic is linked to the larger socio-ecological crisis that has become increasingly visible to us through climate change, biodiversity loss and its devastating consequences on the most vulnerable, and that a *“fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power”²*.

We cannot just rebuild our old models and re-establish our embedded habits but should seize this moment as an opportunity to work for radical change and reinforce our efforts towards integral development and innovative thinking towards the future. We therefore welcome the Commission's proposal to integrate the European Green Deal as an underpinning strategy into the recovery plan and call upon EU member states to translate their pledges towards climate neutrality and the care for the environment into tangible actions that will spur ecological conversion in Europe. This pandemic should be proof for us that urgent action is needed.

- **Promote social justice:** In negotiating and implementing the recovery plan and the MFF, the EU should care about and respect the needs of the most vulnerable in order to ensure social cohesion in Europe. Together, the European Parliament and the member states should aim for a reinforced EU long-term budget. The fight against climate change, COVID-19, poverty and inequalities requires an EU whose overall budget is aligned to its political priorities and values.

While the recovery instrument should be targeted to regions and citizens most in need, we call on the EU to also increase the funding in the already existing programmes targeted towards the poor, the homeless, migrants and asylum seekers. In parallel, the EU should prepare for the event that there will be no MFF agreement by January 2021 and thus work on a contingency plan that will extend the current financial framework by one year. A failure of the negotiations in due time will be to the detriment of the many vulnerable groups in Europe whose support rely on EU funding.

² Pope Francis (2015) – *Laudato si'*, 78: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

- **Promote contributive justice:** We should ensure that nobody is able to shy away from his or her responsibility to contribute to the recovery process in Europe. In response to this crisis, the EU should urgently curb the structures of “*corruption and wide-spread tax evasion, which have taken a world-wide dimension*”³ and enhance the framework for fair taxation in the EU. For too long, a group of member states has blocked or diluted Commission proposals that aimed to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. At the same time, this pandemic has revealed to everybody the importance of sound public infrastructures and services.

We call on the EU to close the legal loopholes that allow tax avoidance and to agree on a common corporate tax base. In addition, the EU should set up an EU-wide financial transaction tax and actively pursue negotiations for a fairer taxation model for the digital company at OECD level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused much pain and sorrow throughout Europe. The first failures by members states to show solidarity have fuelled disappointment about the European project and increased tensions. Let us find new hope for Europe in a joint recovery that expresses our renewed spirit of solidarity as well as our ambition to work for a just future. Let us act together, hope and pray that this crisis will be the beginning of a European recovery through justice.

³ Pope Francis (2013) – Evangelii Gaudium, 56:
http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html