



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Statement of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission

“LISTEN TO THE CRY OF THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS RECOVERY”

“Now there are only two kinds of people: those who care for someone who is hurting and those who pass by; those who bend down to help and those who look the other way and hurry off. Here, all our distinctions, labels and masks fall away: it is the moment of truth. Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others?”¹

Pope Francis

Introduction: Poverty in the EU at the age of COVID-19

Poverty and social exclusion have declined in the EU in the last decade. However, the ambitious social target of Europe 2020 of a reduction of 20 million people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was not met. In 2019, around 91 million people were **at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU**. This represents **about one in five persons** living in the EU. Further data shows that in 2020, around 10% of European workers were at risk of poverty, and about 5.5% of the EU population faced severe material difficulties (*Eurostat*) while nearly 34 million Europeans and families were unable to keep their homes warm².

In this context, the **COMECE Social Affairs Commission**, under the Chairmanship of [H.E. Msgr. Antoine Hérouard](#), calls on the EU institutions, EU leaders and all people of good will to listen to the ‘*cry of the poor*’ in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This paper aims to: 1) Take stock of the existing EU strategies to tackle poverty; 2) Report some actions of the Church to support people in poverty during the pandemic; And 3) bring its recommendations to the attention of the EU institutions and EU leaders.

The COVID-19 crisis has hindered any possibility to overcome a situation of poverty. And though there has not been an explosion of poverty, we can clearly see a **multiplication of situations of extreme fragility**,³ worsening the situation of people facing multiple challenges.

¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (2020), no. 70

² European Commission’s Action Plan EPSR, March 2020

³ Conseil National des politiques de Lutte contre la pauvreté et l’Exclusion sociale (CNLE), *La pauvreté démultipliée. Dimensions, processus et réponses*. Spring 2020-Spring 2021. Directed by Nicolas Duvoux and Michèle Lelièvre (mai 2021).

It is foreseeable that this crisis will lead to higher levels of financial and food insecurity, poverty, income inequality and precarious living conditions, at least in the short term⁴, creating situations of (over)-indebtedness in the long term. People in situations of **vulnerability**, including the retired, have been facing difficulties to pay their rent, to access healthcare and public social services, especially in the rural areas, and to pursue a dignified life. Many **homeless people** have been left behind during the pandemic with nowhere to go, as many shelters became full, and some even had to close their doors due to the lockdowns. In addition, some people have been unable to work legally, and the halt of face-to-face meetings have reinforced administrative burdens, negatively affecting job seekers. **People without legal status** were particularly hit by the crisis, with no possibility to carry on their informal jobs, and not receiving any compensations set up by the government for employees. Some **mothers and single parents**⁵ have also had to provide informal care to their children, while in parallel having to work. In some cases, they have stopped working, thus creating further interruptions in their income and pensions. Loneliness and mental health issues have also increased, as have ruptures within **families**, including increased domestic violence, degradation of **children and youth** education, isolation of **the elderly**, lack of job opportunities, especially for **people with disabilities, young and older workers, and migrants**.

At the same time, the unfair working conditions of **care workers**, agricultural workers and several other job sectors have come under focus during the pandemic, indicating how essential these workers are for society, but also highlighting major structural challenges, such as long working hours, low pay, limited access to Personal Protective Equipment materials and other sanitary measures⁶, etc. In this context, **early and universally accessible vaccination** is a priority of EU governments. They should make sure to reach out to the poor and most vulnerable people through innovative measures (e.g. close to door vaccination without appointment, “vaccibus”⁷ in bigger cities, etc).

Temporary national short-time work schemes supported by the EU’s ‘**SURE**⁸’ programme have helped unemployment to stay relatively low with a moderate increase, compared to the drop in economic activities (moving from 6.7% in 2019 to a projection of 7.6% in 2021⁹). However, temporary mechanisms will necessarily end, which could have a significant impact on employment in the coming months. People are expected to compensate income loss with loans, thus potentially reinforcing poverty traps and over indebtedness. In addition, people with non-standard forms of employment, short-term contracts and the self-employed were less protected, even if some of them received temporary targeted support. The **situation of young people** is particularly worrying and should be of primary concern. The EU youth unemployment rate moved from 15.2% (May 2019) to 17.3% (May 2021, *Eurostat*). Many

⁴ European Commission’s Action Plan EPSR, March 2020

⁵ <https://www.dbk.de/presse/aktuelles/meldung/6-armuts-und-reichtumsbericht-der-bundesregierung>

⁶ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/opinion/the-carers-in-our-own-homes-are-essential-workers-too/>

⁷ <https://www.bruxelles.be/venez-vous-faire-vacciner-dans-le-bus-vaccination>

⁸ SURE = The “European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency”

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-performance-and-forecasts/economic-forecasts/spring-2021-economic-forecast-rolling-sleeves_en

students who were living from part-time jobs have lost all their income. Young people looking for their first professional insertion have experienced a lot of difficulties to find jobs.

Although disparities between Member States exist, **many economic sectors suffered directly from the pandemic** (and in particular the sectors of tourism, hospitality, construction, meat processing, port, transport services, media and culture, etc.) whilst some experienced significant labour shortages. The **healthcare and social care sectors**, although not always directly economically impacted, has been severely affected by the crisis through the extended physical and emotional burden experienced by its workers. Many employees have had a burn-out, and some of them have been leaving their vocation for good. This phenomenon is to be taken seriously in already understaffed public sectors. Nevertheless, the EU social market economy reacted rapidly with an **unprecedented package of €1.8 trillion**, combining a long-term budget of €1100 billion for the period 2021-2027 and the historic temporary **EU recovery instrument ‘[NextGenerationEU](#)’** of €750 billion¹⁰. This intervention coupled with Member States’ national policies and a solid welfare system allowed to avoid a spiral of economic recession, unemployment, and increased poverty in the short run. The Spring 2021 Economic Forecast projects **that all Member States should see their economies return to pre-crisis levels by the end of 2022**, including a forecasted growth of the EU economy by 4.2% in 2021¹¹.

I. EU policies to tackle poverty

1.1. EU guiding strategy on poverty

The European Pillar of Social Rights’ Action Plan

Fighting poverty is one of the main social priorities of the EU. Already in 2017, the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** was proclaimed, setting twenty key principles towards a strong social Europe that is *“fair, inclusive and full of opportunity”* for all people. Fighting in-work poverty and child poverty was already part of the Social Pillar (Pillars 6 and 11)¹². In order to make words a reality and to fully implement social rights, the European Commission adopted its [Action Plan](#) on the EPSR on 4 March 2021, putting forward three headline targets. One of them sets the objective to **reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion “by at least 15 million by 2030”, of which at least 5 million should be children.**

We welcome the focus on children to provide them access to new opportunities and to contribute to **break the intergenerational cycle of poverty**, preventing that they become adults at risk of poverty or social exclusion and thus producing long-term systemic effects. **The poverty target however is not ambitious enough**¹³ as it will not allow the EU to reach the Sustainable Development Goals poverty target 1.2. to *“by 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to*

¹⁰ To know more about the EU recovery package, we invite you to read the latest [statement](#) of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission: *“One year after. What place for justice in the EU recovery package?”* March 2021.

¹¹ [ibid 7.](#)

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights_en

¹³ https://www.caritas.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/210622-EPSR-AP-CE-analysis-public_final.pdf

national definitions”¹⁴. Following the [Porto Social Summit](#) under the Portuguese Council Presidency, we believe that further work is needed to fully implement the measures that will give substance to the principles outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights¹⁵, support people who need immediate assistance and **acknowledge the multi-dimensional approach of poverty**.

The EU expresses its commitment to tackle poverty. Examples of policies to fight against poverty under the Action Plan:

“Fostering social inclusion and combating poverty are core values of our European way of life”, reads the EPSR Action Plan. The most efficient way to tackle poverty is to have **inclusive labour market policies**, accompanied by an **effective social protection system, as well as family oriented and family friendly policies**. In 2020 and early 2021, the European Commission has proposed a number of initiatives that can help to reduce poverty in the long-term. **We welcome in particular:**

- **The support to children in poverty.** On **14 June 2021**, the Council adopted a Recommendation establishing a [European Child Guarantee](#). This scheme will support the target of reducing the number of children in poverty in the EU by 5 million until 2030, and to make sure that governments develop consistent housing, food, health, and education policies, towards effective access to key services for all children, including children with disabilities and mental illness. While we welcome the introduction of one healthy meal per day in schools and the ban on advertising of “high-fat or high-salt foods” in early childhood education, care facilities and schools, we believe that the target of 5 million ought to be more ambitious. In addition, **families and representing organisations should be better involved in the policy-making process of families and children’s policies, especially in the designing of adequate national action plans, that should be well monitored and supported by sufficient funding, both from the EU and national levels.**
- **The objective to better integrate young people in the labour market** through the reinforced [Youth Guarantee](#) in **July 2020**. We support in particular the broader outreach to all young people under the age of 30 that are not in employment, education, training or apprenticeship to provide them a Youth Guarantee scheme within 4 months of being unemployed or leaving education and foster their labour market integration opportunities. We also welcome the recently announced programme ALMA that shall give the chance to young people who are lacking job opportunities to have a professional experience abroad¹⁶. **However, these efforts alone cannot address the difficulties that young people are facing and that were exacerbated by the pandemic** (such as: difficult first integration to the labour market, high unemployment, dreams postponed, challenges of remote education, etc)¹⁷.
- **The stronger access to affordable housing and the fight against homelessness:** The launch by the European institutions, EU governments and civil society of a [European Platform on Combatting Homelessness](#) during the Lisbon high-level Conference on **21 June 2021**, to share best practices and make sure that no one will sleep in precarious conditions because of the lack of “accessible, safe and appropriate” emergency

¹⁴ <https://sdg-tracker.org/no-poverty>

¹⁵ <https://www.caritas.eu/porto-summit-must-lead-to-concrete-action/>

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701

¹⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-generation-graduates-uncertainty/>

accommodation. In addition, we support that people coming out of institutions (e.g. prison, hospital, care facility) should have an “appropriate” housing secured. We also welcome the focus of the EU on affordable social housing, in particular to **combat energy poverty** (Commission recommendation on Energy Poverty¹⁸; the revision of the Energy Efficiency Directive¹⁹, the new Social Climate Fund to tackle energy poverty²⁰, etc.) **However, more should be done to measure and tackle these new forms of poverty.** The ambition should stay high to tackle energy poverty and promote access to renewable energy. In addition, many workers do not earn a sufficient income to be able to pursue a life in dignity. The increase in property prices in some cities forced some people to live further away from their workplaces, increasing their time to commute.

In addition, the European institutions and in particular the European Commission plan many other initiatives to continue improving the social welfare systems, which concern the improvement of the **access to quality essential services** and the better **implementation of social rights** (for instance, through the [new Disability Rights Strategy](#) ensuring better inclusion notably in terms of employment and housing, the upcoming [Action Plan](#) for Social Economy scheduled for Q4 2021, and the upcoming initiative on [Long-Term Care](#) planned in Q3 2022 that shall address disparities between men and women’s pension incomes), the improvement of access to education, skills and lifelong learning, the access to quality and decent employment.

We also welcome the **reinforcement of consumer protection measures towards financial education.** We particularly appreciate the [proposal](#) of directive of the European Commission on 30 June 2021 **to reinforce consumer credit rules**, in order to raise more awareness to consumers²¹ on the risk of becoming over-indebted and tackle disinformation, following the pic of online shopping and digital loans during the pandemic. We call on EU leaders and the European Parliament to find a compromise to implement the directive as soon as possible **to promote financial education and to ensure that quality debt counselling service is made available**, as announced in the New Consumer Agenda’s [Communication](#).

Although progress many social policies were newly conceptualised and enacted extremely quickly during the pandemic, the European Commission and Member States should continue to intensify their efforts to address and **overcome the structural causes of poverty, social exclusion and inequality, also in the light of the green transition.** Against the race to the bottom of labour costs leading to in-work poverty or unemployment, we bring to attention the **need to a dignified salary and social protection, that enables all workers to pursue a life in dignity, enjoy fair working conditions and to have access to decent housing.** The EU should look particularly at **employment status**, to not leave workers in flexible work arrangements behind. A flexible work should not mean a precarious work. At the same time, people who are unable to work should be fully integrated in our society. In addition, **the European Semester should monitor social and economic policies properly to ensure that reforms and investments made will reach the poverty and employment targets** (especially

¹⁸ Commission Recommendation (EU) 2020/1563 of 14 October 2020.

¹⁹ Updating Directive 2012/27/EU of 25 October 2012.

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/social-climate-fund_with-annex_en.pdf

²¹ <https://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/sviluppoumano/vatican-covid19-response/doc-newsletter/economics/book/c-COVIDCommDebtFINAL2021.pdf>

after the end of the emergency funding and national debts need to be paid back), to guarantee an efficient social care system, and to end homelessness in the EU by 2030.

1.2. EU financial support to tackle poverty...

... under the long-term EU budget 2021-2027

As Pope Francis reminds us, we are all members of one “human family”. Particular attention should be paid to avoiding a two-speed recovery in the aftermath of this crisis. Some vulnerable people have been severely affected by the COVID crisis and cannot wait longer before seeing their situation improved²². Out of the nearly €1100 billion EU 2021-2027 long-term budget, a total of €115.8 billion is available for investing in people, social cohesion and values. Under this pillar, **the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, with a budget of roughly **€88 billion** (in 2018 prices) for the period 2021-2027, will continue to be **the EU’s main instrument to support the implementation of the Social Pillar**. It is the EU’s main instrument for investing in people, though it is overwhelmingly framed under the scope of labour market inclusion, i.e. to protect and create jobs, support social innovation and entrepreneurship as well as cross border labour mobility, foster education and skills needed to support the green and digital transitions, and promote social inclusion. Nevertheless, the ESF+ also includes measures to **fight poverty, provide food and basic material assistance** to the most deprived, and **invest in young people and children** particularly hit by the crisis. At least **25% of the ESF+ resources** at national level should be spent to **combat poverty and social exclusion**, out of which Member States most affected by child poverty should invest **at least 5% in measures combating child poverty**. In addition, all Member States will need to dedicate **at least 3% of their ESF+ share** to fight material deprivation.

Under the ESF+, we welcome the amendments under the **Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)** allowing Member States to use an EU co-financing rate up to 100% to ensure that the most deprived have access to basic material and food assistance²³.

... under the temporary recovery plan, ‘NextGenerationEU’

Under the temporary recovery instrument ‘NextGenerationEU’ of €750 billion, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) presents a unique opportunity to finance investments and reforms to support a just **social, ecological and contributive recovery**, as detailed in our latest statement²⁴, and to contribute to the implementation of the EPSR. As part of ‘NGEU’, €50.6 billion is to be spent under REACT-EU²⁵ to **tackle the social and economic impact** of the crisis. We welcome its support to less developed regions. Although families will indirectly receive support under the EU recovery plan ‘NextGenerationEU’, we regret that there is no specific mention to families, who are the vital cell of our society²⁶. The EU also created a temporary support mechanism through SURE, which **extends national job protection programmes** to

²² [Statement](#) of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission: “One year after. What place for justice in the EU recovery package?” March 2021.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ REACT-EU = “Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe”

²⁶ Joint COMECE-FAFCE Reflection Paper on “The Elderly and the Future of Europe”, 3 December 2020.

prevent risks of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Up to €100 billion can be provided under this instrument.

II. Voices from the Catholic Church during the COVID-19 crisis

“Encountering the poor and those in need constantly challenges us and forces us to think. How can we help to eliminate or at least alleviate their marginalization and suffering?”²⁷

As Pope Francis constantly reminds us, for the Church to be Church, **the poor ought to be, and are, at the centre of the Church’s attention**. The preferential option for the poor is a key pillar of the Catholic Social Teaching. For Catholics, this “option” is not “optional” but is implied by their faith in Jesus Christ. To address poverty **two key aspects** of the Church approach are worth highlighting:

- **The poor as protagonists**. A preferential option for the poor means not merely having a priority concern for them in order to alleviate their suffering. It means also to recognize fully that they are persons, contributors to the building of a society oriented towards the Common Good. “They have much to teach us” says Pope Francis.²⁸ Any reflection and action regarding fighting poverty should aim at reducing marginalization and enhancing more integral inclusion, meaning economic, social, and political participation. We need to go beyond “the idea of social policies being a policy *for* the poor, but never *with* the poor and never *of* the poor, much less part of a project that reunites peoples.”²⁹
- **Poverty as multidimensional**³⁰. Poverty cannot be encapsulated by mere monetary indicators and requires an integral approach. Material poverty is only one aspect of a dehumanising poverty. Already in 1967, Pope Paul VI singled out an approach to human development which ought to be integral in order to be fully human, meaning the development of the whole human being and of the whole humanity.³¹ Integral approach is also at the core of the call for an integral ecology in *Laudato si’*.

Good practices: Examples of the Catholic Church’s actions in EU Member States during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church, through various institutions and with the help of different Caritas national networks, together with national, regional or local partners, provided support to people in poverty in answer to their most pressing needs. We collected a few examples of ‘best practices’ from different places across the EU, that **illustrate some of the actions of the Church during the pandemic**, that could possibly be replicated throughout Europe:

- **Germany**

In Germany, the Church made many different **offers of assistance**. Moreover, on 6 September 2020 the “**World Church Sunday of Prayer and Solidarity with the Sufferers**” of the Corona

²⁷ Pope Francis, [Message](#) on the Fourth World Day of the Poor, 15 November 2020.

²⁸ Pope Francis, [Evangelii gaudium](#) (2013), no. 198.

²⁹ Pope Francis, [Fratelli tutti](#) (2020), no. 169.

³⁰ <https://www.atd-quartmonde.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hidden-Dimensions-of-Poverty-20-11-2019.pdf>

³¹ Paul VI, [Populorum progressio](#) (1967), no. 14.

pandemic worldwide was held in all parishes in Germany, including a special collection. With the proceeds of this "[Corona collection](#)" amounting to more than 2.4 million euros, the Church in Germany **supports the work** of its world church partner organisations in Latin America, Africa, Asia and south-eastern Europe.

- [Hungary](#)

In Hungary, the Church continued all its **spiritual services** and **material support** to people in need. [Caritas Hungarica](#) intensified its social service during the pandemic, **building on diocesan centres, social institutions and long-term programmes** with communities living in poverty. In addition, parish groups and communities have been particularly significant in the collection of **private donations**.

- [Italy](#)

In Italy, Caritas Italiana published the [fourth Monitoring Survey](#) on the effects of the pandemic and the responses activated by Italian dioceses and parishes, in collaboration with public and private institutions. In parallel to the spread of the pandemics, clear signs of recovery and the activation of new forms of **support to individuals, families and businesses** affected by the socio-economic effects of the pandemic were observed. Within 211 days, Caritas supported 544,775 people in Italy. Nearly one in four people, **24.4%, never used a Caritas network before**. In addition, the [6th Report on Anti-Poverty Policies](#) was launched under the title "Fighting poverty: learning from experience, improving responses".

- [Lithuania](#)

In response to the challenges arisen from remote learning and working, [Caritas Lithuania](#) offered **services to support families** who lack appropriate digital tools and are unprepared to teach their children. In particular, they **organised activities** for children, offering them an escape from online schooling and **provided canteens** to ensure that they receive at least one nutritious meal per day.

- [Portugal](#)

In Portugal, many initiatives were carried out by the Church during the pandemic. Two renown initiatives are: (1) "[Ponto de Escuta](#)": a Jesuit project allowing people with **mental health** issues or suffering from **loneliness** to talk and to be heard. (2) "[Compras em casa](#)": a **young people** led project enabling people to **make groceries for the elderly**.

III. Recommendations

- 1. Listen to and provide immediate assistance to vulnerable (young) people, women and families:** We call on EU Member States to consult with families and representing organisations to be involved in the designing of adequate national action plans, that should be well monitored and supported by sufficient funding, both from the EU and national levels. In particular, we call on Member States to make full use of the temporary instrument REACT-EU for the period 2021-2022 to **strengthen material and food assistance** under the FEAD, to **support youth employment** under the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). We call on the European Commission to make a good monitoring of the [European Social Fund+](#) to make sure that the fund supports those most in need, including **families in poverty, but also women and single parents** who have particularly suffered from the pandemic. We also call on the Member States in cooperation with public services and relevant social NGOs and Churches to provide adequate social guidance to **address the phenomenon of “non-take-up” of solidarity mechanism** and allowances.
- 2. Give temporary support to regions and local small and medium businesses in need:** the REACT-EU instrument should also be used to **support regions and local small businesses** that were most impacted by the crisis, by strengthening the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)). We call on the European Commission to ensure a proper monitoring of the disbursements of funds to ensure fairness in the sharing of the resources. Ensure that the green transition answers to the social needs by making good use of the [Just Transition Mechanism](#).
- 3. Facilitate access to affordable and decent housing:** while wealth has increased globally, inequality has grown with it, thus creating “*new forms of poverty*”. We call on the EU institutions to measure poverty with criteria that match present realities, including **in-work poverty** and the **lack of access to green energy**³². In addition, we call policymakers for the development of a culture of “gratuity” and “hospitality” of the poor³³. As brothers and sisters of the same planet, “*will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others?*”³⁴
- 4. Prevent over-indebtedness and poverty traps:** We call on EU leaders and the European Parliament to find a compromise to implement the directive to reinforce consumer credit rules as soon as possible to **promote financial education and to ensure that quality debt counselling service is made available**, as announced in the New Consumer Agenda’s [Communication](#).
- 5. Encourage a dignified life through work and close the gender pay gap:** “*helping the poor financially must always be a provisional solution in the face of pressing needs. The broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work*”³⁵. Against the race to the bottom

³² Pope Francis, [Fratelli tutti](#) (2020), no. 21, *ibid* [Message for the 2015 World Day of Peace](#) (8 December 2014), 3-4: AAS 107 (2015), 69-71.

³³ Pope Francis, [Fratelli tutti](#) (2020), no. 141.

³⁴ Pope Francis, [Fratelli tutti](#) (2020), no. 70

³⁵ Pope Francis, [Fratelli tutti](#) (2020), no. 162, *ibid* Encyclical Letter [Laudato Si'](#) (24 May 2015), 128.

of labour costs leading to in-work poverty or unemployment, we bring to attention the **need to a dignified salary and social protection, that enables all workers to pursue a life in dignity, enjoy fair working conditions and to have access to decent housing**. In addition, we call on the EU institutions to **close the gender pay gap** and to improve the **working conditions of platform workers** by creating a framework for more socially responsible platforms, enabling them to pursue a dignified life through work. The EU should look particularly at **employment status**, to not leave workers in flexible work arrangements behind. A flexible work should not mean a precarious work. At the same time, people who are unable to work should be fully integrated in our society.

6. **Monitor adequately the poverty and employment targets through the European Semester:** The European Commission should make sure that the [European Semester](#) monitors social and economic policies properly to ensure that reforms and investments made will reach the poverty and employment targets (especially after the end of the emergency funding and national debts need to be paid back), to guarantee an efficient social care system, and to end homelessness in the EU by 2030.
7. **Invest in new structures of solidarity and boost intergenerational solidarity³⁶:** promote equal opportunities for all people, and in particular for the elderly living in **rural areas**. **Prevent old-age poverty** and guarantee a dignified life for the elderly through an effective public social security and intergenerational solidarity. In addition, a **fair responsibility sharing is needed over time across the generations** to recover from the pandemic, and the **younger generation** should not be left behind in repaying the borrowing from the recovery. We also call on the European Commission to **monitor the implementation of the Child Guarantee** to ensure its effectiveness in all Member States.
8. **Foster integral and multidimensional approaches that recognize the true value of the ‘poor’ and promote their effective participation in our society:** people with disabilities, the elderly, people living in rural areas with poor access to technology, people born in poverty or lacking education, or unable to work, and with no or little access to adequate healthcare services, are often left behind, ‘discarded’ by society and not considered as “useful”. Beyond the mere criteria of “*market freedom and efficiency*”, “*the option for the poor should lead us to friendship with the poor*”³⁷, in a spirit of authentic fraternity. EU policies should recognise better the specific needs of each of these persons and give them an **effective voice**.
9. **Promote access to quality education for children in poverty, encourage a healthy lifestyle, and address the digital divide:** Foster inclusive education systems in the [European Education Area](#), tackling underachievement in early education and creating more supportive learning environments for children in poverty or with special learning needs. The EU should also raise **awareness on healthy lifestyles** through education, especially for children experiencing poverty, e.g. on the importance of regular health checks, physical activity and healthy food. Member States, together with the Church and

³⁶ “[Old Age: Our Future. The elderly after the pandemic](#)”, Vatican City, February 2, 2021

³⁷ Pope Francis, [Fratelli tutti](#) (2020), no. 234

local social services organisations, should develop adequate accompanying programmes targeted at children in poverty who lost over one year of education during the pandemic. The **digital divide** should also be addressed, implementing the [Digital Education Action Plan](#) and enhancing reskilling and upskilling, aiming to provide learners with internet access and the necessary digital devices, while **protecting children** against harmful digital content. **Administrative support** should be given to people facing digital obstacles due to the digitalisation of bureaucratic procedures.

10. **Promote fair taxation and encourage private investments to tackle poverty:** at the time of a global pandemic, it has become increasingly urgent to tackle “*structures of sin*” that allow tax evasion making sure that everyone contributes in a fair way to the recovery and that priority is given to the Common Good. We urge financial leaders to “*co-responsibility*” to **reduce economic inequality**. At the same time, repaying debt should **not compromise the very existence and growth** of the poorer countries. In addition, we call on governments to encourage private investments to tackling poverty, for instance by **recognising better private donations for the poor and vulnerable** and to adapt their tax reduction systems accordingly. In addition, Member States should **incentivise self-employment and entrepreneurship through a more solid legal framework** and clear

11. **Act as a human family, support poor countries globally and promote vaccine equity:** “*nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved*”³⁸. There should not be parts of the world in which people are prevented from “*developing their potential and beauty*” because of poverty or structural causes. “*In the end, this will impoverish us all*”. We call on EU leaders to consider an **ethics of international relations to reduce poverty in other parts of the world**, and to encourage the less developed countries to **improve their own innovation capacity**, while **respecting their own culture** and values. We welcome the [global COVAX facility](#) to **ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines** also in economically weaker regions. Vaccines should be made available and affordable to all at the global level, encouraged by the EU institutions³⁹. Without this, there may be no end to the pandemic as more mutations transpire and keep Europe (and other countries) in a perpetual state of social and health emergency.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (2020), no. 138, ibid Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 60: AAS 101 (2009), 695

³⁹ COMECE-Caritas Europa Joint [Statement](#) on “The European Union and the challenges of Covid-19 Vaccines”, 23 February 2021.