

EMBARGO TODAY, 6 April 16:00

Report of Mgr van Luyn to the COMECE Spring Plenary Assembly, 6 April 2011

Squaring up to a round of crises

Dear brothers in Christ | Anyone who thought that, with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009, the European Union would be able to mark the end of ten very turbulent years and then get down to business, needs to think again. Instead of being able to get down to a calmer session of 'business as usual', the European Union is now confronted with subjects and challenges which demand from its politicians both careful evaluation and rapid action.

Some of these have become 'faithful companions', such as the turbulence in the international financial markets, which began in 2007 with the mortgage crisis in the United States. Other developments have taken us by surprise, like the wind of change in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Some questions have been seething for a longer time and have suddenly gained new explosive power through an unforeseen event: as a result of the earthquake in north-eastern Japan and the resulting destruction of the nuclear power plant at Fukushima, we are confronted with the burning question of how to satisfy the energy requirements of our 'technologised' world in such a way that safety, environmental compatibility, sustainability and security of supply are held in a balanced equilibrium. I will go into all three subjects, as they also have far-reaching consequences for our work.

Financial crisis and Euro Plus Pact | The financial crisis and the threat to the euro as the common European currency have already been on our Plenary Assembly agendas for discussion for some years now. Since our last gathering in November, in a series of summit meetings the European Council has agreed, step by step, upon a package of measures to deal with the euro crisis. At the summit on 25 March, the overall package was adopted. This involves

- an agreement on economic governance, including the reformed Stability Pact,
- agreement concerning a European Stability Mechanism (ESM) to come into force in 2013, by means of which, in case of emergency, hundreds of millions of euros can be mobilised, and which will again necessitate amendment, albeit limited, of the Treaty, and
- the conclusion of the new Euro Plus Pact, which was initially proposed last February by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy and then heavily criticised, before being revised by Herman Van Rompuy and José Manuel Barroso, and which has now been generally accepted.

It cannot be our task to assess this package of measures in detail (we lack the necessary specialist expertise), but one good base line seems discernable to me, indicating that – perhaps with the exception of the United Kingdom and probably also Sweden – the Member States of the European Union will in future work even more closely together. In the past few months, under the pressure of a serious crisis, a community has been further reinforced – a community based on the values of freely exercised solidarity and freely assumed responsibility. Here, the firm commitment of powerful support to those who find themselves in need is linked to their promise each to put their own house in order. Greater solidarity in the EU has become possible through increased responsibility.

Increased responsibility for future generations through the reduction of public debt and the reform of pension systems that could no longer be financed; increased responsibility of the banks and other private financial institutions in the event of the insolvency of any member of the currency union, at least from 2013 onwards. In addition, this coming autumn, the European Council will again discuss making additional demands on the financial sector through a financial transaction tax.

Dear brothers in Christ, we hope that all these measures will re-establish the confidence of the financial markets in the reliability of all the euro countries. The bankruptcy of one country in the Eurozone would have grave consequences for all: for the citizens of the affected country, for the European banking sector and, through the ensuing threat of a Europe-wide credit crunch, for all people in the EU. With all due caution, it is therefore appropriate to highlight with praise the considered actions of the European Council and the European Central Bank, as well as those of the European Commission and the European Parliament. It is becoming increasingly obvious that here in Europe we have been living beyond our means for too long. We have not shared enough of our wealth, either with those who live in great poverty in other parts of the world, or with those who, as children today, are inheriting their parents' irresponsibly high burden of debt.

Therefore, the package of measures adopted on 25 March fits very well, in the political sphere, with this spiritual time of fasting, and the change of direction gives reason for hope. We should also, first and foremost, speak to the faithful about this, particularly since the Euro Plus Pact has aroused disquiet and unrest among many people in the EU.

Japan – earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster | *“Shaken by earthquake, ravaged by the waves, threatened by deadly radiation”* – with these words in an article in *Die Zeit* on 17 March 2011, Bernd Ulrich summarised the catastrophe that hit the Japanese main island of Honshu on 11 March. The images of this terrible event are implanted in our minds; the accompanying figures are sobering: over 11,000 dead, more than 17,000 still missing, hundreds of thousands left homeless, material damage which, by conservative estimates, exceeds 200 billion euros. Behind each of these figures lies untold human suffering: human beings who have lost their family, their friends and all their possessions – human beings who have nothing to look forward to. The composure with which the Japanese people seem

to bear this fate is something which is difficult for us as Europeans to imagine: no looting, hardly any panic, but people waiting patiently in queues for food, medical care, information, or a place in one of the emergency shelters. For us, such discipline and dignity is unfathomable.

This time it was no 'Third World' country stricken by a catastrophe on such a scale, as for example Haiti in January 2010, but the third-largest economy in the world. Nevertheless – the reconstruction will be extremely difficult: the Japanese economy has been stagnating for almost 20 years, the political system is weary and not in a position to offer the necessary support. The population is declining (from 127 million in 2010 to a projected 97 million in 2050) and ageing dramatically: in 2050, 40% of Japanese will be aged over 65. The people of Japan need our solidarity and our aid, which they have been promised by their neighbouring countries as well as by the church organisations. They also need our prayers and our moral support.

But the extent of the natural catastrophe will be exceeded by far by the technical disaster which it triggered: the fire and possible meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. The causes are many, but the consequences are far-reaching. They directly affect the environment and the viability of an entire area of land covering hundreds of square kilometres; they affect the life chances of future generations. The effects of 'Fukushima' on the psyche and self-image – not only of the Japanese, but of a world that places its trust in technology – are probably even more serious. Matthias Nass wrote in *Die Zeit* on 17 March: "*A horror is creeping over people – the idea that they have lost control of a technology they had trusted. The security that has sustained their life up until now could be fading away: living in a State that looks after its citizens and makes their welfare its top priority; working for companies whose engineers do not play with the health and life of human beings; being able to continue giving credence to the words of politicians and authorities without misgivings*"¹.

That applies not only to Japan, but also to us in Europe. Even if the probability of a European nuclear power plant being overrun by a tsunami is comparatively low, there is absolutely no guarantee that one day, for whatever reasons, another catastrophe will not occur. After over-hasty actions and excessive, although understandable, reactions – such as the demand for immediate abandonment of nuclear energy – we will have to seriously consider whether we can really justify the risks and consequences associated with our energy-hungry lifestyle. Since it has become clear just how much carbon-dependent energy production pollutes our environment, we also need to call into question nuclear energy, which at first sight causes comparatively less pollution. We will not be able to abandon it just through saving energy. Energy savings will clearly not enable France, for example, to cover the 75% of its energy requirements currently supplied by nuclear power. We will have to fundamentally change our lifestyles, and live more modestly, more economically and more sustainably. We will have to back energy sources which are

¹ Matthias Nass, 'Die Verlassenen' ['The forsaken ones'], *Die Zeit* 12, 17 March 2011, p. 3.

more environment-friendly but more expensive, and which do not offer us the security of supply to which we have been accustomed.

In the field of energy policy, the Churches, like the European Union as a whole, have no direct competence. Nevertheless, the question arises whether we bishops should not be active on this subject, just as we were some years ago when we spoke out on the question of climate change and the need for a different lifestyle. I think people expect from the Church alternatives which, going beyond exclusively technical solutions, appeal to their deeper-lying humanity and encourage people to seek, find and risk the way to a different and fulfilling life.

The revolutionary 'Arab Spring' Although there has been ferment in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa for a long time, very few of us anticipated the revolutions and regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The unrest and protests in other countries like Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, and also – if somewhat more cautiously – in Morocco and Algeria – make it clear that the Arab world is in a state of turmoil. The reasons differ, but they have common characteristics. The campaigners for the 'turning point of 2011' are young (60% of the people in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are under 30 in age), also comparatively well educated, highly familiar with the Internet and the possibilities it offers – and yet having no real future prospects. The chances of employment, despite good qualifications, are small. The longer that oppression by authoritarian regimes lasts, the less it is accepted. What is also astonishing is that political Islam appears to be playing hardly any role. Secular freedom seems to be the goal, not Islamisation or a theocracy.

When the COMECE Presidium decided at the beginning of January that the next Plenary Assembly should focus on the Middle East, this was still entirely influenced by the bloody attacks against Christian churches in Egypt and Iraq. The pressing plight of Christians in these countries, and the danger that Christianity might disappear from the regions where it originated and where it has been at home for two thousand years, seemed to us important enough that we should occupy ourselves with this more thoroughly at our meeting. Despite the developments in recent weeks, the position of religious minorities – not only Christians – remains precarious. They need to be protected.

In view of recent events, though, we must occupy ourselves more extensively with the new situation. A whole series of questions arise:

What developments can we expect after the expulsion or resignation of the old rulers? Does the western model of democracy really stand a chance in these countries? (Unlike the Eastern European 'turning point' in 1989, they have no democratic tradition to fall back on.)

What might be the consequences of democratisation without any real prospect of improvement in the economic situation? Could this not intensify the prevailing frustration of the younger generation?

How can these countries be assisted in adopting a constitution which will guarantee the rule of law and the upholding of human rights – including the right to full freedom of religion and the protection of minorities?
What tasks can the newly-formed European External Action Service perform here?
Will it not need to pay more attention to the structural modalities of freedom of religion?

Finally, how do we deal with the expected increase in the number of refugees and migrants fleeing to Europe to escape the unstable situation?
All these important questions will occupy us this evening during a public event and tomorrow during our session. For this purpose, we have invited Cardinal Nguib and several experts to give our discussion direction and content with their contributions. After that, our colleague José Luis Bazan will report to us on the expected consequences of the ‘Arab turning point’ for European migration policy.

Dear brothers in Christ! | *“The round of crises: the euro, Libya, refugees, Japan – that is too much at once, even for the EU”, according to German journalist Matthias Krupa. He continued: “The revolution in Egypt, the refugees from Tunisia, the civil war in Libya, and now the earthquake and the nuclear disaster in Japan: Each of these events on its own would pose problems for the still-young external policy structures of the EU. Coming all together, they inevitably lead to the protagonists being stretched too far. The EU is too slow? Maybe. What is quite certain is that, at present, the world is too fast – and not only for the European Union. Which of the known national or international protagonists really has a convincing Libya strategy or a coherent refugee policy to offer right now? France? The USA? The UN?” We could add the question: The Churches and religious communities?*
No, the Catholic Church does not have any coherent strategies, action plans or ready-made responses for these challenges either. What she can offer is her readiness to participate in searching, thinking and working together to find solutions. We can draw upon the rich resources of experience and tradition and make them fruitful for the current challenges. We can have confidence that the Lord accompanies us in this endeavour and will not forsake us – He whose death and resurrection we commemorate and celebrate in the coming days.

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Translated from the original German