ENGLISH

Translated from the Original German

Developments in Europe – October 2011 to March 2012

Speech at the opening of the COMECE Plenary Session, 21 March 2012

"There is a first time for everything," as the German proverb says. Conversely, one could also say, "There is also a last time for everything". The same applies to me and my contribution. While this is my last review as COMECE President, I nevertheless want to restrict myself to the developments in Europe over the past few months since our last Plenary Assembly, and not to make this a review of the last six years during which I have served as President.

Although the situation in Europe is still critical, I will start today notwith the economic and financial problems in Europe, but with some positive developments that are in danger of being overlooked among the many negative headlines about a European crisis.

1. South-eastern Europe – Croatia's accession | On 1 December 2011 the European Parliament approved the accession of Croatia by a large majority (564 votes to 38, with 32 abstentions). A week later, at the European Council in December 2011, the accession treaty was ceremonially signed by the heads of state and government. Finally, in a referendum in Croatia on 22 January, 66.25% of the voters approved their country's accession to the EU. Even if participation was low (at 43.7%), the vote of those who took part was clear: in spite of any reservations about the economic and financial crisis, the Croats see their future in the European Union, whose 28th Member State they will become upon accession on 1 July 2013. Thus, the number of Member States of the European Union has almost doubled in just over 9 years.

The accession treaty still has to be ratified by the 27 Member States. No difficulties are expected in this regard, as none of the Member States will be holding a referendum on this issue. Until its final accession, however, Croatia will be subject to a "European monitoring process" in a number of areas – such as combating corruption and the

functioning of the judiciary. Unlike in the case of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, this observation should be completed upon accession.

2. Candidate status for Serbia | In addition to the accession of Croatia – eight years after the granting of candidate status and after six years of negotiations – it is promising that the prospect of the integration of all the states of former Yugoslavia is not just still alive, but is receiving strong impetus.

On 24 February, Serbia and Kosovo were able to agree on a compromise concerning future regional cooperation. This is to prevent the serious border conflicts, which have also occurred in recent months, through joint border monitoring. At the same time, Serbia accepted the role of Kosovo as an independent negotiating partner in regional agreements. This is not, however, connected with any recognition by Serbia of Kosovo as an independent State.

With this agreement, the way was open to grant Serbia candidate status for membership of the European Union. After the removal of difficulties with Romania, which had demanded guarantees for the Vlachs, a Romanian-speaking minority in Serbia, the European Council on 1 and 2 March was also able to make the appropriate formal decision.

This gives a major boost to the prospect of further integration of the states of former Yugoslavia and other parts of south-eastern Europe into the European Union. Slovenia has already been a member of the EU since 2004, Croatia will become a member in 2013, and Macedonia and Serbia have long been candidates. With the other states – Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo – contracts have been entered into as part of the pre-accession strategy.

It will still take years before all of these countries can join the EU. The prospect of accession can, however, accelerate the changes necessary for accession: compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, a functioning judicial system; the fight against corruption; legal certainty; non-discrimination, and more. Besides the question of when these countries can accept the EU's body of law – and only then is accession possible – there is also the

question of the development of relations between these countries. For both Croatia and Serbia, the important steps in the direction of accession were only taken once it was clear that both countries are also willing to face up to their violence-filled past. The handing over of some of the war criminals from the 1991–1995 war in Yugoslavia wanted by the International Court in The Hague was the indispensable precondition for further talks and negotiations with the European Union concerning accession.

3. Europe as a peace project remains relevant | It is often claimed that the European Union as a peace project has lost its potency and appeal. When we look at the states of former Yugoslavia, the importance of this dimension becomes clear once again. The aim of the EU is not limited to the establishment of a common market or the introduction of a common currency and coping with the difficulties involved. The aim of European integration was and is to overcome those clashes and conflicts that have plagued Europe and torn it apart for centuries. With regard to south-eastern Europe and the Balkans, it is often claimed that, for the people who live there, history is not a matter of the past, but a living reality. The Battle of Amselfeld is not something that happened in 1387; the battle of Mohacs against the Turks was not an event in 1526; the two World Wars of the 20th century did not occur almost 100 years ago. Rather, one gets the feeling that all this happened just yesterday. Thus, despite the centuries that have intervened since these painful events of national history, the animosity between the opponents of that time is just as great, and its effects are still being experienced in everyday life today. Thus, the past can never come to rest, although that is precisely what needs to happen. Letting history rest does not mean forgetting history, but it does mean preventing history from being the essential determinant of everyday life in the present and the future.

Overcoming old antagonisms between former enemies and opponents was the basic idea of Robert Schuman's plan in 1950. A look at Europe – more than 60 years later – shows its effectiveness and confirms its timeliness.
One of Europe's ancient conflicts – between Germany and France – has been settled. The reconciliation of Germany with its other neighbours, with the Dutch and Belgians, with Poland and the Czech Republic, has become a reality. The countries of south-eastern Europe can and must learn from this. At the same time, recent developments in different Member States of the European Union show us that resolving old conflicts and

overcoming centuries of prejudice is not a matter of course, but always remains a task. Populist and nationalist tones in elections in recent months remind us of the need to remain vigilant.
With the economic crisis comes the risk of a boost in support for forces that advocate going it alone as a nation as being a real or even a better alternative for overcoming the difficulties of the crisis. In addition, old populist prejudices and resentments are being dug up and activated. The heated discussions among the public and in the media in connection with the rescue of Greece from bankruptcy, and the ever-recurring clichés of the "lazy Greeks" in particular, and the "southerners" in general, or that the Germans are "steamrollering" Europe and imposing their ideas, are good examples of this.

The disastrous effect which history can continue to have is apparent in the example of Hungary. From the differing assessments – depending on political affiliation – of the current situation, some conclusions can nevertheless be drawn: Hungarian society is deeply divided, the controversy between political opponents makes diligent use of stereotypes, and, as a result, a common basis for political discourse is lacking. Insufficient honest confrontation with the traumatic events of the 20th century – 1918/1919, 1945/48, 1956, 1989 – and a "nostalgia for the glorious past" nourish populism, nationalism and feelings of revenge. But can the recovery of the past (regardless of how it is to be assessed) really be the way to create the future?
Any statements from outside are perceived as unwarranted interference. Only an honest dialogue can bring about change here, without a didactic approach of superiority, but with a willingness to listen to one another, get the full picture and seek to understand. At the same time, the common goals, values and rules of the European Union remain the guiding principle for all Member States, against which they must allow their political conduct to be measured.

The old national reflexes of the past undermine and counteract the achievements of the European integration process. They threaten to lead to re-nationalisation and a lack of solidarity among the countries of Europe. Given the financial crisis, all countries must make efforts.
Sincere solidarity will not misinterpret help as a "favour". On the other hand, solidarity always entails the desire not only to expect solidarity but also to contribute to the

improvement of one's own situation. In practical terms, this must mean the thoroughgoing reform of a political system and a state that is misperceived by society as being a sort of "self-service store". The efforts that this requires must not be shifted onto the most vulnerable members of society, but must be shared by all, and especially by those who have so far been abusing the system to their own benefit.

4. European stability mechanism | Since the beginning of the year, enormous efforts have been made in the European Union to find solutions to the debt crisis in Europe. On 20 February, the Finance Ministers of the Eurozone adopted a second package of assistance, to allow Greek government debt to be brought down to a projected 120.5% of GDP by 2020. Up to 2014, financial transfers to Greece will be about EUR 130 billion, provided that the negotiated terms are respected by Greece at all times. The private sector has accepted a debt writedown of 53.5% of the nominal value of Greek government bonds.

On the institutional side, the signing of two treaties – the treaty on the European stability mechanism between the 17 Eurozone countries and the treaty on stability, coordination and control in the Economic and Monetary Union, of 2 February and on 2 March respectively – marks a major step towards an ever closer political union and a growing differentiation between the Eurozone countries and the other Member States. In the coming months, financial difficulties in several other Member States will occupy public attention. However, the debate over these two treaties and their ratification will increasingly shift to the alternatives of a federal core Europe or the restoration of the Westphalian system of full national sovereignty. With the outbreak of the debt crisis it became clear that it is impossible to continue manoeuvring as had become commonplace after the Treaty of Maastricht. Europe faces a choice: *tertium non datur*. On Friday, we will deal with this question further on the basis of a paper by Stefan Lunte.

5. "Age of more" or "Age of less" | The debt crisis is not exclusively a European problem, however; it affects other parts of the world, albeit to differing degrees. Before all attempts to find a solution, the question of the objective must first be asked: Should we seek only to restore the pre-crisis status quo? Must we not, rather, question more fundamentally the task and role of the economy in society?

After my departure from the Diocese of Rotterdam and the Dutch Bishops' Conference, I had more time to read more books and consider questions as to the "why" of the economic and financial crisis and possible solutions. Three authors have impressed me particularly: the German national economist and economic journalist Susanne Schmidt, the German political scientist and journalist Ulrich Wickert and, finally, the Swiss philosopher David Bosshart. All three of them try to ask the right questions and they all situate the roots of the malaise in a crisis of morals and values.

Why do people put together financial products which they must know could ultimately precipitate financial ruin for all of us? Will an economy one-sidedly fixated on linear growth even be possible in the future? How, given the challenges we are facing, can the economy, the environment, dwindling resources and raw materials and a still-growing world population be brought into balance? Does an economic model that assumes progressively "more" growth in quantitative terms hold any promise at all for the future, or must we accept the fact that we are going to have to make do with "less"?

The responses of the three authors are different, but they agree that morals and values will again play a bigger role and that we are heading for an "age of less". The sooner we get used to this, the better.

An "age of less" in quantitative terms could, on the other hand, mean a great opportunity for a qualitative "age of more": more human dignity, more community spirit and concern for the common good, a greater sense of responsibility for the deplorable situation in the poorer parts of our world, a determined commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, more solidarity with future generations – whose life-chances we are in danger of embezzling.

"More" in this sense – more justice, responsibility and solidarity – was also the driving force behind our statement "*A European community of solidarity and responsibility*" which we adopted during our last Plenary Assembly last October. In it we try to expound, from the perspective of Catholic social teaching, the concept of "a highly competitive social market economy", defined in Article 3 of the Treaty of Lisbon as an objective of the European Union. Allow me one observation: I would like to put the emphasis on the "social" aspect of the market economy. Competitiveness is an element which is already included in the market economy itself. The "social" aspect, however, is a value, grounded in the principles of human dignity and the common good. It is this aspect, therefore, that demands our particular attention.

Our position, presented on 12 January in the presence of about 100 guests, has met with positive responses. The reason for this great interest may lie in the fact that we as bishops have made a statement on an economic matter – or the fact that we are not only trying to find answers to the economic challenges, but to comprehend the European project from its very roots. The final section, section 26, states:
"From the start, the project of European unification has been more than purely economic; it has been, and is, a political and moral project: it should serve justice and peace in Europe and worldwide. The realisation of a social market economy in Europe as a community of solidarity and responsibility is part of this endeavour towards worldwide peace and global justice. A new culture of co-responsibility should replace the current culture of blame. Christians are called upon to promote and develop this culture of co-responsibility. We support this project, as bishops of COMECE, and we recognise therein an important contribution to the creation of a culture that 'drives globalisation towards the humanising goal of solidarity' (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate , 42). As a Church we wish to engage with, and further, efforts in this direction: 'To those who are searching today for a new and authentic theory and praxis of liberation, the Church offers not only her social doctrine and, in general, her teaching about the human person redeemed in Christ, but also her concrete commitment and material assistance in the struggle against marginalisation and suffering.' (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Centesimus Annus, 26)"

6. Active ageing and the value of work | The European Union has declared 2012 the Year of "active age and generational equity". That is why we have decided to deal with this subject in more depth in this Plenary Assembly. Tomorrow we will have the time to hear more about this and to talk about it. In the light of what has just been said, we will have two questions to ask in this context: What value do we place on work? Is it only seen as gainful employment, with older people primarily viewed as a cost factor? How do we achieve a just economic order with the natural decline in performance that accompanies increasing age? What is the value of voluntary work? Is it valued highly enough to offer older people the opportunity to be active in a meaningful way after leaving the world of paid employment? What value do experience and perspective have in the economic process and in society as a whole?

Dear brothers in Christ: Perhaps these questions about “active ageing” also engage me because my own time in paid employment will shortly be coming to an end, and I am grappling with the question: What comes next?
In “Der Sonntag”, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Vienna, I found, in connection with life in old age, four questions posed by the German theologian and psychologist Andreas Wittrahm. In his opinion, all older people need to find an answer to these questions.

The question of the appropriate place to live in old age: Where will I live?
The question of social ties and ways of life: With whom will I live?
The question of individual and social resources for a decent life in old age: On what will I live?
The question of life goals and development tasks: What will I live for?
To find the answers to these questions, it is important that older people ask themselves these questions, but also that they engage in dialogue about them with the other generations: ultimately, each generation does not live for itself alone, but always with others and for others. Only in this way can the accumulated experience of older people be passed on to future generations; and only through an encounter with the younger generations can the view and understanding of older people be open to new developments.
Thank you for your patience and your attention.

+ Adrianus van Luyn,
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Brussels, 21 March 2012