



International Conference in Krakow: Role of Christians in the Process of European Integration

“War in Europe – What the European Union will be like?”
Speech of COMECE General Secretary, Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto
21-22 October 2022

- Cordial **greeting** to all on behalf of COMECE – the Commission of Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union
- **COMECE is a long-standing partner** of this important Conference which offers a **space for dialogue** on pressing issues of concern to the European Union and to the Church and it will stay so.
- This year’s edition of the Conference is dedicated to a **theme that worries us all** - the on-going **war in Ukraine** and its implications for the European Union
- At their **recent Autumn Plenary Assembly** held last week, the Bishops of COMECE issued a heartfelt **appeal for peace** in Ukraine and in the whole of Europe: They expressed their “*sadness at the horrible human suffering inflicted on the people of Ukraine by the **brutal** military aggression initiated by the Russian authorities*” and their “*deep concern that recent actions may risk a further expansion of the war with disastrous consequences for humanity*”. They called on “*the aggressors to immediately suspend the hostilities, and to all parties to open themselves up to negotiation of ‘serious proposals’ for a just peace, working towards a solution to the conflict which respects international law and the territorial integrity of Ukraine*”

- The Bishops of COMECE also recognised the **impact of the war** in Ukraine on **all of us as European citizens**, particularly those who find themselves in **increasingly dramatic socio-economic hardship** due to the energy crisis, rising inflation and the soaring cost of living
- It is in times of crises like the current one, that we can fully **realise the deep value of the European Union** and its founding vision: peace on the European Continent was taken for granted for a long time, and the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union were too often used as empty and abstract references stripped of their original meaning.
- The words of **Cardinal Hollerich**, the President of COMECE, during the **opening of last year's Krakow Conference**, reminding us of the need for a **“solidification of our value system”**, can be seen today as so prophetic for our times which call for concrete expressions of the values of *solidarity, human dignity, freedom, justice, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights*, in response to the war in Ukraine and its consequences, including the millions of refugees who have been forced to leave their homes, especially women and children.
- This is also a **moment of change for Europe and the European Union**. The military aggression against Ukraine has brought a **new momentum** into the **EU enlargement** policy, with three more countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – joining the waiting room, together with the countries of the Western Balkans, for a future EU membership as candidates or potential candidates. Realising the strategic importance of EU enlargement for stability, prosperity and peace on the European continent, the European Union and its Member States will now have to **deliver on their promises** to uphold a **credible EU enlargement process** in order not to disappoint the expectations of the citizens in the candidate countries. Because **frustrations with lacking progress** towards a future EU accession may facilitate the luring of their countries towards international actors that do not always want the good of our Continent

- At the same time, however, the European Union may also need to **undergo an in-depth reflection on possible political, financial and institutional reforms** before being able to fully absorb new members. Part of this reflection should also be a reminder that the European Union is not merely a geographical area or an economic reality, but above all a **project of peace** and a **value-based community** of people.
- The current situation requires a **strong sense of European unity**. The EU's cohesion is closely linked with the resilience of national institutions and democracies. We have to be conscious of the high interest of certain global players in trying to **destabilise and polarise** our societies, through disinformation campaigns and other means.
- A **vanishing cohesion** at the EU and national levels would **prove disastrous** on many fronts for all people living in Europe: just to think of the possible consequences, if the unity in solidarity with Ukraine and its people would diminish, or if concerted actions to tackle socio-economic inequalities and the rising poverty in all its forms – including access to affordable energy - were weak: the issue of social unrest cannot be underestimated.
- Europe and the world now seem to be at a **crossroads**. As Pope Francis encourages us, “*even in the night of the war that is fallen upon humanity*”, we should “*not allow the dream of peace to fade*”.
- The difficult situation we are currently experiencing **may also give birth to a new Europe**. A Europe of values and not of particular interests, a Europe of open arms and not walls, a Europe for which human dignity, justice, freedom and democracy are not just empty words, but fundamental principles on which a peaceful and prosperous future can be built. A Europe that is not closed in itself, but open to further enlargement. A Europe that assumes its responsibility in ensuring security,

without reinforcing armament dynamics. A Europe that does not rely on a mentality of fear, but cherishes a culture of encounter and peace.

- It is my hope that this year's Conference may once again provide a **constructive and fruitful contribution** to the process of renewing the European project of peace and helping Christians to rediscover their important role in the process of further advancing the European integration.

Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto
General Secretary of COMECE
21 October 2022