



**Address of COMECE General Secretary to the 30th Anniversary of
the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy**

Chalikidiki (Greece), 29 June-3 July 2023

**Friday, 30th June 10:00-15:00: Special thematic session: “The role of
Christian values in Europe and the world: Convergences and divergences”**

Dear friends,

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this General Assembly of the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy in which it celebrates its **30th anniversary**. Congratulations! It’s also very nice to be in this place, **Chalkidiki**, with its many memories and its significance for our continent and Christianity: Aristoteles, **Mount Athos**, Thessaloniki... I greet in a special way the Secretary General, Dr. Maximus Charakopoulos, and the religious and civil authorities present here today.

I am **Father Manuel Barrios**, a Catholic priest from Spain that now serves as the General Secretary of **COMECE**, the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union. COMECE was created in 1980 as an official representation of the Catholic Church in the Member States before the European Union with the mission of maintaining a **regular dialogue** with the European institutions and following closely the European integration process. It has its Secretariat in Brussels where there is a staff of experts the follows

closely the EU policies in the areas that are of interest to the Church, such as Legal Affairs, Social and Economic Affairs, External Action of the EU, Migration and Asylum, Religious Freedom, Ecology, Agriculture, Energy, Culture, Education and Youth, Ethics, Research and Health...

I have been asked also by the Secretary General of the **Conference of European Churches (CEC)**, my friend Dr **Jørgen Skov Sørensen**, to represent also them in this meeting. As you know, CEC is a fellowship bringing together 113 churches from Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican traditions from all over Europe. CEC celebrated two weeks ago its General Assembly in Tallinn (Estonia), to which I was kindly invited, electing the new Presidency and elaborating the new strategy and vision for the coming 5 years.

COMECE and CEC work closely together, trying, as institutions that represent the majority of Churches in Europe, to give our contribution to shaping the future of Europe, through **dialogue, advocacy and common action**. I don't agree with what **Dr. Kostas Mygdalis** has just said, that we are **flirting with the EU institutions**. Our role is to have a frank dialogue advocating for our values and concerns; sometimes this dialogue is more diplomatic and takes place behind closed doors, other times it is more public, and sometimes it becomes direct confrontation. Possibly a difference between my view and that expressed previously by Dr. Kostas Mygdalis, is that I think that more important than an explicit mention is made of Christian values as "Christians", is that **these values are really present in EU policies**, and these values are the ones that are written in the **board behind us** that presides our gathering: solidarity, justice, democracy, justice, rule of law, otherness, human rights, protection of the vulnerable....

With this I connect to the topic of this special session today of the IAO Assembly regarding the **role of Christian values in Europe and the world**. My main thesis is that these values are not only important historically, as a thing of the past, as the basis of the European culture unites us all, in the richness of the different Christian traditions, but we want that **these values continue inspiring and shaping the future of Europe**. As Christians we are called to work together for this, each one according to his/her role, though we might have different views on how to do it.

As you know, and as also Vincent Depaigne has just told us, the European institutions promoted a **Conference on the Future of Europe** that concluded its work in May 2022. It started in March 2021 as an initiative to allow all Europeans to have a say on what they expect from the European Union and have a greater role in shaping the future of the Union. This Conference, which was held through a digital platform, citizens panels and the plenary, drafted 49 proposals that the EU Parliament, the EU Commission and the Council have committed to implement. The Churches were not invited as such to the Conference though we advocated strongly for this according to Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. At the end, surprisingly, we were invited to give an input of 7 minutes in the Plenary, which we did together as COMECE and CEC through the intervention of Rev. Christian Krieger, then President of CEC.

Though an interesting exercise of participative democracy and a necessary to attempt to approximate the institutions to the citizens, we have to say, from a Christian point of view, that the outcome up to now of this conference has not been very satisfactory -even taking into consideration the war in Ukraine that

has changed many things in the last months-, also because no mention was made of the role of religion in shaping what Europe is and can be. We can ask ourselves though regarding this Conference: even if Christianity or religion were not explicitly mentioned, **are Christian values present in some way in the proposals made in the final report?** I would say, **yes**. What is said in the final document regarding human rights, the rule of law, security, stronger economy, social justice, jobs, European democracy, Digital transformation, Education, culture, youth, is greatly based on our Christian values, even if this is not recognized explicitly, because Christian values are the basis of our common culture, together with other contributions, also from the secular tradition. A mention was made before to the values of the French revolution.

Today we are **facing many issues in the EU**, like the terrible **war in Ukraine**, the refugee crisis, the coming European elections (6-9 June 2024), **Migration and Asylum**, Human Trafficking, **Ecological transition**, Demographic changes, Religious Freedom, in particular the protection of Christian communities outside the EU and the respect of places of worship, the partnership with Latin America and the Caribbean, the **place of Europe in the world**, Artificial Intelligence, Abortion, end of life, family law...

And we are facing these issues in a **context of strong secularization and of weakness of our Churches**. In Europe today many have lost memory of Christianity, they don't know what being Christian means, there is a great religious illiteracy also in policy makers, there is a loss of faithful in the Churches and the average age of Church goers is high and growing in most places in Europe. It is also true as Dr. Kostas Mygdalis says in the concept note he sent us, that "we can observe that some circles at the heart of the European Union's decision-making centres are unable to conceive this irrefutable truth [the importance of Christian values]. Over the course of time, their actions

seem to be driven by obsessive ideas, resulting to the exclusion of any reference of the Christian dimension of our common European culture.”

We have to recognize that as Churches we are debilitated; the Catholic Church by the sexual abuse crisis that has made us lose credibility and the Orthodox Church by the division between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Patriarchate of Moscow that has increased with the war in Ukraine.

What are we then we called to do to give our contribution as Churches and as Christian politicians to the future of our continent? These would be some of my suggestions:

1. Work more for the **unity of Christians**: Our divisions debilitate us and are a counter-witness to the truth of Christianity.
2. **Fight against religious illiteracy**, through education, information campaigns, etc.
3. Face with courage, **parrhesia**, the anti-Christians lobbies that are present in the EU institutions and very active.
4. Create **networks of Christian politicians** and politicians that, though not Christians, share our values, to work together on what unites us. This is already being done, as this IAO Assembly shows.
5. Lastly, I would say that we have to put together a good strategy for the coming **EU elections in June 2024**. An important change can take place in the EU Parliament in the next elections, possible becoming more friendly to Christian values. Today the majority of the Parliament is indifferent or contrary to the Churches positions in many areas as some of the votes on resolution that have taken place in this legislature demonstrate. Possibly this can change if we are able to work together and

mobilize the Christian community who still gathers the majority of European citizens in their different traditions. In this I think it is right to say that “**secularization theory**”, that predicted that religion will decline as societies develop, has failed not only in the world at large, but also in Europe, where religion still remains very important for many citizens and this is something the policy makers must acknowledge.

Thank you very much for your kind attention!

Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto
General Secretary of COMECE