



***CONFERENCE ON INTEGRAL ECOLOGY
- FOR A SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION –
SOPHIA UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE***

***The work of COMECE in the EU on Integral Ecology
Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, General Secretary of COMECE***

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Dear friends,

It is a pleasure and an honour to participate here in the Sophia University Institute of the Focolare Movement in this conference on Integral Ecology, framed in the Dialop initiative of a dialogue between Socialists/Marxists and Christians. I really think that the extremely important issue for humanity and its future of integral ecology, that not only means the care of nature, of our common home, but also the care of our fellow brothers and sisters, is one in which we can agree on many things and work together, Socialists/Marxists and Christians. And mainly we agree that there is a need for a radical change, an ecological conversion in words of Pope Francis. The technocratic paradigm with its presumption of unlimited power in the use of resources through technology and science, the interest of the owners of capital to always increase their profits at whatever cost, the myth of an unlimited growth that forces us always to grow to be able to survive but with no clear direction... All these things, both material and ideological, we need to overcome to be able to make our world more sustainable and fraternal.

I have been asked to talk about the work of COMECE in the EU, especially, on Integral Ecology. COMECE, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, is an institution of the Catholic Church created more than 40 years ago, with the mission of maintaining a regular dialogue with the European Institutions. It represents officially the Church in the European Union before the European institutions through the Bishops' Conferences of the Member States, that delegate a bishop to be part of its plenary assembly. COMECE has its headquarters in Brussels where we have a Secretariat of around 15 persons, of which I am the Secretary General. In the Secretariat we follow closely the different policy areas that are of interest to the Church and inform the Bishops' Conferences of important developments in these fields. We also advocate for the position of the Church before the EU bodies, the Parliament, the Commission and the Council. The main areas of policy making that we follow are economic and social affairs, migration and asylum, education and culture, ethical issues, legal affairs, external action of the EU, Freedom of Religion inside and outside the EU, and energy, agriculture and ecology.

When the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* was published we decided, together with other Catholic entities working with the EU in Brussels, to create an alliance between us to reinforce our advocacy work in favour of the teachings of the letter. We created, thus, the *Laudato Si* Alliance, ELSIA, that now has as members, together with COMECE, the Jesuit European Social Centre (JESC), CIDSE, Caritas Europa, Justice and Peace Europe, Don Bosco International and the *Laudato Si* Movement.

As COMECE and ELSIA we were happy when the President of the European Commission announced, at the beginning of her mandate, that one of the six priorities of the Commission for 2019-2024 will be the “European green deal”, which will aim at making Europe the first climate-neutral continent with no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, promoting an economic growth decoupled from resource use and leaving no person or place behind. We saw this very much in line with the teachings of *Laudato Si*. We can discuss now, at the end of the term of the Commission, how much of this priority has been accomplished. To make a fair evaluation we should take into account, though, the different crisis we have been through in these last years - Covid, war in Ukraine and in Gaza, migration and asylum, rising populism in many countries, etc. -. Now new elections to the European Parliament are approaching and some parties are exposed, and sometimes yield, to the temptation to mitigate their position on ecological issues so as not to lose votes to populist right-wing parties. Also, it must be said, sometimes changes are being imposed, possibly in the right direction, by the EU, for example in farming, but without explaining or speaking to the persons directly involved and hearing their concerns.

From my perspective as Secretary General of COMECE and following the teaching of Pope Francis in the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, but also in his other fundamental encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, the Church needs today to be prophetic in the real sense of the word, reading the signs of the times, raising awareness, making the cry of the poor her own and calling for repentance and radical change. The two encyclical letters to which I have made reference, *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli tutti*, are explicitly related to the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, both in their inspiration and content. There is a very interesting book published some years ago by the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, himself a

Franciscan, on the figure of St. Francis of Assisi. The title of this book is “Francis of Assisi: A Model for Human Liberation”. In this influential text, Leonardo Boff describes Francis of Assisi as a model of “gentleness and care”, of “integral liberation” in which the spiritual and the social are never separate. In the saint of Assisi Boff sees a humanistic and Christian alternative to life in the contemporary world. For this liberation theologian St Francis not only belongs to Christianity but to all humankind. Leonardo Boff says: “The Church carries within itself constant tension; it proclaims what can never be put into practice, the utopia of the kingdom and radical fraternity among the people. It was precisely these values that Francis lived: the man of the Gospel, sincere, simple and authentic, but radical to the greatest degree, which always allowed him to be obedient to the church of tradition as well as to the church of the poor.” I think in these lines should be our mission as Church in the present moment. Sometimes, when we are involved in advocacy work on policy proposals, we look for the better compromise. Nevertheless, we should never forget the need for this prophetic element, for utopia, for dreaming and working for a different society, more sustainable, fair and fraternal. This is not wishful thinking, it can become a reality that we can experience even now, in the lives of saints and in authentic Christian communities. And in this we can go hand in hand with others that share the same view. Thank you very much!