



## **Let us continue building Europe together**

*We, the bishops delegated by the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (EU), gathered for the 2024 Spring Plenary Assembly of COMECE in Łomża (Poland), celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic EU enlargement, have adopted the following Statement:*

The Catholic Church has accompanied closely the European integration process since its beginnings, considering it a process of bringing together the peoples and countries of Europe in a community to guarantee peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and prosperity. This process, pushed forward with courage by the founding fathers of the European Union after terrible wars on our continent, was based also on Christian values, like the recognition of the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, solidarity and the pursuit of the common good. On 1 May 2004, the EU grew by ten new member states and this was a significant step in the realisation of the vision of a united Europe that could 'breathe with its two lungs', as envisioned by Saint Pope John Paul II, bringing together Eastern and Western Europe into a community of peoples, different, and yet, linked by a common history and destiny. This was a milestone in the Europeanisation of the EU, making it closer to what it is called to be, and a powerful witness to our times of how fraternal cooperation, in pursuit of peace and rooted in shared values, can prevail over conflicts and divisions.

A larger but also more diverse Union has, however, also brought along new challenges. Despite a solid political and economic integration of the EU member states, it is questionable to what extent a genuine dialogue of national realities, cultures, historical experiences and identities has taken place across European societies. As long as a true European spirit that includes a sense of belonging to the same community and of a shared responsibility for it, is not fully developed, trust within the European Union may be undermined and the forging of unity may be confronted with attempts to put particular interests and narrow visions above the common good.

After the crises of recent years that have brought a certain 'enlargement fatigue', Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the geopolitical developments in EU's neighbourhood have generated a new momentum for future accessions to the Union, especially with regard to countries in the Balkans and in the East of Europe. Beyond being a geopolitical necessity for stability on our continent, we regard the prospect of a future EU membership as a strong message of hope for the citizens of the candidate countries and as an answer to their desire for living in peace and justice. We must not forget that these countries have had often to endure hardships and sacrifices along the way.

Accession to the EU is, however, a two-way process. The countries aspiring to a future EU membership must continue pursuing the necessary structural reforms in crucial

areas, especially the rule of law, strengthening of democratic institutions, fundamental rights, including religious freedom and freedom of the media, as well as fight against corruption, tackling organised crime. At the same time, a citizen-centred, credible and fair EU enlargement process should encourage and adequately respond to these reform efforts, avoiding any double-standards in the treatment of the candidate countries.

The credibility of the EU enlargement process also implies concrete steps on the side of the Union to become ready to welcome new members. The future EU expansion is an opportunity to update the idea of a united Europe rooted in practical solidarity and to rediscover with creative fidelity those great ideals which inspired its very foundation. An enlarged Union will also have to re-think its ways of governance, in order to allow its members and institutions to act in a timely and effective manner. Moreover, any adjustments to budgetary frameworks, policies or areas of cooperation should take into consideration their impact on people, especially the most vulnerable members of the societies of the current and future member states.

In our hope that the process of European integration advances, we also feel the need to call for a deeper reflection on our common value basis and the special bonds that unite us as a European family. As Pope Francis said when addressing the COMECE Assembly in March 2023, “Europe has a future if it is truly a union”, cherishing unity in diversity. The principles of subsidiarity, of respect for the different traditions and cultures that all together form Europe, and of following the path of practical solidarity against the one of ideological imposition, are paramount. As Catholic Church, we stand ready to contribute to these efforts.

As the history of the European integration process must, in large part, still be written, we entrust in a particular way the future of our beloved continent to our Lord Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, and the Patron Saints of Europe, Saint Benedict, Saints Cyril and Methodius, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

*Approved by the Assembly of COMECE in Łomża (Poland) on 19 April 2024.*