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# COMECE

## Annual Report

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### 2023



The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences  
of the European Union

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**Mgr. Mariano Crociata,  
President of COMECE.**

# FOREWORD

▲ Reflecting on the past year reveals a panorama brimming with initiatives and activities: institutional meetings including Plenary Assemblies, sessions of the Standing Committee and Commissions; encounters with groups, notable figures and visiting guests; engagements with other ecclesiastical bodies and, particularly, with representatives of European institutions in their various roles. Not to overlook the daily endeavours of our Secretariat across all its areas of expertise.

For those following the work of the institutions of the European Union, it has become essential to receive updates and maintain contact with COMECE. After all, this is COMECE's mission: to understand and accompany the European Union's activities through the perspective of Catholic believers, demonstrating the utmost support and firm belief of our Bishops in the European project. Through faith and a genuine Catholic insight, we will continue to renew this conviction and nurture this project.

2023 was marked by a natural transition of responsibilities, confirming the healthy vitality of an efficiently functioning body. Much gratitude is extended to the outgoing President, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, whose leadership has boosted the work of COMECE in the sign of stability and serenity through proactive and encouraging initiatives. His service as Relator at the Synod of Bishops reminds COMECE of its synodal dimension, anchored in the Church's social teaching.

Our March Assembly, held in Rome, marked this transition with memorable highlights: an audience with Pope Francis, the renewal of the Presidency and the establishment of three new Commissions.

The Pope's call to foster unity and pursue peace was seen as a renewed mandate: peace becomes an objective in a Europe once again marked by war. In this regard, the Pope had a special message for COMECE: "You are by nature a "bridge" between the Churches in Europe and the institutions of the Union. You are by mission builders of relations, of encounter, of dialogue. And this is already working for peace".

The Pope's invitation gained renewed and poignant relevance on 7 October, when Israel, and with it the entire world, had to face Hamas' terrorists attack against defenseless Israeli citizens, victims of unprecedented violence and of abduction. Following that was the military response of Israel against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which still continues. We join those who, as Pope Francis first did, call on both sides to achieve a ceasefire as soon as possible.





Pope Francis and Mgr. Crociata during the March 2023 papal audience.

Our November Assembly was also significant, with the cordial and unanimous re-endorsement of Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto as General Secretary for a second term: signal of stability for COMECE to continue its journey with serenity.

Worth mentioning is also the initiative of the European Commission, within the framework of Article 17 TFEU, to convene an extraordinary high-level meeting with religious representatives to discuss the theme of peace. The invitation from the Commission for religious leaders to collaborate and take diligent part in promoting dialogue at all levels was unanimously welcomed. This task emerges as the dominant and unifying theme of a dramatic year. COMECE intends to continue fulfilling its mission along these lines. ▀

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mariano Crociata".

✠ **Mariano Crociata**

President of COMECE  
Bishop of Latina-Terracina-Sezze-Priverno



Article 17 TFEU High-Level Meeting between EU Religious leaders and the European Commission on the war in the Holy Land.

# ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

CONSISTORY HALL – VATICAN CITY  
23 MARCH 2023



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Pope Francis delivering a speech to the Assembly of EU Bishops during an audience at the Consistory Hall, Vatican City.

▲ Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome! I thank the new President and wish him all the best in his service. I express my heartfelt gratitude to Cardinal Hollerich. He never stops, he never stops! And I greet you all and I thank you for your work, demanding and also exciting, if you do not get mired in bureaucracy and keep your eyes on the horizon, on the inspiring values of the Europe project. That is why I would like to dwell briefly with you today on two focal points, which correspond to the two great “dreams” of Europe’s founding fathers: the dream of unity and the dream of peace.

*Unity.* On this first point, it is crucial to make it clear that European unity cannot be a uniform, homogenising unity, but on the contrary, it must be a unity that respects and values the singularities, the particularities of the peoples and cultures that comprise it. Think of the founding fathers. They belonged to different countries and different cultures: De Gasperi and Spinelli, Italian; Monnet and Schuman,

French; Adenauer, German; Spaak, Belgian; Beck, Luxembourg, to name the main ones. The wealth of Europe resides in the convergence of various sources of thought and historical experience. Like a river, it lives from its tributaries. If the tributaries are weakened and blocked, the entire river suffers and its strength diminishes. The originality of the tributaries. This must be respected: the originality of each country.





**Group photo: the Holy Father, the Bishops of the European Union, and the members of the Staff of COMECE and their families.**

This is the first idea to which I draw your attention: Europe has a future if it is truly a union and not a reduction of the countries with their respective characteristics. The challenge is precisely this: unity in diversity. And it is possible if there is strong inspiration: otherwise, apparatus prevails, the technocratic paradigm prevails, but it is not fruitful because it does not enthuse people, it does not attract the new generations, it does not involve the living forces of society in the construction of a common project.

We wonder: what is the role of Christian inspiration in this challenge? There is no doubt that in the original phase it played a fundamental part, because it was in the hearts and minds of the men and women who initiated the undertaking. Today a lot has changed, certainly, but it is still true that it is the men and women who make the difference. Therefore, the first task of the Church in this field is that of forming people who read the signs of the times, who know how to interpret the project of Europe in today's history.

And here we come to the second focal point: *peace*. History today needs men and women inspired by the dream of a Europe united in the service of peace. After the second world war, Europe experienced the longest period of peace in its history. In the world, however, there was a succession of wars. In recent decades, some wars have dragged on for years, up to today, so that by



**Mgr. Crociata addresses the Holy Father.**



**Pope Francis delivering a speech to the Assembly of EU Bishops during an audience at the Consistory Hall, Vatican City.**



**The Assembly of COMECE at Saint Peter's Square in Rome ahead of the audience with Pope Francis.**



**The COMECE Standing Committee at Saint Peter's Square in Rome ahead of the audience with the Holy Father.**

now one can speak of a third world war. so much so that one can now speak of a third world war. The war in Ukraine is close by, and has shaken the European peace. The neighbouring nations have done their utmost to welcome the refugees; all European peoples are participating in the solidarity effort with the Ukrainian people. This choral response on the level of charity should be matched - but it is clear that this is neither easy nor obvious - by a cohesive commitment to peace.

This challenge is very complex, because the countries of the European Union are involved in multiple alliances, interests, strategies, a series of forces that it is difficult to make converge in a single project. However, one principle should be shared by all, clearly and with determination: war cannot and must not be considered as a solution to conflicts (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 258). If the countries of Europe today do not share this ethical-political principle, then it means they have drifted away from the original dream. If instead they share it, they must commit themselves to implementing it, with all the effort and complexity that the historical situation requires. Because "war is a failure of politics and humanity" (*ibid.*, 261). Politicians must respect this.

COMECE can and must also make its contribution in terms of values and professionalism to this challenge of peace. You are by nature a "bridge" between the Churches in Europe and the institutions of the Union. You are by mission builders of relations,



of encounter, of dialogue. And this is already working for peace. But it is not enough. It also takes prophecy, it takes foresight, it takes creativity to advance the cause of peace. Both architects and craftsmen are needed in this building site; but I would say that the true builder of peace must be both architect and craftsman: the true builder of peace is thus. I also wish this for each of you, well aware that each one of you has his or her own personal charisms that contribute with those of the

others to the common task.

Dear friends, I express my gratitude once again, and I assure you that I pray for you and I pray for your service. Today I have dwelt on these two focal points, which are particularly urgent, but I encourage you also to carry out, as always, your work on ecclesial front. May Our Lady keep you and sustain you. I bless you all from my heart, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

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**A group photo featuring the EU Bishops, the members of the Secretariat and their families at Saint Peter's Square, Rome**



***“COMECE is by nature a ‘bridge’ between the Churches in Europe and the institutions of the Union. You are by mission builders of relations, of encounter, of dialogue”.***

**(POPE FRANCIS)**

## **DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHURCHES AND THE EU** **(ARTICLE 17.3 TFEU)**

▲ Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, a legal basis for EU-Churches dialogue is enshrined in Article 17.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

***This article states that "Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these Churches and organisations".***

In 2023 COMECE, together with its ecumenical partners and in contact with the European Commission, carried forward its reflection on relaunching and improving EU dialogue tools. For COMECE, it is crucial to go beyond merely formal and symbolic moments of dialogue, ensuring occasions of exchange that are relevant for EU policy-making, as well informal and dynamic interactions. Moreover, a clear distinction between Article 17 TFEU Dialogue and Interreligious Dialogue should be maintained,

and EU communication should be more proactive and visible.

We believe that a creative and successful EU-Churches Dialogue can positively affect the way the European Union is perceived in its Member States, due to Churches' deep roots in the fabric of national contexts.

Dialogue with Churches is a responsibility for each EU institution without distinction: this is why COMECE and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) met with the Swedish Presidency of the EU Council sharing inputs and concerns.

At the European Parliament, the current 'open hearing' format of Article 17 Dialogue greatly dilutes exchanges with MEPs and, according to COMECE, should be reformed in the next legislature.



**High-Level meeting between EU and religious leaders, including EC Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, Mgr. Hérourd (Archbishop of Dijon) and Mgr. Vasil' (Archbishop of the Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Košice).**

## High-level meeting of EU and religious leaders on the war in Ukraine

Hosted by the European Commission on 27 January, this meeting was an opportunity to share perspectives on how to address the wide-ranging consequences of the war in Ukraine within the European Union.

COMECE was represented by H.E. Mgr. Antoine Hérourd (Archbishop of Dijon) and H.E. Mgr. Cyril

Vasil' (Archbishop of the Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Košice).

They all stressed that *“the contribution of Churches is and should be considered an essential ingredient for advancing in EU policies promoting the common good”*.

From the onset of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Mgr. Vasil' and his Church community have been among the first Slovak responders to the refugees fleeing from the horrors of the war, offering humanitarian and spiritual support.

During the meeting with the European Commission, Mgr. Vasil' emphasised the role of Churches as *“frontline operational field actors in the provision of humanitarian assistance in many critical areas in the world, including Ukraine and neighbouring countries”*.

Based on his grassroots experience in Eastern Slovakia, he pleaded for EU's continued support for *“voluntary engagement of individuals and organisations committed to accompanying the most vulnerable coming from Ukraine”*.

## Ad-hoc High-level meeting with European religious leaders on the Middle East

The European Commission Vice-President responsible for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas, hosted a special high-level meeting with religious leaders from across Europe to discuss conflicts in the Middle East and their impact on European citizens, on 19 December.

Represented by its President H.E. Mgr. Mariano Crociata, COMECE stressed the key contribution of Churches and religious communities as actor of peace in the Middle Eastern region.

This meeting follows the Commission's communication on *“No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred”*, which called on all Europeans to stand up against hatred and speak up for tolerance and respect.



**COMECE President and General Secretary, Mgr. Crociata and Fr. Barrios Prieto, participating in the ad-hoc meeting between EU and religious leaders on the situation in the Middle East.**

In this context, COMECE also underlined the positive role that religious actors can play within Europe to significantly tackle the domestic consequences of the various conflicts in the Middle East, including antisemitism.

## Meeting with the Swedish Presidency of the EU Council



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**COMECE-CEC Ecumenical delegation meeting with Swedish Minister for Social Affairs and Public Health, Jakob Forssmed, in the context of the Swedish EU Presidency.**

An ecumenical COMECE-CEC delegation was received in Stockholm by Jakob Forssmed, Swedish Minister for Social Affairs and Public Health. COMECE was represented by its President, H.E. Mgr. Mariano Crociata.

During the meeting held on 30 May, European Churches urged the Swedish EU Presidency to maintain a strong focus on European unity, while valuing the diversities of all European people. The delegation also highlighted the positive role Churches and religious communities play in this regard, as actors deeply rooted in national contexts and multipliers of solidarity.

## Dialogue Seminar at the European Parliament on the EU Single Market

Organised on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the EU Single Market, this Dialogue Seminar was an occasion to assess the results of the single market, overviewing its achievements and persistent challenges.

COMECE was represented by Professor Sergio Rodríguez López-Ros, Vice-Rector of the University Abat Oliba CEU (Spain), who recalled that *“more inclusive and fair economic models are needed for the benefit of all and essential to ensure that the EU project remains vibrant”*.

COMECE also encouraged the EU institutions to address pressing challenges within our societies, among which sustainable development, work-life balance, Artificial Intelligence regulation, protection of personal data and youth participation.



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**Prof. Sergio Rodríguez López-Ros, Vice-Rector of the University Abat Oliba CEU (Spain), participating on behalf of COMECE in the EP Seminar on the 30th years anniversary of the EU Single Market.**

The Seminar was organised by Othmar Karas, Vice-President of the European Parliament responsible for the implementation of Article 17 (TFEU).





**Prof. Philip McDonagh shaking hands with EP Vice-President Othmar Karas at the Article 17 Dialogue Seminar on Liberal Democracy.**

## **Dialogue Seminar at the European Parliament on liberal democracy**

COMECE took part in an Article 17 TFEU Dialogue event organised by the European Parliament on “*Liberal democracy*”.

Held in view of the 2024 EU Elections, the event took place on 24 January, hosted by MEP Othmar Karas, First Vice-President of the European Parliament responsible for Article 17 TFEU implementation.

Participants highlighted the contribution that a positive dialogue with Churches can offer for a more democratic debate. Rebuilding trust in institutions and instrumentalisation of religions are two of the main key points that emerged during the discussion.

On this occasion, COMECE was represented by Prof. Philip McDonagh, who emphasised the need to support EU-Churches dialogue with well-crafted frameworks, also relying on the experiences of COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Ecumenical prayer for peace and Christian unity at the European Parliament**

To mark Pentecost, COMECE and CEC held on 6 June a Prayer for Peace and Christian Unity at the European Parliament. The event was hosted by MEP Jan Olbrycht.

The COMECE-CEC joint initiative featured a reflection offered by Prof. Tomáš Halík on the beginnings of the Church at Pentecost as a “*sacrament of understanding*” and on its role in the current historical moment.

In his contribution, the President of COMECE, H.E. Mgr. Mariano Crociata, addressed the ongoing war in Ukraine and stated: “*A just peace has been the incessant and urgent request of the Church and of COMECE*”.



**Mgr. Crociata addressing the participants of the COMECE-CEC Breakfast event dedicated to Peace and Christian Unity.**

*“Migrants flee because of poverty, fear or desperation. Eliminating these causes and thus putting an end to forced migration calls for shared commitment on the part of all, in accordance with the responsibilities of each”.*

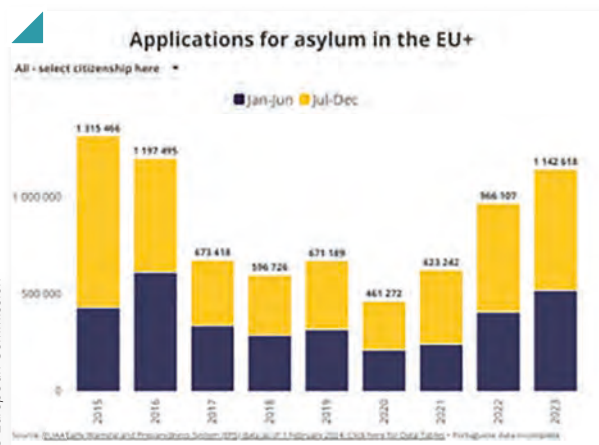
(POPE FRANCIS)

## MIGRATION & ASYLUM

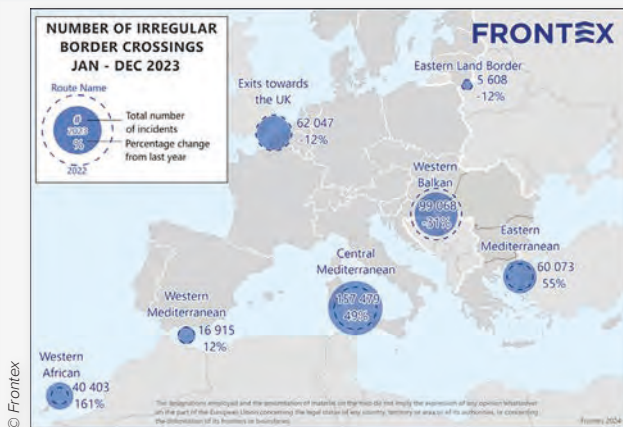
▲ The war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, triggered the activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive. This directive's application was extended until March 2025, benefiting over 4.2 million people from Ukraine. The crisis highlighted the remarkable capacity of European countries and their societies to demonstrate solidarity with Ukrainian refugees. COMECE is a member of the *Catholic Response for Ukraine (CR4U)* initiative, aiming to coordinate efforts among Catholic institutions and enhance support for Ukrainian refugees.

On 20 December, a political agreement on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was reached. This pact encompasses a combination of several regulations, non-binding decisions, and policies that establish a framework for managing migratory flows to the EU. It is reinforced by bilateral agreements with countries of origin and transit, such as Turkey, Tunisia and Libya. According to Frontex, the number of irregular border crossings in 2023 rose to approximately 380,000, marking the highest level

since 2016 and representing a 17% increase from the figures in 2022. The top three nationalities among these crossings were Syrians (with over 100,000 irregular crossings), followed by Guineans and Afghans.



Applications for asylum in the EU+.  
Source: EU Asylum Agency.



Number of irregular border crossings in 2023.

The Central Mediterranean Route was the most active, accounting for 41% of traffic, although the most significant increase was observed on the Western African route to the Spanish Canary Islands, with a 161% rise. Despite implemented measures, 3,129 migrants were still reported missing at the Mediterranean Sea, totalling more than 29,000 since 2014. The EU+ received more than one million asylum applications in 2023, primarily from Syrians, Afghans, Turks, and Venezuelans, with Germany being the most common destination country.

The EU is intensifying its efforts to prevent new irregular arrivals and to reinforce its return mechanisms. Reforms in EU labor migration policies, including the Single Permit and Long-Term Residence Directives, as well as in the EU anti-trafficking legislation, are currently underway.

## THE EU PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

COMECE endorses a human-centered approach in migration and asylum policies and has warned about the negative implications of some provisions in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. Migrants, asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, and their families should be fully respected in their human dignity. Detention should be used as a last resort, and the individual right to international protection, the right to appeal at the border, the unity of migrant families, and the proper conditions of accommodation centers should all be upheld. Solidarity among EU Member States and generosity towards newcomers should also be considered central elements of migration and asylum policies.



School of Leadership and Public Life on globalisation and nationhood, organised by the University San Pablo-CEU, Madrid.





COMECE Adviser Bazán participating in the 2023 meeting of the Migration and Refugee Section of the CCEE Commission for Social Pastoral Care held in Szombathely, Hungary.

## TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

In December 2022, the European Commission introduced a proposed amendment to the Anti-Trafficking Directive that criminalises the use of services from trafficking victims when the 'user' knows the person is a victim.

This amendment also extends the Directive's explicit coverage to include forced marriage, illegal adoption, and certain cases of surrogacy as forms of exploitation.

COMECE advocated for several measures, including enhancing preventive actions against human trafficking, strengthening partnerships between public authorities and various actors (including faith-based organizations and Churches), adopting EU Guidelines against Human Trafficking, and recognising the exploitation of women for surrogacy purposes as a form of human trafficking.

## Commission on Migration and Asylum

The Commission was established in March 2023, during the COMECE Spring Plenary Assembly, replacing the COMECE Working Group on Migration and Asylum.

Presided over by Mgr. Jozef Hal'ko (Slovakia), it met on 1 June to discuss with EU Commission officials the EU policy on irregular migration, the challenges of the EU Asylum system in the context of the ongoing negotiations of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, and the amendment of the Anti-Trafficking Directive.

A second online meeting occurred on 7 December, continuing the discussions around the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the reform of the legal migration package.

**President:** Mgr. Jozef Hal'ko

**Secretary:** José Luis Bazán



Group photo of the COMECE Commission on Migration and Asylum.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 11 July

Contribution to the Consultation of Vatican Dicastery for Human Integral Development on “*Freedom to choose to migrate or to stay*”.

### 29 November

Position paper on EU legislation on Labour Migration released by the Christian Group on Migration and Asylum.

### 18 December

“*Let’s advance the cause of humanity through a fair and just EU Pact on Migration and Asylum*”, statement on the occasion of the International Migrants Day.

### 22 December

Statement on the Agreement reached on the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

### 30 May-11 October

Contribution to the *Catholic Response for Ukraine (CR4U)* Task Force regarding the EU response to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis.

## EVENTS

### 14 February

Contribution in the ECR event “*Contemporary forms of human trafficking and reproductive exploitation*” held at the European Parliament, Strasbourg.

### 26 April

Contribution to the “*EU Policies on Migration and Asylum*” International Programme of Catholic European Leaders, Madrid.



President and Secretary of the COMECE Commission on Migration and Asylum, Mgr. Hal'ko and Adviser Bazán, together with a EC officer, during a meeting on irregular migration and returns.

### 10 May

Workshop on Human Trafficking held by the EPP Working Group Intercultural and Religious Dialogue at the European Parliament, Strasbourg.

### 10 September

Participation in the School of Leadership and Public Life on globalisation and nationhood. Organised by the Center for Studies, Training and Social Analysis for the University San Pablo-CEU, Madrid.

### 9 October

Launch event of the documentary “*Canillitas on labor exploitation in Dominican Republic*”, jointly organised by Don Bosco International, Misiones Salesianas and COMECE.

### 12-14 November

CCEE Meeting of National Directors for the Pastoral Care of Migrants in Europe, Szombathely. ▲



## Ethical considerations in AI development

# ETHICS, RESEARCH & HEALTH

*“ At this time in history, which risks becoming rich in technology and poor in humanity, our reflections must begin with the human heart. ”*

(POPE FRANCIS)

▲ COMECE's activity in the fields of ethics, research, and health during 2023 was characterised by the diversity of the legislative projects and political initiatives launched by European institutions.

The prospect of the 2024 EU elections influenced the pace of some political initiatives from political and institutional actors. In this context, COMECE, particularly through its Commission on Ethics, took an in-depth look at many of these dossiers, implementing a social ethics discourse that considers the assumptions upon which the European Union was founded.

## DIGITAL ETHICS

COMECE accompanied the final phases of the negotiations on the Artificial Intelligence Act between the European Council and the European Parliament, expected to reach an agreement in February 2024. COMECE's contribution highlighted

the importance of ethical evaluation of AI, safeguarding citizens' fundamental rights, asserting the human exclusivity to freedom and accountability. COMECE also reiterated Pope Francis' call on all actors to work towards an international legally binding treaty for an ethically based regulation of AI.



Some of the members of the COMECE Commission on Ethics, including its President and Moderator, Mgr. Anton Jamnik and Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Agius.



## SUBSTANCES OF HUMAN ORIGIN

COMECE intervened in the public debate on the draft regulation on *'Quality and safety standards for substances of human origin intended for human use'* — also known as the SoHO Regulation.

COMECE expressed its position in September when the European Parliament adopted its stance on the draft regulation, and again in October, in anticipation of the inter-institutional negotiations between the EU Council and the Parliament.

In its intervention, COMECE welcomed the general intention to regulate the use of human substances within the European Union but expressed concerns over the broad definition of 'human substances' and denounced the risk of unacceptable degradation of prenatal human life.

## LEGISLATION FOR PLANTS PRODUCED BY CERTAIN NEW GENOMIC TECHNOLOGIES

The European Commission proposed a legal framework for plants obtained through targeted mutagenesis and cisgenesis, referred to as NGT plants.

With this initiative, the Commission aims to maintain a high level of protection for human and animal health and the environment, foster innovation in the agri-food system, and contribute to the objectives of the European Green Deal and the *'Farm to Fork'* strategy.

In this context, COMECE joined the ethical and legal discussions on a new legal framework for these new genomic technologies, advocating for a framework that complies with the precautionary principle, ensuring transparency and consumer choice by implementing traceability and labeling of NGT-1 plants. Finally, due to the risks of significant impact on breeders and farmers, COMECE expressed its criticism for the patenting of NGT-1 plants.

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

In the context of the public debate on including a supposed right to abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Commission on Ethics of COMECE elaborated a statement underlining the ethical and legal indefensibility of such proposal.

The document argues that the respect for the inalienable dignity of every human being in every stage of life — especially in situations of complete vulnerability — is a fundamental principle in our democratic societies.

The Commission stressed that EU Member States have very different constitutional traditions with regard to the legal regulation of abortion, therefore, constituting a fundamental right to abortion would go against the general principles of the Union law.

From a legal perspective, the document also reiterated that there is no recognised right to abortion in European or International law.



Working session on the future EU legal framework to technologies based on Artificial Intelligence.



Dr. Paul Nemitz (European Commission) speaking at the COMECE Commission on Ethics.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 1 June

Voting Advice on the proposal for a regulation of the Europe Parliament and of the Council on harmonized rules on Artificial Intelligence.

### 18 July

Statement “*The Ethical Indefensibility of an EU Fundamental Right to Abortion*”. The document was elaborated by the COMECE Commission on Ethics.

### 12 September

Statement on the proposal for a regulation on quality and safety standards for substances of human origin. The document was elaborated together with the Katholisches Büro of the German Bishops’ Conference.

### 25 October

Position Paper on the proposed regulation on quality and safety standards for substances of human origin.

## EVENTS

### 24-25 February

Online conference of the Initiative of Christians for Europe (IXE).

### 2 May

Presentation of the work of COMECE at the Conference “*Family Networks, Antidote to loneliness*”, Spain.

### 21 June

Contribution to the Conference of Sozialdienst Katholischer Frauen, Germany.

### 18-19 July and 25 September

Exchange meeting with expert group of the German Bishops’ Conference on sexual and reproductive health rights, Germany.

### 18 October

Meeting with Sozialdienst Katholischer Frauen on prostitution, Germany.

### 4 December

Exchange meeting with the German Bishops’ Conference Working Group on Europe.

## Commission on Ethics

The Commission was established in March 2023, during the COMECE Spring Plenary Assembly held in Rome, replacing the COMECE Working Group on Ethics.

It monitors the activities of EU institutions relevant to the field of ethics and prepares reflections, reports, and contributions for COMECE.

The Commission consists of legal and scientific experts delegated by the EU Bishops’ Conferences. In 2023, the Commission convened online on 7 July and in Brussels on 28 November.

**President:** Mgr. Anton Jamnik

**Moderator:** Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Agius

**Secretary:** Friederike Ladenburger



Group photo of the COMECE Commission on Ethics.

# ECOLOGY, ENERGY & AGRICULTURE

*“...a first task is to know and make known the magisterium of the Pope starting with the encyclical *Laudato si’*, but now also with the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*.”*

**(MGR. MARIANO CROCIATA)**

▲ This year was critical for the future of EU environmental, climate and agricultural policies. Criticism on the social costs and the feasibility of some of the most ambitious legislative projects, especially in the context of high food prices and inflation, culminated in major tensions in the European institutions and the public.

Consequently, some of the major projects of the Green Deal have been dropped. It seems clear that the social question needs to be taken more seriously, also in view of the 2024 European elections. In this sensitive moment for Europe the Apostolic Exhortation “*Laudate Deum*” was published, challenging many of our approaches and premises.

We also witnessed a somewhat stabilisation of the energy market in the EU, even if prices are still higher than before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Diversification of energy sources and increased boost for renewable energy production had ambiguous outcomes: e.g., while imports of natural gas from Russia have decreased, LNG imports with higher financial and environmental costs have increased, including from Russia. Energy production from renewables continued to rise, but this has also meant more engagement in extractivism.

## LAUDATE DEUM, “A COMPASS IN THE CONTEXT OF EU ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES”

Published on 4 October 2023, the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Apostolic Exhortation “*Laudate Deum*” provides an important contribution for the work of the Church at the EU institutions. It not only calls for embracing the consensus of the majority of the scientific community on climate issues, but also to go beyond a “*merely ecological approach*” by considering it a social issue, and to question the technological paradigm and lifestyles, so prevalent in our societies.



Screenshot taken during the hybrid event “*The new Laudate Deum of Pope Francis and the EU’s Green Transition*”, organised by COMECE and JESC.



COMECE has welcomed the Apostolic Exhortation and called it “*a compass in the context of EU environmental policies*”, mentioning the necessity to shape policies “*that are integral, directed toward the common good, and considerate of the social question, truly leaving no one behind.*” In this context, COMECE, together with JESC, hosted an event at COMECE to engage with representatives from the European Parliament and Catholic organisations and discuss what the message of “*Laudate Deum*” means for the EU’s green transition.

## SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF EUROPE

Considering the uncertain future of the European Green Deal, a growing division between decision-makers and society, political parties and even different departments within the same institutions, COMECE pointed out on several occasions the necessity of increased dialogue to overcome partisanship and work together for a sustainable future of the European continent.

In this context, COMECE was invited to share its reflection at the roundtable discussion of the EPP Working Group on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue. During the discussion with MEPs and representatives from other religions, COMECE emphasised the need of a truly integral approach to environmental policies, “*considering a responsibility for the care of our common home as stewards of the creation, while putting the human person in the centre of ethical considerations, so that leaving no one behind becomes a reality*”.

## AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

Food prices throughout the EU have remained high, driven by relatively elevated energy and fertilizers prices, and inflation, among others. Much of the criticism and tensions around climate and environmental policies were thus centred on their consequences on the agricultural sector and the future of farming. COMECE has argued in these discussions to reconcile moving towards more sustainable food systems with providing a sustainable future for farmers at the same time and taking measures to keep high-quality food affordable.



COMECE Adviser Johannes Moravitz participating in a meeting on sustainability organised by the EPP Group on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue. The event took place at the European Parliament.

COMECE furthermore participated in the multi-stakeholder project on global food security under the umbrella of the Dublin City University with several international experts and institutions, such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and gave its contribution for providing a European context. The results were presented at the “*The UN Food Systems Stocktaking Moment*”, that took place in Rome on 24-26 July.

## COP AND THE UN

COMECE gave its contribution to the meetings of the Working Group of the Holy See on Integral Ecology and COP 28, providing insights into the specific challenges in the context of EU policies. After the conclusion of COP 28, COMECE published its reflections, welcoming the consensus on some essential issues, such as addressing Loss & Damage earnestly and phasing out fossil fuels in a just way. At the same time, there are concerns that the vague language in the outcome document may indicate a lack of serious commitment.

In Autumn, COMECE was invited to contribute to the dialogue session of the UN human rights Regional Office for Europe on “*The Right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*”. It was pointed out that the establishment of this right was already acknowledged by Pope Francis in a message to the Council of Europe in 2021 and that a serious implementation of such a right should involve a reconsideration of what constitutes “*the good life*” in our societies.



## ELSiA

The *European Laudato Si' Alliance (ELSiA)* is a network of seven Catholic organisations committed to bringing the prophetic message of the *Laudato Si'* Encyclical to life, tackling simultaneously the ecological and social crisis that we face in our times. Its members are the following: COMECE, CIDSE, Caritas Europa, Jesuit European Social Centre, Justice and Peace Europe, Don Bosco International and the Laudato Si' Movement.

In 2023, ELSiA continued its path of contributing towards the ecological conversion, discerning on the skills we need to develop or acquire to respond to the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor. Highlights of the activities of 2023 include the following:

- the completion of the Europe-wide Living Laudato Si' survey, designed to uncover initiatives inspired by the encyclical implemented by Catholic stakeholders in Europe;
- the organization of webinars on the EU sustainable textile strategy;
- the publication of recommendations on the EU Due Diligence Directive;
- the co-organisation of the Brussels events for the second visit of a delegation of the Iglesia y Minería network;
- the organisation the 6th Laudato Si' Reflection Day and the 3rd eco-spirituality workshop in collaboration with the community of Taizé;
- the participation to the gathering in Rome of the *Ecclesial Network Alliance for Integral Ecology (ENA)* in July 2023 to discern its next steps;
- the publication, together with ENA, of remarks on the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*;
- the publication of a statement on COP28.

ELSiA has completed its 2021–2023 project and is discerning its next steps.

**ELSiA Coordinator: Cinzia Verzeletti**



COMECE participated in a meeting of the Global food group held at the Irish Embassy to Italy.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 25 July

*"The EU's role in global agricultural and food systems"*, a contribution of COMECE to "Collective Action for Ending a Collective Problem: A Multi-stakeholder Project on Global Food Security", Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations, Dublin City University.

### 5 October

COMECE welcomes the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *"Laudate Deum"*, calling it *"a compass in the context of EU environmental policies"*.

### 13 December

COMECE publishes its reflections on COP 28 outcomes.

### 19 December

ELSiA publishes a statement on COP 28.

## EVENTS

### 27 March

Holy See Working Group on Integral Ecology, focusing on COP 28.

### 19 April

Intervention at roundtable discussion on “*Sustainable future - reflections from Churches and religious communities*” of the EPP Working Group on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue.

### 21 April

Working Group on Ecology of the German Bishops’ Conference.

### 26 May

6th European Laudato Si’ Reflection Day. The event was organised by ELSiA.

### 6 June

A webinar on the “*EU Sustainable Textiles Strategy*”, organised by ELSiA.

### 4-7 July

“*Resilience in Global Food Systems: A Multilevel Dialogue*”, convened by the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations, Dublin City University at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas (Angelicum).

### 11 July

Holy See Working Group on Integral Ecology, focusing on COP 28.

### 20 October

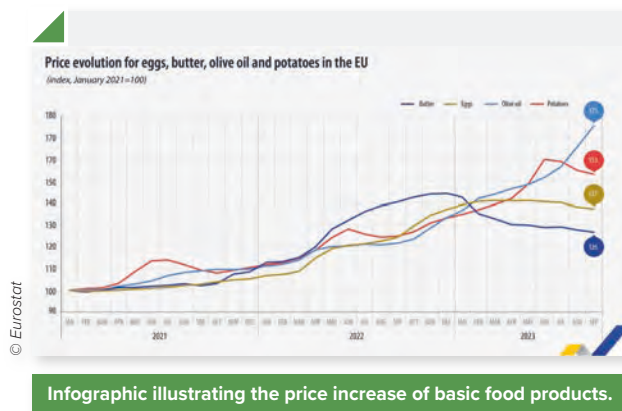
United Nations Human Rights 75 – Regional Dialogue for Europe and Central Asia: “*The Right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*”.

### 7 December

COMECE and JESC co-organised an event on “*Laudate Deum and the EU green transition*”, focused on the challenges posed by the Apostolic Exhortation “*Laudate Deum*” on the EU’s climate and environmental policies.

### 20 December

Mgr. Crociata addresses the participants of the online meeting of the Laudato Si’ Movement. ▲



The UN regional dialogue on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The event featured the participation of COMECE.



*“Fundamental rights are often threatened by ideologies that instrumentalise and manipulate them in the name of a humanism that, in truth, no longer has anything human about it”*

(CARD. PIETRO PAROLIN)

# JUSTICE & FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

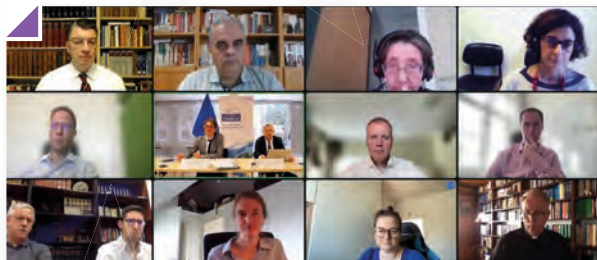
▲ More and more, EU laws have direct relevance for national stakeholders, including religious ones. COMECE equips the Church to face these challenges constructively, while ensuring full respect for its status under Article 17.1 (TFEU) and solid safeguards for freedom of religion across dossiers.

This has been the case for 2023 in files ranging from non-profit law to data protection. In other cases, COMECE raised preoccupations in sensitive areas such as child protection and family law.

Respect for identities and cultures of each country remains a reference point, in accordance with Pope Francis’ concern, as well as ensuring a strong voice for the Church in the public square. Religious illiteracy, including within public institutions, is another crucial focus, as it can undermine sound EU law-making.

EU jurisprudence - especially on freedom of religion and discrimination on grounds of religion - remains a central theme, also in view of more intense dialogue with the Court of Justice of the European Union.

## FACILITATING CROSS-BORDER ACTIVITIES FOR NON-PROFIT ASSOCIATIONS



Screenshot taken during a meeting of the Legal Affairs Commission.

EU legislative initiatives on Non-Profit actors operating across Member States’ borders continued to be a strong focus of COMECE work.

The European Commission presented the relevant proposal in September 2023, excluding Churches and

religions organisations from the scope of this Directive. COMECE promptly reacted by underlying with the EU institutions that such exclusion would put religious organisations that wish to operate across borders at a disadvantage compared to most other Non-Profit actors.

## PROTECTING DATA WHILE SAFEGUARDING FREEDOM OF RELIGION



Annual meeting of EU Bishops' Data Protection Experts.

One of our core priorities is to assist COMECE member Bishops' Conferences in dealing with data protection challenges. For instance, during 2023, the Catholic Church in Ireland and Belgium relied on technical support from COMECE in facing legal proceedings concerning erasure from sacramental records. In May, the 5th COMECE annual meeting of Church data protection experts addressed - in dialogue with EU officers - the concepts of 'Data controller' and 'Data processor', as well as the Right of Access. During this meeting, participants continued their reflection on Canon Law and its interaction with the GDPR, with a contribution of two Church experts from Croatia.

The comprehensive COMECE Guidance on GDPR application for Bishops' Conferences continued to be promoted among Church experts.

Legitimate interest as a legal basis for data processing is constantly monitored. It will be again on the COMECE agenda in view of the future consultation to revise the relevant EU Guidance.



Mgr. Hoogenboom and EC officer during an exchange on parenthood.

## RECOGNITION OF PARENTHOOD BETWEEN MEMBER STATES

COMECE closely followed this sensitive dossier stressing the need to avoid any impact on national family law systems regarding practices such as surrogate motherhood. Moreover, COMECE highlighted the importance of providing space to Member States in applying national public order principles in this matter. The topic was also discussed in dialogue with the European Commission and the European Parliament on various occasions.

## PROTECTING CHILDREN ON-LINE AND OFF-LINE

During 2023, COMECE again underlined the importance of commitment to combating online child sexual abuse in all its heinous forms. For COMECE, privacy rules should not create undue obstacles to the fight against this anti-human phenomenon. Furthermore, COMECE urges the EU institutions to craft and implement rules that keep pace with dizzyingly fast technological developments. Fruitful exchanges were held on this file with the European Parliament.

COMECE also started to prepare itself to constructively contribute to the revision of the Directive on criminal provisions to combat sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, including in the physical environment (off-line).

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 22 June

Contribution to EU discussions on the proposed Regulation on parenthood recognition.

### 28 August

Inputs to EU discussion on the reform of *De minimis* State aid Regulations.

### 29 November

COMECE contributed to EU discussions on the proposed Directive on cross-border associations.

## EVENTS

### 15 May

5th COMECE Annual Meeting of Data Protection Experts of EU Bishops' Conferences.

## Legal Affairs Commission

The Commission is composed of legal experts delegated by EU Episcopates. It contributes to implementing Article 17.3 (TFEU) Dialogue with the EU institutions on legal matters affecting Churches and religious communities. In the course of 2023, mandates were renewed for a further period of five years.

The COMECE Legal Affairs Commission met twice in 2023: once online, once physically in Brussels.

On 2-3 March, the spotlight was on: the proposed European Media Services Act; the assessment of EU Rule of Law instruments; the 'Equality Package'; EU jurisprudence impacting on religion.

On 28-29 September, experts focused on: the Proposal for a Directive on European cross-border associations; the Proposal for a Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse; the evolution of the EU jurisprudence on discrimination on grounds of religion; and, again, on Rule of Law.

Members regularly exchanged on data protection and freedom of religion issues emerging in the respective Member States.

**President:** Mgr. Theodorus C.M. Hoogenboom  
**Secretary:** Alessandro Calcagno



Group photo of the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission.


### Strengthening the rules to fight Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a growing and complex problem in our society, both online and offline.



Infographic showing some statistics on the phenomenon of child sexual abuse in the EU.





*“A great river of poverty is traversing our cities and swelling to the point of overflowing; it seems to overwhelm us, so great are the needs of our brothers and sisters who plead for our help, support, and solidarity.”*

(POPE FRANCIS)

## SOCIAL & ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

▲ In 2023, the European Union grappled with a complex socio-economic landscape shaped by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Income inequality remained a pressing issue, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Although overall income inequality in the EU remained stable, notable income drops were experienced by those seeking employment and individuals with low to medium education levels.

The pandemic further exposed health disparities. Individuals in the lowest income quintile were nearly three times more likely to report a disability, underscoring the intersection between income levels and health outcomes.

Access to health services deteriorated during the pandemic for lower-income groups, highlighting the urgent need for policies that tackle both income and health disparities.

Precarious employment conditions particularly affected temporary workers, young people and holders of in low-wage jobs. Additionally, bridging

the digital divide became crucial: access to adequate online learning equipment proved more essential than income itself.

While the EU made significant progress towards the socio-economic Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), environmental trends showed less improvement. Addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities will be essential for the EU's resilience and cohesion in the years ahead.

### SOLIDARITY AS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY

The Social Affairs Commission dedicated one of its meetings to explore ways in which solidarity can alleviate poverty in the European Union.

The experts shared best practices and ongoing projects from their respective countries and highlighted the latest positions of their Bishops' Conferences regarding the significance of solidarity in alleviating poverty.



Some members of the Social Affairs Commission at the European Parliament.

The meeting featured a keynote speech by Fr. Grégoire Catta (France), underscoring the pivotal value of solidarity, as outlined in the Encyclical letter *“Fratelli tutti”*. Guest speakers included Ruth Owen, Deputy Director of the European Federation of National Organizations working with Homeless, who shed light on the current state of homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe. Additionally, Frank Siebern-Thomas, Head of the Fair, Green and Digital Transitions Research Unit at the European Commission, discussed the EU’s efforts to ensure fair and just transitions. Following this meeting, COMECE is currently working on a reflection paper

## DEMOCRACY AT WORK

Issues related to democracy, citizens’ participation, and sustainable economy gained momentum due to increased interest from EU institutions. This interest is evidenced by the European Parliament’s Report on democracy at work, the European Commission’s Social Economy Action Plan, and the 2023 European Economic and Social Committee’s Opinion on Democracy at work.

In this context, the COMECE Social Affairs Commission, under the new chairmanship of H.E. Mgr. Joseph Galea-Curmi, delved into the topic with a special session titled *‘Democracy at Work: How Active Participation Can Create a More Human and Sustainable Economy for All’*. The session featured a

video presentation by Isabelle Ferreras, Professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain, and insights from Aline Hoffmann, Head of Unit at ETUI. Key points included exploring relevant studies, learning from successful democratic participation models, and considering efforts to establish harmonised frameworks for worker participation both within and beyond Europe.

## THE SOCIAL ECONOMY, SOURCE OF RELATIONAL WEALTH

In February, H.E. Mgr. Antoine Hérouard, then Chair of the Social Affairs Commission, unveiled the COMECE Reflection Paper on Social Economy during a breakfast event at the European Parliament, hosted by MEP Patrizia Toia.

Drafted by an ad-hoc working group established by COMECE in November 2022, under the leadership of Prof. Elena Lasida, the paper proposes concrete measures to EU institutions aiming to unlock the full potential of the Social Economy in all EU Member States. The document underscores the need for aligning national policies and legal frameworks with the social economy’s unique requirements.

Its recommendations include defining precise criteria for social economy membership, enhancing access to EU funds and private investments, advocating for a job-focused fiscal framework and integrating the social economy into the industrial

strategies of each EU Member State. Rooted in principles of Catholic Social Teaching, this initiative seeks to empower the social economy and contribute to societal well-being.

## THE FUTURE OF WORK AFTER LAUDATO SI'

*The Future of Work after Laudato Si'* project, inspired by Pope Francis, addresses global issues of work, inequality, and environmental crises. In its second phase, it aims to establish a Global Transformative Community, enabling collaboration among Catholic-inspired organisations for social justice.

Commemorating the 60th anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*, the Catholic Church engages in a synodal global reflection that aligns with the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s proposal for a Global Coalition for Social Justice.

In June, COMECE actively participated in a dialogue meeting, discussing themes such as extreme poverty, dignified employment and migration challenges. This fosters dialogue among diverse organisations.

Amid unresolved climate transitions and conflicts, the focus remains on promoting social justice in the world of work, bridging faith-based efforts and grassroots action.

Additionally, COMECE's involvement in the Economy of Francesco event the previous year, reflects its dedication to shaping an economy that prioritises human well-being and sustainability for future generations.



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Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Sr. Alessandra Smerilli, F.M.A., and COMECE Adviser Alix de Wasseige, at the Economy of Francesco, 2022.



## THE EUROPEAN SUNDAY ALLIANCE

The *European Sunday Alliance* is a network of over 100 national Sunday Alliances, trade unions, civil society organisations and religious communities across Europe, all committed to putting the establishment of a European weekly common day of rest for workers as a priority on the EU social policy agenda. By tradition, this day would be Sunday in Europe, as enshrined in Art. 2 of the European Social Charter.

The Alliance emphasises the necessity for quality resting periods to preserve workers' mental health. To address this, the Alliance organised a breakfast event entitled "*Work and Loneliness: Quality resting time for improved mental health of workers*" host at the European Parliament by MEP Miriam Lexmann, sponsor of the Alliance since March 2023.

The speakers at the event included European Commission's Vice-President Dubravka Šuica's Head of Cabinet Colin Scicluna, Marie-Louise Coleiro-Preca, President of Eurochild and Stefan-Bernhard Eirich, Federal President of the German Catholic Workers' Movement (KAB). The event gathered trade unions, employer organisations and key EU stakeholders on mental health issues.



© COMECE

Mgr. Hérouard presents the COMECE contribution to the Social Economy at the European Parliament.





Jean-Baptiste de Franssu, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Istituto per le Opere di Religione (IOR) speaking at the COMECE Social Affairs Commission.

## EVENTS

### 28 February

Conference “*Defining the framework conditions of the Social Economy: How far will the EU go?*”, organised by the COMECE Social Affairs Commission and hosted at the European Parliament by MEP Patrizia Toia.

### 26 April

Conference “*Work and loneliness: Quality resting time for an improved mental health of workers*”, organised by COMECE as member of the European Sunday Alliance. The event was held at the European Parliament.

### 3 May

Conference “*Towards a new model for companies in Europe*”, organised by the Chapel for Europe.

### 9-10 June

Conference “*Social justice in the world of work and beyond: from common values to common engagement and action*”, organised by The Future of Work – Labour after Laudato si’ Project and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), in collaboration with COMECE, Aggiornamenti Sociali, CERAS, WCC, ATD Quart-Monde, and other Catholic-Inspired Organizations (CIOs), along with participation from WIEGO and international networks of workers in the informal economy. The event took place in Geneva.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 3 March

Statement of the European Sunday Alliance calling on political leaders to “*establish a synchronised quality*

*and social resting weekly time for workers in order to enable them to preserve their mental health*”.

### 28 November

COMECE’s assessment to the European Commission’s Consultation on defining the framework conditions of the Social Economy.

## Social Affairs Commission

The Commission is composed of legal experts delegated by EU Episcopates. It monitors EU social and economic policies, prepares statements and contributions, and organises activities related to this field. In the course of 2023, mandates were renewed for a further period of five years.

The Commission met twice in 2023. On 27-28 February experts exchanged on: the social economy, the impact of inflation on vulnerable people and integral ways to reduce the public debt and deficit of the EU Member States. The event also featured the participation of Jean-Baptiste de Franssu, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Istituto per le Opere di Religione (IOR).

On 12 October, the Commission focused mainly on solidarity as an effective tool to alleviate poverty and on how to increase citizens’ participation for a more human and sustainable economy.

**President:** Mgr. Joseph Galea-Curmi

**Secretary:** Alix de Wasseige



Group photo of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission.

*“Europe, offer a renewed vision  
for justice and peace to the  
continent and to the world!”*

*(MGR. RIMANTAS NORVILA)*

## EU EXTERNAL ACTION

▲ The European Union has been surrounded by an arc of instability and conflict over the recent months, both to the East as well as to the South. In addition to a tragic war unfolding in the heart of our continent, a renewed wave of violence has flared-up in the Holy Land.

The Church has remained concerned about the immense human suffering, the dire humanitarian consequences and the widespread destruction caused by these conflicts.

Moreover, at the global level, the world seems to be regressing into a dangerous dynamic. The polarisation of the international community, fuelled by a renewed logic of great powers competition, along with eroding trust in multilateral cooperation frameworks, leaves open even the scenario of an uncontrollable escalation with catastrophic consequences for the whole of humanity.

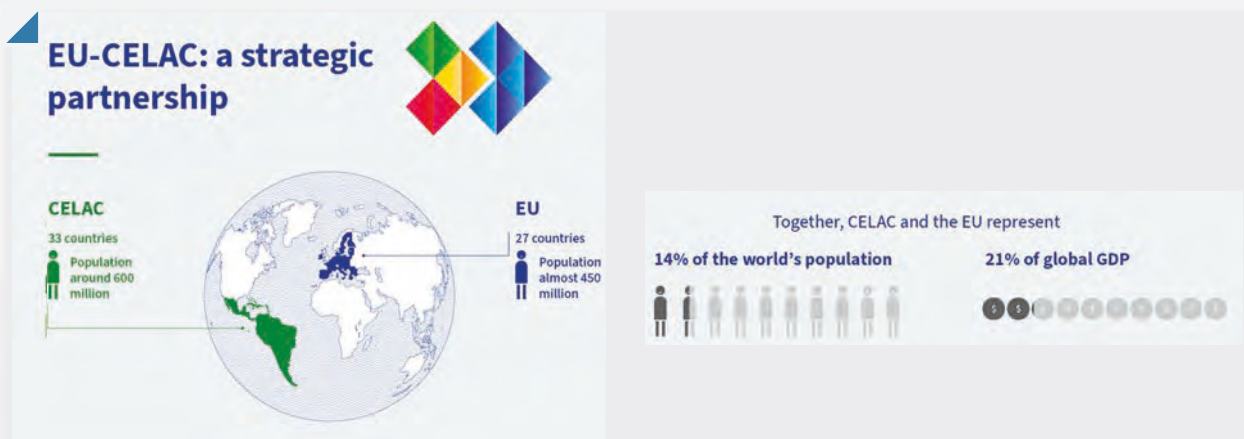
In this difficult geopolitical context, the Church expects from the EU and its leaders to offer to the continent and to the world a renewed vision for stability, justice and lasting peace.



Meeting between His Beatitude Shevchuk, Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), and EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi.

### WORKING FOR LASTING PEACE IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD AND IN THE WORLD

COMECE has continued to express its deep concern about the deteriorating security situation in the EU's neighbourhood and globally.



Infographic showing contextual statistics of the EU-CELAC partnership.

Particular attention was devoted to the suffering of the Ukrainian people, as well as to the pain of the Armenian people in the Caucasus region.

The President of COMECE sent a letter of solidarity and closeness on behalf of all EU Bishops to the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, H.B. Card. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, O.F.M., assuring him and all the people suffering from the devastating wave of violence unfolding in the Holy Land, of prayers and support.

During their Autumn Plenary Assembly that also featured the participation of H.B. Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the COMECE Bishops urged the EU to *“fully employ its potential to settle conflicts and to light lamps of hope, acting as a united, trustful and integrating force, cherishing democratic principles and the rule of law, within and outside its borders.”*



**“Africa-EU partnership of equals: how can we get there? Is the Global Gateway fit for purpose?”.** The event was co-organised by COMECE and its partners, co-hosted by MEPs Saskia Bricmont and Carlos Zorrinho.

## EU-LATIN AMERICA/THE CARIBBEAN: FOR A PEOPLE-CENTRED AND FAIR PARTNERSHIP

In the lead up to the 2023 Summit between the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), COMECE and its partners elaborated a joint contribution calling for a renewed fair and mutually beneficial EU-LAC partnership.

In close cooperation with the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), and the Caritas regional offices from both sides of the Atlantic, COMECE offered reflections, recommendations and best practices in view of a relaunch of the bi-regional partnership that *“addresses the structural causes undermining peace, social justice and societal cohesion, and aims at strengthening the ties between the people of Europe and Latin America, thus promoting a more fraternal world”*.

COMECE also hosted a *“Churches and Mining Network”* delegation consisting of religious authorities and young community leaders from six Latin American countries, who shared their testimonies with EU officials on the devastating impacts of extractive industries on their communities in the context of the discussions on the EU Critical Raw Materials Act.



## TOWARDS AN EU-AFRICA PARTNERSHIP OF EQUALS

In the follow-up to the 6th Summit between the EU and the African Union, COMECE together with religious and faith-based partners from both regions organised a debate in the European Parliament to highlight the need for a more balanced partnership between Africa and Europe.

The event offered the opportunity to Church representatives and community leaders to share best practices in view of shaping the EU's Global Gateway Initiative towards a trust-based investment mechanism relying on local knowledge and locally-driven vision of development.

Moreover, COMECE also contributed to the debate that led to the adoption of a European Parliament's Report on *"EU development cooperation to enhance access to education and training in developing countries"*, highlighting the opportunities of engagement with local faith-based actors, particularly in Africa.

## CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY DUE DILIGENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

COMECE has continued to engage with its faith-based partners in a number of advocacy initiatives calling for a robust EU legal framework to hold companies accountable for environmental damage and human rights abuses.

In the context of the inter-institutional negotiations on an EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, COMECE joined a global faith leaders appeal, urging for the adoption of a strong legislative text that *"would be an important step towards a sustainable economy that serves people and cares for Creation"*.

Moreover, in close dialogue with human rights defenders, COMECE elaborated a contribution to the European Parliament's Report *"on the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders"*, offering recommendations to strengthen the protection of human rights and environmental defenders worldwide.

## EU ENLARGEMENT: A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IN STABILITY, PROSPERITY AND PEACE

COMECE has continued to accompany the EU enlargement process in close dialogue with Church authorities from the countries aspiring for a future EU membership.

Following the visit of H.E. Mgr. Ottavio Vitale, R.C.J., Bishop of Lezhë (Albania), to COMECE, and an exchange with EU officials on Albania's EU perspectives, the President of COMECE welcomed the historic decisions of the European Council on the opening of EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and on granting Georgia the status of a candidate country.



While expressing hope for a swift initiation of accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the COMECE President recalled that a credible EU enlargement process will require the European Union to undertake certain political, institutional and administrative reforms to be able to welcome new members soon. An enlarged and more diverse future EU will also *"need to rediscover our common value basis and the special bonds that unite us as a European family"*.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 20 February

Statement by the President of COMECE on the occasion of the first anniversary of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: *"Please, stop this 'madness of war'!"*

### 7 March

Working Document on *"Enhancing the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and their implementation based on grassroots experiences from Latin America"*.

### 16 March

Statement on the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

### 18 April

Contribution in view of the 2023 EU-CELAC Summit: *"A partnership of hope for the good of our peoples and a more fraternal world"*.

### 26 May

Joint Peace Message of the Presidents of COMECE and CEC on the occasion of Pentecost.

### 2 June

Statement in the context of inter-institutional negotiations on the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

### 5 July

Appeal of faith leaders *"for a robust EU due diligence law"*.

### 10 October

Mgr. Crociata's Statement on the current situation in the Holy Land: *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!"*

### 19 October

Exchange of letters between COMECE President and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

### 10 November

Declaration of the COMECE Bishops on the deteriorating international security and peace: *"Europe, offer a renewed vision for justice and peace to the continent and to the world!"*

### 13 December

Contribution on the EU Parliament's Report *"EU*



Map showing the EU and its Neighbourhood.

development cooperation to enhance access to education and training in developing countries”.

### 15 December

Statement of the COMECE President on the historic decisions of the European Council regarding EU Enlargement.

## EVENTS

### 20 January

Webinar on “*The Brumadinho dam disaster and the need for a strong EU due diligence law*”.

### 7 March

Dialogue in the European Parliament: “*Africa-EU partnership of equals: how can we get there? Is the Global Gateway fit for purpose?*”

### 25 May

Dialogue in the European Parliament: “*The war in Ukraine and on-going security challenges in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood – towards lasting peace and European integration*”.

### 6 June

Public debate “*How can the EU-CELAC Summit contribute to a partnership of equals and promote global justice?*”

### 22 September

Dialogue meeting with EU officials and Brussels-based religious actors with members of the “*Second Caravan for Integral Ecology*”.

### 9 October

Streaming of the documentary “*Canillitas*” on child labour in the Dominican Republic.

## Commission on the EU External Relations

The Commission monitors and prepares statements, contributions and other activities to the EU policy and public debates on areas of EU’s External Action, such as Security & Defence, Sustainable Development, Neighbourhood, Enlargement, Human Rights and Trade.

Under the chairmanship of H.E. Mgr. Jan Vokál (Czech Republic), the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations gathered on 24-25 May and 15 November 2023 to discuss with EU and Church representatives the key challenges the EU is facing in its External Action. In the course of 2023, mandates were renewed for a further period of five years.

The Commission members exchanged perspectives with EU officials on the EU’s integrated approach to external conflicts and crises. Further discussions were held on the 2023 EU-CELAC Summit, EU-China relations as well as a post-war institutional architecture for peace in Europe. The Commission also exchanged views on EU’s global role with representatives of the Vatican’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and of the Committee of International Justice and Peace of the US Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

**President:** Mgr. Jan Vokál

**Secretary:** Marek Mišák



Group photo of the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations.

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# CULTURE & EDUCATION

*“We need to combine upskilling and jobs with education in a lifelong perspective to promote integral human development and the dignity of each profession”*

*(FR. MANUEL BARRIOS PRIETO)*

▲ The latest data from the *Education and Training Monitor 2023* continue to highlight increasing teacher shortages, especially in Vocational Education and Training. Further research on the European Education Area reveals that progress towards educational targets varies significantly: it is faster in some areas, yet stagnant or even reversed in others.

Despite improvements in early childhood education and care or early school leaving rates, the latest PISA report in Maths, Reading and Science confirms persistent, disastrous trends in underachievement in basic skills across the EU Member States.

The connection between employment and education was further enhanced by emphasising skills through the launch of the dedicated European Year.

In the cultural landscape, main policies addressed the status of artists and cultural workers, as well as the role of heritage and culture in the socioeconomic development of local communities.

## THE EUROPEAN YEAR OF SKILLS

The designation of 2023 as the European Year of Skills was clearly aimed at addressing the current challenges in the EU labour market by responding to the shortage of skilled workforce across Europe. This initiative focused particularly on enhancing the competitiveness and employability of EU citizens. It aimed at facilitating the exchange of good practices for more inclusive investment in training and upskilling, ensuring skills relevance, and attracting talent. In light of this policy framework, COMECE and its partner organisations, FAFCE and DBI, cautioned EU institutions against perceiving training and upskilling solely through the lenses of employability and competitiveness. Together, we suggested a more holistic interpretation of the EU Year of Skills, aimed ultimately at fostering the integral development of the person.



Conference on challenges, perspectives and best practises of Education, Training and Skills in the context of the European Year of Skills 2023. The event was organised by COMECE, DBI, FAFCE, EKD, ELSiA.

In this perspective, we organised the dialogue conference “*Grounded in the Present, skilled for the Future*”: three panels stimulated reflection on skills for the ecological conversion, the inclusiveness and responsibility of digital spaces, as well as informal skills learnt in the family and the role of vocational training in tackling social exclusion.

COMECE addressed AI within the broader context of digitalisation in learning and teaching, emphasising the evidence-based effects of the overuse of digital technologies among pupils and young people. These consequences include a higher frequency of burnout, lower school motivation and performance in some subjects, and an increased disinterest towards schoolwork.

In discussion with experts from the European Commission, COMECE explored the educational use of AI and stressed the need for stronger teaching of critical thinking and age-assurance measures in the use and deployment of AI.

## EUROPEAN SCHOOLS

The European schools provide a multilingual and multicultural education for pupils at nursery, primary and secondary levels, including classes in Religious Education and Ethics at all grades.

In the context of the resolution “*System of European Schools – state of play, challenges and perspectives*”, adopted by the European Parliament in 2023 regarding the status of the European Schools, COMECE advocated for the importance of confessional religious education at all levels of learning, stressing its fundamental role for the integral development of young people, enabling them to explore questions of belief, spirituality, life and meaning. In light of these elements, COMECE welcomed the European Parliament’s position and insisted to “*maintain the current provision of religious and ethical education*”.

In 2023, COMECE regularly cooperated with parents, coordinators and other Churches and religious communities responsible for religious education in these schools. It organised two meetings between religious authorities and the European Schools’ Secretariat in Brussels, kickstarting a series of regular meetings aimed at fostering constructive and transparent dialogue on the educational dossier.



## CHALLENGES OF DIGITALISATION AND AI FOR LEARNERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The rise of AI and the increasing use of digital tools in Education pose questions about the effectiveness of teaching methods and the consequences of digital tools exposure.

Main findings from the European Commission, within the Digital Education Action Plan, reveal that European citizens still lack basic digital skills, which are increasingly in demand in the labour market.

Simultaneously, EU institutions have addressed challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence, highlighting both the benefits and risks associated with AI technologies in educational endeavours. These include ethical concerns related to discrimination, social and pedagogical development, creativity and data privacy.



Meeting between religious authorities and the Secretariat of the European Schools.

## PRESERVING AND PROMOTING RELIGIOUS HERITAGE IN EUROPE

In the cultural landscape of the European Union, Christian cultural heritage is prominently present in every Member State. However, the scarcity of funding for restauration and the complexity of cataloguing movable religious heritage pose risks to many cultural artefacts that are integral to the identity of the European Union. The presence of international networks and the availability of EU funding are crucial for religious actors and civil society. COMECE engaged with stakeholders from academia, research and institutions to address issues related to religious heritage in Europe. In particular, it highlighted the need for greater coordination and support of cultural heritage, especially on enhancing the understanding of culture as vector for economic growth and development. Cultural heritage, however, is not limited to artefacts: COMECE continued its dialogue with EU institutions and actors from the Bishops' Conferences on including churches' restauration and reuse in the *New European Bauhaus* initiative.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 14 June

Contribution to the mid-term evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps.

### 2 June

Takeaways from the conference "*Grounded in the Present, skilled for the Future*" on the European Year of Skills.

## EVENTS

### 31 May

"*Grounded in the Present, Skilled for the Future*", dialogue conference on the European Year of Skills, organised with Don Bosco International and the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe.

### 23 October

Speech at the General Assembly of the European Federation for Catholic Adult Education (FEECA), Vienna.





The church of the Circumcision of Christ, Malta.

## Commission on Culture and Education


The Commission was established in March 2023, during the COMECE Spring Plenary Assembly held in Rome, replacing the COMECE Working Group on Culture and Education. It is composed of the experts delegated by the EU Bishops' Conferences. During 2023, the Commission was convened twice. On 16-17 May, it discussed the effects of digitalisation on children and learners, the future of learning and teaching in higher education and good practices of research and protection of religious heritage. On 17 November, members exchanged, among others, on the midterm evaluation of the European Education Area and the interplay between AI and Education.

**President:** Mgr. Janusz Stepnowski

**Secretary:** Emilio Dogliani



Group photo of the COMECE Commission on Culture and Education.



*“The ‘polite’ persecution for wanting to demonstrate the values of the Son of God, disguised as culture, modernity and progress, ends up taking away man’s freedom”*

(POPE FRANCIS)

© Stephen Butler/Shutterstock  
Christians in the Middle East

## INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

▲ According to the ACN Religious Freedom Report (2023), in 61 countries in the world people face severe violations of the fundamental right to religious freedom.

The persecution of vulnerable religious communities became more severe and concentrated, often with the impunity for totalitarian and autocratic regimes that are considered strategic commercial or political partner (e.g., China).

Hybrid cases of “polite” and bloody persecution became more frequent, combining intolerance and discrimination with direct attacks against religious communities by authorities and uncontrolled mobs, such as in India and Pakistan.

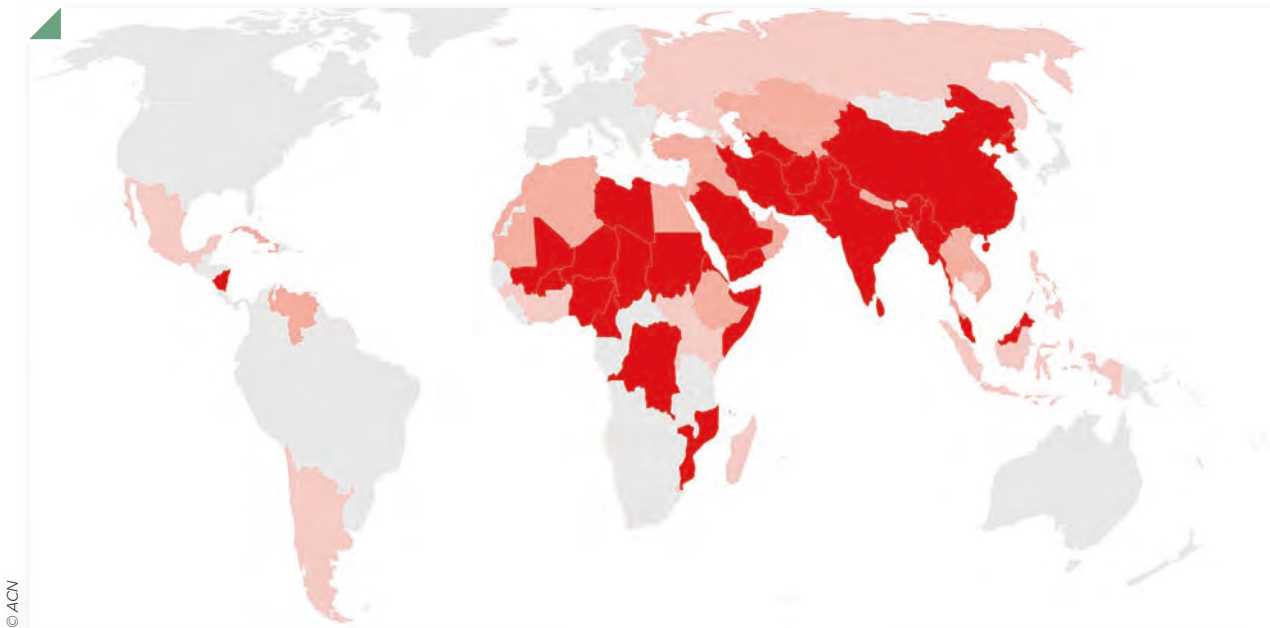
Jihadism is expanding its influence and controlling large areas of the Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and beyond. Including northern Mozambique, Kenya and Somalia, while also affecting other parts of the continent.

In the Middle East, Salafi-Jihadi insurgency is escalating its activities in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Islamist radicalisation is increasing in Asia, with a concerning potential terrorism spillover from Afghanistan to its Central Asian neighbors.

In Latin American, the Catholic Church faces persecution by dictatorial regimes in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela, alongside attacks by far-left and anti-system groups against Churches in Chile.

The level of anti-Semitism has significantly increased posing a global threat, particularly after Hamas’ terrorist attacks in October 2023.

The European Parliament has called “for the EU and its Member States to lead the global fight against antisemitism”. On the other hand, Muslim minority communities in several countries suffer from intolerance, discrimination (e.g., India, Myanmar) and persecution (e.g., Uyghurs in China), with a rising number of incidents of intra-Muslim oppression (e.g., Ahmadis in Pakistan, or Hazara in Afghanistan).



According to the Aid to the Church in Need's 2023 Religious Freedom Report, religious persecution is openly perpetrated in 28 countries in the world (dark red). Additionally, 33 countries (light red) are noted for discriminating against religious communities. Another 23 countries (pink) remain under observation for potential issues related to religious freedom.

Pope Francis has referred several times to the ongoing “polite persecution”, that *“involves nonviolent but socially significant cases of gradual marginalization and exclusion from political and social life and from the exercise of certain professions, even in traditionally Christian lands.”*

This type of persecution, often associated with the so-called “cancel culture”, implies legal sanctions and loss of job opportunities, and it is expanding in Western countries, eroding freedom of thought, conscience and religion through the abuse of anti-discrimination policies, the restriction of the right to conscientious objection, and the rise of radical secularism.

The vandalisation of Christian churches and attacks against religious sites and objects are on the rise in Western countries – e.g., 85 churches in Canada have been attacked since May 2021; 40 churches in Chile since 2019; at least 312 incidents, including arson and statues beheaded, were reported in the USA since 2020.

The EU should prioritise and strengthen the role of religious freedom in its external policies, including development and cooperation aid, to ensure the effective and comprehensive protection and promotion of this fundamental freedom.

Such a focus not only safeguards religious freedom itself but also enhances many other fundamental rights and freedoms.

COMECE actively contributes to the work of the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion of Belief and Religious Tolerance, the ECR Policy Working Group on Religious Freedom, and the EPP Service for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue. Additionally, COMECE engages in regular exchanges with members of the European Parliament and advisers interested in international religious freedom.



Panel discussion on interreligious dialogue, organised by the Muslim-Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) and KAICIID, with the cooperation of the Spanish Foundation “Tres Culturas”, Seville.



## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 29 November

International Conference “*Freedom of Religion in Public Space*”, held at the Charles University of Prague under the auspices of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

### 15-16 October

Panel discussion on interreligious dialogue, organised by the Muslim-Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) and KAICIID, with the cooperation of the Spanish Foundation “*Tres Culturas*”, Seville.

### 11 July

Written contribution about Christians in Manipur, India.

### 20 June

Contribution to the briefing on the threat to international religious freedom to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ms Nazila Ghanea, at the EEAS, Brussels.

### 8 June

“*Article 18: an indivisible right divided*”, ACN Religious Freedom Report 2023.

### 8 May

Conference on the 2nd Anniversary of the European Parliament’s Resolution on Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws, organised by Human Rights Without Frontiers, Brussels.



Adviser Bazán during the conference “*Freedom of Religion in public space*”, held in Prague by the Czech ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture together with the Charles University of Prague.

## EVENTS

### 4 December

XXV Annual EPP Group Intercultural Dialogue with Churches and Religious Institutions, “*The Role of Dialogue with Churches and Religious Communities Today*”, Santiago de Compostela.

### 5 October

Presentation of the International Religious Freedom Report, Aid to the Church in Need, Madrid.

### 12 June

“*Syria - Humanitarian and Development Challenges of Faith Based Actors: A Christian Perspective*”, co-organised by COMECE, L’Œuvre d’Orient and Aid to the Church in Need.

### 26 May

Workshop with Bishop Thabet Habib Mekko, from Alqosh (Iraq), co-organised by COMECE and Aid to the Church in Need.

### 16 May

High-level meeting on the situation in Nigeria with H.E. Mgr. Matthew Kukah, Bishop of Sokoto (Nigeria), co-organised by COMECE and the Sant’Egidio Community.

# YOUTH POLICIES

▲ In the area of youth policies, 2023 was regarded as a year to follow-up on the European Year of Youth, with the involvement of many stakeholders through platforms set up by the EU institutions. The focus of EU policymaking was primarily on enhancing working conditions for young people. This included introducing proposals on banning unpaid traineeships and, within the framework of the European Year of Skills, efforts were made to improve upskilling and skills recognition.



© COMECE

2022-2023 Presidency of the COMECE Youth Net, Rome.

*“May you be generative! Young people capable of generating new ideas, new visions of the world, of the economy, of politics, of social coexistence, but above all of new paths to be travelled together”*

(POPE FRANCIS)

Furthermore, 2023 also saw the highest annual budget envelope ever for the Erasmus+ flagship programme, which supports the EU Youth Strategy.

European institutions coordinated exchanges on providing stronger support for young people's mental health, enhancing the inclusion of young voices in policymaking debates, aiming to bridge the gap between citizens and institutions.

## COMECE YOUTH NET ON “DEMOCRACY, VALUES AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS”

As part of its 2023 activities, the COMECE Youth Net – the network comprising young individuals delegated by EU Episcopates and acting as a consultative body within the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union – presented its first annual contribution “Preserving a value-based European Union for today and tomorrow”.





COMECE event “*Christian testimonies between faith and social engagement*”, held at World Youth Day, Lisbon.

This document underscored the importance of rediscovering the European Union as a community with a soul, open to the transcendent and welcoming towards the unique contributions of Churches. The latter part of the document contained recommendations aimed at boosting young people’s engagement with EU institutions. These recommendations include creating structural pathways for youth participation, facilitating citizens education on our shared cultural roots, and promoting a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility.

In particular, the Youth Net called on the EU to increase investment in education, promote democratic and religious literacy, strengthen dialogue between the EU, Churches and faith-based organizations, and bridge the gap between rural and urban areas establishing equal opportunities.

## CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS AND SOCIETY

COMECE activities in 2023 aimed to spur discussions on the role of young people and their importance in policymaking.

During the COMECE Youth Net Spring meeting, participants met with officials from the European

institutions and stressed the importance of improving mental healthcare, reducing youth unemployment in vulnerable regions and promoting an inclusive and human-centred digitalisation.

Reflecting on ways to reduce the distance between the European Union and young people, they discussed empowering youth in decision-making and enhancing the exchange of initiatives and opportunities.

As part of a broader dialogue on the involvement of Christians in society and politics, the Youth Net participated in World Youth Day in Lisbon through the event “*Christian testimonies between faith and social engagement*”.



Spring meeting of the COMECE Youth Platform.



Guests from civil society, politics, the cultural and private sector shared their professional and personal experience, including how they live their faith at work and in their private life. During the event, young pilgrims raised questions about the meaning of human dignity, Christian values and compromise in EU and local politics, secularisation and the importance of prayer in everyday life.



Young delegates of EU Episcopates during a meeting in Brussels.

## COMECE YOUTH PLATFORM

Launched in April 2019, the COMECE Youth Platform gathers over 10 European Catholic youth networks, offering a collaborative space for sharing best practices, enhancing training and capacity-building opportunities, as well as strengthening synergies to empower young people and the Common Good. During two meetings in 2023, members paid particular attention to their initiatives following the European Year of Youth. They discussed the mid-term evaluation of EU youth programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps, and the training initiatives organised by their national members for youth. Together, they explored ways to intensify their actions towards a concerted project aimed at making a significant contribution in the run-up to the European elections in 2024.

## EVENTS

### 10 January

Winter Meeting of the COMECE Youth Platform.

### 20 April

Spring Meeting of the COMECE Youth Platform.

### 27-28 April

Spring Meeting of the COMECE Youth Net.

### 3 August

World Youth Day event “*Christian testimonies between faith and social engagement*” held in Lisbon.

### 13-15 November

Participation in the 5th KAICIID European Policy Dialogue forum “*Young People and Social Inclusion in Cities*”, Rotterdam.

### 20 November

Autumn Meeting of the COMECE Youth Net.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 3 August

Keynote speech of H.E. Mgr. Antoine Hérouard at the event “*Christian testimonies between faith and social engagement*” in the context of World Youth Day in Lisbon.

### 25 September

Contribution of the COMECE Youth Net “*Preserving a value-based European Union for today and tomorrow*”.



# COMMUNICATION

▲ In 2023, new collaborations were established with newspapers, online media and press agencies that opened their offices in Brussels. Past collaborations were maintained and strengthened. The result was an even greater presence of COMECE's activities and contributions in European media, particularly of Catholic nature.

Significant effort was dedicated to the development of the website, launched in 2022. Additionally, the encouraging outcome of the newsletter readership, which, in its new format and function, reached unprecedented numbers for COMECE, was noted.

The production of the monthly podcast “Rethinking Europe” continued. Initiated in 2021 in collaboration with *Radio Chrétienne Francophone* (RCF), it summarises and presents European affairs from the perspective of the Catholic Church, while promoting the work of COMECE in dialogue with the Secretariat staff.



Mgr. Crociata responded to journalists' questions following his election as President of COMECE in March 2023.

The year 2023 saw the consolidation of a new practice: supporting in loco the COMECE-CEC ecumenical delegation in its meetings with the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This allowed greater media presence for the Churches' contributions to the priorities of





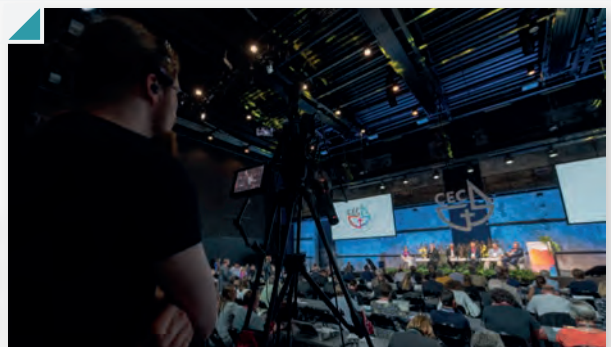
Group photo from the CCEE Meeting of Press Officers and Spokespersons of European Bishops' Conferences, held in Cyprus.

each EU Presidency. This new practice also offers an opportunity for increasing interaction with the press offices of the related episcopal conferences and national media.

In May, the press office first participated in a seminar on Church Communication, organised in Rome by the University of the Holy Cross, and then contributed to the annual meeting of press officers and spokespersons of the Episcopates in Europe organised by CCEE. Held in Cyprus, the meeting featured a discussion on the Synod, as well as on Artificial Intelligence. In this context, COMECE presented features of the legal framework being shared by the European institutions for the development and use of technologies based on AI.

In June, embodying a true ecumenical spirit, the press office supported the Conference of European Churches (CEC) in media relations. This collaboration led to coverage of the 2023 CEC General Assembly, held in Tallinn, Estonia, by Catholic media outlets.

Heartfelt thanks go to all the journalists, media operators, spokespersons, and press officers with whom we have had the pleasure of collaborating throughout 2023.



COMECE Press Officer assisted the Conference of European Churches (CEC) in media relations during its General Assembly in Tallinn, Estonia.



Vatican News interviewed the COMECE Presidency following its election in March 2023.



# PLENARY ASSEMBLY

## ROME

22-24 March

The Bishops of the European Union gathered in Rome to elect their new Presidency. Mgr. Mariano Crociata (Italy) was elected as President. The Assembly also elected four Vice-Presidents: Mgr. Antoine Hérouard (France), Mgr. Nuno Brás da Silva Martins (Portugal), Mgr. Rimantas Norvila (Lithuania), Mgr. Czeslaw Kozon (Nordic Bishops' Conference).

Following this election, the Assembly of Bishops welcomed Cardinal Secretary of State His Eminence Pietro Parolin. Together they discussed the humanitarian, geo-political and social implications of the war in Ukraine, and ways for the Catholic Church to encourage and contribute to EU's role as global peace actor.

On the second day, the Assembly and the Staff of the Secretariat were received by Pope Francis in a special audience dedicated to the role of COMECE as a bridge between the Catholic Church and the EU institutions.

The Holy Father highlighted that Europe *"cannot be a uniform, homogenising unity, [but one] that respects and values the singularities, the peculiarities of the peoples and cultures that make it up"*.

Furthermore, the Holy Father exhorted the EU Bishops to keep being builders of encounter and dialogue, promoting the cause of peace with prophecy and creativity, never losing sight of *"the two great dreams of Europe's founding fathers: the dream of unity and the dream of peace"*.

The Assembly continued with dialogue meetings with H.E. Mgr. Paul Gallagher (Secretary for Relations with States), H.E. Alexandra Valkenburg, (EU Ambassador to the Holy See), H.Em. Cardinal Matteo Zuppi (President of the Italian Bishops' Conference) and Antonio Tajani (Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs). The Assembly also transformed three COMECE Working Groups into Commissions chaired by Bishops.

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**Mgr. Paul Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States, speaking at the COMECE Assembly.**

© COMECE/Cristian Gennari/Sellani



**Antonio Tajani, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and former President of the European Parliament, speaking at the COMECE Assembly.**

© COMECE/Cristian Gennari/Sellani



**EU Bishops discussing during their Plenary Assembly.**

# COMECE

## BRUSSELS

8-10 November

Bishops adopted a statement on peace in the context of the serious deterioration of international security and called on the EU “to offer a renewed vision for justice and peace”.

With particular attention to Russia’s war against Ukraine, to the pain of the Armenian people in the Caucasus and to the suffering of civilians in Israel and Palestine, the Assembly of Bishops expressed concerns about the repercussions of the current international polarisation and regional instabilities for European societies, “*stirring up fears, weakening dialogue and threatening social cohesion*”.

The Bishops “*strongly condemn all forms and expression of anti-Semitism, radicalisation and xenophobia, often [...] resulting in violent extremism and terrorism*”, which have been gaining ground in several European countries.

In this context and in view of the 2024 European elections, the COMECE Assembly called upon EU leaders, as well as all European citizens, to work towards “*a Europe which fully employs its potential to settle conflicts and to light lamps of hope, acting as a united, trustful and integrating force, cherishing democratic principles and the rule of law, within and outside its borders*”.

The declaration was elaborated following a series of stimulating exchanges with high-level EU and Church representatives, including H.Em. Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa OFM (Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem), His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk (Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church), Othmar Karas and Pedro Silva Pereira (Vice-Presidents of the European Parliament).

The Assembly also confirmed Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto as General Secretary of COMECE for a second mandate of 4 years.



During the Autumn Plenary Assembly, Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto was reconfirmed as General Secretary of COMECE.



A group photo of the COMECE Assembly.



The COMECE Standing Committee welcoming EP Vice-President MEP Othmar Karas.



The Catholic Church  
in the European Union

## PRESIDENCY

According to the statute of COMECE, the Presidency is elected by the Assembly from among its members. They are representatives of the geographical distribution of the Episcopates of the European Union. Their mandate lasts for a period of five years and is renewable only once.

In March 2023, the Assembly gathered in Rome elected the following members to its leadership:

- **Mgr. Mariano Crociata** (President)
- **Mgr. Antoine Hérouard** (First Vice-President)
- **Mgr. Czesław Kozon** (Vice-President)
- **Mgr. Nuno Brás da Silva Martins** (Vice-President)
- **Mgr. Rimantas Norvila** (Vice-President)



The members of the COMECE Presidency elected in March 2023. From left to right: Mgr. Kozon, Mgr. Hérouard, Mgr. Crociata, Mgr. Brás da Silva Martins, Mgr. Norvila.



# BISHOPS DELEGATED TO COMECE

COMECE comprises the Episcopal Conferences in the EU. Each member Bishops' Conference appoints a delegate Bishop to the Assembly of COMECE. A single Bishop represents Denmark, Finland, Island, Norway and Sweden. The COMECE Assembly also includes one observer member from each of the following Bishop's Conferences: Switzerland, Scotland, England and Wales and the International Bishops' Conference of Saints Cyril and Methodius.

## H.E. Mgr. Lodewijk AERTS



Bishop of Bruges (Belgium)



## H.E. Mgr. Theodorus C.M. HOOGENBOOM



Auxiliary Bishop of Utrecht (The Netherlands)



## H.E. Mgr. Virgil BERCEA



Bishop of Oradea Mare/Gran Varadino (Romania)



## H.E. Mgr. Anton JAMNIK



Auxiliary Bishop of Ljubljana (Slovenia)



## H.E. Mgr. Nuno BRÁS DA SILVA MARTINS



Bishop of Funchal (Portugal)



## H.E. Mgr. Philippe JOURDAN



Apostolic Administrator of Estonia



## H.E. Mgr. Mariano CROCIATA



Bishop of Latina (Italy)



## H.E. Mgr. Czeslaw KOZON



Bishop of Copenhagen (Nordic Bishops' Conference)



## H.E. Mgr. Joseph GALEA-CURMI



Auxiliary Bishop of Malta (Malta)



## H.E. Mgr. Andris KRAVALIS



Auxiliary Bishop of Riga (Latvia)



## H.E. Mgr. Jozef HAL'KO



Auxiliary Bishop of Bratislava (Slovakia)



## H.E. Mgr. Juan Antonio MARTÍNEZ CAMINO SJ



Auxiliary Bishop of Madrid (Spain)



## H.E. Mgr. Antoine HÉROUARD



Archbishop of Dijon (France)



## H.E. Mgr. Gábor MOHOS



Auxiliary Bishop of Esztergom-Budapest (Hungary)





**H.E. Mgr. Manuel NIN, O.S.B.**



Apostolic Exarch to the Greek  
Byzantine Catholic Church  
(Greece)



**H.E. Mgr. Rimantas NORVILA**



Bishop of Vilkaŭiškis  
(Lithuania)



**Bishop Kieran O'REILLY**



Archbishop of  
Cashel and Emly  
(Ireland)



**H.E. Mgr. Franz-Josef OVERBECK**



Bishop of Essen and Military  
Bishop (Germany)



**H.E. Mgr. Christo PROYKOV**



Apostolic Exarch of Sofia  
(Bulgaria)



**H.E. Mgr. Ivan ŠAŠKO**



Auxiliary Bishop of Zagreb  
(Croatia)



**H.E. Mgr. Selim Jean SFEIR**



Archbishop of the Maronites  
(Cyprus)



**H.E. Mgr. Janusz STEPNOWSKI**



Bishop of Łomża (Poland)



**H.E. Mgr. Jan VOKÁL**



Bishop of Hradec Králové  
(Czech Republic)



**Bishop Léon WAGENER**



Auxiliary Bishop  
of Luxembourg  
(Luxembourg)



**H.E. Mgr. Ägidius Johann  
ZSIFKOVICS**



Bishop of Eisenstadt (Austria)



**H.Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich** *Until March 2023*  
Archbishop of Luxembourg (Luxembourg)

## Observers

**H.E. Mgr. Markus BÜCHEL**



Bishop of St-Gallen  
(Switzerland)



**H.E. Mgr. László NÉMET**



Metropolitan Archbishop of  
Belgrade (Serbia)



**H.E. Mgr. Hugh (Edward)  
GILBERT, O.S.B.**



Bishop of Aberdeen  
(Scotland)



**H.E. Mgr. Nicholas HUDSON**



Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster  
(England and Wales)





# SECRETARIAT STAFF

The Secretariat ensures the continuity of COMECE's work from its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. A small team monitors and analyzes EU policies and initiatives, striving to contribute to relevant processes. The Secretariat reports to both the Presidency and the Assembly.

## **Fr. Manuel Enrique Barrios Prieto**

General Secretary

## **Alessandro Calcagno**

Assistant General Secretary and Adviser for Fundamental Rights and Article 17 TFEU

## **José-Luis Bazán**

Adviser for Migration, Asylum & International Religious Freedom

## **Marek Mišák**

Adviser for EU External Affairs

## **Friederike Ladenburger**

Adviser for Ethics, Research & Health

## **Emilio Dogliani**

Adviser for Education, Culture & Youth Policy

## **Alix de Wasseige**

Adviser for Social & Economic Affairs

## **Michele Turzi** (from May to December)

Adviser for Social & Economic Affairs

## **Johannes Moravitz**

Adviser on Ecology, Energy & Agriculture

## **Stefan Lunte**

Adviser, General Secretary of Justice and Peace Europe

## **Alessandro Di Maio**

Press & Communication Manager

## **Maud Oger**

Personal Assistant to the General Secretary

## **Carolina Ducoing**

Office Manager

## **Albert Arevalo**

Logistical Support

## **Olivier Coevoet**

Volunteer

The Secretariat expresses its utmost appreciation to **Michael Kuhn**. After more than 26 years of committed service to the Secretariat, Michael retired in April 2023. We wish him all the best in this new chapter of his life and in his future projects.

The Secretariat also thanks the voluntary interns for their hard work and commitment throughout the course of the year:

## **Khatia Platchiashvili (Georgia)**

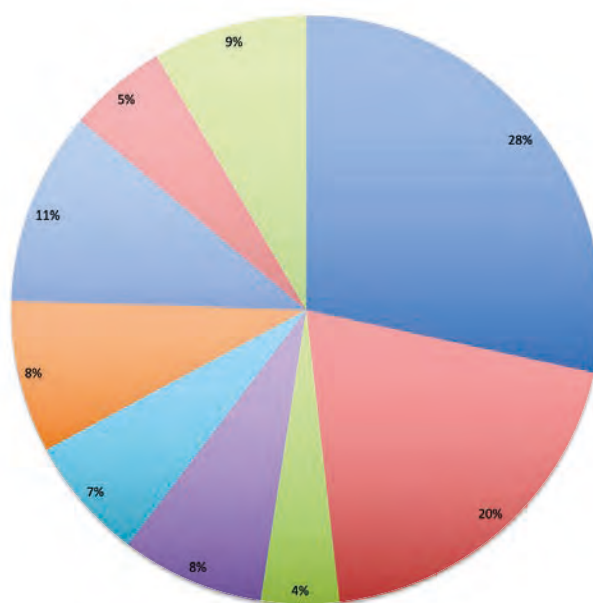
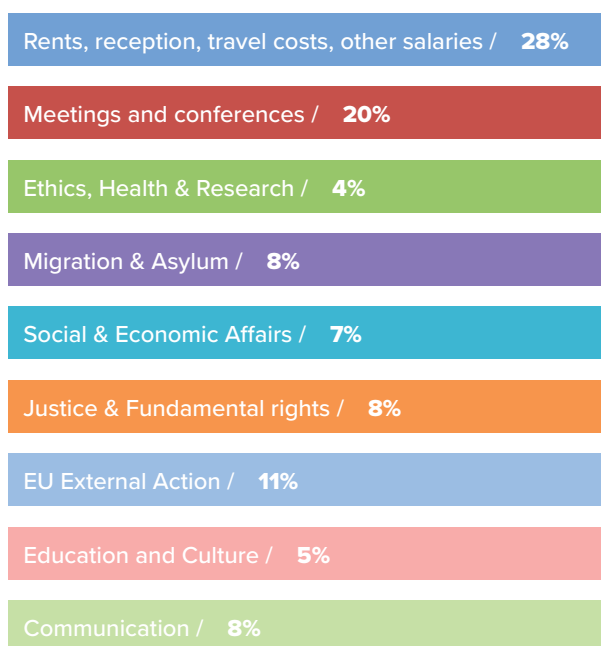
## **Ivan Prunak (Ukraine)**



# FINANCES

Total expenditure in the year 2022: **1.101.345 €**  
(Financial Closure 2023 not yet available)

The Secretariat of COMECE and its activities are financed exclusively by the contributions of its Member Bishops' Conferences. The Secretariat of COMECE is registered in the EU transparency Register under the identification number: **47350036909-69**



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**Front Cover:**

Pope Francis and the EU Bishops. © VATICAN MEDIA





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