



## Contribution of COMECE during Article 17 TFEU Seminar on 'Housing in the EU: Strategies for a Europe that Supports People, Families and Young Generations'

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In most EU Member States, a growing number of people struggle with increased energy bills, and thus housing. In 2023, 10.6% of the European population could not afford to keep their homes adequately warm, meaning almost 48 million people. This is a concerning increase from 7% in 2019. In his audience with COMECE almost two weeks ago, Pope Leo XIV expressed his concern about the economic and social consequences of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the urgency of peace. We can already see here how the housing crisis has to be seen in the context of various other political and social dimensions.

In my short intervention today, I would like to talk about the issue of family and housing, implications of the housing crisis and some potential solutions to an issue that requires many.

### **Family and housing**

Firstly, it must be said that the issue of housing cannot be separated from reflections about the human person and its place in this world. In fact, as the late Pope Francis recalled in a message concerning the housing crisis in the city of Rome in 2024, striving for the common good encompasses "all the conditions that guarantee human dignity", including the inviolable rights to land, a home, and work. Particularly this aspect has to be seen in the context of our demographic crisis. To cite Pope Francis once more, this time from his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*: "*Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families.*"

Economists (e.g., James Pomeroy, HSBC) have pointed out that shrinking fertility rates in developed countries are often, among others, caused by elevated house prices. There is a trend of couples postponing their first child in order to save for family homes. In Ireland, the Catholic marriage care service of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, Accord, commissioned Amárach Research to undertake a survey to determine the level of correlation between couples deciding to marry and have children, and the availability of housing supply. The results represent a fascinating yet concerning case study of the link between housing and fertility rates mentioned above:

- 84% of adults in Ireland say that the housing crisis is causing some couples to delay getting married and/or have children: this rises to 89% of women (79% of men);
- 54% of those aged 25-34 years plan to get married and/or have children;
- 48% of couples planning to get married would have married before if it wasn't for the housing situation (33% would have married in the past three years but didn't);
- and, - 60% of couples planning to have children would have done so before if it wasn't for the housing situation (36% would have had a child in the past three years but didn't).

One look at the House Price Index not only shows how housing prices have increased throughout the EU on average by 48% since 2015, but we can also see deduct that average real wages have not kept pace with house prices. The Encyclical Letters *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII and *Centesimus Annus* by Pope John Paul II teach that people have the right to a "just wage" that enables the worker to support himself and his family with all basic necessities. This includes the possibility of savings and acquiring personal property.

Here we can see one potential solution to the crisis: Many young people, and especially couples, are in need of more capital to acquire or rent affordable and convenient homes. That is an imperative for working on just wages in the true sense and other direct financial help. According to an analytical report from the European Construction Section Observatory (2019) this might be achieved not only through the

implementation of policies promoting indirect benefits such as favorable lending or fiscal conditions but even more through stronger policies providing grants and subsidies for home ownership support.

A second solution might be the revitalization of the EU's rural areas - turning them into attractive places of job opportunities and social life, through investment and connectivity. The long-term vision of rural areas presents some hopeful initiatives, yet more consideration should be given to them. While we are discussing the worsening housing crisis, many rural areas throughout the EU are emptying out. Churches have traditionally a strong connection with rural areas in most Member States and can be good partners in this endeavor.

Finally, we have seen after the Russian invasion of Ukraine how many ecclesiastical buildings have been of use for hosting many of the refugees. A closer collaboration between churches and states can lead to improved use of church property as housing projects, for example, for young spouses and families.