"Discrimination of Christians in Europe"

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Hourable Members of the European Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly honoured to be here with you today to briefly present the work and reflection carried out by my organisation (COMECE - The Commission of the Bishops' Confereces of the European Union) on the topic of the anti-Christian hatred in the EU. We are thankful in particular to the MEPs of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief for the kind invitation and to OIDAC and ECPP for the involvement of COMECE in this important initiative.

Before I focus as briefly as possible on the elements that COMECE deems relevant for this discussion, please allow me underline that we are highly appreciative for the work carried out by the Observatory for Intolerance and Discrimination in Europe: their work in collecting data and cases is invaluable, not only to raise awareness about the matter and to counter under-reporting, but also to support solid policy-making, including at the EU level.

COMECE's main mission is to partner with the EU institutions, advocating and contributing to the enrichment of the contents and aims of EU policies and legislation. In my capacity as representative of COMECE today, I will concisely refer to some points that we consider crucial for this domain.

I will start from the most important one. COMECE has been strongly advocating for the appointment of an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred. We would like to see the EU embracing the fight against this phenomenon with more conviction and the appointment of an EU Coordinator would be a very concrete step that the Union could take to tacke the issue.

While acknowledging and not questioning the specificity of Jewish and Muslim communities - which can already rely on an EU Coordinator - more and more reports are clearly showing the presence of crimes against Christians and of hatred,

intolerance and discrimination towards them within the European Union, as we also heard this morning.

We commend the work carried out at the level of OSCE on the matter, with the recent publishing of the Guidance *Understanding Anti-Christian Hate Crimes and Addressing the Security Needs of Christian Communities*. The Guidance highlights the fact that ignoring the phenomenon is not an option anymore. COMECE hopes that this will also pave the way to similar initiatives at the EU level, taking this priority on board.

For COMECE, it is essential that equal means of protection are provided for the faithful and the sacred places of different religious denominations, regardless of whether they belong to a 'majority' or 'minority'.

We also see the risk that lack of concrete action on the EU's part with the appointment of a Coordinator being instrumentalised by certain actors to fuel anti-EU rhetoric and narratives, including among Christian EU citizens.

It is also important from our point of view to prevent any confusion between the EU Coordinator on anti-Christian hatred and the EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU. They concern different geographic and policy ambits (fundamental rights within the EU the first one; the situation of Christian communities in third countries the second one). Both the EU Coordinator and the EU Special Envoy need adequate resources and must be allowed to use their full potential to focus on respective aspects and settings (in the first case rather on intolerance, discrimination, hate speech, vandalism in the EU; in the second rather on grave cases of violations, violence, persecution outside the EU).

The point on the establisment of an EU Coordinator was also stressed by the COMECE bishops in dialogue with Commissioner Brunner at the last COMECE Plenary assembly in early October.

A second point on which we believe the EU can do more and better is access to EU funding. There have been cases, even this year, of EU funding calls under the 'CERV' Programme addressing 'promotion of equality and the fight against racism, xenophobia, and all other forms of discrimination' that explicitly included certain religious communities but omitted references to Christian communities.

We noticed again that in the proposed Regulation concerning the future 'AgoraEU Programme' mention is not made of Christians. Recital 15 refers to the fact that *"The Programme should support actions to prevent and combat all forms of xenophobia and racism,*

antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, interphobia, intolerance and discrimination based on gender identity, intolerance towards persons belonging to minorities including Roma, as well as hate speech". No mention is made of Christians. Article 7, point a) refers to the fact that within the CERV+ strand "*…the 'Rights, Equality, Citizens and Civil Society' specific objective shall focus on: a) promoting equality, and preventing and fighting against discrimination on the grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, and all forms of racism and intolerance*". Again, no mention is made of Christians and this is another place where this could be done, together with antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

COMECE would call the Parliament to address this omission and hopes to count in particular on the proactiveness of the MEPs present here today.

Yesterday, the European Commission hosted the annual High-level meeting with religious leaders, addressing the topic *'Living together in increasingly polarised societies'*. This gave the COMECE representative, H.E. Mgr. Czeslaw Kozon, the opportunity to also focus on the matter we are debating today: "*…there is more than one singular reason for the present situation of many Christians of experiencing discrimination, exclusion, harassment, hatred and violence. One reason is to a large extend the most extreme form of secularization of society in the sense, that there is not supposed to be any room for religion in public space or religious argumentation in politics and public debate… many challenges and limitations for Christians in modern societies derive from policies characterized if not by sheer hostility then at least by ignorance and lack of comprehension, both for the positive role of religion in society and the basic need for individuals to live according to their belief and the right to have it secured and protected by civil legislation*".

This leads me to mention another aspect which in COMECE's view is relevant, is the sound protection of religious symbols in the public square. When religious symbols, signs, messages and expressions are seen as potentially offensive to sensibilities of believers of other denominations or of non-believers (or are depicted as possible 'means of pressure' on others) acts of intolerance and even hatred can find more fertile ground, including against Christians. This also concerns the area of employment and occupation, where religion should not be considered as something that can be 'left outside the door' compared to other characteristics.

Certain legislative initiatives aimed at strictly limiting freedom of religion may also fuel hatred and intolerance, including against Christians, as they may create an atmosphere of suspicicon, of negative bias towards religions. Therefore we also see a link between a strong (or weak) protection of freedom of religion and prevention (or not) of hatred, discrimination and intolerance.

Terminology is also crucial. When we speak about fighting 'intolerance' we should also bear in mind that promoting 'tolerance' cannot become a surrogate for the proper protection of fundamental rights, including those of believers.

As already hinted at before, protection against hate speech and hate crimes must be equally guaranteed to all believers, regardless of whether they belong to a majority or a minority denomination. Fighting against hate speech and hate crimes cannot be reduced to a problem mainly/exclusively pertaining to 'religious minorities'. If certain religious denominations are (correctly) protected, whereas certain majority denominations are neglected or perceive a lesser protection - almost as if they were a 'legitimate target' - there is the risk of an unacceptable imbalance in the fundamental rights domain.

Religious literacy (on the nature, core tenets, self-understanding, structures of religious denominations) is also important for this area. This includes public authorities and institutions, so that they elaborate appropriate policies and laws. Religious illiteracy may set the stage for the misuse of religious feelings among the populations: ignorance and lack of knowledge often lead to hatred and intolerance. This is another areas where the EU could be encouraged to foster more action.

For the specific point of protection of places of worship, COMECE has been active on this dossier for many years now and can count on direct contacts and collaboration with various EU-funded consortia that are working on the matter. Most recently we have been included in the European database of experts and stakeholders created in the context of the PARTESS-COM project (*Participatory Approaches to Protecting Places of Worship, Schools and Community Centres*) a European initiative that aims to enhance dialogue, cooperation, and safety among religious communities, authorities, and practitioners across Europe. We have also contributed last week to the survey on protecting vulnerable sites and strengthening community bonds carried out by 'ShieldED' (another EU-funded project to safeguard schools, places of worship and cultural centres).

We are especially concerned about the rising number of attacks on places of worship in the EU. We appreciate the fact that the European Commission has integrated this aspect in its funding instruments and COMECE has been involved in the activities of various EU-funded consortia addressing the issue. However, we would like to see the relevant policies more explicitly linked with the exercise of freedom of religion. In other words, protecting places of worship is important not just for security reasons - or for their symbolic value - but especially in view of safeguarding freedom of religion, which is primarily exercised in such places. The scope of action should also be as

broad as possible: safety of places of worship should not be reduced to acts of terrorism (instances of vandalism, violence, profanations, disruptions of assemblies, defacing, arson, harassment, acts of malevolence etc. are not related to terrorism but have to be prevented/countered, including through funding).

Let me conclude by restating COMECE's encouragement to the EU institutions, not to be afraid to take the next step, politically, in exploring the legal areas we are discussing today, enhancing what the Union is doing on this point. The data, as we heard are there, it is now about taking a courageous step further at the political level.