



# COMECE

## Annual Report

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### 2025



The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences  
of the European Union

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



# FOREWORD

Alongside its regular daily activities, the year 2025, which we now leave behind, was characterised by a number of undoubtedly distinctive features that shaped the overall work of COMECE.

It was the year of the transition from Pope Francis to Leo XIV. With joyful surprise, our Permanent Committee was granted its first audience already in the first weeks following the election of the new Pontiff. He wished to listen to us and to engage in dialogue with great cordiality and attentiveness. It was also the year of the Jubilee – the Jubilee of Hope – which has renewed the momentum of many believers and of many people of good will who look to the life of the Church with expectation and trust.

It was a year in which Russia's war against Ukraine continued to be fought. We visited the country in July, choosing the western city of Lviv, where we were able to witness its many different facets. COMECE has continued to follow with great attention the distressingly dramatic situation of that country – wounded but not defeated, courageous and indomitable. In this context, it is important to emphasise that in March 2025 COMECE granted observer status within its Assembly to the Latin Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

Concern for peace has also extended to other contexts, in particular to Gaza, where Palestinian casualties have reached extremely high numbers. The truce that was agreed has unfortunately not put an end to the continuing toll of deaths and violence in that region.

During the year, the European Union has been deeply affected by these and other international developments, in response to which the difficulty of consistently finding a common position has become evident. The far-reaching changes that have taken place in the field of trade have at times led to unity in the search for coordinated responses and new initiatives, including the opening of additional areas of exchange. At the same time, however, both old and new tendencies towards polarisation have emerged, as seen in debates on common defence and on the safeguarding of rights.

The international context makes everything more challenging, highlighting the growing difficulty for the European Union to make its voice heard. It needs a united position in order to affirm its nature and its mission as a project of peace, particularly at this time of conflict and heightened tension in many parts of the world.

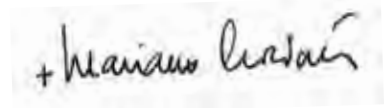
The activity of COMECE – which this year also saw the beginning of the service of the new Apostolic Nuncio of the Holy See to the European Union, Mgr Bernardito Cleopas Auza – continued to develop through a significant series of initiatives.

The work of the Assembly remained constant, with its two meetings in Nemi (Rome) and in Brussels, alongside the work of the General Secretariat and of the six Commissions through which the work of experts is organised under the guidance of the bishops.

In addition to the steady production of statements, opinions and documentation on the various matters addressed by the institutions of the European Union – with particular attention to the implementation of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – there were also both informal and formal meetings with various institutional figures. Among these, particular mention should be made of the meetings with the governments of the countries holding the rotating six-month Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which this year took us on visits to Warsaw and Copenhagen.

The year 2025 leaves the European Union with the urgent task of seeking ever greater institutional and political cohesion in the face of a fractured world which, as many observers point out, appears increasingly marked by turmoil.

The mission of the Union – as well as the pursuit of its most authentic interests, namely the well-being, peace and progress of its peoples – requires from it, and from each of its Member States, a determined effort to overcome narrow self-interest and to give the Union as a whole the renewed impetus that both the continent and the wider world so greatly need. If Europe does not take on this task, no one else will. ▲



✠ **Mariano Crociata**

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



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Pope Leo XIV and Mgr Mariano Crociata at a papal audience, May 2025

# INTERVIEW

## WITH THE NEW APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE EU, MGR AUZA



▲ On 22 March 2025, Pope Francis appointed H.E. Mgr Bernardito Cleopas Auza, Archbishop of Suacia, as the new Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union, succeeding the late Mgr Noël Treanor, who passed away in August 2024.

Born in Talibon in the Philippines in 1959, Archbishop Auza has extensive diplomatic experience which began in 1990. Over the years he has served in several Pontifical Representations around the world, including in Madagascar, Bulgaria, Albania, the United Nations, Haiti, the Organization of American States, Spain and Andorra.

COMECE collaborates closely with the Apostolic Nuncio accredited to the European Union, who is always invited to take part in the meetings of the Assembly and Standing Committee. To mark the beginning of his mission in Brussels and of this cooperation, we invited him to share his reflections and vision in the following interview conducted by our Communication Officer Alessandro Di Maio.

**Your Excellency, one year after the beginning of your mission as Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union, which priorities do you consider central to your mandate in Brussels today?**

The Holy See takes great interest in the life and evolution of the European Union, of its institutions and, above all, of its people. A long-term priority would be how the Holy See could contribute to shaping Europe and its future in a context of what we call a “crisis of values”, the waning of Europe’s spiritual and moral strengths, the dissolution of the primal certainties about God, about the human



© Nunciatura

Official portrait of Mgr Bernardito Cleopas Auza, Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union.



The headquarter of the Apostolic Nunciature to the European Union in Brussels.

person and about the universe, and a conscious rejection of the roots and trunk of European civilisation.

Among the specific themes to which the Holy See pays great attention are life and family, respect for fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and religion, Europe's demographic winter and the phenomenon of migration, the tensions between an unarmed and disarming peace and the right to defence (the need to arm oneself) in the context of wars of aggression, the need to defend and reform a multilateral system in crisis, EU enlargement, as well as the challenge of striking the right balance between the exigencies of a more competitive Europe on the world stage and maintaining strong norms to guarantee respect for human and labour rights and environmental protection.

**Europe is going through a period marked by conflicts and strong polarisation, and by a sense of crisis and urgency. Given that the Holy See is not an EU Member State, what concrete contribution can it make to the European project in this context?**

A time of great peril. A war in Europe. Aggressive and unilateral geopolitical and trade policies of world powers. The law of force over the force of law. A fear of invasion or a sense of being already invaded. An anguish at being left alone to defend oneself in a merciless world. AI-powered economies in other parts of the world catching

Europe half asleep. A waning of Europe's role in the world. A feeling of being ignored unless useful. A sensation of losing control. A sense of decline. Omens of an impending fall...

A mix of these facts, perceptions and reproaches has provoked anguish, with political discourse evoking an urgency that borders on panic. I believe it is the role of the Holy See to accompany Europe in facing this epoch-changing time with responsibility and steadfast serenity, without fear and trembling; to remind it that moments of great challenge are also moments of great opportunity; and to help it recover its strengths, its vigour, its idealism and its talents for dialogue, integration and the generation of cultures and perennial values. But it must heed the signs.

**There is frequent reference to the “soul of Europe”. What does rediscovering this soul mean today in political and cultural terms?**

What is the “soul of Europe”? Is it synonymous with the “identity of Europe”? The concept, if treated in depth, would require volumes, as in Joseph Ratzinger, and a return to the noblest idea of Europe, as in Robert Schuman. The Catholic Church, I believe, understands the term as fundamentally referring to the spiritual, cultural, intellectual and moral values that historically shaped Europe. If Europe has “lost its soul”, rediscovering and reinvigorating these values is the way to recover it.

In today's cultural and political terms, it means, among other things, being intellectually honest and humble enough to acknowledge that Christianity has gifted Europe with that felicitous synthesis of the intellectual brilliance of Greece, the legal genius of Rome and the faith of Jerusalem. One does not need to be a Christian, nor should a non-Christian feel offended, to accept this historical fact and the

values that Christianity generated and that helped make Europe great. This would imply refocusing the European project from being merely an economic and political union to a Europe united by a common history and continually nurtured by the ever-flowing living sap of shared fundamental values.

**In an increasingly pluralistic and secularised context, what role can Christians still play in European public life?**

Coherent and courageous Christians whose life and work are influenced by their faith will always have a role to play in any society, and even more so in a secularised Europe. We need coherent Christian politicians like Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer, whose political careers were deeply influenced by their faith and by their awareness of the “intrinsic bond” between Europe and Christianity. Christians of their mould would be like lamps set on a hill and salt of the earth, illuminating corners and seasoning tables which the “institutional Church” may not or cannot reach. They

would be leaven in the reinvigoration of the soul of Europe.

There is no lack of Christian politicians today, but, as an observer once commented to me, even the coherent ones often end up swamped by ideologies that control the levers of policy-making. Yet resignation, much less surrender, is not in the vocabulary of a coherent and courageous Christian politician.

**You previously represented the Holy See at the United Nations, and we are now witnessing what many describe as a weakening, if not an actual collapse, of international institutions. Do you share this assessment?**

I was recently invited to a conference on multilateralism and asked to speak on the question: Where is the United Nations? Where is the European Union? The provocative title conveys the widespread frustration at the incapacity of multilateral organisations to stop a country from



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Pope Leo XIV and Mgr Auza at a papal audience, May 2025.

invading another, to prevent nations from being torn apart by civil wars and mercenaries protecting unspeakable foreign interests, or to prevent millions from being massacred or dying of hunger and thirst in conflicts across different regions of the world.

The hard fact is that multilateral entities are what Member States design them to be. Treaty or Charter limitations and the raw power of *realpolitik* are among the factors that often weaken their effectiveness. Two examples of statutory provisions illustrate this clearly: the veto in the UN Security Council and the unanimity required in EU decision-making on matters that truly matter in multilateral settings, particularly highly sensitive issues linked to national sovereignty such as common foreign and security policy, sensitive data concerning internal security, EU enlargement, taxation policy and a few others.

Pope Leo XIV offered a striking assessment of today's multilateralism in his Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See on 9 January: *"In our time, the weakness of multilateralism is a particular cause for concern at the international level. A diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force, by either individuals or groups of allies. War is back in vogue and a zeal for war is spreading. The principle which prohibited nations from using force to violate the borders of others has been completely undermined."*

I am sure the Holy Father's words continue to find resonance among many individuals and institutions.

When all is said and done, multilateralism is here to stay. Although it appears weakened today, it remains the best, and perhaps the only, instrument the world has to avert total chaos and the domination of the weak by the powerful. The task, therefore, is not to abandon it but to make it work as effectively as possible despite its inherent limitations and the constraints of *realpolitik*. Sensible reform will be essential to its continued relevance.

**In European affairs, COMECE coordinates the Bishops' Conferences of the EU and represents them before the European institutions, contributing to the legislative process and to the shaping of EU policies. How do you assess its role today, and what contribution can it offer to the dialogue between the Church and the European Union?**

COMECE is the Church's logical response to the creation of the European Union. The local Churches need an instrument that allows them to participate actively in the life and shaping of the Union, seeking to bring values and principles into EU decisions in harmony with the Church's teaching and ensuring that their voices are heard in Brussels.

It is also the instrument through which the Church maintains and fosters a structured and regular dialogue with the EU institutions, as provided for in Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. In a deeply secularised and highly ideologised environment the challenge is immense, but withdrawal from this interaction simply because it is difficult should never be considered an option.

**Although the Nunciature to the EU and COMECE have distinct roles, are there specific dossiers or areas where close collaboration between them is particularly necessary? What do you see as your specific contribution to the work of COMECE?**

The Apostolic Nunciature to the EU and COMECE share the same mission: to ensure that the leaven of the Gospel is present in the life and decisions of the European Union, each acting at different yet intersecting levels. While common priorities and collaboration are natural, I believe that our cooperation will be particularly fruitful in areas concerning respect for life and family, migration and asylum, vigilance in defending fundamental freedoms such as freedom of conscience and religion, as well as in the promotion of education and a culture of peace. I sincerely hope to be able to contribute to the work of COMECE in these and other areas. ▲

# INTERVIEW

# WITH STEFAN LUNTE

## 30 YEARS AT THE COMECE SECRETARIAT

▲ Stefan Lunte, a German and French national, served as an adviser at the COMECE Secretariat for three decades. He began his work in 1996 and concluded his service in December 2025, bringing to a close thirty years of dedicated engagement in support of the Catholic Church's dialogue with the European Union and its institutions.

To mark this milestone and honour his long-standing service, the COMECE Secretariat wished to pay tribute to his contribution and commitment over the years. For this occasion, our Communication Officer Alessandro Di Maio conducted an interview with him.

In this conversation, Stefan Lunte reflects on some of the defining moments of his career in Brussels, sharing insights on the evolution of the European project, the development of COMECE and the many encounters that shaped his experience. His testimony offers a valuable glimpse into three decades of service to the Church's mission of accompanying European integration.

**When and how did your collaboration with COMECE begin? Can you share the story of your beginning at COMECE?**

It all started in 1996. At that time I was already living in France. I had previously met Fr Hans Langendörfer, the German Jesuit who was then advising the German Bishops' Conference on European affairs and who would soon become its Secretary General for more than two decades. I had also met Mgr Noël Treanor, the Irish priest who had



Stefan Lunte at the conference "América Latina y la Unión Europea: juntos para el bien común universal", held in Madrid in May 2002.

been appointed Secretary General of COMECE two years earlier.

Instead of first settling into the newly acquired COMECE headquarters on Rue Stevin, Noel Treanor decided to send me directly, on 1 January 1996, to a Caritas Europa conference on EU social policy in Bratislava. It was quite an unforgettable experience in the depths of winter. When I returned, I said to myself: "You managed this, you will manage the rest."

In the following months I familiarised myself with the sometimes arcane workings of the EU and tried to meet as many people as possible, both inside and around the institutions. At the same time I began preparing the establishment of the first COMECE commission on social affairs. This meant calling people on the phone, writing letters and sending faxes — which at the time were the cutting-edge technology.

The first meeting of this commission took place in autumn 1996 and I remember being very excited about the group. Bishop Adrianus van Luyn, the Dutch Salesian who later became President of COMECE, presided over it. I still remember several of its members, especially Professor Stefano Zamagni from Bologna, who did so much to promote Catholic Social Teaching.

**What was the European Community like at that time, both politically and culturally? And what was COMECE's place within that landscape?**

We were at the end of the Delors era. The President of the European Commission was the Luxembourger Jacques Santer, yet many people in Brussels were still inspired by Jacques Delors, who had revitalised the European project through the Single European Act in the 1980s and then fundamentally transformed it in the early 1990s with the Maastricht Treaty and the creation of the monetary union.

I had the opportunity to meet Delors in 1996 at a European conference in Reims organised by the French Bishops' Conference and COMECE during the celebrations marking the 1500th anniversary of the baptism of Clovis. The aim was to give these commemorations a broader European dimension. Delors attended and delivered a moving speech on one of his recurring themes: the need to give a soul to Europe.

It was also at this conference that I met Reinhard Marx for the first time. He had just been ordained Auxiliary Bishop of Paderborn and had driven through the night to attend the event. His conviction that the Church must support the process of European integration has never changed and we have remained on very good terms ever since.

Among the participants was also the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, later Metropolitan of Pergamon, whom Pope Francis invited to comment on *Laudato Si'* in 2015.

Looking back, this was probably the first major European conference organised by COMECE, in cooperation with the French bishops. It reflected the vision of Mgr Joseph Homeyer, then President of COMECE, who wanted the organisation to



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**Stefan Lunte (right) together with his wife Dominique and Fr Jean-Marie in Besson (France) on the occasion of the first COMECE Summer School in 1999.**

become more visible in the public sphere. With Noel Treanor's insight and judgement we were able to turn that vision into something concrete.

**Looking back at your early years, what atmosphere do you remember within the organisation?**

In the office we had a real family atmosphere. Noel Treanor and our discreet yet highly efficient secretary, Agnes Paillard, were at the heart of the team. There was also our cook, Fatima, whose son Aziz sometimes dropped by. Philippe Loir, a former EU official who had worked closely with Delors, advised us on communication matters, while the Belgian lawyer Silvio Marcus-Helmons dealt with legal affairs and famously smoked a cigar in his office after lunch. I also remember a journalist from Luxembourg who was part of the team.

We usually had lunch together, often with guests. Conversations were lively and humorous, revolving around Church and State and the future of Europe. We also worked long hours. I arrived at 8 am and rarely left before 8 pm, which was not a problem since my family was living in France. I also remember the legendary Christmas parties, when we shared our different carols and traditions.

The bishops who made up the COMECE Plenary Assembly knew each other well and were always glad to meet every six months. At that time they were convinced that the European project deserved the support of the Church.

### What were the main challenges facing COMECE during those early years?

In the late 1990s Bishop Homeyer decided to invite representatives from the bishops' conferences of Central and Eastern Europe to attend the plenary sessions as observers. Among them were figures such as Archbishop Henryk Muszyński, the Czech auxiliary bishop Václav Malý and the then auxiliary bishop Gintaras Grušas.

Managing the growing assembly and integrating the perspectives of these new participants was a real challenge. We also organised visits to Brussels by entire bishops' conferences from the new EU Member States, which was demanding but also very exciting. At that time we truly felt that Europe was finally coming together.

### Were there particular European debates or crises that shaped your work in a decisive way?

Personally, I was very involved in the project of the common currency, the euro. For many years I have been interested in what it means, from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching, that sovereign states share a currency and the capacity to set interest rates within a negotiated framework.

In Brussels I discussed these questions with Andreas Kees, a devout Protestant and former civil servant who had been closely involved in negotiating parts of the Maastricht Treaty. I also exchanged views with François Villeroy de Galhau, who at the time worked at the French Permanent Representation to the EU and is now Governor of the Banque de France.

Over the years I also had the opportunity to meet figures such as Michel Camdessus, Mario Monti, Michel Hansenne, Ruud Lubbers, Peter Sutherland and Hans Tietmeyer.

### How did COMECE seek to make its voice heard within the European institutions at that time? What were the main tools?

Meals and letters, in that order. We regularly invited guests for lunch and I also developed the habit of inviting people for breakfast, which proved very efficient and suited me well since I was living alone in Brussels.

These meetings were often followed up by letters and, increasingly, by emails to clarify what had been discussed. At that time it was also relatively easy to enter the buildings of the European institutions. I remember walking in and out of the European Parliament without any specific accreditation.



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Christmas dinner at the COMECE Secretariat in 2000.

We also began organising larger conferences bringing together delegations from Churches in the Member States, Members of the European Parliament and officials from the EU institutions. We called them social congresses. The first focused on the monetary union, another on fair trade policies. An unforgettable conference took place in Madrid in 2002 with a large delegation from CELAM to discuss relations between Europe and Latin America.

**Over the course of your thirty years of service, what do you consider to have been your most significant contributions to COMECE's work?**

I believe the COMECE pilgrimage to Santiago in 2004, with delegations from all the old and new EU Member States, was a major moment in the organisation's history. The intention was to express gratitude to God for the "unification" of Europe by walking together along the great European pilgrimage route and praying at the shrine of Saint James in Compostela. It was a significant logistical challenge and the team was exhausted at the end, but we succeeded.

Later, in 2009, I coordinated the preparations for the first Catholic Social Days in Gdańsk, which proved to be an innovative and stimulating format. Looking back, I see these gatherings as expressions of a synodal Church in Europe, even before the term became widely used.

Finally, I would mention the Week for Hope in Brussels in 2013. It did not attract as many participants as I had hoped, but I appreciated the concept of presenting saints from different European countries and centuries in various places across the European quarter.

I remain grateful to the successive presidents and general secretaries of COMECE for allowing me to imagine and realise these initiatives together with our team. And yes, I am proud of it.

**What were the greatest professional difficulties you encountered, and how did you navigate them? Any suggestions to the COMECE team members of today and of the future?**

From a very personal point of view, I would say that the greatest difficulty was maintaining a certain missionary freshness in a highly secular environment. In such a context, the temptation is strong to remain only among the few who share similar views.



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A group photo taken in Belgrade (Serbia) in 2000.



Stefan Lunte and Noël Treanor when he was General Secretary of COMECE.

At the same time, it is not always easy to express the mission of the Church in such an environment without resorting to overused formulas. Presenting the Christian faith and tradition openly, and being willing to expose oneself in doing so, remained a challenge throughout the years. For this reason, I believe COMECE advisers should support one another regularly in their mission.

**In your view, how has the European Union changed during these 30 years and how has COMECE evolved over the same period, both in its mission and in its methods?**

I would distinguish two periods since 1996. The first fifteen years were a time of optimism for the European Union, marked by the Maastricht Treaty and the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe and to the Mediterranean.

From around 2009–2010 onwards, the following fifteen years were shaped by a series of crises: the sovereign debt crisis, the challenges linked to migration after the Arab Spring, the sense of being unable to prevent Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Covid-19 crisis. All this has fuelled scepticism about the EU, its leaders and politics more broadly.

We are now entering a new geopolitical era in which Europe will have to define itself more clearly in relation to the United States, China and Russia. It is reassuring that a large majority of citizens still support the European Union, although the growing scepticism in France is a matter of concern, since the European project would be unthinkable without it.

COMECE will also have to position itself within this new chapter. Europe is no longer dominant economically or geopolitically and must increasingly learn to act on its own. Catholics, however, belong to a universal community and cannot reduce their identity to something purely European or national. From this perspective, it might even be useful to look at the history of the Dutch Republic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to understand certain aspects of the situation we face today. The EU could adopt a more flexible and dynamic international posture, exerting influence by relying on networks, diplomacy, economic strength, trade and culture.

**Do you think the relationship between the Church and the European institutions has developed or shifted in any significant way? Why do you think so?**

After a period of mutual discovery and curiosity, marked by the development of Article 17 TFEU and the procedures linked to its implementation, I have



**Stefan Lunte during the 2025 autumn plenary Assembly of COMECE.**

the impression that we are now entering a phase of routine, rather like an old couple that has not managed to keep the romantic flame alive.

I can only speculate about the reasons. Perhaps representatives of the European institutions have not always clearly seen the value of engaging with Church leaders. At the same time, bishops may not always have found the most effective way to address them. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that the relationship can improve.

### **What do you see as the main challenges and opportunities for COMECE in the coming years?**

COMECE should offer spaces and moments for open and respectful dialogue about the contradictions present in contemporary Europe. Over the past decades many good intentions and far-reaching political decisions aimed at building a prosperous, peaceful and united Europe have not always fulfilled expectations and sometimes have even produced the opposite effect.

Let me explain. The monetary union was promoted as a powerful instrument to strengthen unity and interdependence among its participants. It certainly created strong interdependence, yet unity and friendship did not necessarily grow alongside it.

The common market promised prosperity for all but could not prevent a significant increase in regional disparities. Likewise, the free movement of people, one of the major achievements of the Schengen Agreement, was not accompanied by sufficient political agreement on asylum and migration policies, contributing to serious difficulties and growing resentment.

In this context, COMECE could launch a project aimed at identifying and examining these contradictions in an open and respectful manner. Such an initiative would help Europe reflect more honestly on its challenges and would position COMECE as a meaningful mediator for the common good, capable of fostering dialogue among political leaders and citizens alike.

### **And what about the future of the European Union — are you hopeful?**

Definitely. We are in the midst of serious structural demographic, economic and ecological challenges. Yet we also possess immense cultural and spiritual resources to respond to them. I remain very confident about this.

### **A personal note: as you step into retirement after thirty years, how would you sum up this chapter of your life? What will you miss most about COMECE?**

I will miss the people, of course — colleagues and friends. I will also miss the stimulating cultural atmosphere of Brussels and the occasional beer and fries on Place Jourdan.

Summing up this chapter of my life is actually quite simple. My gratitude for all these years goes, of course, to the many people I had the privilege to meet. But ultimately the most adequate way to express that gratitude is prayer, and the most fitting addressee is God himself. ▀

*“It is more essential than ever to engage in dialogue and collaborate with everyone for the common good, while respecting the legitimate autonomy of the political sphere”.*

*(H.EM. PIETRO CARD. PAROLIN)*

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

▶ Since its insertion into EU primary law through the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, Article 17(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides for an open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions on the one hand and Churches and religious associations or communities on the other.

The EU institutions acknowledge that Article 17(3) TFEU entails an obligation for them to engage in this dialogue, in particular on matters of EU competence, on the basis of the recognition of the identity and specific contribution of Churches and religious associations or communities.

For COMECE, the Article 17(3) TFEU dialogue is not primarily about occasions of visibility or symbolic proximity with the EU institutions, but rather about regular opportunities to provide concrete input to EU policy and legislation on behalf of its member Bishops' Conferences.

This also reflects COMECE's mission as outlined in its Statute, which states that “COMECE partners the political process of the European Union in the areas of interest to the Episcopates of the European Union [...], communicates to the European institutions and authorities the opinions and views of the Episcopates of the European Union concerning European integration”.

The Article 17(3) TFEU dialogue is carried out by COMECE both bilaterally and at the ecumenical level, in cooperation with the other Churches' representative offices present in Brussels.

Regular working meetings with the Commission's Dialogue Coordinator and with the Cabinet of the responsible Commissioner are proactively sought by COMECE and its ecumenical partners in order to assess the practices and tools of the dialogue.

This has led to tangible improvements, for instance in the organisation of the annual high-level meeting between EU and religious leaders. For the 2025 edition, for example: a) adequate press coverage on the side of the European Commission was reintegrated; b) an informal moment of dialogue with the Commissioner preceded the event; c) discussions during the formal programme featured a concrete interaction between the Commissioner and each religious representative, with the exchanges being facilitated by guiding questions.

At the level of the European Parliament a significant effort was made to address more specific and technical policy initiatives linked to the Commission Work Programme, under the proactive impulse of the responsible EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna. A working meeting with religious representatives was organised by MEP Sberna in March 2025 in order to identify priority topics for dialogue.

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### Annual high-level meeting of EU and religious leaders

COMECE participated in the Article 17 TFEU Annual High-Level Meeting between the European Commission and religious leaders on the theme 'Living together in increasingly polarised societies' held on Monday 17 November 2025 in Brussels (Belgium).

During the meeting, COMECE Vice-President Mgr Czeslaw Kozon called for stronger institutional action, including *“the appointment of an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred and the urgent need for improved religious literacy”*.

The meeting was hosted by Magnus Brunner, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration, responsible for the implementation of the Article 17 TFEU dialogue.



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Annual Article 17 TFEU meeting between the European Commission and religious leaders. The photo includes: Commissioner Magnus Brunner and COMECE Vice-President Mgr. Czeslaw Kozon. Brussels, 17 November 2025.

## Meeting with the Polish Presidency of the EU Council

A delegation of COMECE and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) met with Mr Adam Szłapka, Polish Minister for European Union Affairs, in Warsaw (Poland). The meeting took place on Monday 7 April 2025 in the context of Poland's ongoing Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The ecumenical delegation shared a joint reflection highlighting the Churches' views on the main policy priorities of the Polish EU Presidency. The discussion focused on promoting a just and lasting peace in Ukraine and a new European security architecture, as well as on ensuring fair migration and asylum policies and a credible, citizen-centred and merit-based EU enlargement process.



Ecumenical delegation meets with Adam Szłapka, Polish Minister for European Union Affairs. Warsaw, (Poland), April 2025.

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## Meeting with the Danish Presidency of the EU Council

A COMECE-CEC ecumenical delegation met with Mr Morten Dahlin, Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs, in Copenhagen (Denmark) on Monday 24 November 2025 in the context of Denmark's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Significant attention was devoted to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The delegation encouraged the Danish EU Presidency to support efforts towards a European Peace Strategy aimed at strengthening the EU's integrated approach to peacebuilding, as well as promoting the future reconstruction of Ukraine.



Discussion with Morten Dahlin, Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs, in Copenhagen on 24 November 2025 in the context of the Danish EU Presidency.

During the meeting with Minister Dahlin, the delegation also called for fair and humane EU migration and asylum policies that guarantee respect for human dignity and fundamental rights. In this context, the delegation reiterated the need for *“a broad alliance between public authorities, civil society and Churches”* to support migrants, safeguard their dignity and facilitate their integration into host societies.

## Commissioner Brunner and EP Vice-President Sberna at the COMECE Assembly

In the context of the COMECE Autumn Assembly, held in Brussels from 1 to 3 October 2025, the bishops of the European Union held an in-depth discussion on the implementation of Article 17 TFEU with European Parliament Vice-President Antonella Sberna and EU Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration Magnus Brunner.

Vice-President Sberna underlined that, in the face of today's challenges, the European Union must rediscover its identity and self-awareness, including its foundational roots and spiritual dimension. She also highlighted the particular importance and contribution of Churches in times of crisis.

Commissioner Brunner concurred on the need to make high-level meetings between the EU and religious leaders more dialogical, avoiding what would otherwise risk becoming a merely formal exchange between Article 17 participants.



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EU Commissioner Magnus Brunner together with the bishops of the COMECE Standing Committee. Brussels, October 2025.



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EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna during the Autumn COMECE Assembly, Brussels, October 2025.

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## Dialogue Seminar at the European Parliament on 'Housing in the EU'

COMECE participated in the Article 17 TFEU Seminar on 'Housing in the EU: Strategies for a Europe that Supports People, Families and Young Generations', held at the European Parliament on Wednesday 4 June 2025. The event was hosted by the Vice-President of the European Parliament, MEP Antonella Sberna.

COMECE was represented by Johannes Moravitz, Adviser on Ecology, Energy and Agriculture. In his contribution he addressed the structural challenges in the housing sector and their impact on young couples who postpone starting a family due to high housing costs across the EU.



© COMECE

Participants of the Article 17 TFEU Seminar on "Housing in the EU: Strategies for a Europe that Supports People, Families and Young Generations", hosted at the European Parliament by the EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna.

He analysed the issue and presented three potential policy responses: fair wages, the revitalisation of rural areas and closer cooperation between religious actors and governments.

© CEEC



Some of the speakers of the Article 17 TFEU dialogue meeting on the MFF proposal held at the European Parliament, Brussels, December 2025.

### Dialogue Seminar at the European Parliament on the MFF

The General Secretary of COMECE, Fr Manuel Barrios Prieto, participated in the Article 17 dialogue meeting entitled ‘Beyond the numbers: the contribution of Article 17 TFEU to an EU Multiannual Financial Framework grounded in ethics, solidarity and inclusion’, held at the European Parliament in Brussels (Belgium) on Tuesday 2 December 2025.

He contributed to the panel ‘Measuring what matters – ethics as a compass for EU budget priorities’, presenting COMECE’s technical proposals on the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

He underlined that *“the Commission’s proposal for the MFF 2028–2034 is ambitious in structure, yet insufficient in volume and risky in several of its implications”*. He warned that *“without new revenues, social and ecological priorities risk becoming the first casualties”*, stressing the need for adequate own resources to ensure that solidarity and long-term commitments are not weakened.

The event also featured contributions from Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament; Antonella Sberna, Vice-President of the European Parliament responsible for the implementation of Article 17 TFEU; Magnus Brunner, EU Commissioner responsible for Article 17 TFEU; and Nathalia Feinberg, Danish Ambassador and Special Representative for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

© DBK



Mgr Wilmer (Germany) at the European Commission together with Natasha Bertaud, Deputy Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Magnus; Protestant Bishop Kirsten Fehrs; and Vincent Depaigne, EC Coordinator for the dialogue with Churches. Brussels, July 2025.

### Bishop Wilmer at the European Commission

Following his appointment as the German bishop delegate to the COMECE Assembly, Mgr Heiner Wilmer SCJ visited Brussels for a series of dialogue meetings with representatives of European institutions and Catholic organisations. The meetings were facilitated by COMECE and took place in Brussels on 2–3 July 2025.

Among others, Mgr Wilmer met Natasha Bertaud, Deputy Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Magnus, and Vincent Depaigne, Coordinator for the dialogue between the European Commission and Churches. The discussions focused on the European Union’s geopolitical responsibilities, the safeguarding of peace and democracy, care for creation and the ethical development of artificial intelligence. ▲

© European Union, 2025



COMECE Vice-President Mgr Czeslaw Kozon and other religious leaders with European Commissioner Magnus Brunner during an Article 17 TFEU dialogue meeting in Brussels, November 2025.

*“In a world darkened by war and injustice, even when all seems lost, migrants and refugees stand as messengers of hope. Their courage and tenacity bear heroic testimony to a faith that sees beyond what our eyes can see and gives them the strength to defy death on the various contemporary migration routes.”*

(POPE LEO XIV, MESSAGE FOR THE 111TH  
WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES,  
OCTOBER 2025)

## MIGRATION & ASYLUM

▲ Migration is one of the most significant and controversial phenomena in contemporary societies, particularly in the ‘global north’. Conflicts and instability, particularly in the EU southern and eastern neighbourhoods, have led to millions of people entering EU countries, many of them irregularly.

Growing social unrest in Europe, generated by various causes including economic difficulties, the weakening of families, increased insecurity and the loss of religious and spiritual vigour, has led to a rejection of migration policies perceived as excessively tolerant and relaxed.

The EU Migration and Asylum Pact seeks to address migration challenges in a holistic and joint manner, although its implementation is conditioned by the social and political realities of each country.

According to COMECE, it is necessary to confront the root causes of forced migration and act on them with a spirit of solidarity, in cooperation with the countries involved and the international community, while responsibly harmonising the rights and needs of host communities with the human dignity of newcomers.

The Temporary Protection Directive, extended to March 2027, has granted safety to Ukrainians fleeing the war and has shown the solidarity of Europeans. The fight against human trafficking and migrant smuggling - which should not include genuine humanitarian assistance - must continue to be an unwavering priority, as well as the prevention of deaths at sea.

## EU PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

This new EU legislation focuses on security, including reinforced return procedures and countering the instrumentalisation of migration by third countries. The EU Member States have presented their National Implementation Plans, which will be combined with the European Strategy on Migration and Asylum.

The Pact will be fully applied by June 2026. Gaps and limitations of the Pact were highlighted and brought to the attention of policymakers by COMECE and other Christian organisations during 2025.



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African and Middle Eastern migrants in Puglia, Italy.

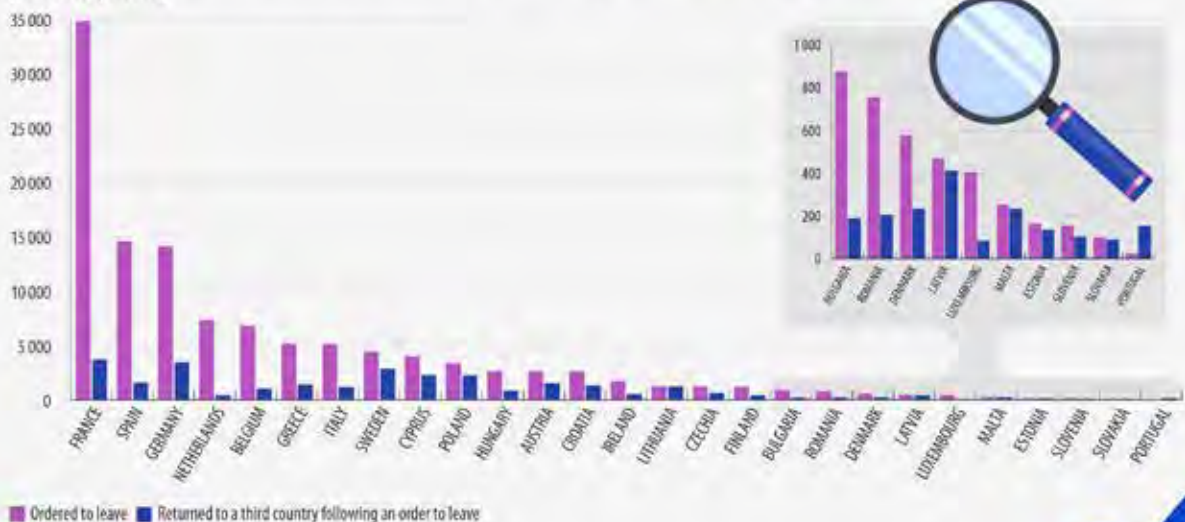
## RETURN PACKAGE

A substantial increase in the number of returns of irregular migrants is a key priority for the European Union and its Member States. The Council adopted its position on the draft proposal for a Regulation on the return of irregular migrants on 8 December 2025, to be agreed with the Parliament.

“Return hubs” outside the EU for rejected asylum seekers will be created. The EU is expanding return and readmission agreements with countries of origin. The EU list of safe countries of origin for returnees and the common concept of a safe third country were agreed by the Council and the Parliament in December 2025.

### Non-EU citizens ordered to leave and returned following an order to leave, Q2 2025

(number of persons)



Legend: Ordered to leave (purple bar), Returned to a third country following an order to leave (blue bar)

Country ranking is based on 'Ordered to leave', highest to lowest values.

eurostat

## EU PACT ON THE MEDITERRANEAN

Proposed by the European Commission in October 2025, it was welcomed by the Council in its Conclusions published the following month. The Pact reflects the strategic ambition “to achieve deeper integration within the Common Mediterranean Space” through a “practical framework of cooperation” that includes preparedness and migration management.



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Adviser José Luis Bazán participating in the panel “The Invisible Victims – Women and Children: The True Exploited in the Reproductive Market” at the conference “Surrogacy: An Ethical and Political Challenge for Europe”, hosted at the European Parliament by MEPs Paolo Inselvini, Bert-Jan Ruissen and Stephen Bartulica. Brussels, 19 November 2025.

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, amended in June 2024, includes forced marriage, illegal adoption and certain cases of surrogacy as criminal offences. Knowingly using services provided by victims of trafficking will constitute a criminal offence. EU Member States should bring into force their legislation to comply with this Directive by 15 July 2026. The EU has also adopted a Regulation prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market. COMECE maintains regular contact with the Santa Marta Group to advocate for the prevention of and the fight against human trafficking.

The Santa Marta Group, represented by H.E. Mgr William Kenney CP, was hosted at the 2025 Autumn Plenary Assembly of COMECE. This meeting was an opportunity to review the activities of this organisation in the fight against human trafficking and to explore possible ways of strengthening its action at EU level.

© COMECE



Conference “Artificial Intelligence and Human Trafficking: Threats, Tools, and Legal Frontiers”, held at the European Parliament in Brussels on 30 September 2025. The event was organised by COMECE and the Santa Marta Group and it was hosted by MEP Javier Zarzalejos.

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Mgr Jozef Haľko, President of the COMECE Commission on Migration and Asylum.

## Commission on Migration and Asylum

This Commission deals with current EU policies on migration, asylum and related areas (e.g. human trafficking). In 2025 the members of the Commission met in Brussels on 27–28 May. During this meeting, the members discussed ongoing policies and legislative initiatives with EU officials, including the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and its impact in the Schengen area, the new Pact for the Mediterranean and the new EU Return System.

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

**Secretary:** José Luis Bazán



Commission on Migration and Asylum during its 2023 spring meeting.

### Christian Group on Migration

The Secretariat of COMECE is also a member of the Christian Group on Migration and Asylum, a Brussels-based informal group of Christian organisations working in this field to exchange information and views and to develop common positions and coordinated advocacy towards the EU institutions.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 18 September

Statement of the Christian Group on Migration on the European Commission's proposal for a new common European system for returns.

### 19 November

"Surrogacy as a type of Human Trafficking", Conference on "Surrogacy: An Ethical and Political Challenge for Europe", hosted at the European Parliament, Brussels, by MEPs Paolo Inselvini, Bert-Jan Ruissen and Stephen Bartulica.

## EVENTS

### 9 May

Conference on fraud in the asylum process, organised in Budapest by Ludovika University and the Hungarian Institute for Migration.

### 11 June

Visit of a delegation of the Spanish Bishops' Conference to Brussels and facilitation of the organisation of several meetings with EU officials, including with the Chief Legal Adviser of the European Commission.

### 5-13 July

Lectures on "The Virtue of Justice: Balancing Rights, Responsibilities and the Common Good", during the II European Summer School organized by COMECE and the University Francisco de Vitoria at the Royal Monastery of Poblet (Spain).

### 30 September

Conference on "Artificial Intelligence and Human Trafficking: threats, tools, and legal frontiers", co-organised by COMECE and the Santa Marta Group at the European Parliament, Brussels.

### 10 December

"EU Policies on Migration and Asylum: An Update", meeting of the CCEE Section for Migration, Catania (Italy). ▴



## Ethical considerations in AI development

*“Technological innovation can be a form of participation in the divine act of creation. It carries an ethical and spiritual weight, for every design choice expresses a vision of humanity. ... Cultivate moral discernment as a fundamental part of your work — to develop systems that reflect justice, solidarity, and a genuine reverence for life.”*

(POPE LEO XIV TO PARTICIPANTS OF THE BUILDERS AI FORUM 2025)

# ETHICS, RESEARCH & HEALTH

▲ Ethics is increasingly central to EU policies because scientific and technological progress raises complex societal questions about rights, values and human dignity. COMECE activities in the fields of ethics, research and health during 2025 were characterised by political discussions regarding the European Union’s search for greater competitiveness, accompanied by dramatic geopolitical changes.

Ethics underpins scientific legitimacy, protects individuals (e.g. in clinical research or data use) and provides a normative basis for technology governance across borders — essential in a diverse EU of 27 Member States. Research fuels economic growth, enhances global competitiveness, creates jobs and delivers evidence-based solutions to societal challenges such as climate change, ageing populations and health inequalities. Better health outcomes benefit citizens directly by increasing



COMECE adviser Friederike Ladenburger at the conference on AI and democracy, “Need for EU Awareness and Ethical Regulation to Face Risks and Support Innovation”, held in Poland in September 2025 as part of the XXV Conference on the Role of Christians in EU Integration.

life expectancy and quality of life. At the same time, strong health systems and data infrastructures are essential for resilience against crises and for enabling health research to flourish.

A key pillar for the European Union in implementing responsible policies in the context of ethics, science and health is the provision of the necessary financial resources. COMECE therefore focuses heavily on negotiations on the EU’s multiannual financial framework, for which a first draft was presented in 2025.



COMECE at the “2nd Care Dialogue” with faith-based organisations and trade unions, hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and focused on the ethical dimensions of artificial intelligence in EU policy.

## DIGITAL ETHICS

This dossier remains a key focus of COMECE’s work. In 2025, the European Commission continued to establish the structural framework for implementing the AI Act and published further initiatives, including the Continent Action Plan on Artificial Intelligence.

This plan aims to enhance AI capabilities in the EU by promoting initiatives in key areas, such as building large-scale AI computing infrastructure, increasing access to high-quality data and simplifying the implementation of the EU AI Act.

Furthermore, an EU Code of Practice on Artificial Intelligence, intended to help providers of general-purpose AI models comply with the obligations contained in the Act, was published, together with a Digital Simplification Package. COMECE strongly advocated maintaining a balance between the legitimate objective of revitalising the European economy and the ethical implementation of systems based on Artificial Intelligence.

As part of its advocacy work, COMECE contributes to consultation bodies involved in the important phase of implementing the AI Act and other AI-related regulations, such as the EU Apply AI Alliance, and has applied to join the AI Act Advisory Forum as a stakeholder organisation.



Mgr Jamnik presiding the Autumn meeting of the COMECE Commission on Ethics.

## MENTAL HEALTH

The European Union has increasingly recognised mental health as a crucial component of public health, with a focus on prevention, care and social inclusion. Its approach is multi-dimensional, combining policy guidance, funding, research and collaboration among member states.

The EU promotes equitable access to mental health services across Member States. This includes integrating mental health into primary care, supporting community-based services and ensuring high-quality standards. Another key pillar of the EU approach to mental health is research. The EU funds research to better understand mental health issues and effective interventions. Programmes such as Horizon Europe support studies on mental health, digital mental health tools and innovations in care.

In 2025 the Commission on Ethics of COMECE placed a strong focus on mental health, collaborating with the relevant departments of the EU institutions and paid special attention to marginalised groups and to the triggering factors present in modern society. COMECE also concentrated on ensuring that interventions are tailored to different needs and grounded in Catholic Social Teaching.

## ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

COMECE constantly monitors EU policies acting under the umbrella term of ‘Sexual and Reproductive Rights’. In this context, in 2025 our advocacy work focused mainly on the following two dossiers: the European Citizens’ Initiative ‘My Voice, My Choice’ and the Critical Medicines Act.

At the heart of the citizens’ initiative is a practical demand: the creation of a European financial mechanism to support access to safe abortion care. The proposed fund would cover medical expenses, enabling women to receive care in EU countries where abortion is legal and accessible. In this context, COMECE highlighted that the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) clearly states that *“the Union’s action shall respect the responsibilities of the Member States for the definition of their health policy and for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care”*. According to COMECE, a financial support mechanism must not undermine the public order legislation of Member States or the healthcare and ethical decisions they take in the exercise of their competences in health matters.

Regarding the Critical Medicines Act, this important EU legislation aims to tackle shortages and secure the supply of essential medicines such as antibiotics, insulin and painkillers by boosting EU manufacturing, diversifying supply chains, promoting collaborative procurement and incentivising innovation in order to make Europe more self-sufficient in pharmaceuticals. While welcoming the

objective of this legislation, COMECE criticised the proposal of the European Parliament to include abortifacient medicinal products in the legislation as medicinal products of common interest.

## EU SCIENCE AND RESEARCH POLICY AND THE NEGOTIATIONS ON THE MFF

In 2025 the European institutions started negotiations on the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). COMECE closely examined the proposal with regard to the EU science and research programme ‘Horizon Europe’. The next Horizon Europe programme (2028–2034) will build on the achievements of its predecessors and aims to strengthen investment in research and innovation. It will also be closely connected to the European Competitiveness Fund.

COMECE collaborated closely with Catholic stakeholders in the fields of research and education and welcomed the European Commission’s proposal to retain Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ as stand-alone programmes. This decision reaffirms the EU’s recognition of education, research and innovation as cornerstones of Europe’s future and as a strategic investment in its prosperity, resilience and global competitiveness, while promoting shared European values.

The proposed doubling of the Horizon Europe budget to €175 billion also sends a strong signal of support for research and innovation. However, the proposed alignment with the European Competitiveness Fund, including shared governance and a single rulebook, raises concerns about preserving its autonomy.



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Plenary hall of European Parliament in Strasbourg voting for the “My voice, my choice” European citizens’ initiative in December 2025.

Adviser Friederike Ladenburger holding a copy of the journal *La Società – rivista scientifica di dottrina sociale della Chiesa*, which features her academic article “Quo vadis Europa? Ein Blick aus kirchlicher Perspektive auf die Regulierung der künstlichen Intelligenz durch die Europäische Union”.

© COMECE



## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 15 May

Academic article “Quo vadis Europa Ein Blick aus kirchlicher Perspektive auf die Regulierung der künstlichen Intelligenz durch die Europäische Union” published on “La Società – rivista scientifica di dottrina sociale della Chiesa”.

### 10 July

Contribution by COMECE President Mgr. Mariano Crociata during the conference on “Health as an investment: a european commitment” organised in Rome (Italy) by the Federazione Nazionale degli Ordini dei Medici Chirurghi e degli Odontoiatri (FNOMCeO).

### 2 December

Contribution by COMECE General Secretary Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto during the Article 17 TFEU Dialogue Seminar “Beyond the numbers: the contribution of Article 17 TFEU to an EU Multiannual Financial Framework grounded in ethics, solidarity and inclusion” held at the European Parliament, Brussels (Belgium).

### 16 December

Position Paper on the European Citizens’ Initiative “My Voice, My Choice” ahead of the vote at the European Parliament, Strasbourg (France).

## EVENTS

### 4 June

Conference “Religious Education – Fit for the Present and Future?” held at the Chapel for Europe, Brussels (Belgium).

### 2-3 July

Facilitation in the organisation of several dialogue meetings between Mgr. Heiner Wilmer with the cabinet of EU Commissioner Magnus Brunner, Members of the European Parliament and representatives of Brussels-based Catholic organisations.

### 26 September

Session “AI and Bigtech vs. Democratic Processes. Opportunity or Threat?” within the context of the XXV International Conference “The Role of Christians in the Process of European Integration – A lonely Europe”, held in Warsaw (Poland).

### 5 November

Panel on “Artificial Intelligence – Care, Cure and Costs” within the 2nd Care Dialogue between faith-based organisations and trade unions, held at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Brussels (Belgium).

### 27 November

Conference “The Future of Religious Education in the European Schools” held at the Chapel for Europe, Brussels (Belgium).

### 11 December

Workshop on Artificial Intelligence “The Ethics of AI” held at Caritas Europa, Brussels (Belgium). ▲

## Commission on Ethics

This Commission consists of legal and scientific experts delegated by the Bishops’ Conferences of the EU and monitors the activities of the EU institutions relevant to the field of ethics. In 2025 the Commission convened online on 8 April and in Brussels on 2–3 November. During the first meeting the delegates focused on the topic of mental health, as well as on the activities of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies and the work of the ethics sector of the European Commission. At the autumn meeting the Commission again addressed the issue of mental health and analysed developments and prospects related to artificial intelligence in the EU, as well as assessing the state of the values underlying the European project.

**President:** Mgr. Anton Jamnik

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

**Secretary:** Friederike Ladenburger



2025 Autumn meeting of the COMECE Commission on Ethics, Brussels.

*“Care for creation is a path of hope, where humanity learns again to live in harmony with God, with others and with the earth”.*

*(POPE LEO XIV, MESSAGE FOR THE WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR THE CARE OF CREATION 2025)*

# ECOLOGY, ENERGY & AGRICULTURE

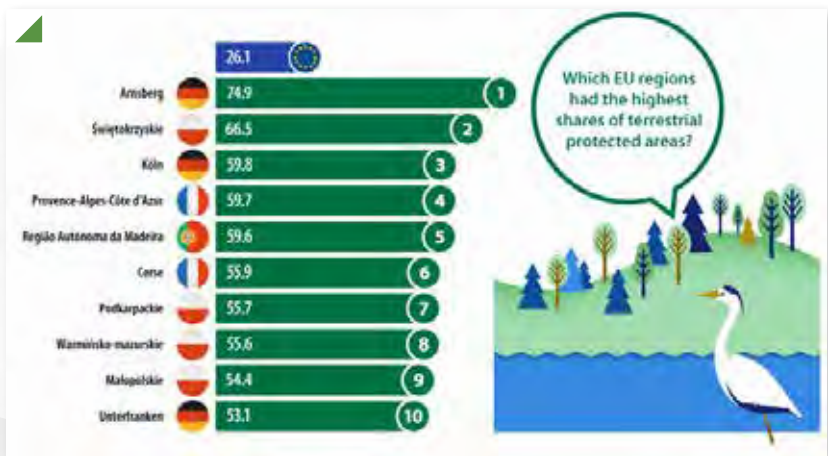
▲ 2025 marked a year of recalibration for the EU’s green policies. While the objectives of the European Green Deal formally remained in place, political attention shifted towards competitiveness, regulatory simplification and economic security under the European Commission’s mandate.

Debates intensified around the economic impact of environmental legislation, particularly in agriculture, industry and energy-intensive sectors.

The implementation of the Nature Restoration framework, adjustments within the Common Agricultural Policy and preparations for the 2040 climate

target all unfolded against growing concerns about affordability, energy prices and social cohesion. Rather than introducing major new environmental initiatives, 2025 was characterised by efforts to balance climate ambition with economic resilience, reflecting an increasingly strategic and geopolitical framing of ecological and energy policy within the European Union.

© European Environment Agency (EEA) and Eurostat



Which EU regions had the highest shares of terrestrial protected areas?

## AGRICULTURAL PRESSURES AND TRADE TENSIONS

In 2025 the political impact of the previous year's farmers' protests continued to influence EU agricultural policy. Debates centred on simplifying Common Agricultural Policy requirements, easing administrative burdens and reassessing the practical implementation of environmental legislation. Concerns about farm income, generational renewal and the competitiveness of European agriculture remained high on both EU institutions' and COMECE's agendas, particularly in the context of geopolitical instability and market volatility.

In December renewed protests erupted in several Member States in response to the proposed EU–Mercosur trade agreement. Many farmers voiced fears of unfair competition, lower production standards and additional pressure on already fragile farm incomes. The agreement reignited broader tensions between trade policy, environmental standards and the long-term sustainability of European agriculture.



© Lenka Macúgrová

Farmers block roads near the European institutions in Brussels in late 2025.

## EMISSIONS TRADING SYSTEM, 2040 TARGET AND COP30

In 2025, EU climate policy centred on preparations for the 2040 emissions reduction target and the continued implementation of the revised Emissions Trading System. Particular attention was given to the upcoming launch of ETS II, which will extend carbon pricing to buildings and road transport. As Member States advanced their preparations, concerns grew about the potential social impact on households already facing high energy prices and rising cost of living.

At the same time, international climate diplomacy regained momentum in view of COP30, placing additional scrutiny on the EU's credibility and

leadership in global climate action. Internal debates therefore intensified over how to reconcile ambitious emission pathways with competitiveness, industrial resilience and social fairness. The year highlighted the delicate

balance between maintaining climate leadership and sustaining economic and public support for the transition. ▴



© ELSIA

2025 European Laudato Si' Reflection Day, Brussels.



## EUROPEAN LAUDATO SI' ALLIANCE (ELSiA)

ELSiA is an alliance of European Catholic non-profit organisations, networks and Bishops' Conferences that share the goals of social justice, integral human development and care for our common home. Its members – Caritas Europa, CIDSE, COMECE, Don Bosco International, the Laudato Si' Movement, JESC, Justice and Peace Europe and Pax Christi International – work together to promote human and social development and are committed to strengthening their engagement in integral ecology.



© ELSiA

Some of the representatives of ELSiA in Castel Gandolfo (Italy) for a gathering convened by the CCEE Section for the Safeguarding of Creation.

The alliance aims to bring the principles of *Laudato Si'* into European Union policies by promoting an integral ecological approach that links environmental protection, social justice and human dignity. In September 2025, Pax Christi International joined the Alliance.



© ELSiA

Bishops, priests, sisters and representatives of several Catholic organisations met in Castel Gandolfo from 19 to 21 September for a gathering convened by the CCEE Section for the Safeguarding of Creation. The theme was "Laudato Si': Conversion and Commitment".

Following the transition undergone by the alliance in the previous year, 2025 marked a period of renewed activity for ELSIA, with a working calendar rich in initiatives and advocacy actions, including:

- Event “Rethinking debt(s): a moral call for a just future!” (Brussels, 5 March)
- Letter sent to the Polish Council Presidency regarding the EU’s position on the 4th Financing for Development Conference (Brussels, 16 April)
- Conference “European Laudato Si’ Reflection Day”, calling on EU leaders to promote justice-driven actions on food and energy transitions (Brussels, 5 June)
- Letter to EU leaders urging them to commit the EU to climate neutrality by 2040 and to avoid harmful loopholes such as international carbon credits (Brussels, 23 June)
- Participation in the event “Laudato Si’: Conversion and Commitment”, organised by the CCEE Section for the Safeguarding of Creation (Rome, 19–21 September)
- Conference “Europe’s Ecological Journey: Taking Stock and Advancing *Laudato Si’*”, held in the context of the event “Raising Hope for Climate Justice Conference”, which marked the tenth anniversary of *Laudato Si’* (Rome, 1–3 October)
- Open letter “A Faith-Based Appeal for Justice and Action: EU Climate Leadership at COP30” addressed to EU leaders in the context of COP30 in Belém (Brussels, 7 October)
- Statement “A step to overcome the European throwaway culture” on the revision of the European Waste Framework Directive (Brussels, 16 November)
- Statement on the occasion of the ninth World Day of the Poor (Brussels, 16 November)



© Dicastero for Promoting Integral Human Development

Pope Leo XIV’s message for the 10th World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation.



© COMECE

2025 European Laudato Si’ Reflection Day, Brussels.

*“The defence of religious freedom, then, cannot remain abstract; it must be lived, protected and promoted in the daily lives of individuals and communities”*

*(POPE LEO XIV TO THE DELEGATION OF ‘AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED’, OCTOBER 2025)*

## JUSTICE & FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

▲ In contributing to ongoing EU initiatives in the area of Justice & Fundamental Rights, COMECE keeps as its main reference point a strong protection of freedom of religion in the EU, addressing pressing concerns for the Catholic Church in Europe. Any legal challenge that impacts the Church’s functioning and daily activities, from data protection to equality and non-discrimination to child protection, is closely monitored and addressed in a timely manner and with specific expertise.

The support provided to this process by the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission is essential, as well-grounded contributions to EU policies and legislation can only be based on firm and constant contact with the reality on the ground in the Member States. This is also part of the service COMECE offers to the EU institutions in promoting evidence-based and effective initiatives.

On the other hand, COMECE does not lose sight of the broader context in which relevant policies are elaborated, as demonstrated by the comprehensive contribution to the European Commission ‘European Democracy Shield’ published during the year 2025.



© COMECE

A discussion on the GDPR taking place during the autumn meeting of the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission, Brussels.

### DATA PROTECTION

As has been the case in the past few years, in 2025 too the protection of personal data within the Church continued to be the highest priority for this policy area.

The issue of erasure from baptism records required extensive discussions, both in view of supporting national Bishops’ Conferences in facing legal cases and with regard to new proceedings pending

before the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights on the matter.

COMECE devoted two *ad hoc* meetings to data protection during the year, which also helped to address the priorities of the European Data Protection Board, the interpretation of Article 91 of the General Data Protection Regulation (Existing data protection rules of Churches and religious associations) as well as the digitalisation of baptism records.

Cooperation with the Holy See was intense, especially in relation to the important Explanatory Note issued by the Dicastery for Legislative Texts on 17 April 2025 on the prohibition of erasures from parochial baptism registers.

## CHILD PROTECTION

COMECE continued to follow closely the negotiations on the revision of the EU Child Sexual Abuse Directive. Once again with the support of Bishops' Conferences' experts in this area, the negotiating positions of the European Parliament and the EU Council were analysed with a view to providing input to the discussions.

Among the main points addressed were: Church autonomy vis-à-vis training, awareness raising activities, dedicated guidelines and internal protocols; statute of limitations; effective criminal sanctions; impact of AI; exposure to pornography; and the role of the new European Centre to prevent and counter child sexual abuse.

The work carried out with the experts also helped to prepare the Church in the Member States for the future implementation of the EU Directive.

The fruitful collaboration with the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors also continued, with exchanges on different tools aimed at improving child safeguarding within the Church.

## EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

During the year, COMECE repeatedly reiterated its call for the appointment of an EU Coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred, so as to address a phenomenon that is constantly increasing.



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Meeting on discrimination of Christians in Europe, held at the European Parliament, Brussels, in November 2025.



© COMECE

COMECE Adviser Alessandro Calcagno at the European Parliament, Brussels, November 2025.



© COMECE

The Legal Affairs Commission during a dialogue session with Clemence Ladenburger, Deputy Director-General of the Legal Service of the European Commission, Brussels, February 2025.

This request was presented in various EU contexts: in October at the COMECE Plenary Assembly, in dialogue with the responsible Commissioner Magnus Brunner, in November during the High-level meeting of EU and religious leaders and at a successful conference organised by the European Parliament Intergroup on the Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience.

COMECE also promoted the OSCE practical guide Understanding Anti-Christian Hate Crimes and Addressing the Security Needs of Christian Communities, which should inspire similar actions at EU level.

The emphasis placed by COMECE on the dossier of protection of places of worship is also part of these efforts. Advocacy also concerned the inclusion of Christian communities in EU funding instruments related to the fight against hate speech, in particular the AgoraEU Programme.

## IMPACT OF EU LAW ON NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS

During 2025, COMECE focused on the impact of EU law on the activities of non-profit entities, with particular regard to State aid legislation.

An *ad hoc* online meeting of our Legal Affairs Commission was devoted to this topic, also in the context of the ‘Omnibus’ simplification agenda of the European Commission.

In its contribution on the revision of the State Aid General Block Exemption Regulation, COMECE underlined that a much better consideration of the specificity of non-profit entities and Churches in the EU State aid domain should be achieved; and that some concepts related to EU State aid law do not fit non-profit entities. A lightening of the financial requirements to access the benefits deriving from the Regulation was also advocated for.

A similar approach was applied to EU work on the revision of the EU State Aid Decision on Services of General Economic Interest (SGEI).

## CROSS-BORDER FAMILY LAW

The ruling issued by the Court of Justice of the EU in the case *Wojewoda Mazowiecki*, in November 2025, concerning the recognition of same-sex marriages between Member States was analysed in depth and led to the issuing of a Statement by the COMECE Presidency reacting to some of the most problematic aspects.

The ruling obliges a Member State to recognise a marriage between two EU citizens of the same sex lawfully concluded in another Member State where they have exercised their freedom to move and reside. Although the Court acknowledges that rules on marriage “*come within the competence of the Member States*”, COMECE highlighted that the decision appears to push jurisprudence beyond EU competences and recalled that Article 9 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU states that “*the right to marry and the right to found a family shall be guaranteed in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of these rights*”.

COMECE also regretted the limited role attributed to national identities (Article 4.2 TEU), noting that for some Member States the definition of marriage forms part of their national identity. The ruling may foster pressure to amend national family law, creating a convergence of matrimonial-law effects despite the EU having no mandate to harmonise family law and may also increase legal uncertainty.

For a number of years COMECE has devoted deep reflection to the impact of EU jurisprudence on national family law systems. The matter will continue to be examined in the context of the COMECE Legal Affairs Commission, with more general reference to the evolution of the jurisprudence on the matter.



Entrance of the Court of Justice of the European Union.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 5 April

Contribution to the public consultation on AML/CFT and Financial inclusion – Updated FATF Guidance on AML/CFT Measures and Financial inclusion. The text was elaborated jointly with the Dutch Bishops' Conference.

### 26 May

Contribution to the European Commission public consultation on the 'European Democracy Shield'.

### 30 September

Inputs to EU discussions on the recast of the Child sexual abuse Directive.

### 6 October

Contribution to the European Commission public consultation on the General Block Exemption Regulation general revision.

### 24 October

Inputs to EU discussions on the revision of the EU State aid Decision on Services of General Economic Interest (SGEI).

### 14 November

Contribution to the EU-funded SHIELDed project consultation on 'Mapping best practices and tools in protecting soft targets'.

### 9 December

Statement by the Presidency of COMECE on the recent European Court of Justice judgment concerning the recognition of same-sex marriages between Member States.

## EVENTS

### 25 September

"4th Dialogue between ministerial offices responsible for Religious Affairs", organised by the Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria and by the Belgian Federal Ministry of Justice, held in Brussels (Belgium).

### 18 November

Conference on "Discrimination of Christians in Europe", organised by the European Parliament Integroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief in cooperation with OIDAC and ECPP. ▀

## Legal Affairs Commission

Our Legal Affairs Commission gathers legal experts delegated by the great majority of Bishops' Conferences based in the EU. It hosts internal discussions and dialogue sessions with EU officers, with a special focus on issues touching upon State-Church relations, freedom of religion in the Union and the daily life and activities of the Catholic Church.

The COMECE Legal Affairs Commission held two ordinary meetings in 2025, one held physically in Brussels, the second on-line. On 5–6 February, discussions focused on the Commission priorities for the new legislature, data protection, rights of the child, child sexual abuse legislation and freedom of religion in the EU. On 17–18 September, experts addressed topics such as non-discrimination laws and the Church as employer, data protection and child sexual abuse legislation, the Omnibus IV simplification proposal as well as the European Democracy Shield.


During 2025 COMECE also organised the annual meeting of Bishops' Conferences data protection experts and two *ad hoc* meetings devoted to data protection as well as to the impact of EU law on non-profit organisations.

**President:** Mgr. Theodorus C.M. Hoogenboom

**Secretary:** Alessandro Calcagno



COMECE Legal Affairs Commission's meeting in February 2025.



*“Love for the poor is an essential element of the history of God’s dealings with us; it rises up from the heart of the Church as a constant appeal to the hearts of the faithful, both individually and in our communities”.*

*(POPE LEO XIV’S FIRST APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION, DILEXI TE)*

## SOCIAL & ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

The year 2025 confronted the European Union with a complex convergence of socio-economic pressures. While macroeconomic indicators suggested relative stability compared to the years of the pandemic and the energy crisis, structural vulnerabilities remained deeply embedded across European societies. For COMECE, these challenges are not merely technical or financial. They concern the dignity of the human person, the strength of social cohesion and the moral orientation of European integration.

The EU policy agenda was strongly shaped by concerns over competitiveness, productivity and strategic autonomy. At the same time, labour markets continued to face skills shortages, demographic ageing and the expansion of non-standard forms of employment.

COMECE repeatedly stressed that work is not simply a factor of production but a fundamental

means of participation in society and a path to personal and family fulfilment. Ensuring quality employment through fair wages, adequate social protection, work-life balance and the right to rest remained at the heart of COMECE’s advocacy at European level in 2025 in the field of social and economic affairs.

In spring 2025 the world welcomed the election of Pope Leo XIV. By choosing a name that consciously recalls Pope Leo XIII and the landmark social teaching of *Rerum Novarum*, the new pontiff signalled that the profound technological transformations of our time would be central to his pontificate.

Marking the World Day of the Poor during the Jubilee Year, Pope Leo XIV called for moving beyond charitable gestures and addressing the structural causes of poverty. He highlighted work, housing, education and care as pillars of a just



COMECE President Mgr Crociata's participating in the INAPP conference on public policies, held in Rome (Italy) in November 2025.

society. COMECE's engagement on quality jobs, social investment and the ethical governance of economic transformation stands in continuity with this call, helping ensure that Europe's transitions remain socially just and human centred.

## THE FUTURE OF THE EU BUDGET AND SOCIAL INVESTMENT

The debate surrounding the Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2028–2034 became one of the defining social policy discussions in 2025. While a minimum allocation of €100 billion for social objectives has been proposed under the new framework, concerns have been raised that, in real terms and without clear earmarking, this may represent a reduction compared to the current ESF+ envelope.

Beyond financial figures, the reform of EU funding instruments raises structural questions about governance. Shifts towards greater centralisation risk weakening the role of regional and local actors, including civil society organisations and social economy enterprises. For COMECE, subsidiarity and partnership are not procedural formalities but essential principles that ensure policies respond to real needs on the ground.

## HOUSING IN THE EU

Across the European Union, access to affordable housing has become increasingly difficult for many citizens. Rising property prices, high rents and growing pressure in urban areas have made it harder for young people and families to find stable housing, with many postponing major life decisions such as starting a family.

In this context, COMECE engaged in discussions on housing and social justice at European level. An example of this advocacy work was its participation in the Article 17 TFEU Seminar entitled "Housing in the EU: Strategies for a Europe that Supports People, Families and Young Generations", held at the European Parliament and hosted by EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna.

According to COMECE, it is essential that the EU and its Member States address the structural challenges affecting the housing sector and their social consequences, particularly for young couples who often postpone starting a family due to high housing costs across the EU.

COMECE advocated ensuring just wages, promoting the revitalisation of rural areas and strengthening cooperation between public authorities and religious actors in order to support communities facing housing difficulties.



[www.europeansundayalliance.eu](http://www.europeansundayalliance.eu)

## EUROPEAN SUNDAY ALLIANCE (ESA)

In 2025 the Alliance welcomed the European Commission's initiative to explore legislative measures on fair telework and the right to disconnect. The Alliance urged the Commission to consider introducing a regulation on the right to disconnect, either alongside or within a revised Working Time Directive.

The right to disconnect referred to a worker's ability to refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communication, such as emails or messages, outside working hours and during holidays. According to ESA, this issue had become increasingly important in the context of digitalisation and the growing use of remote work.

While telework could offer flexibility and productivity gains, it could also blur the boundaries between work and private life. Constant connectivity and the pressure of an 'always-on' culture, including during evenings and weekends, could contribute to stress, burnout and other health risks for workers.

In its opinion, the European Sunday Alliance therefore called on the EU to clarify and strengthen the right to disconnect in European legislation. It also reiterated the importance of a common weekly day of rest, which should, where possible, coincide with the day traditionally recognised as a day of rest in each country or region, often Sunday.

## Social Affairs Commission

This Commission is composed of experts delegated by the Bishops' Conferences in the European Union. It monitors EU social and economic policies.

In 2025 the Commission gathered twice online, on 25 June and 25 November. Experts discussed the MFF 2028–2034 proposal and its social implications, especially the risk of centralisation and diminished social safeguards. Discussions also centred on rising housing costs, demographic decline and the integration of migrants and foreign workers.

The meetings of the Commission also highlighted a key strategic concern: the tension between infrastructure-driven investments and direct support for people. Social cohesion was repeatedly affirmed as a precondition for sustainable development, not merely a by-product of economic growth.

**President:** Mgr. Joseph Galea-Curmi  
**Secretary:** Alix de Wasseige, Johannes Moravitz, Lenka Mačugová



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Mgr Galea-Curmi presided over the recent autumn meeting of our Social Affairs Commission, held online in November 2025.

## EVENTS

### 8 January

Participation of the President of COMECE, Mons. Crociata, in the Social Pastoral Ministry meeting of the Dioceses of Triveneto (Italy).

### 4 June

Article 17 TFEU Dialogue Seminar on “Housing in the EU: Strategies for a Europe that Supports People, Families and Young Generations”, hosted by the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Antonella Sberna, and held at the European Parliament, Brussels (Belgium).

### 12 November

Participation in the event “30 Years of the Policoro Project at the European Parliament: countering youth unemployment through the contribution of the Church”, held in Brussels (Belgium) and organised by the Italian Bishops’ Conference (CEI).

### 20 November

COMECE President Mgr Crociata’s participation in the INAPP conference on public policies, held in Rome (Italy). His contribution focused on social cohesion in the EU.

### 2 December

Article 17 TFEU Dialogue Seminar on “Beyond the numbers: the contribution of Article 17 TFEU to an EU Multiannual Financial Framework grounded in ethics, solidarity and inclusion”, hosted by European Parliament Vice-President Antonella Sberna and held at the European Parliament, Brussels (Belgium)

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 14 October

Opinion of the European Sunday Alliance (ESA) to the European Commission on a possible new EU directive on a right to disconnect and fair telework. ▲



COMECE adviser Johannes Moravitz participating in the Article 17 TFEU Seminar on “Housing in the EU: Strategies for a Europe that Supports People, Families and Young Generations”, hosted at the European Parliament by the EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna.



General Secretary Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto together with some of the participants of the Article 17 TFEU dialogue meeting on the MFF proposal for the period 2028–2034, held at the European Parliament and hosted by EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna.

# EU EXTERNAL ACTION

▲ The European Union has continued to navigate a challenging geopolitical environment marked by persistent instability and violence in its neighbourhood and beyond—notably the ongoing war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East. These crises have generated immense human suffering, severe humanitarian needs and widespread destruction, which remain a matter of deep concern for the Church.

At the same time, the international context has become increasingly fragmented, confrontational and unpredictable, testing the EU's capacity to act as a credible, values-based global actor for peace.

In this context, while strengthening its external action and global partnerships, it remains essential for the EU to advance its enlargement process with the candidate countries, as this constitutes a strategic investment in stability, prosperity and lasting peace on the European continent. The Church remains convinced that, amid the current geopolitical tensions, the contribution of a united and cohesive EU is indispensable for revitalising multilateral cooperation and promoting integral human development, solidarity and peace in Europe's neighbourhood and across the wider world.

*“In these turbulent and unstable times, many are looking to Europe, and to the European Union in particular, hoping it will give a lead.”*

(EU BISHOPS - STATEMENT OF THE SPRING 2025  
PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF COMECE)

## RENEWING EU'S GLOBAL ROLE AS A 'PROMISE OF PEACE' AND 'A SOURCE OF DEVELOPMENT'

In a context of growing geopolitical tensions and erosion of multilateralism, the EU's global role is increasingly being challenged. Its vocation as a project of peace, rooted in the values of human dignity, solidarity and justice, calls for a renewal of the founding fathers' vision with 'creative fidelity' to its political, cultural and spiritual roots.

As the EU's attention has increasingly shifted towards defence and competitiveness, the Bishops of COMECE issued at their 2025 Spring Plenary Assembly in Nemi (Italy) an appeal to the European Union *“to remain faithful to its founding principles and continue to act as a united, trustful and integrating force for its neighbourhood and for the world.”*

In a Reflection Paper published in June 2025, COMECE urged that *“defence spending remains proportionate to the actual needs”* and called for the elaboration of a 'European Peace Strategy' as a guiding framework to strengthen the EU's integral approach to human security and peace. At the same time, COMECE pleaded for the *“pursuit of a citizen-*

centred, fair and merit-based enlargement process, while calling for EU internal reforms to ensure the Union's capacity to integrate future members”.

Moreover, according to COMECE, European policy-makers should “seek international partnerships that do not merely balance, but combine self-interest with values in a coherent way”.

COMECE's reflections on EU's global role have been discussed in a number of public conferences, in bilateral meetings with EU officials and MEPs, as well as during a Summer School at the historic Monastery of Poblet.



Working session of the 2025 spring meeting of the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations.



COMECE President and General Secretary with Mgr Mokrzycki, Archbishop of Lviv of the Latins in Ukraine at the Lychakiv military cemetery.

## FOR A JUST AND LASTING PEACE IN UKRAINE, IN EU'S NEIGHBOURHOOD AND IN THE WORLD

Among the key advocacy concerns of COMECE over the past year has been the encouragement of efforts leading to a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Following a Statement of the COMECE Standing Committee reaffirming EU Bishops' continued closeness to the people of Ukraine, a delegation led by President Mgr. Mariano Crociata paid a three-day solidarity visit to Ukraine in July 2025.

The COMECE delegation met with representatives of the Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine, as well as with local authorities and members of civil society and academia. On this occasion, COMECE called upon EU leaders to “enhance all diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine, rooted in international law and the principles of justice”.

COMECE has also closely monitored the situation in the Holy Land, the broader Middle East region, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Myanmar, engaging in pertinent advocacy initiatives aiming at promoting justice and peace.



The COMECE delegation with H.B. Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Bishop Stepan Sus and Rev. Ihor Shaban from the Greek Catholic Church of Ukraine. Lviv, July 2025.



© SECAM

SECAM 20th Plenary Assembly in Kigali (Rwanda) from 30 July to 4 August 2025.

## PROMOTING A JUST AND PEOPLE-CENTRED EU-AFRICA PARTNERSHIP

COMECE has further deepened its fraternal collaboration with the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). Following the visit of a SECAM delegation led by its General Secretary, Rev. Fr. Rafael Simbine Junior, to COMECE and the participation of COMECE General Secretary, Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, in SECAM's 20th Plenary Assembly held in Kigali, Rwanda, the Secretariats of the Bishops' representations of the two regions elaborated a joint Statement calling for an EU-Africa partnership *"grounded in mutual respect, environmental stewardship, and the centrality of human dignity"*.

Ahead of the 7th Summit between the European Union and the African Union, COMECE together with SECAM and other Catholic organisations issued a joint Declaration calling for *"a partnership that brings justice for the African people"*.

## CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY DUE DILIGENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

COMECE has continued its advocacy in defending the recently adopted Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which aims to hold businesses accountable for environmental damage and human rights abuses.

In the context of legislative initiatives aiming at simplifying the requirements posed by the CSDDD ("Omnibus I"), COMECE issued a Note warning of *"the risks of undermining the integrity of some of the EU's landmark sustainability laws"* in the name of the competitiveness of Europe's industry.

COMECE insisted that this should not come at the expense of transparency, accountability or the EU's social and environmental commitments. Otherwise, the implications for human rights and environmental protection, as well as for the EU's credibility as a global leader in promoting corporate responsibility, could be *"profoundly negative"*.

Questions of Corporate Social Responsibility, especially in the extraction and mining sector and the impacts of lacking due diligence standards on indigenous communities, were at the centre of discussions with a Church delegation from Brazil hosted by COMECE in October 2025.



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**Marcley Araújo Souza, Advisor to the Council of Chiefs of the Pataxó people during the visit of a delegation of Church and indigenous leaders from Latin America.**



© COMECE

**COMECE adviser Marek Mišák in the Amazon region together with Mgr Moacir Goulart de Figueredo M.S.C., Bishop of Sucumbíos, and REPAM representative Lucy Urvina. July-August 2025.**

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 12 February

Statement of the COMECE President on the Humanitarian, Security and Political Crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

### 4 March

Statement of the Presidency of COMECE in support of Ukraine and its people amid deepening geopolitical complexities and uncertainties.

### 20 March

Comments of the COMECE Secretariat on the European Commission’s ‘First Omnibus package’ proposal.

### 29 March

“Looking to Europe with hope”, declaration of the COMECE bishops adopted during their 2025 Spring Plenary Assembly in Nemi (Italy).

### 15 May

Statement of COMECE and SECAM ahead of the AU–EU Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, entitled “For we know that things can change”.

### 23 June

Reflection paper on European Union’s role in a changing world: “From founding vision to global mission”.

### 17 July

Statement of the COMECE President on the attack on the only Catholic Church in the Gaza Strip.

### 3 October

Note from the President of COMECE on the crisis in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan.

### 10 November

Joint Statement of Catholic actors ahead of the 7th AU-EU Summit in Angola.

## EVENTS

### 30 January

Breakfast meeting with Fr. Mykhailo Stanchyshyn SJ on challenges experienced by the people on the ground in Ukraine, and on perspectives for a just and lasting peace.

### 13 March

Visit of researchers from the Nanovic Institute for European Studies & the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame.

### 7 April

Debate “Europe, Church, Ecumenism in times of turmoil” in the context of the COMECE-CEC delegation’s meeting with Poland’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

## 19 June

Visit of a delegation of the Colombian Bishops' Conference and Caritas Colombia.

## 5-13 July

Lectures on Security, Strategy and Leadership during the II European Summer School organized by COMECE and the University Francisco de Vitoria at the Royal Monastery of Poblet (Spain).

## 16-18 July

Solidarity visit to Ukraine by a COMECE delegation led by its President Mgr. Mariano Crociata.

## 22 July – 2 August

Solidarity visit to Catholic communities affected by mining in the Amazon region, meeting local Bishops and indigenous groups.

## 30 July – 4 August

Participation of the COMECE Secretary General in SECAM's 20th Plenary Assembly in Kigali (Rwanda).

## 15-17 September

Participation in a panel discussion on European defence cooperation and the call to peace: Christian citizenship and public policy, in Nyborg (Denmark).

## 27 October

Roundtable with H.Em. Cardinal Leonardo Steiner and the Missionary Council for Indigenous People (CIMI), and representatives of faith-based organisations, on the situation of indigenous communities in South America. ▀

## Commission on EU External Relations

Following the end of the mandate of H.E. Mgr. Jan Vokál (Czech Republic), H.E. Mgr. Kieran O'Reilly (Ireland) took over as President of the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations. The Commission gathered on 19–20 May and 2 December 2025 to discuss with EU and Church representatives the key challenges the EU is facing in its external action.

The Commission members exchanged perspectives with EU officials on the EU's response to the wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East, as well as on the EU's competitiveness and development policies. Further discussions were held on the future of the partnership between the European Union and the African Union, and on the EU's role on the global stage in the current geopolitical context.

**President:** Mgr. Kieran O'Reilly

**Secretary:** Marek Mišák



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Spring meeting of the COMECE Commission on EU External Relations, Brussels, May 2025.

## CULTURE & EDUCATION

*“Education is always an act of hope that invites us to believe that change is possible”.*

*(POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE FOR THE LAUNCH OF THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON EDUCATION, 2019)*

▲ In 2025, culture and education remained central to the European Union’s efforts to strengthen social cohesion, innovation and democratic resilience in a rapidly changing global context. Ongoing digital transformation, geopolitical instability and increasing economic competition placed growing pressure on Europe’s education systems, cultural sectors and research communities.

At the same time, discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) highlighted the strategic importance of investing in education, youth mobility and cultural cooperation as essential pillars of Europe’s future. Within this context, COMECE continued to promote a vision of education and culture that places the human person, solidarity and the common good at the centre of European policies.

Particular attention was also devoted to the European Universities Initiative, which represents a major step towards deeper cooperation among higher education institutions across the continent.

COMECE also continued its engagement with the New European Bauhaus, highlighting the contribution that culture, heritage and community participation can make to Europe’s ecological and social transition.

Another important area of work for COMECE in 2025 concerned the role of religious education in the formation of young generations. COMECE advocated in different context in favour of religious education, considered as an essential part of the holistic development of pupils, fostering cultural awareness, moral reflection and dialogue in increasingly pluralistic societies.

### THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE (EUI)

This initiative was launched by the European Commission in 2019 with the aim of fostering unprecedented levels of cooperation among higher education institutions across Europe. Through the creation of transnational alliances – currently 65 alliances involving more than 570 higher education institutions – the initiative seeks to enhance the quality, inclusiveness and global competitiveness of European higher education.

For Catholic universities, the EUI presents both unique challenges and valuable opportunities to integrate their foundational values within a broader European educational framework.

In 2025, COMECE promoted the EUI among Catholic universities, highlighting the opportunities

that such cooperation offers to the many students enrolled in Catholic universities across the European Union.

In this context, COMECE, together with the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), organised a series of webinars presenting the European Commission initiative, its aims and opportunities, as well as sharing experiences, discussing challenges and highlighting opportunities specifically for Catholic higher education institutions.

## DARE AND ARE TO INVEST IN THE FUTURE

In the context of the discussion on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028–2034, COMECE elaborated inputs from its Commission on Culture and Education and its Youth Platform and called on the EU institutions to commit to the future of European citizens by strengthening financial support and investment in study and training mobility. It also urged greater support for EU Member States, which hold the primary responsibility for building resilient and future-proof education systems and cultural environments.



Screenshot of the conference “European Universities Alliances: an opportunity for Catholic Universities?”, held on 6 and 13 May 2025 by COMECE and the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU).



Some of the representatives of the COMECE Youth Platform.



Students of the second edition of the European Summer School organised by COMECE and the School of Governance and Leadership Isabel la Católica in the Monastery of Poblet in Catalonia (Spain) from 5 to 13 July.

This advocacy work included a contribution to an EU public consultation through which COMECE invited the EU to take investments in education, culture and youth to the next level, “ensuring the Union can provide a favourable and socially cohesive environment for all its citizens to learn, train, create, innovate and become individuals aware of their identity, culture and indispensable role for the common good”.

Throughout 2025, COMECE also highlighted how Europe’s key educational and cultural programmes – such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps – have become essential pillars of European cooperation, identity and innovation. It therefore advocated expanding EU financial support for these programmes and promoting greater alignment between them and national policies.

## SECOND EUROPEAN SUMMER SCHOOL

COMECE and the School of Governance and Leadership Isabel la Católica held the second edition of the European Summer School, which took place from 5 to 13 July in the historic Monastery of Poblet in Catalonia (Spain), a stunning former medieval monastery now transformed into a centre for reflection, study and dialogue.

Under the theme “Security and Defence in Europe”, the Summer School brought together 50 young leaders aged 22 to 35 with international experts, senior strategists and distinguished academics. Participants engaged with professionals with experience in NATO, the European Parliament, leading security think tanks and the diplomatic sphere to explore Europe’s role in a world facing growing uncertainties.

Attendees explored critical global issues such as the war in Ukraine, instability in Africa and the Middle East, nuclear deterrence, tensions in the Asia-Pacific region and hybrid threats to European security. The Summer School was made possible thanks to the valuable collaboration of COMECE advisers José Luis Bazán, Marek Miśák and Stefan Lunte.



© EC

Logo of the New European Bauhaus Initiative.

## NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS LAB ON RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

In 2025 COMECE continued its engagement with the platform dedicated to the reuse and sustainable restoration of churches. The initiative brings together interested Bishops’ Conferences, academic institutions and other stakeholders in order to facilitate informal exchanges on best practices and projects related to the renovation and adaptive reuse of church buildings.

Following its recognition as an official partner of the New European Bauhaus, COMECE, together with Future for Religious Heritage and the Catholic Private University Linz, proposed the creation of a New European Bauhaus Lab entitled “*Renovation, transformation and renewal of church buildings and religious heritage in the EU*”. The proposal was subsequently accepted by the European Commission.

The Lab will focus on several priorities: promoting European debate and cooperation on the renovation, transformation and reuse of churches and religious buildings; encouraging interdisciplinary European research projects connected with the three dimensions of the New European Bauhaus; fostering the exchange of best practices among EU Member States, civil society and religious actors; raising public awareness on the value of religious heritage; and supporting renovation or transformation processes that respect the original use, memory and sacral character of these buildings.

Through this initiative COMECE seeks to highlight the importance of church buildings and religious heritage for European identity, sustainability and social cohesion.

## EUROPEAN SCHOOLS

This year the Secretariat continued its advocacy in support of maintaining religious education as a mandatory component of the curriculum in the European Schools.

COMECE's work focused on three main priorities. First, the Secretariat facilitated a framework for regular meetings among the religious authorities responsible for religious education in the European Schools, strengthening coordination and dialogue among them. Second, COMECE maintained regular contacts with the Secretariat-General of the European Schools, with particular attention to improving the exchange of information with the management of the different schools across the system.

Finally, in June 2025 COMECE organised a conference bringing together religious authorities responsible for religious education, academics as well as students and parents from the European Schools. The event addressed the broader role of religion in education and offered a platform to discuss the proposed reforms concerning the final two years of the European Schools' secondary cycle.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 16 September

Contribution "Dare and care to invest in the future" to the EC public consultation on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028–2034.

## EVENTS

### 10 April

Film screening of "Making Dust", a documentary film for an insightful exploration of the loss of churches and their lasting impact on our communities. The event was organised by COMECE, together with the Chapel for Europe and the Future for Religious Heritage (FRH). It was held in Brussels (Belgium).

### 6 May

First session of the conference "European Universities Alliances: an opportunity for Catholic Universities?", focused on the goals of the EUI and the structure of these alliances. The event was organised by COMECE and the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU).

### 13 May

Second session of the conference "European Universities Alliances: an opportunity for Catholic Universities?", focused on the experiences of Catholic universities already participating in alliances. The event was organised by COMECE and the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU).

### 4 June

Conference "Religious Education: Fit for Present and Future? The Role of Religion in the Formation of Young Generations at the European Schools", held in Brussels (Belgium) and organised by COMECE, the religious authorities responsible for Religion at the European Schools and the Chapel for Europe.

### 5-13 July

Second edition of the European Summer School organised in Poblet (Spain) and co-organised by COMECE and the School of Government and Leadership Isabel la Católica. ▽

## Commission on Culture and Education

This Commission is composed of experts in the fields of culture and education delegated by the EU Bishops' Conferences. In 2025 the Commission met twice, on 15–16 May and 10 December.

During the first meeting, experts exchanged with EU officials on the Union of Skills, the structure of Erasmus+ in the context of the current MFF negotiations, strategies for greater accessibility to culture and heritage and early school leaving across the EU Member States. In the autumn meeting, the Commission focused on the Culture Compass for Europe and the need for a renewed educational approach in the age of digitalisation.


**President:** Mgr. Janusz Stepnowski

**Secretary:** Emilio Dogliani, Luca Fabbris



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A 2024 meeting of the Commission on Culture and Education, presided by Mgr Janusz Stepnowski.



*“Religious freedom is not merely a legal right or a privilege granted to us by governments; it is a foundational condition that makes authentic reconciliation possible”.*

*(POPE LEO XIV - ADDRESS TO A DELEGATION OF  
“AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED”, OCTOBER 2025)*

© Stephen Butler / Shutterstock  
Christians in the Middle East

# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

▲ The “Religious Freedom in the World Report 2025” published by ACN concluded that there have been severe violations of religious freedom in 62 countries in the world: 24 classified as “persecution” and 38 as “discrimination”, together affecting more than 5.4 billion people. Today, the fundamental right to religious freedom is not only under pressure but also increasingly disappearing. Authoritarian rule is among the main drivers of persecution or discrimination in 52 countries.

In China, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua and North Korea, egregious and systematic violations of religious freedom by the authorities include arbitrary arrest, inhuman treatment and large-scale repression. In Egypt, Ethiopia, Mexico, Türkiye and Vietnam, religious communities face systematic legal inequality and restrictions on worship, movement and expression.

Religious extremism is the most prominent driver of persecution or discrimination in 25 countries. Jihadist terrorists from the Sahel to Pakistan target Christians but also members of other religious communities opposing their ideology.

Religious nationalism in India and Myanmar provokes persecution, while in Palestine, Israel, Sri Lanka and Nepal it brings religious discrimination. A rising trend is the systematic targeting of religious leaders and communities by organised and mafia-style criminal entities (e.g. Mexico, Haiti, Nigeria).

Women and girls from religious minorities suffer systematic abuse, including forced conversion and forced marriage. AI and digital tools are being weaponised against religious groups (e.g. China and North Korea).

A sharp rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes followed the 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attack in Israel and the war in Gaza. Anti-Christian incidents are also on the rise across Western countries, including Latin American ones, mostly involving the vandalism of churches (in recent years, over 3,000 in the UK; 600 cases in Greece; more than 500 in the USA etc.) and restrictions on the right to conscientious objection, but also verbal and physical attacks against priests and the faithful.



© ACN

Countries with significant violations of Religious Freedom according to the ACN 2025 Report.

While religious freedom is on the agenda of EU institutions (e.g. the European Parliament’s Intergroups on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience and on Christians in the Middle East; the EU Special Representative on Human Rights and the EEAS Human Rights Division, which also deal with religious freedom), the post of EU Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU has been vacant since Frans van Daele finished his mandate at the end of 2024, despite numerous requests by MEPs and civil society for its reinstatement.

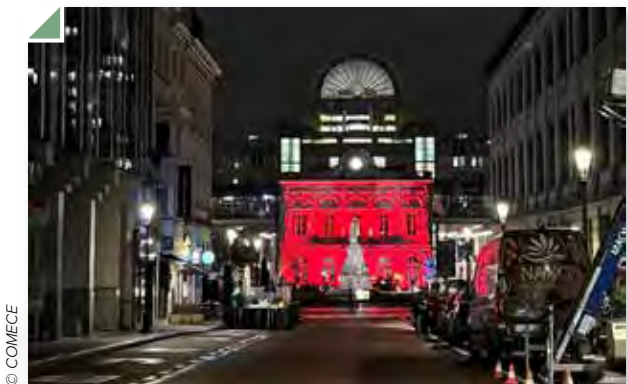
COMECE is actively engaged with these and other relevant actors at EU level to advocate for the full protection and respect of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion worldwide.

## PAKISTAN

The country is moving backwards rather than forwards in fulfilling its international human rights obligations (including religious freedom), which condition its status as a GSP+ beneficiary. Ongoing negotiations between the EU and Pakistan will determine the country’s status as a beneficiary of the unilateral trade privilege granting access to the EU market without tariffs for certain products.

## MIDDLE EAST, IN PARTICULAR SYRIA AND LEBANON

Religious minorities, in particular Christians, face an existential threat in the Middle East. Vulnerable, unprotected and often attacked, Christian communities have been reduced to worrying levels. COMECE is actively engaged in promoting EU policies that protect religious minorities in these countries and support the safe and voluntary return of those who have sought protection elsewhere.



© COMECE

Parts of the Brussels seat of the European Parliament were illuminated in red as a sign in solidarity with persecuted Christians around the world. This initiative was promoted by ACN and some MEPs.



Christians praying in a church of Aleppo, Syria.

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, IN PARTICULAR NIGERIA

From Mali to Mozambique, jihadist terrorism is spreading and becoming firmly established across sub-Saharan Africa, from West to East, generating mass violence and death, promoting organised criminality, causing mass displacement and exploiting resources in the areas they control to expand their activities. Christian communities, as well as others perceived as opponents, are among the first to suffer from this type of terrorism.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

The vandalism of Christian churches in Western countries, including Latin America, is a persistent trend (e.g. US, Australia, Canada, UK, Chile, Argentina...), as is the adoption of legislation that erodes free speech (e.g. bans on praying silently in buffer zones near abortion clinics or the unlawful arrest of street preachers). Restrictions on the right to conscientious objection, or the denial of basic parental rights in education to allow parents to educate their children according to their religious or moral principles, are also a problematic reality, which Pope Francis named as *“polite persecution”* that *“takes away man’s freedom.”*

## IMPACT OF AI ON THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION

The emergence of AI in people’s daily lives has created a new paradigm that affects how we understand reality and how religious freedom is exercised. At the same time, such a powerful tool does not escape the misuse of totalitarian states that seek absolute control over religious groups considered disaffected or hostile.



COMECE Adviser Bazán participating in a round table on religious freedom at the European Parliament TV channel, with MEPs Zovko and Sousa Silva. Brussels, April 2025.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 12 February

Statement of the President of COMECE calling for “urgent EU action amid catastrophic crisis in DRC”.

### 17 July

COMECE President’s statement on the Gaza Church attack.

### 6 October

Letter and Statement of the COMECE bishops to the President of the European Commission, advocating the reinstatement of an EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU.

### 15 October

Analysis “*Fleeing from religiously motivated persecution and discrimination*” and “*A change of era: religious freedom in the age of artificial intelligence*” included in the 2025 World Report of the Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

## EVENTS

### 2 April

Conference “Polite persecution of Christians”, organized by the EPP Working Group on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue and held at the European Parliament, Strasbourg (France).

### 6 May

Conference “Freedom of religion and diplomacy of conscience by the Holy See” held at the Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic), sponsored by the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Czech Republic.

### 5-13 July

“Persecution of Christians in the World”, Workshop at the II European Summer School organised by COMECE and the University Francisco de Vitoria at the Royal Monastery of Poblet (Spain).

### 26 November

“Censorship and Self-censorship: Are Religious Freedom and Free Speech Under Threat?”, International Conference “Persecution for Faith and Chaos in the World” held at the Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic).

### 6-9 October

Conference “EU policies and instruments regarding religious freedom outside the EU” held in the context of the Thirty-Second Annual International Law and Religion Symposium, organised by the International Law and Religion Studies Center of the Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah) ▲.



Adviser Bazán joined the conference “Persecution for faith and chaos in the world” at Charles University of Prague for “Red Wednesday” noting growing limits to free expression and impact on FoRB in some Western countries.



Our adviser José Luis Bazán participated in the 32nd Annual International Law & Religion Symposium, organised by International Center for Law and Religion Studies at the Brigham Young University in Utah (USA) earlier this month.



World Youth Day, Lisbon.  
© Diogo Sá / JMJ Lisboa 2023

*“Dear young people, aspire to great things, to holiness, wherever you are. Do not settle for less. The world needs your dreams, your courage and your generosity to build a future that is more just and more human”.*

(POPE LEO XIV AT THE 2025 HOMILY AT THE JUBILEE OF YOUTH MASS)

# YOUTH POLICIES

▲ In 2025, youth-related policies continued to gain prominence within the European Union’s agenda, reflecting growing awareness of the challenges faced by younger generations in a rapidly changing political, social and economic landscape.

Following the appointment in 2024 of the first-ever European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, COMECE intensified its engagement with EU institutions on youth-related policies. The creation of this portfolio

marked an important step in recognising the need to address the concerns of younger generations and to strengthen intergenerational solidarity within European policymaking.

In the same context, the European Commission launched in 2025 the Youth Advisory Board, a new body intended to strengthen youth participation in EU governance and to provide advice on issues affecting young people across Europe.

Within this evolving policy landscape, COMECE continued to advocate for policies that place the dignity, participation and aspirations of young people at the centre of European decision-making. In particular, through its contribution to the discussions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework, COMECE called for stronger investments in education, youth mobility and cultural programmes, highlighting the importance of initiatives such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps for fostering cooperation, innovation and a shared European identity among younger generations.



Youth participation and its support to the EU.

Through its work on this dossier and through the activities of its Youth Platform and Youth Net, COMECE contributed to the broader discourse on youth and democracy, strengthening the voice of Catholic youth in dialogue with the European institutions and encouraging greater youth participation in shaping the future of Europe.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVE ON EU MIGRATION POLICIES

Migration and asylum remain among the most important issues not only in public opinion but also on the agenda of the institutions of the European Union. In this context, the young delegates of the EU Bishops' Conferences to the COMECE Youth Net - a consultative body within the COMECE Secretariat launched in 2022 - focused their attention on this topic, making it their annual contribution for the years 2024–2025.

The document explores key dimensions of integration, including vocational fulfilment and respect for human dignity, the demographic crisis and the role of community-based approaches, as well as the relationship between migration and security.

The document also incorporates the results of a survey disseminated throughout the year among members of the Youth Net. Based on the responses, young people put forward recommendations to the EU institutions and Member States to improve the integration of migrants across the continent. Among the policy suggestions:

- empowering public discourse through education and data transparency on migration;
- strengthening EU-wide cooperation and policy coherence, particularly in implementing the EU Pact on Asylum and Migration;
- fostering inclusive societies by supporting local communities;
- promoting comprehensive integration programmes.

## COMECE AND THE EC YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

In July the European Commission formally launched the Youth Advisory Board with the main objective of advising the Commission on issues affecting young people across Europe and strengthening youth participation in EU governance. The Board brings together 28 young representatives, mainly from the National Youth Councils of EU Member States and the European Youth Forum, with additional observers from candidate countries.

In this context, as part of ongoing efforts to strengthen youth engagement at the European level, members of the COMECE Youth Platform met on 16 June with Mr David Ciliberti, Cabinet Expert of the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glenn Micallef, shortly after the Youth Advisory Board had been announced.



© COMECE

COMECE Youth Net meeting in Budapest on 20-22 June 2025.



© COMECE

Members of the COMECE Youth Platform meeting with David Ciliberti, Cabinet Expert of Commissioner Glenn Micallef, on the establishment of the Commission's Youth Advisory Board.

During the meeting, the COMECE Youth Platform presented an open letter to the Commissioner suggesting practical steps to ensure that the Board would be inclusive, accessible and genuinely representative of the diversity of young people across Europe.

The COMECE Youth Platform also outlined several proposals aimed at ensuring that the Youth Advisory Board empowers young people from all backgrounds to play a meaningful role in EU decision-making. It further called for the inclusion of youth organisations that are not currently part of the European Commission's networks, including faith-based youth organisations, in order to bring fresh perspectives and voices that are often overlooked.

When the Youth Advisory Board was presented in July, the COMECE Youth Platform regretted the lack of willingness to involve organisations beyond the National Youth Councils and the European Youth Forum. The Platform, however, expressed satisfaction at seeing that several elements suggested in its open letter had been incorporated into the proposed functioning of the Board.

## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ON PEACE AND DEFENCE

In its role as a consultative body within the COMECE Secretariat, bringing a youth perspective to EU policymaking and reflecting young people's diverse sensitivities to current political and social challenges, in 2025 the youth delegates of the EU Bishops' Conferences to the COMECE Youth Net also addressed the role of the European Union in the field of defence and the promotion of peace. These topics are of particular relevance in the current historical context, marked by growing international instability and conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood.

In this context, the COMECE Youth Net engaged in dialogue with the perspectives offered by EU officials and diplomats through a series of initiatives. Among these was the webinar "The Future of EU Security and Defence: Exploring Ways to Build Peace", conceived and organised by the Youth Net itself.

The event served as a platform for critical reflection on the EU's role in promoting peace and security in

a world increasingly marked by declining dialogue, the erosion of multilateralism and persistent conflicts.

The event featured contributions by Philip McDonagh, former Irish Ambassador to India, Russia and the Holy See and current Adjunct Professor and Director of the Centre for Religion, Human Values and International Relations at Dublin City University, and by Krastio Preslavsky, Deputy Head of Unit at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, responsible for the programming of EU defence industry initiatives.

## DARE AND CARE TO INVEST IN THE FUTURE

In the context of discussions on the next long-term EU budget, COMECE intensified its advocacy work in 2025 to promote greater attention to youth-related policies. With the contribution entitled "Dare and care to invest in the future", submitted as part of the European Commission's public consultation on the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034, COMECE highlighted the importance of more ambitious investments not only in the fields of education and culture but also in youth programmes.

COMECE called on the European institutions to strengthen financial support for study and training mobility. In particular, COMECE emphasised the strategic role of European programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps, which are considered



© COMECE

A youth pastoral delegation from the German Bishops' Conference (DBK) meeting with COMECE adviser Emilio Dogliani to discuss youth participation, democracy and active citizenship.

pillars of European cooperation, innovation and a shared identity among younger generations.

Through this advocacy initiative, COMECE also drew the attention of the EU institutions to the difficulties faced by many youth organisations, such as the administrative complexity of European programmes or the limited coherence between EU funds and national policies. The objective is to ensure that future European policies provide young people with a favourable environment in which to learn, train, innovate and contribute to the common good, recognising their essential role in the democratic and social development of Europe.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

### 16 June

COMECE Youth Platform's open letter to Glenn Micallef, EU Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glenn Micallef.

### 17 July

2024–2025 contribution of the COMECE Youth Net "Migration and asylum policies in the EU: a focus on integration - Annual Written Contribution of the COMECE Youth Net on fostering integration of migrants in the European Union".

### 16 September

Contribution "Dare and care to invest in the future" to the EC public consultation on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028–2034.



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On 20-22 June 2025, the COMECE Youth Net convened a meeting in Budapest, gathering young delegates from the EU Bishops' Conferences to discuss today's challenges and opportunities for the continent in the areas of migration, youth engagement and culture.

## EVENTS

### 13 February

Meeting with a youth pastoral delegation from the German Bishops' Conference (DBK) during its visit to Brussels to meet EU stakeholders. The discussion focused on youth participation, democracy and active citizenship in the context of the new EU institutional cycle. The meeting took place at the COMECE Secretariat.

### 5 June

COMECE Youth Net's webinar "The Future of EU Security and Defence: Exploring Ways to Build Peace".

### 16 June

COMECE Youth Platform meeting with David Ciliberti, Cabinet Expert of Commissioner Glenn Micallef, on the establishment of the Commission's Youth Advisory Board. The meeting took place in Brussels (Belgium).

### 20-22 June

Spring meeting of the COMECE Youth Net to discuss today's challenges and opportunities for the continent in the areas of migration, youth engagement and culture. The event was held in Budapest (Hungary).

### 17 July

Meeting with a group of young representatives from the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Evangelischen Jugend in Deutschland (AEJ), who visited the COMECE Secretariat as part of a tour of EU institutions and organisations based in Brussels. The meeting took place at the COMECE Secretariat.

### 21 November

Meeting with a group of students from the Sant'Agostino paritary school in Salsomaggiore Terme (Italy) to discuss Church's contribution to EU policy making. The visit was facilitated by Don Bosco International. The meeting took place at the COMECE Secretariat. ▲



# COMMUNICATION

**VISIT OUR WEBSITE**  
**[WWW.COMECE.EU](http://WWW.COMECE.EU)**

- Join our mail-list to receive our **Newsletter and Press Releases.**
-    : @comeceEU
- Download and share photos and videos from our YouTube and Flickr accounts

In 2025, both long-standing partnerships and those developed in recent years were further consolidated with newspapers, online media and press agencies across various EU Member States. Cooperation with the press offices of Bishops' Conferences and faith-based organisations was also strengthened, building on shared initiatives and mutual support.

Internal data point to continued positive trends in external communication across both traditional and social media channels. As a result, COMECE's activities and contributions have gained greater visibility in European media.

Since the launch of the new website in 2022, readership has continued to grow, increasing by 6% compared to 2024 and by 20% overall since 2022. The newsletter, in its updated format and functionality, reached a record level for COMECE.

Although the number of followers continues to grow, recent difficulties can be observed in the



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**The President of COMECE, Mgr Mariano Crociata, interviewed by Rai while in Rome in May 2025.**

dissemination of content across certain social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), which has undergone significant changes following its acquisition by Elon Musk and the major transformations he introduced to the platform's functioning.



© CCEE

CCEE Annual meeting of Spokespersons and Press officers, Prague, June 2025.

In May, following the audience of the COMECE Presidency with the newly elected Pope Leo XIV, a major press conference was organised at the Vatican by the COMECE Press Office. Around 80 journalists from international media outlets were accredited by the Holy See Press Office. It was the largest press event in COMECE's history.

Although this success was partly made possible by the presence of numerous journalists in Rome - many of whom had travelled there initially for the Jubilee and subsequently for the death of Pope Francis and the conclave that elected Pope Leo - it can be confidently stated that there is growing journalistic interest in the relationship between the Church and Europe, as well as in how the new Pontiff views the European Union.

In this regard, special thanks are due to the Dicastery for Communication of the Holy See, as well as to the Holy See Press Office and all colleagues within the Vatican media, who have consistently supported COMECE's communication efforts over the years.



© CCEE

Alessandro Di Maio at the CCEE Annual meeting of Spokespersons and Press officers, held in Prague. In the photo also: Francisc Ungureanu, General Secretary of the Romanian Episcopate, and James Abbott, Press officer of the England and Wales Episcopate. Prague, June 2025.

In June, Alessandro Di Maio participated in the annual meeting of press officers and spokespersons of the European Episcopates, organised by Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE). The event took place in Prague and was supported by the Czech Bishops' Conference. In this context, Di Maio presented an analysis of the challenges and opportunities of communicating the Church in Europe.

In particular, he described his working context, namely that of COMECE's mission within a secular and supranational environment such as the European Union, where almost no truly pan-European media operate but rather a plurality of national media, each with its own language and audience. He sought to address the question of how the Church can communicate effectively in such a context.

During 2025, the COMECE Press Office supported the COMECE-CEC ecumenical delegations in their meetings with the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union, namely Poland and Denmark. This approach enhanced COMECE's visibility in the media of the country holding the Presidency and provided an opportunity to strengthen engagement with the press offices of the relevant Bishops' Conferences.



Press conference in Rome following the first audience of the COMECE Presidency with Pope Leo XIV.

© COMECE

In this regard, we would like to thank Fr Leszek Gęsiak SJ, spokesperson of the Polish Bishops' Conference, as well as all representatives of the Churches in Denmark, whose support on the ground proved both valuable and fruitful.

Finally, the Press Office extends its heartfelt gratitude to all journalists, media professionals, spokespersons and press officers with whom we have collaborated. Your support has been invaluable in making the voice of the Church in Europe more accessible to a wider audience throughout 2025. ▲



COMECE President Mgr Crociata interviewed by a EWTN crew in Brussels during a Plenary Assembly.

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# SPRING PLENAR ASSEMBLY

## NEMI (ITALY)

26-28 March



The Spring Assembly of COMECE took place in Nemi in the province of Rome, Italy. The meeting included a series of dialogue sessions with Vatican, EU and academic representatives to discuss Europe's unity and its role as a global actor for peace amid growing internal polarisation and international instability.

Deeply concerned about the dangerous spiral the world is descending into, the EU bishops issued the declaration "Looking to Europe with hope", urging the European Union to show leadership by acting as a *"united, trustful and integrating force for its neighbourhood and the world"*.

On European defence, the Assembly recognised the need for a strong EU capable of protecting its citizens and values, while stressing the EU's original vocation as a project of peace and that *"any necessary, proportionate and adequate investments towards European defence must therefore not come at the expense of efforts aimed at promoting human dignity, justice, integral human development and the care of Creation"*.

Following the Mario Draghi report on European competitiveness, the COMECE bishops acknowledged the need for the EU to strengthen its position in the global economy without undermining Europe's historical commitment to solidarity, especially with the most vulnerable regions of the world as well as with those suffering from poverty or seeking refuge.

The bishops had the opportunity to meet with H.E. Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin. Highlighting the crises facing Europe and warning against nationalistic policies, the Cardinal urged political leaders to *"set aside divisions and ideological barriers"* in favour of dialogue. He emphasised Europe's responsibility, rooted in its Christian tradition, to promote peace and solidarity. *"Dialogue remains the only viable path,"* he said, stressing the Church's role in reconciliation.



© Ada Lush/COMECE

Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin and COMECE President Mgr. Mariano Crociata during the 2025 Spring Assembly of COMECE.



© Ada Lush/COMECE

President Mario Monti addressing the Plenary Assembly of COMECE.



**COMECE bishops in dialogue with H.E. Mgr. Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See.**

The EU bishops also engaged in a discussion with Professor Mario Monti, former Prime Minister of Italy (2011–2013) and European Commissioner for the Single Market and Competition (1995–2004). He offered insights into current international political issues, including the future of transatlantic relations and the challenge of economic competitiveness.

During his address, President Monti reflected on his past collaboration with COMECE and emphasised its role in promoting a Europe based on shared values.

The bishops of COMECE were received in Vatican City by H.E. Mgr. Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See. They discussed rising global tensions exacerbated by the erosion of multilateralism, as well as recent shifts in transatlantic relations. The exchange with Mgr. Gallagher also focused on the wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land and on the future of EU integration.

In the second part of the Assembly, the bishops met His Excellency Martin Selmayr, the EU Ambassador to the Holy See. This meeting — the first since the Ambassador's appointment in September 2024 — focused on matters related to Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and on GDPR and data processing within the Church.



**Bishops and staff of COMECE on Via della Conciliazione, Rome.**

The Assembly also featured the participation of H.E. Mgr. Giuseppe Baturi, General Secretary of the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) and President Paolo Gentiloni, former Prime Minister of Italy (2016–2018) and European Commissioner for the Economy (2019–2023).

While Mgr. Baturi outlined the history of the CEI and recent initiatives of the Conference, particularly on issues concerning the Mediterranean, young people and Europe, President Gentiloni analysed topics such as European defence, the economic challenges facing Europe and the need for a “*European awakening*”.

Following their request, the Assembly welcomed the Latin Church of Ukraine and the Greek-Catholic Church of Ukraine as observer members. The decision had been taken in the previous months and was implemented in Nemi.

The proceedings of the COMECE Plenary Assembly alternated with moments of prayer. On the occasion of the Jubilee, the bishops and staff of COMECE also made a pilgrimage to Rome, passing through the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica and joining in prayer with Mgr. Paul Richard Gallagher at the Chapel of the Choir.

The Assembly of COMECE also sent a message to the Holy Father to convey its closeness to the Pope in this difficult moment of illness and its filial devotion.



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**His Excellency Martin Selmayr, the EU Ambassador to the Holy See.**



© Ada Lushi/COMECE

**President Paolo Gentiloni addressing the bishops of the European Union.**



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**Bishops and staff of COMECE participate in the Jubilee procession to St. Peter's Basilica.**

# AUTUMN PLENARY ASSEMBLY

## BRUSSELS (BELGIUM)

1-3 October 2025  

The Assembly was held at the COMECE Secretariat in Brussels and featured dialogue sessions with high-level representatives of the EU institutions on the implementation of Article 17 TFEU and other internal and international issues.

During the meeting, the bishops addressed a letter to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, advocating the reinstatement of an EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union. One year into the mandate of the von der Leyen II Commission, COMECE noted that this key position, considered crucial for advancing the protection and promotion of freedom of religion globally, remains vacant. Together with the request for its appointment, the Assembly called on the President of the European Commission to ensure that the position is supported by a strong mandate and adequate human and financial resources.

The bishops also held an in-depth discussion on the implementation of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) with EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna and EU Commissioner Magnus Brunner. Vice-President Sberna underlined that, in the face of today's challenges, the European Union must rediscover its identity and foundational roots, including its spiritual dimension. She also highlighted the important contribution of Churches in times of crisis. Commissioner Brunner agreed on the need to make high-level meetings between EU and religious leaders more genuinely dialogical, avoiding purely formal exchanges.

While discussing discrimination and intolerance on grounds of religion within the European Union, the bishops reiterated their call for the appointment of an EU Coordinator to address anti-Christian hatred



EU Commissioner Magnus Brunner together with the bishops of the COMECE.



EP Vice-President Antonella Sberna during the Autumn COMECE Assembly.



Klaus Welle, Special Adviser to the EU Commissioner for Defence, at the Assembly of EU bishops. Brussels, October 2025.

within the Union. In this regard, Commissioner Brunner acknowledged the growing phenomenon of anti-Christian hatred in the EU and the need to counter it effectively.

The Assembly also reflected on the role of the European Union on the global stage and its internal strategic challenges. Valuable insights were provided by Klaus Welle, Special Adviser to the EU Commissioner for Defence. Together they discussed the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and its consequences for the EU, particularly in the fields of defence and the protection of democracy. In this context, the bishops reflected on conflicts in the EU's neighbouring regions and their President Mgr Mariano Crociata issued a note expressing deep concern over the situation in the Gaza Strip, as well as other crises in the Holy Land, Ukraine and Sudan.

Migration was another key topic. The bishops devoted significant time to this issue, including

an exchange with Commissioner Brunner and Dr Welle. While the Commissioner emphasised the importance of humane legislation and the effective implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, Dr Welle highlighted the need for responsibility both towards migrants and refugees arriving in Europe and towards the most vulnerable members of host societies.

The Assembly also hosted H.E. Mgr William Kenney CP and Alexander DesForges from the Santa Marta Group to discuss the fight against human trafficking and strengthen cooperation in advocacy towards the EU institutions.

The Autumn Assembly included several moments of prayer. A well-attended Mass for Europe was celebrated at the Église de Notre-Dame des Victoires au Sablon in Brussels. Another Mass was celebrated by the newly appointed Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union, H.E. Mgr Bernardito Cleopas Auza.





# PRESIDENCY

According to the statute of COMECE, the Presidency is elected by the Assembly from among its members. Its members represent the geographical distribution of the Episcopates of the European Union. Their mandate lasts for a period of five years and can be renewed 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. Czeslaw Kozon** (Vice-President)
- **Mgr. Nuno Brás da Silva Martins** (Vice-President)
- **Mgr. Rimantas Norvila** (Vice-President)




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

# BISHOPS DELEGATED TO COMECE

COMECE comprises the Episcopal Conferences of the European Union. Each member Bishops' Conference appoints a delegate bishop to the Assembly of COMECE. A single bishop represents Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The Assembly also includes one observer member from each of the following Episcopal Conferences: Switzerland, Scotland, England and Wales, and the International Bishops' Conference of Saints Cyril and Methodius. In March 2025 COMECE granted observer status within its Assembly to the Latin Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

## 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

 Bishop of Tallinn (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 Vilkaiviškis  
(Lithuania)



**H.E. Mgr. Kieran O'REILLY**



Archbishop of  
Cashel and Emly  
(Ireland)



**H.E. Mgr. Heiner WILMER**



Bishop of Hildesheim  
(Germany)



**H.E. Mgr. Petko VALOV**



Eparch of Saint John XXIII 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. Stanislav PŘIBYL, CSsR**



Bishop of Hradec Králové  
(Archbishop of Prague  
(Czech Republic)



**H.E. Mgr. Léon WAGENER**



Auxiliary Bishop  
of Luxembourg  
(Luxembourg)



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



Bishop of Eisenstadt (Austria)



## Observers

**H.E. Mgr. Joseph Maria BONNEMAIN**



Bishop of Chur  
(Switzerland)



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



Bishop of Aberdeen  
(Scotland)



**H.Em. Card. Mgr. László NÉMET**



Metropolitan Archbishop of  
Belgrade (Serbia)



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



Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster  
(England and Wales)



**Rev. Fr. Vyacheslav GRYNEVYCH**



Director of Caritas Spes  
(Ukraine – Roman Catholic  
Church)



**H.E. Mgr. Stepan SUS**



Curial Bishop of Kyiv-Halyč  
(Ukraine – Greek Catholic  
Church)



# SECRETARIAT STAFF

The Secretariat ensures the continuity of COMECE's work from its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. A small team monitors and analyses 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, Luca Fabbris**

Advisers for Education, Culture & Youth Policy

**Alix de Wasseige, Lenka Mačugová**

Advisers for Social & Economic Affairs

**Johannes Moravitz, Lenka Mačugová**

Advisers 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

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**Henrique Gomes e Silva** (Brasil)

**Iga Malinowska** (Poland)

**Barnabás Cseh** (Hungary)

**Martin Claeys** (Belgium)

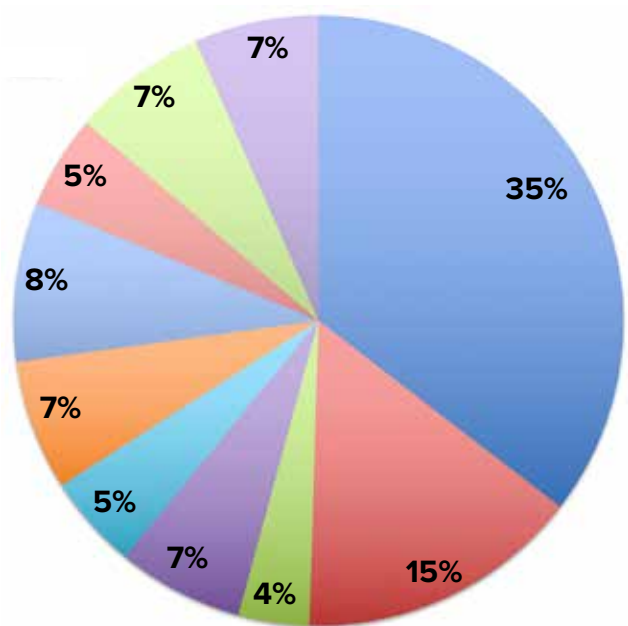
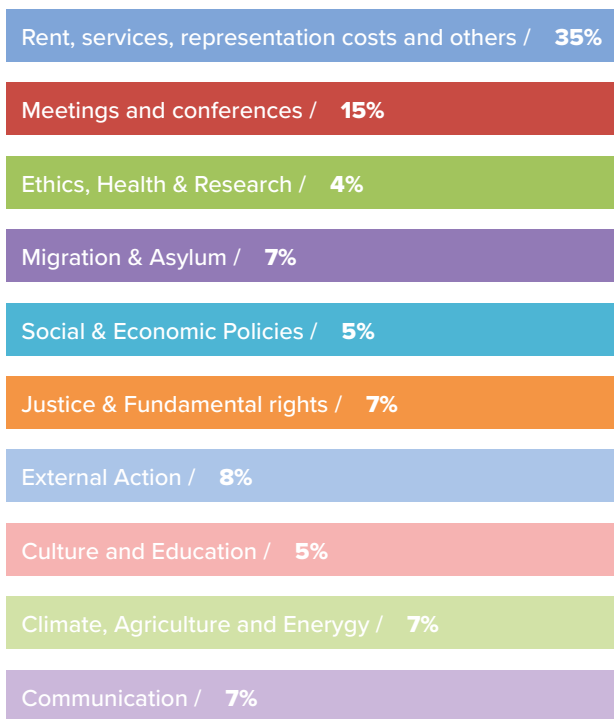
**Luca Fabbris** (Italy)

# FINANCES

Total expenditure in the year 2024: **1.414.177 €**

(Financial Closure 2025 not yet available)

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**Front Cover:**

Mgr Mariano Crociata (President of COMECE) and Fr Manuel Barrios Prieto (General Secretary) with Archbishop Mokrzycki of Lviv of the Latins in Ukraine at the Lychakiv military cemetery, during a COMECE solidarity visit to Ukraine.  
(Photo: COMECE)



[www.comece.eu](http://www.comece.eu)

19, Square de Meeûs, B-1050 Brussels

**Tel.** +32 (2) 235 05 10

**Fax** +32 (2) 230 33 34

**Mail:** [comece@comece.eu](mailto:comece@comece.eu)



@comeceEU