Keynote Speech

The Role of the Churches in European Decision-Making Bodies
The Christian Mandate for Democracies in Europe

DECORE Closing Event, Erasmus+ Project

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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today and to take part in the closing event of the DECORE project. Let me begin by congratulating ProRurE and all those who have contributed to this initiative. Strengthening democratic competences for sustainable rural areas in and for Europe is a very important undertaking, and I am particularly pleased to see that it brings together people from different European countries, different Christian traditions and different professional backgrounds.
I would also like to acknowledge the long-standing relationship between ProRurE and COMECE. We have had the opportunity to meet on several occasions since 2017, and I am grateful for the commitment you have consistently shown to strengthening the European project, particularly by giving a voice to rural communities.
The title of this afternoon's session is ambitious: *The role of the Churches in European decision-making bodies – The Christian Mandate for Democracies in Europe.*
I would like to approach this subject from three perspectives: first, what kind of Europe are we seeking to build? Second, what contribution can the Christian Churches make to the health of our democracies? And third, how can this contribution be translated into concrete engagement with European political institutions?
I hope that these reflections will provide some inspiration for our discussion and, above all, for your own work in your respective countries and communities.

1. Europe: a project of peace, freedom and solidarity

Let me start with a fundamental observation: the European Union is much more than an economic community or a single market.
Of course, the internal market, economic cooperation and common institutions are essential achievements. They have contributed enormously to prosperity, stability and cooperation among European countries. But they do not explain the deeper meaning of European integration.
The European project was born out of the ruins of the Second World War. Its founding generation understood that peace could not be secured simply by signing treaties or declaring good intentions. It required a profound change in the way European nations related to one another.

Former enemies had to learn to cooperate, to share responsibilities and, ultimately, to build a common future.
Figures such as Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi understood that reconciliation was not merely a political necessity. It was also a moral undertaking. Their Christian convictions helped them to recognise the dignity of every human person, the importance of solidarity and the need to overcome national antagonisms.
This is why the European project has always had a spiritual and moral dimension, even though the European Union is not a religious project and must remain open to citizens of every faith and belief.
The European Union is built on values. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union identifies human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights as its founding values.
These are not simply words in a treaty. They are the foundations of a political community.
And they need to be constantly translated into practice.
Today, however, we must ask ourselves whether we are sufficiently aware of the historical and moral significance of the European project.
We live in a time of war on our continent. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has reminded us that peace, freedom and national sovereignty cannot be taken for granted. We face instability in our neighbourhood, growing geopolitical tensions, economic competition and new threats to our security.
At the same time, our societies are experiencing deep divisions. Trust in democratic institutions is weakening in many places. Political debate is becoming increasingly polarised, and the temptation to retreat into national interests is growing.
In this context, I believe we must recover something of the founding inspiration of European integration.
Europe must remain a project of peace, reconciliation and solidarity. It must be a community in which the strength of the whole does not come at the expense of the dignity or identity of its individual members.
And this brings me to a second observation: a democratic Europe cannot be sustained by institutions alone.

2. The challenges facing our democracies

Democracy is often understood primarily in institutional terms: elections, parliaments, governments, the rule of law and the separation of powers.
These are indispensable. But democracy is also a culture, a way of living together and accepting responsibility for the common good.
It requires citizens who are willing to participate, to listen to others, to accept legitimate differences and to seek solutions through dialogue rather than confrontation.
This democratic culture is currently under pressure.
We are witnessing the growth of populism, polarisation and nationalism. Political opponents are increasingly portrayed not simply as people with different opinions, but as enemies. Public debate is sometimes reduced to slogans, accusations and the manipulation of people's fears.
Disinformation and the rapid circulation of misleading information through digital platforms make this situation even more difficult.

We should also recognise that these developments do not emerge in a vacuum.
Many people feel that political institutions are distant from their everyday lives. They believe that decisions are taken somewhere else, by people who do not understand their concerns. They experience economic insecurity, social exclusion and a loss of confidence in the future.
This feeling is particularly important when we speak about rural areas.
Too often, rural communities are perceived as peripheral: places that need support, rather than places that have something valuable to contribute to the future of Europe.
Yet rural areas are essential to Europe's identity and sustainability. They are home to important agricultural and economic activities, cultural traditions, local associations, schools, parishes and other communities. They preserve forms of social solidarity and participation that are sometimes weakened in larger urban environments.
Of course, rural areas also face serious challenges: population decline, ageing, limited access to services, insufficient infrastructure, difficulties in finding employment and educational opportunities, and sometimes a sense of political abandonment.
If people living in rural areas feel that their concerns are not heard, that their contribution is undervalued and that the future is being decided without them, we should not be surprised if frustration grows and political extremes find fertile ground.
This is why the work of ProRurE and the DECORE project is so relevant.
Strengthening democratic competences in rural areas is not a secondary educational activity. It is a contribution to the resilience of European democracy itself.
We need to ensure that people in villages and smaller communities are not merely recipients of European policies, but active participants in shaping the future of their societies.
Democracy needs participation. And participation requires that people feel that their voice matters.

3. The Christian mandate for democracy

What, then, is the specific contribution that Christians and the Churches can make?
I would begin by recalling that the Church does not identify itself with any particular political system, party or ideology. Nor does it seek to exercise political power.
The Church's mission is different. It is called to proclaim the Gospel, to serve the human person and to contribute to the building of a society in which every person can live with dignity.
But this mission has an unavoidable social and public dimension.
Christian faith cannot be reduced to a private matter, separated entirely from the life of society. The Gospel has something to say about how we treat one another, how we organise our economic and social relationships, how we exercise authority and how we care for those who are vulnerable.
The Christian contribution to democracy is therefore not about imposing a religious programme on society. It is about bringing into public life a vision of the human person and of the common good.
Allow me to highlight five principles of Catholic Social Teaching which I believe are particularly relevant.

First, the dignity of the human person.

Every human being possesses an intrinsic dignity that does not depend on nationality, social status, economic productivity, religious affiliation or political opinions.
This principle is fundamental to democracy. It reminds us that political institutions exist to serve people, not the other way around.
It also challenges us to resist every form of exclusion, discrimination and dehumanisation.

Second, the common good.

Politics should not be reduced to the competition between particular interests. Its purpose is to create the conditions in which individuals and communities can develop and flourish.
This requires a sense of responsibility that goes beyond individual or national advantage.
In an increasingly interconnected Europe, the common good cannot be limited to the interests of one country or one generation. It also requires solidarity with those who are poorer, more vulnerable or more exposed to the consequences of decisions taken elsewhere.

Third, solidarity.

Solidarity is more than generosity or occasional assistance. It is the recognition that we are responsible for one another.
It is particularly relevant in a European Union where countries and regions have different economic capacities and social realities.
A Europe in which the stronger regions prosper while others are left behind will eventually lose its sense of common purpose.

Fourth, subsidiarity.

This principle is especially important for our discussion today.
Subsidiarity reminds us that decisions should be taken as close as possible to the people concerned, and that families, local communities, associations and intermediate bodies should be allowed to exercise their proper responsibilities.
It is therefore a safeguard against excessive centralisation.
But subsidiarity also has a positive dimension: when individuals, local communities or national authorities cannot adequately address a problem on their own, higher levels of governance have a responsibility to intervene and provide support.
Subsidiarity and solidarity must therefore go together.
This has direct implications for the future of rural areas. Local communities should not be treated simply as administrative units receiving instructions from above. They should be recognised as places of initiative, participation and responsibility.

Fifth, participation.

Every person should have the possibility of contributing to the life of society.
Participation is not limited to voting every few years. It includes involvement in local associations, voluntary organisations, educational initiatives, religious communities and civic activities.
This is one of the reasons why I attach such importance to the work of Christian organisations and educational providers.

They help people acquire not only knowledge and skills, but also the ability to listen, to cooperate, to exercise responsibility and to participate constructively in public life.
These five principles do not provide a ready-made political programme. They offer criteria for evaluating political decisions and for helping citizens and institutions work towards a more humane society.
They also show why the Christian mandate for democracy is fundamentally a mandate of service.

4. How does COMECE engage with European decision-making?
Let me now turn to the practical dimension of this contribution.
COMECE, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, brings together the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Union's Member States.
Our mission is to accompany and engage with the European integration process, bringing the concerns, reflections and contribution of the Catholic Church into dialogue with the European institutions.
We do not claim to speak for all Christians or all religious communities. We represent the Catholic Bishops' Conferences within the framework of our mandate. At the same time, we consider cooperation with other Churches and Christian organisations essential.
The European Union is a plural society, and the Christian Churches have a responsibility to work together, where possible, in promoting peace, human dignity, solidarity and the common good.
One of the most important legal foundations for our engagement is Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.
Article 17 recognises the status of Churches and religious associations or communities under national law. It also provides that the European Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with Churches and religious associations.
This provision is important because it acknowledges that Churches are not simply private organisations or interest groups.
They are communities with a particular identity, a long-standing presence in European societies and a contribution to make to the common good.
Article 17 also recognises the role of philosophical and non-confessional organisations, ensuring that the dialogue takes place within the broader framework of Europe's pluralism.
For COMECE, this dialogue is not an end in itself. It is a way of contributing to the quality of European decision-making.
How does this happen in practice?
We maintain regular contacts with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. We meet European Commissioners, Members of the European Parliament, representatives of the rotating Presidencies of the Council and other political decision-makers.
We organise exchanges, conferences and consultations. We prepare statements, position papers and contributions on legislative and political initiatives.
But perhaps the most important aspect of our work is that we try to bring a perspective into political discussions which might otherwise be overlooked.
Let me give a few examples.

When we discuss migration, we insist that the management of borders and migration flows must be accompanied by respect for human dignity, the protection of fundamental rights and solidarity with people in vulnerable situations.
When we discuss the economy, employment and social policy, we recall that economic activity must serve the human person and that the success of European policies cannot be measured exclusively in terms of competitiveness or growth.
When we discuss the environment and the ecological transition, we draw inspiration from Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'*, and its understanding of integral ecology: the close relationship between care for creation, social justice and the dignity of the human person.
When we discuss artificial intelligence and digital transformation, we insist that technological progress must remain at the service of humanity. Innovation cannot be considered an absolute value in itself. We must ask what kind of society we are creating and whether technological developments respect human dignity, freedom and responsibility.
And when we discuss security and defence, particularly in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, we recognise the responsibility of European countries to protect their citizens and defend peace. At the same time, we insist that security must remain connected to international law, the protection of human life and the pursuit of a just and lasting peace.
These are concrete examples of how the Church can contribute to political debate without becoming a political actor in the partisan sense.
We do not seek to replace elected representatives or to take decisions that belong to democratic institutions. Our role is to bring ethical reflection, the experience of our communities and the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching into the public discussion.
And I would stress that this dialogue must be reciprocal.
The Churches must be willing to listen to political decision-makers, to understand the complexity of their responsibilities and to engage constructively with people who do not share our convictions.
Dialogue does not mean that we will always agree. It means recognising one another as partners in the search for the common good.

5. An ecumenical contribution in a plural Europe

I would also like to emphasise the ecumenical dimension of this work.
COMECE is a Catholic organisation, but we do not believe that the contribution of Christianity to Europe can be made in isolation.
The European Union brings together countries with different religious histories and traditions. Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians have all contributed to Europe's cultural, spiritual and social heritage. Other religious communities and people without religious affiliation are also part of our societies.
We therefore need to build relationships of trust and cooperation.
At European level, COMECE regularly cooperates with the Conference of European Churches, which brings together Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican Churches, as well as with other Christian organisations.

This cooperation is particularly important when addressing questions that concern the whole of society: peace, religious freedom, the protection of human dignity, migration, social justice, care for creation and the future of democracy.
We may have different theological traditions and institutional structures, but we share many responsibilities.
Our common witness is particularly important in a society where religion is sometimes regarded as something that belongs exclusively to the private sphere.
We should not seek privileges for religious communities. But neither should we accept that their contribution to public life is considered irrelevant.
A plural society is not one in which religious convictions are invisible. It is one in which people and communities with different convictions can contribute freely and responsibly to the common good.
This is precisely the spirit of Article 17: an open, transparent and regular dialogue, based on the recognition of the specific identity of each partner.

6. Rural communities, education and the future of Europe

Let me return briefly to the particular focus of your project.
I believe that the Churches have an important responsibility towards rural communities.
Across Europe, parishes, religious associations, schools, charitable organisations and local Christian initiatives are often among the few institutions that maintain a strong presence in smaller towns and villages.
They are not simply providers of religious services. They are also places of encounter, solidarity, education and community life.
They can help people overcome isolation, support vulnerable families, welcome newcomers and create opportunities for dialogue between generations.
They can also contribute to the democratic life of local communities.
This is particularly important for young people.
We often speak about young people as the future of Europe. That is true, but we must not forget that they are also part of Europe's present.
They need opportunities to participate, to express their concerns and to take responsibility. They need to discover that Europe is not simply something decided in Brussels, Strasbourg or national capitals.
Europe is also built in their schools, associations, parishes, universities, voluntary organisations and local communities.
Educational initiatives such as DECORE are therefore particularly valuable.
Democratic competences cannot be acquired only by reading about democratic institutions. They develop through experience: learning to cooperate, listening to different perspectives, resolving disagreements, taking initiatives and accepting responsibility.
And this brings us back to the importance of subsidiarity.
A strong Europe does not require weak local communities. On the contrary, Europe will be stronger when its regions, towns, villages and associations are able to make their full contribution.
I would also encourage you to consider how the Churches can help people engage with the challenges of the digital and ecological transitions.

Artificial intelligence, for example, is transforming education, employment, communication and even the way we understand human relationships. Rural communities should not be left behind in these developments. They should have access to the opportunities that technology offers, while also being equipped to recognise its risks.
Likewise, the ecological transition must be fair and attentive to the realities of people living in rural areas, including farmers, small businesses and families who depend on local economic activities.
A transition that does not listen to those most directly affected risks creating new divisions. A transition rooted in dialogue, participation and solidarity can instead become an opportunity for renewal.

7. Our mission for a united Europe

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Allow me to conclude with a final reflection.
When we speak about the future of Europe, we sometimes focus almost exclusively on political and institutional questions: how to reform the Union, how to strengthen its competences, how to improve its decision-making or how to respond to international challenges.
These questions are important. But Europe also needs something more fundamental: a sense of purpose.
It needs citizens who believe that living together, despite our differences, is possible and worthwhile.
It needs communities that do not withdraw into themselves, but remain open to others.
It needs political leaders who understand that their responsibility is not simply to defend particular interests, but to serve the common good.
And it needs Churches that are willing to make their contribution, not by seeking power or privileges, but by serving people and helping society rediscover the values on which a humane and reconciled Europe can be built.
The Christian mission for a united Europe is not to make Europe Christian through political power. It is to contribute, together with people of other convictions, to a Europe in which human dignity is respected, solidarity is practised, freedom is accompanied by responsibility and peace remains a common undertaking.
This mission is particularly important today, when war, polarisation and uncertainty are testing our societies.
We should not underestimate the contribution that ordinary people can make.
A teacher helping young people understand democracy; a volunteer bringing people together in a rural community; a parish supporting families in difficulty; an educator creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue; a young Christian taking responsibility for the future of his or her community: all these are concrete contributions to the European project.
They may not make headlines. But they help create the social fabric without which democracy cannot survive.
I would therefore like to thank ProRurE and all the participants in the DECORE project for reminding us of this essential dimension of European integration.

The future of Europe will not be decided only in the institutions of the European Union. It will also be shaped by what happens in our towns and villages, in our schools and associations, in our Churches and communities.
And perhaps this is the most important message I would like to leave with you today:
Europe will remain united and democratic only if its citizens feel that they belong to a common project and that they have a real responsibility for its future.

The Churches, together with other actors in civil society, have an important role to play in nurturing that sense of belonging, responsibility and hope.
Let us continue working together for a Europe that is not merely a market or a geopolitical actor, but a community of peoples committed to peace, freedom, solidarity and human dignity.
A Europe capable of listening to all its citizens, including those living far from its political centres.
A Europe that does not fear its diversity, but sees it as an opportunity for encounter and mutual enrichment.
And a Europe that remains faithful to the conviction that our common future is worth building together.

Thank you very much.