

Message from the Plenary Assembly of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences, Holy Land 2015

The Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of the European nations, at their Plenary Assembly in the Holy Land (11-16 September), express their closeness to the faithful and thank the Patriarch of Jerusalem for the invitation. They also express their thanks to the religious, in this year devoted to the Consecrated Life, and to all the Christians whom they have met and who live in this Land, for their testimony of faith and safekeeping of the Holy Places as places of Christian remembrance and living worship. Through their pilgrimage, the European bishops also wished to encourage pilgrimages in the land of Jesus in order to renew the faith and support the Christians of these places.

Coming here, the European prelates also wanted to renew their rootedness in Christ at a time when Europe is asking of the Church, even if not always consciously, that she proclaims without fear and with joy the newness of life in Christ which is the Gospel. Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, was often recalled as an incentive for pastoral renewal. The Jubilee of Mercy, too, is a gift for the Church and opportunity of grace which the Christian community, along with its pastors, has already welcomed as a time of spiritual conversion and new missionary enthusiasm.

Looking at the joys, sufferings and challenges of the Church in the different countries, there emerged a picture of the great movement of peoples: asylum-seekers, refugees, migrants. The anguish knows no bounds. The complexity of this exodus, with its inevitable differentiations, demands great attention from the individual States, whose situations are radically different, with the aim of responding promptly to the needs of immediate assistance and welcome of people desperate due to war, persecution, and misery. Through the necessary institutions, the States must maintain public order, guarantee justice for all and offer generous willingness to those truly in need, with a view to respectful and collaborative integration. The commitment of the Churches of Europe is great, and, following the indications of the Holy Father Pope Francis, they are collaborating with the States, who are primarily responsible for the

social and economic life of their peoples. The many experiences already underway encourage the pursuit and intensification of every effort. Given the complexity of the situations and the breadth of the humanitarian tragedies, we hope that the UN will take the situation into decisive consideration and reach effective solutions not just with respect to the first welcome but also to the migrants' countries of origin, taking appropriate measures to stop the violence and build the peace and development of all peoples. Furthermore, peace in the Middle East and in North Africa is vital for Europe, just as it is crucial that a true peace throughout the continent itself be reached as soon as possible, starting from Ukraine.

The Middle East, which is suffering conflicts, divisions and wars, needs justice and stability in the different regions and peoples: the bishops reaffirm that dialogue and development is the real name of peace. Guaranteeing the equality of citizens, the Middle East countries and societies, rich in their own cultural and religious patrimony, could be an example of co-existence for the international community. In the Holy Land, the Christian community contributes in a very special manner to building the peace, understanding and culture of forgiveness, without which social cohesion does not exist. In particular, the bishops hope that the sensitive situation in the Cremisan region might find an appropriate solution respectful of the rights of families, their properties, and of the two religious communities as well as their teaching mission.

The need to respect religious freedom as a fundamental human right without which other rights seems fragile strongly emerged. Tragic proof of this is the persecution of Christians, many of whom have offered their lives with exemplary testimony of faith: they are in our prayers, our fraternal closeness and admiration is extended to them. Furthermore, the ongoing secularisation in the European countries tends to confine religion to the private sphere and to the margins of society. Into this picture comes the fundamental right of parents to educate their own children according to their convictions. For this freedom to be possible it is necessary that Catholic schools are able to carry out their educative task on behalf of the whole of society with every appropriate support. The European bishops reaffirm this innate right in the Holy Land, too, and are supportive of the pastors and families concerned about the education of their own children.

One theme which frequently arose and which links the Assembly to the forthcoming Synod was that of the Family. The human and Christian beauty of the family and its universal reality was reiterated: father, mother, children. The demographic decline to be seen in almost all European countries is a matter of particular concern. In Nazareth the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences, along with local families, prayed for the Synod, and these families, along with the parish priests, guaranteed that during the Synod they will offer daily prayers in the Basilica of the Annunciation for the Pope and Bishops gathered in Rome.

The Church strongly believes in the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman: it is the basic cell of society and of the Christian community itself. It is difficult to see why different situations of coexistence should be treated in the same way. Of particular concern is the attempt to apply "gender theory": it is a plan of the "one thought" which tends to colonise Europe, too, and about which Pope Francis has often spoken. The Church does not accept "gender theory" because it is an expression of an anthropology contrary to the true and authentic appreciation of the human person.

In view of the Year of Mercy, the pastors renewed their commitment for the true happiness and destiny of humanity. For this, like the first apostles, they are addressing the people of Europe and the countries with the word of the Gospel, conscious that only in Jesus Christ can answers be found to the profound questions of the heart and European humanism be fully accomplished.