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Message from the Presidency on the 50th anniversary of the CCEE establishment

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

It is with joy that the Presidency of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) addresses you on the fiftieth anniversary of its establishment. On the feast of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, 25 March 1971, the Congregation for Bishops approved the Norms for Guidelines ad experimentum. These norms were later refined and made definitive by St John Paul II in 1995. This Body was born under the gaze of the Mother of Christ and of the Church, who would subsequently be venerated as Queen of Europe.

The wind of the Second Vatican Council continued to blow on the boat of the Church led by the Successor of Peter, St Paul VI, and the sense of episcopal collegiality, "cum et sub Petro", gave new impetus to the Apostolic mission. Throughout the European continent also, the need was felt to strengthen the efforts of evangelisation in the face of the great challenges that the cultural change of 1968 had triggered.

Promoting the meeting of the Bishops' Conferences, reciprocal knowledge, the exchange of experiences, a new proclamation of Christ, pastoral care and its future, presented themselves as necessary steps in the face of new ways of thinking and acting. From this perspective, the CCEE was a sign of the Church's attentiveness to the changing world. The view of the whole continent, from west to east, was also a prophecy of what would happen in 1989 with the reunification of Europe: a unification that was not external, but inherent in its culture and spirituality.

The composition of the Council expanded over the years. The Presidents of the 33 Bishops' Conferences were joined by the Bishops who did not belong to a specific Conference: The Archbishops of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, of Maronite Cyprus and the Bishops of Chişinău in the Republic of Moldova, of the Apostolic Administration of Estonia and of the Eparchy of Mukachevo.

The network was soon consolidated and became a living part of the two Synods of European Bishops in 1991 and 1999. The life and vitality of the CCEE are nourished by prayer and consolidated appointments. It is not possible to make a full assessment of all these years, but we cannot keep silent about ten symposia, three ecumenical assemblies, five Catholic-Orthodox forums, fifty plenary assemblies (with the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences since 1995), meetings with the general secretaries, press officers and spokespersons, meetings of commissions on emerging issues. Together with timely documents and communiqués, the Church's cordial and attentive closeness to the beloved European continent was thus expressed. On this occasion, it is right and good for us to thank all the Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Commission leaders, General Secretaries and all those - priests and laity - who have generously served the CCEE. Everything is written in God's book.

Today, our organisation sees its mission strengthened and its discreet, but effective, presence becoming more important. We are confronting the persistent de-Christianisation of Europe, to which is added the pernicious pandemic that affects people in their health, in the family, in the economy, at work, in social relationships and even in the religious life. Added to this is the advance of an individualistic culture that leads to withdrawal into micro-worlds, with repercussions on peoples, States and continents: one need only consider migratory movements, and a certain scepticism towards the effort of walking together.

The more God seems to be disappearing from the view of modern man, and the more existential restlessness, fears and divisive pressures seem to be growing, the more the Church is

called to proclaim Christ our hope, and to bear witness to the way of communion and collaboration in a way that does not annul our differences, but respects and values them in superior harmony.

Today, there seems to be a certain hesitancy towards reason, and this partly explains the difficulty of faith finding attention in minds and space in hearts. As a result, the identity of the human person is lost, with significant ethical and social repercussions. This is also evident in the widespread demographic crisis, an uncertain culture of life in its entire course, the perception of freedom as an individualistic absolute, and in the need for an integral and harmonious education.

In a particular way at this time, it is necessary to pay attention to the dialogue between all religions as a basis for building a fraternal world, as well as an urgent commitment to the creation of which we are all custodians. These are challenges to which Pope Francis draws attention and offers operational guidelines. Proclaiming the person of Christ means opening the heart of humanity and its intelligence to the whole of reality as well as rediscovering the true face of each person, the ultimate foundation of their dignity and right. It means announcing their future and thus, also the meaning of the present.

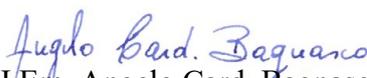
In this perspective, meetings and collaboration with other Christian denominations are precious and necessary dimensions that the CCEE has pursued and intensified over the years in the name of the Lord Jesus Himself and with the salvation of humanity at its core. The relationships established with other religions also have the same aim and are sustained by great trust.

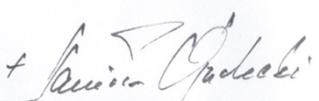
We cannot remain silent, to the praise of God and our encouragement, that even the desert flourishes. The "spiritual desert" that seems to define the Continent, deeper down contains budding seeds that move us; they instil confidence and enthusiasm in the integral proclamation of the Gospel. Beneath the surface, in fact, lives a host of people of all ages who seek the meaning of existence and feel a longing for God. The pandemic emergency is also pushing us to rediscover the transience of the human being, the fleeting nature of time, and is sharpening our longing for the "beyond" that is God, and which Jesus revealed. The desire for the Word of God, for faith, for the Eucharist, for prayer, for devotion to the Blessed Virgin, for the Christian community, circulates in many hearts and through mysterious ways, meet, connect and support each other for the good of all. In this sense, it is the hour of an awakening of consciences, an awakening that is perhaps slow but inescapable. It is one of the signs that the Spirit of the Risen Lord is always blowing on the boat of the Church.

In this horizon of hope, we would like to invite all pastors to pray for each other, and to have the Christian communities pray with a particular intention on a Sunday in the Holy Mass. Our prayer will be supported by the Patron Saints of Europe: Catherine, Bridget, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Benedict, Cyril and Methodius.

While renewing our communion with the Holy Father Francis, we look to Mary who welcomes the announcement of the Word made flesh, and we make a unified act of faith in the Risen One. He is at our side as on the road to Emmaus: He listens to us, He enlightens us, He invites us to dine with Him, He restores us with His presence. We make our own the call of the disciples: "Stay with us, Lord, for the evening is coming", and He continues to say to us: "Do not fear, I am with you".

St. Gallen, 25 March 2021


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