



### **III EUROPEAN CATHOLIC SOCIAL DAYS BRATISLAVA, 17-20 March 2022**

**H.E. Msgr Archbishop Gintaras Grušas  
Archbishop of Vilnius, CCEE President**

As we begin these Social Days, we must first acknowledge the long journey we have taken to get here. Not so much in distance, but in the time and circumstances of the pandemic we are still living through and the effect that it has had on our lives, communities and on the Church itself. The joy of at least part of the participants to be able to come together here in Bratislava, while many others join the process through the internet transmission of our proceedings. My sincere thanks to all those who have worked here in Bratislava and throughout Europe in planning these Social Days over the past years.

Having chosen the title for these days as „Europe beyond the pandemic: a new beginning“, we embark with the hope of helping one another find a path on which we can assist in the renewal of the Church in Europe and of our European society. A hope that has been challenged even more in the last few weeks with the outbreak of war on the European continent. The challenges before us are great, but our coming together to pray, to analyze the current situation and to look for solutions is at an appropriate moment.

The pandemic caused much pain, confusion and the loss of many loved ones, at times increased division in society and in our communities, but beyond the virus itself it brought into clarity various problems that had been festering for some time. At the dawn of the new millenium, Pope John Paul II in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* wrote:

....In connection with the spread of individualism, we see an increased weakening of interpersonal solidarity: while charitable institutions continue to carry out praiseworthy work, one notes a decline in the sense of solidarity, with the result that many people, while not lacking material necessities, feel increasingly alone, left to themselves without structures of affection and support.

At the root of this loss of hope is an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ. This sort of thinking has led to man being considered as “the absolute centre of reality, a view which makes him occupy – falsely – the place of God and which forgets that it is not man who creates God, but rather God who creates man. Forgetfulness of God led to the abandonment of man”. It is therefore “no wonder that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, and of pragmatism – and even a cynical hedonism – in daily life”.(16) European culture gives the impression of “silent apostasy” on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist. (EE 8,9)

As the pandemic spread, we all remember Pope Francis’ *Statio Orbis* on March 27, 2020 with the iconic image of the Holy Father alone in an empty St. Peter’s Square interceding for the world before God and entrusting us to the Blessed Mother. During his address, he noted how the virus had exposed the shortcomings of our own society. He said:

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

Pope Francis took the lead in reminding us what needs to be done to recover from the effects of the pandemic in a series of catechesis given between August 5 and September 30 2020 entitled *Healing the World*. He himself summarized the teachings at the beginning of the final catechesis:

In recent weeks we have reflected together, in the light of the Gospel, on how to heal the world that is suffering from a malaise that has been highlighted and accentuated by the pandemic. The malaise was already there: the pandemic highlighted it more, it accentuated it. We have walked the paths of dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity, paths that are essential to promote human dignity and the common good. And as disciples of Jesus, we have proposed to follow in his steps, opting for the poor, rethinking the use of material goods and taking care of our common home. In the midst of the pandemic that afflicts us, we anchored ourselves to the principles of the social doctrine of the Church, allowing ourselves to be guided by faith, by hope and by charity. Here we found solid help so as to be transformers who dream big, who are not stopped by the meanness that divides and hurts, but who encourage the generation of a new and better world.

Several days later, he published his Encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* containing a synthesis and compendium of the teaching of what we must do in order to heal the world, to heal our European continent.

the brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few. Today we can recognize that "we fed ourselves on dreams of splendour and grandeur, and ended up consuming distraction, insularity and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity. We looked for quick and safe results, only to find ourselves overwhelmed by impatience and anxiety. Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real". The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence. (FT 33)

We must begin the work of rebuilding our society, we must begin the work of **re-evangelizing** the baptized, who have been lulled away by the comforts of modern society into a belief that man can do it on his own and only when he feels helpless, turns to God for help. The Holy Father has outlined for us the path, but we must adopt it concretely for our situation today on the European continent. Our response must be Christ centered – whether we are discussing demographic changes and family challenges, developments in technology and digital transitions, or the recovery of our environment. Our call is to renew all these things in Christ. For He alone is our hope and the hope of Europe. Without God at the center of our lives and our work, we would create a social justice system as vacuous as the one that the atheistic communist system

attempted to create for their unattainable ideal society. "Lord, may everything we do begin with your inspiration, continue with your help and reach perfection under your guidance." (LOH, Thursday after Ash Wednesday)