

Message  
of the 5th European Catholic-Orthodox Forum  
Paris, France, 9 - 12 January 2017

“Take heart; I have overcome the world” (*John 16: 33*)

1. At the invitation of His Eminence Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris, the 5th European Catholic-Orthodox Forum was held from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2017 at the headquarters of the Missions Etrangères of Paris, France. The Forum was co-chaired by Cardinal Peter Erdő, on behalf of the President of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) and Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Following the positive experiences of the first four meetings of the European Catholic-Orthodox Forum (Trent, Italy, 11 - 14 December 2008, Rhodes, Greece, 18 - 22 October 2010, Lisbon, Portugal, 5 - 8 June 2012, Minsk, Belarus, 2 - 6 June 2014), twelve delegates of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) with twelve representatives of the Orthodox Churches in Europe met in Paris to examine in depth the themes of the threat of fundamentalist terrorism, the value of the person, and religious freedom.

The theme of the meeting “*Europe in fear of the threat from fundamentalist terrorism, and the value of human person and religious freedom*” was considered in depth at the Forum, the aim of which is to demonstrate the convergence of Catholics and Orthodox on the major issues of social ethics, in order to contribute to the peace and stability of our societies. We always turn to the inexhaustible source of inspiration and renewal, the Gospel of Christ the Saviour of humanity.

2. Our work took place in a fraternal spirit of cooperation, as we kept in mind all our fellow citizens, whether they are believers or non-believers, since we all participate in a common adventure. Our Churches to a large degree share the same view that the principles of life in society are inscribed in the human nature common to all, and that these principles receive a powerful illumination through the Christian faith. The message we are sending to Europe is therefore open to all people of good will.

In the present context of unprecedented challenges and threats against Christianity, our Catholic and Orthodox Churches want to stand together in order to face them. They wish to act together both in communicating and promoting Christian values and principles in the sphere of public life, including the international level.

In these times of widespread concern for their future, our societies are turning to their spiritual resources, to draw out means of responding to the situation that Europe is experiencing, and to trace the path ahead for a future full of hope and greater confidence.

3. We discussed the terrorist actions that have plagued many of our countries and have given rise to various reactions. We have tried to decipher the causes of terrorism. We are well aware that we have little influence on Islamist networks, but we need to understand the phenomenon in all its dimensions. There is no question of stigmatizing the religion of Islam. We observe, with Muslim leaders themselves, that some terrorists justify their action from the sacred texts of Islam. We are well aware that a great work of hermeneutics of the foundational texts is

required, in order to acquire an enlightened understanding. The perpetrators of terrorist acts are most often socially disengaged young people, who find in these unspeakable actions an outlet for their own distress.

It has been suggested that radicalisation has become Islamised, rather than the opposite. We believe that some narratives of Islamic history and experience have reinforced the spirit of these young people with a vision of hatred and rejection of the other. Youth, however, is the time of hope and of building the future. We invite all young people to commit themselves to building a fraternal world that excludes no one. We call on Muslim religious authorities to ensure that there is no propagation of a systematically hostile image of the non-Muslim world.

4. We do not hesitate to recall that our Churches themselves have undertaken just such a work to gain a deeper understanding of the word of God in the Scriptures not according to "the letter that kills" but according to "the Spirit that gives life" (*2 Corinthians* 3: 6). The word of God is given to us to free the human being from his or her sins. We must never instrumentalise it. Nor can we expect that the generations who preceded us in the distant past should have lived according to our current perception of things. It is not right to reproach the Churches for attitudes of intolerance that are inadmissible nowadays, but that used to be shared by societies in the past which did not distinguish between religious affiliation and belonging to a society and a State. We deplore the crimes that may have been committed in the name of religion.

5. We have endeavoured to recall the first legal text to introduce freedom of religion, the Edict of Milan of the Emperor Constantine in 313. We also vividly recall that it was the Christian Apologists of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries who claimed the freedom to believe in a society that did not have any understanding of the distinction between religious and civil society. The Edict of Constantine proclaims the right of each person freely to decide for himself or herself the religious faith which he or she is to follow. It insists that religious groups must coexist peacefully with each other in society throughout the world. It indicates that political power should not favour a particular religion, but respect the "supreme divinity", which each religion names according to its convictions. The legal foundations of the secularity of the modern state are inspired by these insights. The state guarantees religious freedom for all, but it is itself subject to a natural ethical order from which it cannot escape.

6. Our Catholic and Orthodox Churches proclaim the centrality of the human person and of its dignity created in the image of God. They affirm the dignity of human nature created freely. Human freedom is exercised to the utmost in the act of religious faith. The act of faith must always remain free. The constitutions of our States guarantee the fundamental rights of the human person. Nevertheless, in our societies, forces are always at work to marginalise or even erase religions and their message from the public space. We believe that Europe needs more than ever the breath of faith in Christ and the hope that it provides. Christianity is a marker of identity that does not deny others their human rights, but seeks to cooperate with all for the realisation of the common good.

We are well aware that the personalist Christian vision of humanity is a minority view in relation to a dominant discourse that promotes hedonistic individualism, which ignores the notions of objective truth and common good.

7. Terrorist violence against people considered "unbelievers" or "infidels" is the extreme degree of religious intolerance. We unreservedly condemn it. We deplore the fact that such acts have developed in the soil of a misguided religious culture, where the other is presented as hated by God himself and condemned to annihilation on account of this. We nevertheless seek to continue the dialogue with the leaders of all religions. The religious persecutions recorded in the world target Christians eighty percent of the time. We would like to express our solidarity with our oppressed brothers and sisters, targets of Islamist terrorism, especially in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The alleged offences of blasphemy regularly lead Christians before the courts, despite their having shown no intention of offending their Muslim compatriots. Central and Eastern Europe has for too long been subjected to regimes of oppression for it not to feel solidarity with Christians now being persecuted.

There are other forms of persecution that we see on the rise. They are aimed mainly at religious minorities forced to choose between leaving their country of origin or converting. It is not morally permissible to treat a human person as an object, to enslave it or to trample on its freedom of conscience.

8. Civil freedom in matters of religion, which we enjoy according to the constitutions of our countries and according to international conventions on human rights, is sometimes the subject of restrictive interpretation. More subtle forms of discrimination against believers are present when, for example, they are excluded from certain roles or professions, when their right to conscientious objection is disregarded, or when persons who request counselling when faced with the choice of performing an abortion have that request denied.

9. Liberal societies rightly defend freedom of expression. They do not always grasp the harm which the liberty of some may cause to the liberty of others. The media's denigration of what is most sacred to some may be perceived by them as an offence. A violent reaction is not admissible, because it is worse than the evil it seeks to denounce. But in our pluralistic society, the notion of respect for others must prevail over the desire to denigrate. Freedom of expression must be exercised, like all freedoms, in a responsible manner, above all in a world where digital technologies considerably extend the spread of information. No freedom is ever unlimited. Expressing disagreement with rational arguments must prevail over denigration that does not allow the interlocutor the opportunity to express himself or herself.

10. In this respect, Catholics and Orthodox give primary attention to education. It is important that students of all religions or beliefs have access to objective information about the major religions, especially those present in their own country. Alongside the set curriculum of education for all, the possibility of organising times for confessional catechesis must also be provided for. Children and young people must be properly educated in their own religion and at the same time educated to respect the religion of others. School should not be a place for the experimentation of anthropological theses without scientific foundation, like gender theories, or certain ecological ideologies that go as far as transhumanism.

11. We regret that some concepts of secularism have led entire generations to a form of religious illiteracy which deprives citizens of the basic knowledge that is necessary for them

to understand their own cultural heritage, as well as the cultural heritage of other traditions that are inspired by religion. Ignoring the importance of the religious element in human culture can lead to unacceptable instances of discrimination or persecution in our societies, even as they strive to be open. Cultural relativism, devoid of truth or moral good, cannot be established as dogma, because this actually leads to division between human beings.

12. Today Europe is experiencing unprecedented waves of migration. With regard to migrants, we remember that we are all children of Abraham, who was welcomed as a foreigner in the land of Seth, where he was able to find a burial place for his wife Sarah. We believe that welcoming foreigners is a paramount human and Christian duty. However, immigration must also take into account what is actually feasible in the host countries. Under international law, everybody has the right to leave their country of origin and move somewhere else, if they commit to respecting the host country's law and sovereignty. The host country, in turn, one guaranteeing law and order should respect immigrants' freedom of conscience and religion. The key word for immigrants is integration. They are not expected to discard their deep human identity, but to live it in the new context of the host country. In order for integration to be possible, and for pluralistic societies to be liveable, a common foundation of values and principles must be developed, without which social cohesion will never be achieved. This common foundation is constituted by the rights and duties pertaining to all individuals by reason of their humanity: it must allow for cultural differences that do not divide us, but rather enrich our common heritage. In practical terms, immigrants should not be pushed to the outskirts of major cities, where they risk forming ghettos and developing hostile attitudes towards their host countries.

13. Pluralistic societies are a real challenge for contemporary mankind, especially in Europe. Our long Christian tradition has taught us that the Gospel of Jesus has been able – and is still able – to bring men and women of every origin together in one single people of faith. The Spirit of Pentecost always brings life to our Churches. It is our responsibility to testify to the fact that what ultimately joins people together is something spiritual. The Church sees itself as on pilgrimage on Earth. In this journey towards the ultimate kingdom, she already displays the unity faith within the diversity of contemporary cultures and living conditions.

14. Secular Europe is deeply rooted in our Christian traditions, which have provided it with its universalist vision, its notion of the dignity of the human person and its moral principles. If you are cut off from your roots, you will come adrift. The emptiness within especially exposes the youngest people to the worst temptations. We firmly repeat that the Christian faith reconciles all the personal and social dimensions that are found in the human person. This is expressed in the dual commandment to love God and our neighbour, which is the key to mutual acceptance. The love of neighbour comes without condition or demands (cf. *Matthew 22 :39*). The dialogue of truth between people of different religions or beliefs is the only way out of situations of fear and mutual exclusion. Dialogue teaches us to become more humble. In dialogue with others, we constantly discover unsuspected riches in our common humanity. Thus we are happy to make progress towards a better knowledge and greater love of Him who – to us – is the fulfilment of our humanity: Jesus Christ our Lord, “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (*John 14 :6*).

