

Press Release

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Annual Assembly 2004 of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions in Sarajevo

Don't Forget! – Europe is Challenged

“Only a common approach leads to the future,” declared Ambassador Michael Humphreys, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, to open the Annual Assembly of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions held from September 25th to 28th in Sarajevo. Ambassador Humphreys congratulated the Conference for making a political statement in the choice of Sarajevo as the Annual Assembly location. And this because the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still explosive; still needing European attention.

Held on the 25th and 26th of September, the General Assembly in Sarajevo was chaired by the Swiss leadership of the European Conference (2002 – 2005). With the future of Europe in mind, Justice and Peace Commissions from 18 European countries discussed the significant political and humanitarian developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

High-ranking guests, both political and religious leaders, were impressed by the commitment of the Justice and Peace Commissions. Ambassador Michael Humphreys, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, argued for an open and honest debate about the future of the country. Both, Europe and Bosnia and Herzegovina are in favour of the country's membership in the EU, he said. But until then, many things need to be done because, as Ambassador Humphreys emphasised, the EU is not merely a club to join, but an association of nations sharing moral and economic standards. Both, Cardinal Puljic from Sarajevo as well as Bishop Komarica from Banja Luka, raised questions about the moral dimension of peace when they emphasized the importance of protecting human dignity and complying with human rights. Bishop Komarica reminded everyone that respecting law alone can not create the future; adding that the presence of a hopeful and future pointing spirit is indispensable in strengthening truth and honesty, justice and peace as well as enabling courage to grow.

The European Conference President, Josef Bieger-Hänggi, emphasised how crucial it is to respect the unique contexts of human beings who have suffered. He reminded those assembled that the Catholic Church is challenged especially by the task of putting its social message into action. Towards this mission, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions have taken concerted steps through an active partnership between the Justice and Peace Commission of Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina. To build on this commitment, the newly appointed German leadership of the European Conference for 2005 to 2008 emphasized their dedication to the continuation of its work with the Bosnia and Herzegovina Commission, particularly to improved organizational partnership as well as better fulfilment of the Catholic social message.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Europe to prove maturity

The Study Days following the General Assembly were dedicated to exploration of the social-political situations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even ten years after the war, scars have not yet healed; neither externally nor in the memory of the people. When opening the Study Days, Bishop Pero Sudar of Sarajevo stated that the most important post-war question, the central question which will enable people to come to terms with the past, deal with their present, and create a new future, is the questioning of truth. "Even though peace is finally grounded in God," said Bishop Sudar, "people's histories, their very diverse experiences, and the resulting different truths have to be respected." The detailed information of Historian and Professor Arnold Suppan from Vienna helped the Assembly better respect the complexity held within the histories effecting Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ombudswoman for Human Rights for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ms. Branka Raguz, and Mr. Vehid Šehić, President of the Citizens' Forum of Tuzla, gave impressive illustrations of Sudar's call for respect, pointing out that in the end if peace is to be realized, the truth must be spoken out loud – even if it is hard to tell.

After learning more about the complexity of the situation from the above speakers, the remarks of Rudolf Schoch, Representative of the Swiss Cooperation Office, were not surprising. He explained that SDC's work has been difficult, even on a local level. He also made clear that the Swiss State model should not be applied to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a State, one forced upon the people from the outside, would not be taken seriously by the people. To close the Study Days, Mons. Frank Dewane of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in Rome emphasised the importance of faith and forgiveness.

For the European Commissions there remains the question of how to continue realizing justice and peace in the Europe of today; a Europe, which includes Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Study Days made clear how difficult it is to make the transition from a cease-fire to a sustainable peace. Europe therefore, remains challenged. The ongoing and urgent psychological, social, and economic repercussions of war are endangering the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, European action on these issues should be assured and informed so as to avoid more conflict; conflict which could prove to be devastating for the Balkan States as well as for the European project.

For your information:

Background: Justice and Peace Commissions & II. Vatican Council

Justice and Peace was founded after the II. Vatican Council (1962-1965) on suggestion of Pope Paul VI. He encouraged the Church to join all people of good will and commit itself to social issues and to strive for justice and peace. The National Commissions are institutionally linked with the Bishop's Conference of their respective countries. They address Human Rights, development, peace and social issues. For a few years now, they've also included ecological issues. Some Commission are focussed on practical activities against injustice and strife, others concentrate on theoretical reflections. Nevertheless, their objective is the same: Peace, Justice and Preservation of Creation.

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions gathers 28 National Commissions, advisory councils of the respective Bishops' Conferences on peace, justice, and social issues. Currently, the Swiss

Commission provides leadership for the European Conference. This year, the Swiss National Commission organized the Annual Assembly where 18 Commissions participated, including the Ukrainian Commission which, founded by the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in the beginning of 2004, was voted in by the General Assembly 2004 as the newest member of the European Conference.

From October 2005 on, the German Commission will provide leadership for the Conference: Mons. Leo Schwarz, Auxiliary Bishop of Trier, and Jörg Lüer, Director of the German Commission's Berlin office, were voted in as the new Conference President and Secretary General respectively.

Background: The Dayton agreement in discussion

A recent statement prepared for the 10th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement was signed by many high-ranking European politicians and emphasized that the Dayton Agreement is primarily a ceasefire agreement and not a peace treaty. It stopped the war, but is not capable of creating a sustainable peace. Most of the speakers during the Study Days shared this view.

Amongst others, the former EU Administrator of Mostar, Hans Koschnik, the former Prime Minister of Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and the former Ombudsman for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Gret Haller, urge for a further development of the Peace Treaty and new impulses for structural change. According to their statement, Bosnia and Herzegovina only has a future if the state is guided by a new and sustainable foundation for peace. They propose an international conference in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement, not only to discuss the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but in a broader sense, to define whether or not Europe is willing to accept its role in the creation of peace for Bosnia and Herzegovina, thereby facing its own future head on.

Photos and text can be obtained on our website www.juspax-eu.org.

Further information:

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