

## **Overcome division – bear a joint witness to peace and justice!**

**Key note speech by Auxiliary Bishop Leo Schwarz, President  
Meeting of Secretaries General in Berlin, Germany, 2006, March, 10th – 12th**

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I am pleased about our meeting here today in Berlin. Some of us had to cover long distances to participate in the annual meeting of the general secretaries of Justice and Peace Commissions. We have to be thankful for that. Others, regrettably, cannot be with us today and we will miss them these days. And yet they are with us and join us with their thoughts and, I hope so, with their prayers. In any case, we are called to bear the whole conference in mind.

Our meeting in Berlin is of symbolic value. The breakup of Europe and the world has been tangible in the city of Berlin over decades. The collision of the Soviet Union and the Western Powers in this city resulted in walls and blocs that burdened Europe and the world for almost half a century. Tomorrow, when we will visit the Reichstag, we will come across the scars of our wounds. The nail objects by the Swiss artist Günter Uecker in the chapel make our divisions and injuries depressingly obvious.

But we will also stay for a while at the mighty altar stone which reminds everyone of us of the passion, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The 2711 concrete slabs of the Holocaust Memorial form a memory landscape which leaves the visitors distressed but yet, with all our hopes and prayers, leads us out of the topography of terror.

It is no accident that we will close our meeting on Sunday in the Chapel of Reconciliation. Situated in the former death strip at the Wall, blown up by the Communist rulers, rebuilt after the fall of the Wall, this chapel is a sign of hope. The fact that our Protestant brothers and sisters grant us ecumenical hospitality there is also an encouraging gesture on the way to Belfast.

We meet in this city, which speaks to us, as delegates of our commissions, as Christians who are committed to promote peace and justice. Our approaches might be quite different, but we are united in the message of Jesus Christ; we share common objectives.

We are united in our longing for a Europe that will be a home for justice and peace, for a Europe that is willing to learn from its history and that does not neglect global solidarity.

Our countries and Churches have their own specific character, but this variety gives us strength. This variety will not compromise our work as long as we seize the opportunity and meet our obligation to work together. I mean that we should do everything possible to define clearly our message and our service.

This hope encourages us to seriously ask three questions:

- What can and should the European Justice and Peace Commissions contribute to the future of Europe, which also includes a global responsibility?
- To what extent do we have to change or develop our mode of cooperation in order to be effective?

- What can we do to take common action and what should this common action be like? Sustainability is an important keyword.

We do not start from zero, as everybody knows. But the decisive steps towards a European Conference, which is undisputedly based on the spirit of Catholic Social Teaching, which cultivates the exchange of ideas and is able to take common action, these steps remain to be taken.

The meeting here in Berlin is supposed to bring our cooperation one step forward. In the following, I wish to make some suggestions to stimulate discussion, placing the situation of JP Europe in a broader context. Tomorrow, we will attempt to define more concrete forms of cooperation.

#### **I. The problems faced by Europe correspond to those problems and challenges faced by our European Conference.**

We are part of the historical situation, part of the problem and hopefully part of the solution. The European Conference has changed in the last 16 years since 1989. It has become more European in essence.

Likewise, its variety has increased. The new commissions from East and Central Europe have broadened our horizons. And the experience gained by the old-established commissions was certainly quite helpful to the new commissions. We can still learn a lot from each other. And we have already learned a lot from each other.

But let us be honest. It is not always easy to cooperate. Sometimes our variety places a heavy burden on us. Some of you will certainly remember the fierce discussions on defining a common position on the wars in former Yugoslavia. Then, the debate on a common position on the war in Iraq has again revealed great differences. It is with good reason that the national commissions have different working agendas, but this makes it hard to find a common basis.

Our mutual viewpoints are characterized by many critical questions – not only by enthusiasm for the unknown. Or, if we just look at our different Church cultures in Europe. What does Catholicity mean? This much is certain: the way of Christ is our way; we sing, pray and celebrate the Holy Eucharist together. But how can we jointly bear the Christian witness to justice and peace? What issues need to be raised? What questions need to be discussed? There are varying opinions in our ranks. It is of continuing importance in the future that we solve the resulting tensions in constructive discussions.

Many signs indicate that we have not yet managed to find suitable ways to using our spiritual and Christian identity to leverage on this variety. This is not an internal affair of the Church and it will be fatal, if we lose ourselves in self-governance. We must have the courage to go new ways and to take up the challenge of European cooperation. Looking at ourselves in the mirror of Europe, we must not overestimate our own position. From the outside point of view, we are no deciding factor for Europe. But this is not really a problem for us, as long as we are aware of our “hidden” strength, our spiritual foundations. Our main concern is not to gain institutional power but to bear a credible witness. Our mission is to translate Christ’s message into life.

It can be noticed that, in practice, we mostly get stuck in national thinking whereas political reality has considerably changed – not only within the EU. I really do not want to support a naïve Europeanization. Europe is fundamentally composed of nations. You cannot understand Europe, if you do not understand these nations and their histories. Europe does not replace these nations, but rather accentuates their true importance.

However, I am absolutely convinced that our Conference has left great potential unused so far. And I am sure that an open and dialogue-oriented European cooperation within our Conference will be very fruitful especially at the national level. The challenges of today – poverty alleviation, migration, globalization, human rights, religious freedom in particular, just peace – cannot be effectively addressed at national level. All these questions also have a national dimension, of course. And it is indispensable to take these national dimensions seriously. But those who stop at this point, refuse to see reality and may get stuck in internal affairs. If we want to reach the “Turning Point for Europe” (which was proclaimed in the title of a book by our Pope), we must overcome pure human calculation and come to the dimension of the spirit of God which was promised to us.

For this reason, I am glad that we will have the opportunity to discuss the fundamentals of our cooperation in the days to come. Let us all think about what we as Christians expect from Europe.

## **II. What do we as Christians expect from Europe?**

The European idea is a concrete response to the experience of great European disasters – a Europe of hopelessness and disappointment. The denomination wars, which culminated in the Thirty Years’ War, urged us to think about religious freedom and international law. The idea of human rights was not least born of these movements of thinking. Common market and common foreign and security policy are just two examples marking the nations’ attempt to cooperate in promoting social development instead of working against one another as they used to do in the past. One cannot deny that this undertaking has been full of crises. Therefore, it is not without reason that some people have their doubts about the European idea. The debates on the European Constitution have made clear that we are about to enter a new stage in the European process. The partly rejection of this Constitution was a real shock for many people. The European community shows little interest in its Christian roots. The technological civilisation is in the focus of attention. All that counts is profit and performance. This civilisation is unable to grasp and convey the value of relationships. People have forgotten to search for the soul of Europe. The grotesque distortions in the recent conflict of cultures have revealed the dangers of this civilisation. In his first Encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI has set the boundaries for our action.

“The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.” (Encyclical: Deus Caritas Est: no. 28a)

One thing has become clear to me: Who else but we as the Church, in fulfilment of Christ's mission, can proclaim the healing of wounds? This is also why we must make our voice heard with the ideologically neutral states.

Thinking about Europe means learning to see the reality of Europe's past and present with different eyes.

From the outset, the process of European unification was a matter of accepting each other as vital partners. This is also true for our Conference:

- Without the views of our partners, the pictures we form of ourselves remain incomplete.
- Without the experience and viewpoints of our partners – even if we have good reason to question them – we will be unable to find sound answers to the social problems of our time.

European thinking is dependent on an open community of learning. At the same time, it itself is a product of this community of learning. Europe is a continuous dialogue among the nations. A basic openness is needed to let others participate in the process of learning and thinking and to review one's own truths. But wherever and whenever it is necessary, we, as the European Conference, will intervene and articulate our truths reliably and with persistence. Only then, Europe can in the long run be more than a self-satisfied assembly of mainly wealthy societies.

In his apostolic letter "Ecclesia in Europe" which was published two years ago and which can be considered as his legacy to the "Church in Europe", Pope John Paul II demonstrated us that we have a say. It is a revolutionary document. It does not address the Churches in the individual countries. It invites the Church in Europe to reread the Gospel, to reassess Church life in view of the newly emerging Europe. It is touching that every major paragraph ends with a call on "the Church in Europe".

### **But Europe is not only associated with hopes**

Fears of a loss of identity, memories and experiences of imperial temptations in- and outside of Europe are only two keywords that exemplify the ambivalence of the real Europe. It will be good for us to take these questions seriously. Because disregarding them would pave the way for disappointment and frustration. Our Conference provides a great chance to talk about this variety of hopes and anxieties.

With all respect for the plurality of philosophic, theological, cultural and political approaches to Europe, in the final analysis and above all, **Europe is a spiritual project**, overcoming and getting control of the dangerous preponderance of politics and economy. It is not first and foremost a matter of efficient organisation of social and economic processes. This plays a certain role, of course, but it is more important to raise the serious question of a justified hope for the future based on our experiences in the past and present. This is by no means feuilleton. Dealing with justice as the basis for the inner structure and outside appearance of our societies is a very demanding and substantial task.

To be able to meet this demand without losing orientation, it is indispensable to watch carefully the compass indicating the great questions and longings. Our

compass is the Holy Scripture, the instructive tradition of the Church and last but not least the Eucharist.

### III. Take up the challenge!

Some of us might ask themselves what we, with our modest means, can contribute to this giant project. I understand this very well. But there is no reason to despair!

Please remember: 60 years ago, Europe was razed to the ground after the war which had been initiated by Germany. Millions of people were killed, injured, mutilated, expelled and homeless as a result of this war. The graffiti by Russian, Soviet soldiers, which we will see tomorrow at the Reichstag, bear witness to this war. For many decades, Europe suffered from the terrible division into East and West and the after-effects are still noticeable today. At the end of the war in 1945, who would have thought that Germany would once be a respected member of the European family? When the tanks rolled into Prague in 1968 and when Poland declared the state of war in 1981, who would have thought that democracy and human rights would be the basis for the majority of societies in Europe soon? Likewise, it is not long ago that Spain, Portugal and Greece got over their dictatorships. Who of us would have thought that we would live to see the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall? Not many of us, I guess. Today, it is all too natural that we meet. We must make use of this potential, especially when it comes to realizing the millennium goals which have been inexcusably neglected so far.

The first step towards taking up a challenge is to straighten things out for oneself. And I think, we, as JP Europe, are able to do this with a good conscience and with reasonable self-awareness.

- We are a union of 28 national commissions. And we have good prospects for further growth.
- We are part of the Catholic players at European level, and as such we need to coordinate our work with them and serve as a supplementary force.
- We are part of the worldwide Justice and Peace family, headed by the Pontifical Council to which we feel closely connected.
- We want to help Catholic Social Teaching gain relevance in Europe. We feel a special commitment to the poor, to those who have been deprived of their rights and to the victims of persecution, war and expulsion. We want to give them a voice.
- We know that the spiritual dimension is indispensable for our work.
- JP Europe makes a contribution to a unified, free and just Europe. We commit ourselves to the project of European unification.
- We want to help ensure that Europe embraces its responsibility arising from its history and its present. This especially applies to its responsibility for the countries of the South.

Let us not be intimidated by these challenging tasks. It is not our job to work all these wonders ourselves. But it is up to us to take practical measures and point the way towards another reality.

We will need to be patient and we need to be good at sizing things up. We should not aim at short-lived, spectacular action. We should rather focus on continuous steps towards more cooperation. We have already achieved a lot in the recent years. But much work remains to be done.

While we urge for more European cooperation, we must not demand too much of ourselves! We are not yet ready to put into practice everything what is actually desirable. We need to respect our differences and accept our non-negotiable responsibility! But we must take care not to become totally absorbed with these differences!

Let us start with the issues and subjects which are suitable for us to take joint action!  
Let us trust that our European community will grow closer in this way!  
Let us take the next step towards a European Conference, which promotes dialogue and exchange, which encourages multilateral cooperation and which is able to take joint action!