

Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions

*Final Declaration of the International Workshop in Malta
14th to 16th of September 2012*

The Arab Spring One Year Later

“Today the possibilities of *interaction between cultures* have increased significantly, giving rise to new openings for intercultural dialogue: a dialogue that, if it is to be effective, has to set out from a deep-seated knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners.”

(Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 26)

Coming to Malta to study the impact and consequences of the “Arab spring”, a year after it began, the *Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions* – representing 30 national commissions – was faced with the challenge, not only of understanding the identity of others, but reflecting on the positive and negative aspects of our own identity today. We chose Malta as the location for our annual International Workshop because of its geographical proximity and close ties to the region. Historically at the forefront of the encounters between Christian and Muslim civilisations, Malta remains an important cultural crossroads today. This was emphasised in an address by the Prime Minister of Malta, Dr Lawrence Gonzi, who described how Malta has found itself caught between a humanitarian crisis in North Africa and an economic crisis in Europe. He expressed the concern that our societies are abandoning the values that have served to “anchor” us, with people demanding the immediate satisfaction of their own wants to the neglect of the needs of others. Similar concerns were expressed in some of the expert analyses and eyewitness accounts from the Arab Spring.

Although it is crucial to resist the temptation to reduce this complex phenomenon to generalisations and stereotypes, in the different national contexts the struggle against oppression was founded on the same core values: human dignity, freedom from arbitrary violence, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, distributive justice, equal citizenship, equal access to public goods and services and national pride. These values need to be protected throughout the long and difficult task of constructing a new foundation for the nation. Indeed, there are already clear warning signs that, for some, hope is giving way to disappointment and frustration as progress slows down and dreams of a better future fail to materialise. A significant threat is posed by forces, both internal and external, which seek to provoke and exploit division, violence and insecurity.

A core element of the Workshop was a reflection on how we, as Europeans, can make a positive contribution to political processes in these countries. While we may embrace our democratic systems, we cannot assume they could simply be transplanted to other national and cultural contexts. Indeed, we need to acknowledge that they are not working for all members of our society and our core values appear to be giving way to extreme individualism.

As Europeans we need to respect the right of other nations to define democracy in accordance with their traditions and religious beliefs. At the same time, we cannot ignore the need to protect human dignity and rights. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict argues that cultures and religions should be evaluated on the basis of what they do for the whole person and all people (55). An essential element of this process is the establishment of dialogue and interaction founded on mutual respect. We were grateful to be welcomed by the Muslim community of Malta and hear from Imam Mohammed Elsadi about the challenges they face in living according to their values in European societies. We could find common ground in our shared concern about respect for religious symbols and the challenge of communicating our values to young people in an increasingly secular society.

A different type of inter-cultural and inter-religious relationship was presented by Maltese businessmen working in North Africa. Economic activity is an important way in which we can contribute to the development of these emerging societies, but it needs to be based on strong ethical foundations and in-depth knowledge of the local political, social and cultural context, otherwise it will serve only to further injustice.

The importance of economic justice and global solidarity is evident from the migration of large numbers of vulnerable people from other parts of Africa, through North Africa and into Europe. The European countries of the Mediterranean – Spain, Italy, Greece and Malta – bear a heavy burden as the first point of entry for these migrants, a burden which, to date, has not been shared equally by other European countries. This is most extreme in Malta, a small island that already had the highest population density in Europe. To put it in context: if we were to assess the impact of the number of migrants who arrived by sea to Malta in the first six months of this year, in relation to land area, population and GDP, it would be equivalent to the entire population of Malta migrating to Germany.

In Malta we visited three centres for migrants – the closed centre at Hal Far, the open centre at Marsa and the open centre run by the Migrant Commission of the Maltese Church and the Good Shepherd Sisters in Balzan – as well as hearing from the Jesuit Refugee Service, the International Organisation for Migration and KOPIN (Koperazzjoni Internazzjonali) about the support they provide. We could see first hand how the unjust distribution of resources on a global scale has reduced people to a state of such desperation that they will undertake long and perilous journeys of many years, across several countries, through deserts and conflict zones, in the hope of finally getting a place on an overcrowded and unsafe vessel to make the terrifying journey across the Mediterranean sea, a journey not all will survive.

Having experienced violence, exploitation and starvation, their first experience of Europe will be detention. We saw the challenges faced by the staff of the closed centre, attempting to care for traumatised people under these conditions. We learned about the difficult process that begins when people leave the closed centre and attempt integration, with so much to learn and the threat of deportation always hanging over them. We were impressed by the efforts of staff and volunteers in these organisations to respect the dignity and promote the recovery of the people in their care with the very limited means at their disposal. At the same time, however, we were shocked to see that in our modern, developed society, people still live in such basic and over-crowded conditions.

This is not only a Maltese problem. The vast majority of these migrants did not want to come to Malta, seeing it only as a further step on the journey towards continental Europe. Other European nations cannot allow geography to distance them from their responsibilities. Existing European legislation, notably the Dublin Regulation, which determines that asylum applications must be processed in the country of arrival, is placing an unfair burden on the Maltese and increasing the suffering of the migrants affected. Neither at the level of the EU or the UN is there any provision for a form of asylum to be granted on the basis of economic reasons, even where people are coming from situations of extreme poverty.

Both volunteers and migrants told us that, from their experience, in Malta, as in other parts of Europe, racism and xenophobia are on the rise. Some media have made a significant contribution to this development, with talk of "invasion" and inaccurate or over-simplified accounts of what is happening in places such as North Africa. We cannot lay all the blame on media however, and need to look instead at our own willingness to adopt a critical approach to the information provided and actively challenge messages we consider to be false or unjust.

One of the most important messages of the Arab Spring was the power of young people united against oppression. This was recognised by Pope Benedict in his recent visit to Lebanon, in which he called on the young people of the region to set an example by showing how "Muslims and Christians, Islam and Christianity, can live side by side without hatred, with respect for the beliefs of each person, so as to build together a free and humane society."

During our Workshop we took a moment to reflect on the contribution of all those who have dedicated their lives to the work for justice and peace in the Mediterranean region and planted a tree dedicated to their memory in Hastings Gardens in Valletta. We were conscious that those who undertake this work do

so frequently under threat of violence. Foremost in our minds were the recent deaths in attacks on embassies and the continued devastating loss of life in Syria. In an effort to address this danger, European Justice and Peace Commissions are currently campaigning for a strong and binding Arms Trade Treaty, aimed at making a safer world for all.

We would like to thank our hosts, who made this experience possible:

The Archbishop of Malta, Mgr Paul Cremona OP
The Apostolic Nuncio to Malta, Mgr Tommaso Caputo
The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Malta and its President, Mr Roderick Agius
The Office of the Prime Minister
The Migrants Commission of the Catholic Church
The Good Shepherd Sisters
Imam Mohammed Elsadi
The Jesuit Refugee Service
AWAS – The National Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers
The Management of the Open Centre at Marsa
KOPIN – Koperazzjoni Internazzionali

Special thanks are due to the experts who addressed our workshop:

Dr Laurence Gonzi, Prime Minister of Malta
Dr Tonio Borg, Minister for Foreign Affairs
Dr George Vella, Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs of the Labour Party
Prof. Arnold Cassola, Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs for the Green Party
Prof. Godfrey Pirota
Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ
Dr Emilio Platti OP
Fr Joe Ellul OP
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Mr Raymond Borg

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Note for Editors

The *Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions* (Justice and Peace Europe) is a European network that today unites 30 national Justice and Peace commissions. Each one is established or recognized by its Catholic bishops' conference. The secretariat of Justice and Peace Europe is currently situated in Paris (France).