

Invest in Young People to Combat Racism and Political Extremism

Increasing numbers of young people across Europe are frightened for the future, unable to see how they can hope to make a living in an increasingly challenging economic climate. Sadly, many now feel the years spent in education have been wasted, as there are no jobs available to match their qualifications. Some are forced to migrate in search of work, while others would like to take that option but face insurmountable barriers in the form of visa requirements or travel costs. Although the particular economic, social and political circumstances will vary from one national context to another, a common thread running through all European countries is that young people do not feel that their concerns and fears are being taken seriously by those in positions of power – political and economic. This sense of alienation creates a dangerous vacuum of leadership. Groups of political extremists, intent on destabilising the democratic foundations of our societies, are all too ready to step into this space, presenting themselves as the only people who are prepared to take young people seriously. They seek to manipulate the anger and frustration that exists in our societies and direct it towards groups of people who are deemed not to 'belong'. They exploit and exacerbate insecurity, providing scapegoats and claiming that these people are taking our jobs, taking our money and threatening our identity.

As a Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, representing 30 different national commissions, we wish to appeal those in leadership in our societies to prioritise investing in our young people. In making this appeal we do not in any way wish to suggest that racism and political extremism are driven by young people – very often this is not the case, and, indeed, many young people show courageous leadership in defending human rights. The basis for this appeal is two-fold: firstly, young people are the leaders of the future and investing in their education, formation, security and well-being needs to be a priority; secondly, there is a need to recognise that many young people today are in an extremely vulnerable position. This has not been adequately acknowledged to date and it is not only dangerous, but also unjust. Young people did not create the crisis we are now experiencing, and yet many of

them are being forced to pay a heavy price. Political extremists thrive where they are able to tap into such feelings of injustice.

Acknowledging the Anger

The combination of individual choices and policy decisions which prioritised the economic security of some, above the well-being of all and the demands of justice, has undoubtedly led to a breakdown in social cohesion. Pope Benedict XVI had warned in *Caritas in Veritate* that the erosion of social cohesion as a result of a 'systematic increase of social inequality' places democracy at risk (32). There is a lot of anger in our societies at the present time. This anger manifests itself in different ways: from protests on the street to the annihilation at the polls of the political parties who were in power in the period leading up to the crisis. Anger, when properly directed and expressed, can contribute to positive change. For instance, public anger arising from the crisis has forced Governments in many countries to be more accountable and transparent in their use of public funds. But anger can also be manipulated and turned to violence, giving rise to new injustices. Already we have seen protests turn violent on the streets of many of our cities. Condemnations of violence will be meaningless if we fail to address the underlying causes.

The theme chosen by Pope Benedict XVI for his 2012 Message for World Day of Peace is 'Educating Young People in Justice and Peace'.¹ In these dark times our hope for the future lies in our young people, whose "enthusiasm and idealism can offer new hope to the world". The Pope recognises, however, the alienation and frustration experienced by so many young people today, stating: 'It is important that this unease and its underlying idealism receive due attention at every level of society'. This will require engagement across a broad range of sectors: political leadership, financial institutions, employers, educational institutions, media and the community and voluntary sector. Young people should not feel that their skills and talents are being wasted and we need to be more pro-active and creative than we have been to date in our search for meaningful solutions.

¹ *Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of World Day of Peace (1 January 2012)*
www.vatican.va

Educating for Justice and Peace

Education is of primary importance in combating racism and political extremism. Here, we refer to education in the widest sense of the word. Academic achievement is important, but the context in which the work of education is carried out is equally significant.

I. Education is about values

Values are as important as knowledge. We need to ensure that our education systems have, as their central focus, the dignity of the human person. Through education, the idealism of young people should be nurtured and supported, with emphasis on principles of solidarity and human rights. Encouragement alone is not sufficient, however. We also need to challenge young people to extend their sense of solidarity to those considered to be on the margins of society – those most likely to become targets of political extremism. The history of 20th century Europe clearly shows how freedom is threatened when we allow the values of human dignity and the common good to become marginalised, and forget the duty of care to others that stems from our Christian obligation to solidarity. A core aim of our education systems should be to enable and empower young people to respond to future challenges in a spirit of sharing and cooperation with others.

II. Our education systems should prepare people to participate in a globalised and multi-cultural society

The sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas has warned that ‘sustained political fragmentation in the world and in Europe is in contradiction to the systemic growth of a global multi-cultural society, and an insurmountable obstacle to any progress in the development of better relationships between state powers and social powers in judicial and constitutional civilisation’.² Young people should be educated in an environment that reflects, as closely as possible, the environment in which they will live and work. Through their education they should experience respect for their

² “Jürgen Habermas: democracy is at stake”, *Le Monde*, 27 October 2011

identity and individuality in a way that will encourage them to show that same respect to others. Understanding of other cultures is central to this process. In reflecting on their own identity, young people should be invited to explore these issues through dialogue based on mutual respect. Political extremism and racism feed on ignorance and fear. By breaking down these barriers, education can greatly limit this threat.

III. Education is central to Participation

Education is the key to overcoming social exclusion and disadvantage. It can enable people to break cycles of poverty and deprivation in families and communities. There is a danger that, in times of economic recession, government spending in the area of education can be reduced. There is a significant risk that much of the progress made over recent decades in creating more equitable and inclusive education systems can be lost, with the result that education once again becomes the preserve of wealthy elites. In a recent paper, entitled *A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility*, the Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) pointed out that: 'In the past, social policy, overly focused on financial assistance, has often shifted its viewpoint away from the fact that strengthening families and investing in education constitute the best means of preventing poverty and social exclusion'.³ We cannot afford to repeat these mistakes in our response to the current crisis. In addition, our education systems need to prepare young people to participate in society, and that includes, in a particular way, political life. As feelings of disempowerment and alienation grow, our education authorities need to be open to exploring new ways of approaching the political education of our young people.

IV. Education needs to take account of the particular challenges faced by young people today

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict observed that, 'As society becomes more globalised, it makes us neighbours but does not make us brothers [and sisters]' (19). As a result of ease of travel and new technologies, the horizons of our young people are so much wider than ever before. Ease of communication, however, is no guarantee of the quality of the experience and internet and social media are opening

³ Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), *A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility* (2012), 18.

up new spaces where young people can be manipulated and exploited. These spaces can be difficult to control, but here too Pope Benedict believes that participation is the key to overcoming threats to human dignity: ‘Believers who bear witness to their most profound convictions greatly help prevent the web from becoming an instrument which depersonalises people, attempts to manipulate them emotionally or allows those who are powerful to monopolise the opinions of others’.⁴ As Pope Benedict rightly notes, the young people of today need a new kind of leadership: ‘we need authentic witnesses, and not simply people who parcel out rules and facts; we need witnesses capable of seeing farther than others because their life is so much broader.’ Here there is a challenge too for Churches and faith communities – could we be doing more to reach out to young people, using language and forms of communication that are meaningful to them?

Giving Young People Leadership They Can Trust

It is both dangerous and irresponsible to ignore the alienation of young people from political structures and processes. Of our political leaders Pope Benedict says: ‘Let them give young people a transparent image of politics as a genuine service to the good of all.’ The Pope does not make this appeal lightly; it is plain to see that the outworkings of this crisis have cast political institutions, and, indeed, politicians, in a very negative light. Much has been done to address the lack of transparency and accountability that allowed the greed and corruption of the few to detract from the dedication and service of the vast majority of our public representatives, but still we have to ask ourselves: how many of our most able and talented young people are, today, putting themselves forward for a career in politics? For those who are taking an active interest in political life, is there a danger their lack of confidence in the current system may push them towards those who seek to destabilise and undermine democratic politics?

A Challenge to Young People

⁴ Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the 45th World Communications Day, ‘Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age’ (5 June 2011) www.vatican.va

In concluding we cannot fail to recognise that young people themselves are called to show leadership in the difficulties we currently face. Protesting against injustice serves a vital purpose in highlighting the need for change, but cannot, in itself, bring about that change. For that, we need people to get involved and translate their values and principles into concrete action. Opting to live on the margins of society can, at times, prove easier than working for change from the thick of it.

As citizens we have a responsibility to hold our policy makers to account and ensure that decisions taken in matters of public policy are consistent with our values. This engagement, however, cannot be solely negative. In the words of Pope Benedict: 'It is also the duty of the laity to participate actively in political life, in a manner coherent with the teaching of the Church, bringing their well-founded reasoning and great ideals into the democratic debate, and into the search for a broad consensus among everyone who cares about the defence of life and freedom, the protection of truth and the good of the family, solidarity with the needy, and the vital search for the common good'.⁵

Addressing young people in his message for World Day of Peace this year, the Pope says: 'To the young, who have such a strong attachment to ideals, I extend a particular invitation to be patient and persevering in seeking justice and peace, in cultivating the taste for what is just and true, even when it involves sacrifice and swimming against the tide.'

⁵ "Politics is a very important realm for the exercise of charity", *Zenit*, 21 May 2010

As a Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions:

- **We call on our political leaders to take seriously the need to rebuild young people's trust in the political system by protecting their present and future wellbeing as an integral part of the strategy for economic recovery;**
- **We call on our Education Ministers to ensure that, even in difficult economic circumstances, the promotion of educational opportunities for all young people remains a priority. This will require the development and implementation of specific strategies to target educational disadvantage among particularly marginalised groups in the society, such as migrants and people with disabilities;**
- **We emphasise that education needs to be about more than academic achievement – it needs to prepare young people to participate in an increasingly multi-cultural society and achieve their full potential through personal cultural development. Professional training and formation aimed at the development of practical skills needs to be given adequate recognition;**
- **We call on our young people to address their concerns for the future by actively participating in society, educating themselves about the political system and working for justice and peace.**

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

