

It's a pleasure to join you on all here at the seat of COMECE together with the Vice President and Secretary General of Justice and Peace Europe, Dr Ingeborg Gabriel and Stefan Lunte respectively.

I am delighted to meet again some friends and acquaintances of my yesteryears and particularly Klaus Welle, Secretary General of the European Parliament.

This occasion is something of a maiden voyage for me as newly elected President of Justice and Peace Europe. As one who is also the delegate of the Irish Bishops' Conference to COMECE, this appearance combines the organic link between these two emanations – COMECE and Justice and Peace Europe - of the faith-inspired mission of the Church, the Christian community, in and for society.

My task is to present the Pope Francis' 2019 World Peace Day Message and together with Klaus Welle and with all of you to explore its pertinence for the European political project presently.

I must admit to a certain surprise on my part when I first read the text. It was short. Unlike earlier texts its theme, "Good Politics is at the Service of Peace" was generic in theme, whereas earlier texts focussed on specific issues such as, migrants and refugees (2018), Non-violence (2017), Slavery (2015), Religious Freedom (2011), poverty (2009 & 1993). Its generic subject matter makes it no less pertinent and challenging in the context of the mushrooming of fragmentation on our political landscapes, especially in Europe, and over against the seeming decline in public confidence in the post-World War international institutional order and in the face of the new risks confronting the human family in so many well-known domains of governance.

Somehow, as I read the text, I was also drawn to revisiting that notable document issued by the Standing Committee of the French Bishops' Conference "*Dans un monde qui change retrouver le sens du politique*" where the authors rightly assert the primacy of the appreciation of the political over politics : "*le politique précède la politique*"¹. Indeed they issued a challenge in the form of a call to re-building a sense and appreciation of the significance of politics : "*c'est à un travail de refondation auquel il nous faut, ensemble, nous atteler*"². These

¹ Dans un monde qui change retrouver les sens du politique, Bayard, Mame, Editions du Cerf, p.21

² Idem p. 17

assertions and phrases resonate with the subject and title of the 2019 Peace Day Message. And both texts invite us to consider and explore the quality of the politics which we, citizens of Europe and its Member States presently endow the European acquis with its institutional instruments of solidarity, peace-building and ultimately of justice within and beyond our borders. Another line in that French text reminds us that if politics is undergoing a severe crisis today, it is not the sole responsibility of the political class³. Citizens, civic society, its multiple and autonomous components have a crucial role to play to irrigate, aerate and fertilise the humus for political leadership. Hence the importance of our discussions and exchanges here this morning.

To come to the structure and content of the World Peace Day Message : it contains seven sections. Right from the **introductory section**, which roots peace-making and peace-building in the mission of disciples and Christians (Lk 10.5-6), the subject of the Message is given a universal quality and dimension : the peace of which this Message speaks is for *“every family, community, country and continent, in all their diversity”* (no. 1.1).

Sections two and three, section three being in many ways the core of the text, are built around two iconic figures, the poet Charles Péguy and Cardinal François-Xavier Van Thuan, both of whom thematised the significance of hope. The reference to C. Péguy’s poem, *La Porche du Mystère de la deuxième vertu* (The Portal of the Mystery of Hope) and the citation of Cardinal Van Thuan’s “Beatitudes of the Politician” which recall the collection of his message from prison compiled in “The Road to Hope” remind me of responses given to a one-time President of COMECE by European political leaders when he asked them what specific, or value-added, contribution Churches could bring to the European project. Interestingly the predominant response was given in a single word : “hope” – offer and seek to engender hope in building a value laden sense of destiny. That was then ; how do we as Christians, and as Churches in our parishes and communities, go about this vital task of inspiration in the Europe of today, of Brexit, of rising populism, of uncertainty and insecurity among citizens ?

Section four recognises that just as politics is illuminated by examples of virtuous service, it also *“has its share of vices”*. Such vices, we all know, *“detract*

³ Idem p. 20

from the credibility of political life overall” and “undermine the ideal of democracy”. These remarks lead into two crucial themes in **section five**, namely, the confidence, or lack thereof in politics on the part of youth and the crucial importance of trust as a sine qua non for *“good politics”*. These intertwined subjects, vital as they are as inter-generational societal and political social capital, have a certain immediacy this weekend as young people, tomorrow’s citizens, gather with Pope Francis for the World Youth Days in Panama.

Thinking of youth, **section six** with the assertive title, *“No to war and to the strategy of fear”*, features a chilling rapier-lie reminder with the claim that currently 1 child in 6 is affected by the violence of war or its effects. For us in Europe and for the forthcoming legislature there is an urgent ethical need to give thrust to code of conduct on arms exports established by the EU and its Member States.

As in section five the reality of the politics of fear is signalled specifically in regard to migrants and refugees and to issues concerning personal security, which can fertilise *“attitudes of rejection or forms of nationalism”*. The manipulative politics of fear played some role, indeed a decisive role, in the Brexit debacle.

The seventh and final section anchors some seminal remarks with reference to the recently celebrated 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights :

- *“Peace, in effect, is the fruit of a great political project grounded in the mutual responsibility and interdependence of human beings”* (no.7.2.) which chimes with the 2016 statement of the French bishops already referred to
- *“Peace is a challenge that needs to be taken up ever anew”* (no 7.2) : have we lost this sense of the permanent and generational responsibility for moulding the conditions for peace?
- The interdependent pre-conditions for the promotion of peace : (i) peace with oneself , (ii) peace with others and (iii) peace with all creation

In regard to these three interdependent pre-conditions for peace, as we move toward the European elections and with an eye to priorities for the 2019 – 2024 legislature we might consider the following issues :

- In respect of being at *“peace with oneself”* (no 7.3) : in the light of the emergent new divisions in Europe between north and south, between

east and west, it would seem that Europe and its peoples have work to do in the arenas of understanding and reconciliation. The intensification of measure in cohesion policies may assist and are certainly necessary. Work need to be done on hearts and minds (no 7.2) and in this arena Churches, faith communities and politics carry a shared responsibility.

- Concerning “*peace with others*” (no. 7.4) : the EU and we, its electors and body politic, carry immense political and social-ethical responsibilities for our world and our time. Sustained efforts to enhance constructive politically integrated relations with China, the USA, Russia, the Middle East are of course vital. We also need to invest efforts in defending and promoting multilateral cooperation – a theme emphasised by Pope Francis in his address to the Diplomatic Corps on of Monday 7th January 2019.
- The third pre-condition, namely “*peace with creation*” (no7.5) links with Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si* , with the priorities which Justice and Peace Europe has identified for its work in the coming time and of course with an inescapable priority for the European Union and its Member States. To cite the closing words of a book by Martin Rees, *On the Future, Prospects for Humanity* : in this arena, as in so many others “ *we need to think globally, we need to think rationally, we need to think long-term – empowered by twenty-first century technology but guided by values that science alone can’t provide*”⁴

By way of conclusion, it is worth registering the inspirational value of these World Peace Day Messages initiated by Pope Paul VI in 1968. The invocation of Charles Péguy and Cardinal Van Thuan in this year’s Message underlines the importance of imagination for good politics and for the work of peace.

Each year these Messages launch a prophetic call for a better world for all peoples and nations. They touch sensitive issues of existential significance for the personal, communal and global common good. They invite both citizens and all involved in politics to imaginative and ethically informed initiatives for the good of all humanity. Reading this 2019 Message in line with the 51 preceding Messages, the inspirational words of Jean Boissonat (1929-2016) come to mind : “ *À force d’imaginer le bien, on finit par y contribuer*”⁵

⁴ Martin Rees, *On The Future Prospects for Humanity*, Princeton University Press, 2018, p.227

⁵ Cited in Michel Camdessus, *Vers le monde de 2050, Ce que l’Avenir nous reserve*, Fayard, 2017, p.233.