



*To the Presidents of the
European Bishops' Conferences*

*To the bishops of Europe
Via e-mail*

St.Gallen, 25 March 2011

Your Eminence,
Your Grace,
Dear confrère,

Forty years ago, on 25 March 1971, the first directive rules of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences (CEE) were approved. So today we are celebrating an anniversary which is also an opportunity to present to you this body which is at the service of the bishops, and therefore the Church, in Europe.

It would certainly be too long to recount the history of this body, however we think it is worth highlighting some aspects. Hence we have decided to send this letter to you from the President and Vice-presidents of the Council.

CEE can be considered a fruit of the Second Vatican Council and the deepening of the ecclesiological truth of the communion of bishops, something clarified with special emphasis precisely in that period. In 1965, bearing in mind the beauty and importance of continuing along the path of the enrichment of the exercise of collegiality, a meeting of the presidents of 13 European Bishops' Conferences took place. The result of that meeting, six years later, was the constitutive assembly of CEE (Rome, 23-24 March 1971) under the presidency of the Archbishop of Marseilles, Roger Etchegaray, with the participation of 17 representatives of Europe's Bishops' Conferences. On 25 March the same year, the Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops approved CEE's directive norms *ad experimentum*.

In those years, CEE was a response to the urgency and difficulty for bishops from the whole of Europe to meet regularly and freely. Right from its origins, in fact, CEE was thought as a body which had to breathe "with two lungs" and which had to gather the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the whole of the European continent, or rather of those countries, too, which did not belong to the then European Community. Currently, CEE numbers 37 members: the presidents of 33 Bishops' Conferences and 4 bishops who do not belong to a Bishops' Conference: the Archbishops of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of *Chişinău* in the Republic of Moldova.

Time has demonstrated how important these relationships have been, so much so that in the two Synods of Bishops for Europe (in 1991 and 1999) it was possible to count on a network of friendships between bishops, fundamental for progressing the enormous challenges present at the dawn of the third millennium.

Today in Europe the challenges are perhaps different, but the importance of the relationships between us bishops and between our Bishops' Conferences has in no way diminished. If anything, today one feels even more the need to nurture these relationships by a fruitful exercise of episcopal collegiality, experienced in communion with the Pope, so as to be able to preserve the good of the Church and be more effective in the fulfilment of our mission. Our efforts to establish networks of friendship and solidarity, at a time when life is ever more inter-linked, thus becomes a testimony of the Church's care which, being Catholic by nature, feels called to be present and to bring the light of Christ to this globalised world.

So we can say that in 40 years CEE has tried to carry out its mission through consultation, especially during the annual Plenary Assembly at which the presidents of the Bishops' Conferences participate, but also when, through meetings on different themes, we are able to explore further in the light of faith an issue of common interest. Thus we try to keep a closer eye on issues bearing in mind all points of view, in order to have more effective co-operation, when this is requested, and in harmony with the Roman dicasteries.

As Venerable John Paul II reminded us, the human person is the path of the Church and therefore, when we ask ourselves what are CCEE's main concerns, it seems to us that we can say they are precisely the concerns of the Church, or the human person. All our attention is therefore focused on the person in Europe, his/her personal, spiritual and social situation. We think in particular about questions linked to migration and problems connected with the demographic collapse: of the family, the education and culture of the respect for life to defend it in all its stages, from conception to natural death. Only the culture of love and life can guarantee a future. How can one not also think of the different dimensions of daily life in Europe and therefore of the political questions and the necessary relationships between Church and State? And our relationship with Creation, with God's gifts which have been offered to us as sustenance and which raise our eyes heavenwards, but about which too often we forget that we have been given responsibility for their fair administration in the knowledge that we are not the owners but simply stewards who must make the "Lord's vineyard" bear fruit and hand it over intact to the next generation.

Also and above all to love the human person means for us to give each person the opportunity to encounter and know Jesus Christ. For this reason CCEE is particularly committed to evangelisation and care for the faith. In this sense the unity of Christians and ecumenism are privileged topics for our attention and commitment. In this regard we wish to recall our forty-year relationship with CEC – the Conference of European Churches – which began in 1959 and which brings together numerous Christian Churches from the whole of Europe, and also the meetings with the Orthodox Churches from the whole of Europe which with a great deal of interest have been going on for some years. Inter-religious relations, too, (relations with Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and new forms of religion) and above all the effort to promote healthy living side-by-side in a plural Europe, have been and still are very important for the mission of the Church in Europe.

It is impossible to consider all these 40 years of CCEE activity. But we can say that the inheritance of these 40 years is: 8 symposia, 6 ecumenical meetings, 3 ecumenical assemblies, 2 Catholic-Orthodox fora; 40 plenary assemblies (from 1995 with the presidents of the Bishops' Conferences), the meetings of the General Secretaries, the Media Officers and Spokespeople, and commission meetings on a wide variety of issues. In all hundreds and hundreds of meetings, documents, communiqués, and interviews about the witness of the Church in Europe.

When CCEE was born, part of Europe was still under totalitarian regimes which did not respect religious freedom and many of our confrères paid with their lives for their witness to the faith. Thank God that time has passed, but some recent events make one think that there does not exist yet a settled form of secularism capable of really appraising the religious experience. For this reason and to avoid Europe becoming a social environment which not only does not respect but even attacks faith and prevents Christian witness, we are offering support to the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe. We are delighted at the recent step taken by the Great Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg about the displaying of crucifixes. This decision manifests respect for the real situation of European people and for the logic of subsidiarity without which true justice would be difficult.

Furthermore, our eyes are not focused just on Europe. We are aware of the fact that our continent will only be able to define its own identity in relation to other continents. From the outset, Europe has been a continent open to others and, although we know that not everything that has come from Europe has been good, we are sure that European culture has also been, in many cases, a source of blessing for the whole world: suffice to think of the missions. The memory of the Judaeo-Christian heritage and the Greek-Roman culture, too, is truly a richness and we must be proud of it. Sadly, it seems that today many of these values are being forgotten and Europe is like

the prodigal son needing conversion and so every generation must rediscover the values of our culture.

For this reason, over these years CCEE has tried to be a workshop, a school and a house of communion. CCEE has never become a “strong” body, with vast structures and highly visible on the social and political scenes. It has preferred to travel a more discreet route, aiming above all at making our meetings places of prayer, encounter, friendship, dialogue, exchange, trust, information, and discussion about common problems. Thus we have learned to experience ourselves more as one Catholic Church, and to have respect for the diversity of situations and sensitivities, to take on the burdens and problems of others, to intensify the plans for collaboration and help within a perspective of the exchange of gifts.

Dear brothers in the episcopate, CCEE is at your service, it is at the service of bishops and the individual churches in Europe, in communion with the successor of Peter and through the Bishops’ Conferences.

Today, on CCEE’s fortieth anniversary, we invite all the Catholic faithful of Europe to thank the Lord together with the Venerable John Paul II for the gift of CCEE and for the Church in Europe:

*May our old Europe welcome you,
the Incarnate Word!*

*Jesus Christ,
Lord of history,
keep the future open
to the generous and free decisions
of those who, accepting the grace
of good inspirations, commit themselves
to decisive action
for justice and charity,
in the sign of total respect
for truth and freedom:
so that good continues to be
a joyful reality in Europe,
keep our Continent
anchored in God!*

*O Most Holy Trinity,
grant that the whole of Europe
may feel evermore
the need for the Christian unity
and fraternal communion
of all its peoples,
so that with incomprehension
and mutual distrust overcome
and ideological conflicts defeated
in the common knowledge of the truth,
it can be for the whole world
an example of just and peaceful living side-by-side,
in mutual respect
and inviolate freedom.*

*To you, God all-powerful Father,
God the Son who has redeemed the world,
God the Holy Spirit who are a buttress
and teacher of all holiness,
I entrust the whole Church
of yesterday, today and tomorrow,
the Church which is in Europe
and which is spread throughout the world.
Into your hands
I place this special richness,
made up of so many different gifts,
old and new,
poured into the common treasure
of so many different children.
Amen.*

We ask the intercession of the Holy Patrons of Europe – Catherine, Bridget, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Benedict, Cyril and Methodius – on the day when we celebrate the feast of the Annunciation, that the Church in Europe may be a generous and humble servant of that mystery of welcoming the Divine Word.

Yours fraternally,

+ Péter Card. Erdő

Péter Cardinal Erdő
Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest
President of CCEE

+ Josip Card. Bozanić

Josip Cardinal Bozanić
Archbishop of Zagreb
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+ Jean Pierre Card. Ricard

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