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'The rich future of hope for the Conference of European Churches'

Address by His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios I for the
50th anniversary of the Conference of European Churches

We give honour and glory to the Triune God who has blessed the work of our Conference of European Churches during its fifty years. Lyon is a highly symbolic place for celebrating this anniversary, since it was to this city that St Irenaeus came from the East to exercise his ministry as bishop. Thanks to the faith and love of St Irenaeus, the distance between East and West was overcome, and East and West thereafter journeyed together in a spirit of dialogue and praying the Lord to guide them towards "**...unity of faith and communion in the Holy Spirit**"¹, so that they could experience in future the fullness of their love and communion in the same faith.

I have often expressed my belief, personally and as Ecumenical Patriarch, and also at the level of all Orthodoxy that it is only by engaging in dialogue and by closely cooperating that the churches will prove capable of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to the world in a convincing and effective way. For that reason, as the Church of Constantinople, since my blessed predecessor, Patriarch Joachim III issued his famous Encyclical of 1902, we believe strongly that re-establishing communion between Christians is a prime urgent duty for us all, for it is a commandment given by Christ our Saviour in his last prayer. That prayer is a legacy from our Lord Jesus Christ that we must observe to the letter, in order that the world may believe (John 17: 21).

It was in that spirit, and by always praying in our liturgies for the union of all Christians, that we Orthodox founded, with other churches, the World Council of Churches over sixty years ago. Similarly, more than fifty years ago, together with several other European churches, we set up this Conference of European Churches (CEC), whose fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating today by giving thanks to God. As joint founders and present members of CEC we do not only enjoy the fruit harvested to this day by sharing in the joy of those who rejoice, and we do not only share our joy at all that has been done, rich achievements blessed by God, but we also accept our share of the responsibility incumbent on us for any omissions or failures in the course of the years. I wish deliberately here to emphasize this Orthodox position, wishing thereby to dispel any possible doubts and misunderstandings

¹ Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostome



that may have arisen, both within and outside our Orthodox church, as regards what CEC has already achieved.

I wish here to express my happiness that a great number of Orthodox colleagues have made a valuable contribution to CEC at all levels. We owe them an immense debt of gratitude.

However, quite apart from the valuable contribution made by all those colleagues, we cannot ignore our responsibilities and obligations towards CEC, and especially those that we have with regard to the commandment of our Lord, who enjoins us to do everything in our power to re-establish full communion between the Christian churches in Europe. That is our hope and unshakeable conviction.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is in that spirit and with the greatest hope that I look forward to the future of CEC.

There is no doubt that during the past fifty years there have been many valuable achievements by CEC. In those years countless documents on ecumenical issues have been produced, documents of great theological depth, such as the **Charta Oecumenica**, which is the fruit of joint efforts by all the churches of Europe, i.e. our own CEC and the [Roman Catholic] Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE).

However, as was emphasized in the Message from the Third European Ecumenical Assembly at Sibiu in 2007, our faithful have not become consciously aware of many proposals made in the **Charta**, nor have they *a fortiori* been implemented by our churches. Unfortunately, the faithful in our churches remain unaware of a great number of its recommendations. They have thus remained a dead letter incapable of producing the positive desired effects. The result is that what we have said is not matched by our actions, which damages the credibility of our churches, and gives the impression, both within and without, that we are incapable of finding solutions to current problems. I am sure that for all of you these comments are not new, and that is why I strongly recommend and heartily encourage the appropriate bodies within CEC to do everything in their power to promote its reception (*receptio*) and increase awareness of what has been jointly agreed.

I believe that our theological schools and faculties can contribute to this end and should assume responsibility in the form of study curricula to inform and appropriately guide the students of our churches, so as to pass on to them the well founded spirit of reconciliation and the ecumenical imperative. Moreover, I wish and recommend that scholars in that field and teachers in our faculties of theology examine together the continuing problems still hindering the achievement of full communion between our churches, so as to find appropriate solutions and enable us all, with God's help, to reach unity of faith and communion in the Holy Spirit.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has always stressed the need for cooperation between our theology faculties in Europe (the Encyclical of 1920), and welcomes the commitment made in the **Charta Oecumenica** (section II, sub-section 3). We thus welcome and view with



great favour such initiatives and all steps taken in that direction and we duly appreciate CEC's theological contribution as well as its involvement in promoting programmes designed to improve cooperation between our theological faculties.

In this regard, I should like to emphasize that cooperation between CEC and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences has been essential and constructive. In order to improve this ecumenical commitment, I am proposing to set up a better organized and structured way of cooperation between our two organizations. I should like to recall that the Church of Constantinople some time ago, at the Eighth CEC Assembly at the Orthodox Academy in Crete in 1979, proposed that the Roman Catholic Church should in the future become a member of CEC. It is clear that such a step is not a simple matter and would require preparatory work and changes to the relevant rules. However, I am convinced that a conference of **all** the European Churches working in harmony will be able to respond better to the sacred command to re-establish communion between the churches and serve our contemporaries confronted as they are with so many complex problems.

It will then be possible to promote more effectively the dialogue of the churches of Europe with the European institutions and the European Union. This dialogue, in which my own church has been involved for many years, is valuable and essential, not only for the churches but also for the political bodies of the European Union, and above all for the peoples of Europe.

The future of the new Europe that is under construction is sombre and, indeed, uncertain, being built as it is without Christian spiritual values which touch on everything concerning the support and protection of human beings and their dignity. That is why we clearly declare that for Europe respect for the dignity of the human person as made **"in the image of God"** must be the foundation for the absolute respect for and protection of all the rights of all people, **"independently of colour, religion, race, nationality and language"** (Third Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference, Chambésy, 1986).

These are difficult times, and the conditions of life are critical. There are still, sadly, enduring wars and conflicts between nations and walls of separation. Social and economic injustice affects all households. Xenophobia, racism, human rights violations, and denial of religious freedom cause increasing disquiet. Secularization and the crisis in spirituality and Christian values are daily a growing concern for our churches. The faith, our faith in Jesus Christ, is also being called in question.

Our young people continue to face unemployment and shortage of jobs. Businesses, small and large, are closing down every day because of the deep economic crisis. Hundreds of thousands of poor immigrants seek refuge in our continent in search of a better future, victims of trafficking in human beings. And, finally, the environment itself also suffers from our indifference and incompetence in protecting it, in creating a space for respect for nature and the economy of creation.



Christians, Jews and Muslims have, for some years now, been engaged in dialogue for promoting peace and reconciliation between the different monotheistic religions. All are desperately seeking hope.

That is why any procrastination cannot be justified. On the contrary, the collaboration between our churches and their cooperation with the European leaders active in the fields of politics, the economy and society is essential and urgent.

We have an obligation to proclaim and witness together to the crucified Christ, who suffered, was buried, and **"by death has conquered death"** as the Easter troparion declares. He has destroyed death and freed the human race **"by giving them life"**. Despite difficulties and setbacks, despite crises and conflicts, despite wars and suffering, it is today the duty of all Christians and all churches together to communicate this message of resurrection and hope, this message of reconciliation and peace, for Christ is the hope of the world. I do not ignore pain, suffering or martyrdom, but I am determined to persist in resistance and to proclaim with you all, today, tomorrow and to all eternity the words of the apostle Paul:

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light' (Rom. 13: 11-12, NIV).

Inspired by unshakeable belief, love and faith, we must proclaim to the oppressed and suffering the strength, the courage and the will to resist that come from the optimism and the hope of Christ's message:

Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes... Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation... (Eph. 6: 11, 14 -17, NIV).

It is my firm belief that the Triune God will guide our steps, and the work of the Conference of European Churches and of all the churches of Europe in the coming fifty years in love and communion, for the good of all and to the glory of God's holy Name.

Amen.