

MED – MARE, EUROPA, DIRITTI

(SEA, EUROPE, RIGHTS)

Statement by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy Foreign Affairs Consultation for the Conference of European Churches General Assembly (Lyon, 15th-21st July 2009)

*“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison,
and did not take care of you?” (Matthew 25,44)*

“But our citizenship is in heaven...” (Philippians 3,20)

This statement is the specific contribution of Italian Protestant Churches to the debate that will take place at the 50th Anniversary CEC Assembly. This Assembly will celebrate CEC's past and at the same time reflect particularly on the future of the Conference and generally of the future of Europe. Integration between CEC and CCME has great importance in order to strengthen the commitment and the voice of Churches advocating migrants' rights. We believe that working together towards an important international event may help to emphasise our project and our vision. Our particular perspective is characterised by Italy's geographical position, a European peninsula on the Mediterranean Sea. Italian Churches believe indeed that the present and the future of the Christian witnessing by the European Churches have an important role for what the Ancient Romans called *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea).

MARE – For many European citizens, the sea (and particularly the Mediterranean Sea) is the place of holidays, relax and fun. For many others it is the border between despair and hope. The Mediterranean Sea is the new Berlin Wall: a place with a highly symbolic meaning that is also a place of death. Many, in fact, are the fisher people (who, by the way, are struggling to survive climate change and over-exploitation of fishing resources) who are finding in their nets more and more corpses of women and men who did not succeed in illegally entering Europe. The politicians' lack of capacity and will to face this critical situation is a primal source of concern for the Italian Churches.

Mediterranean Sea has always been a crossroads of peoples and cultures, cradle of civilisations and religions. Sicily is a symbol of this history, as it was inhabited by Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans and Spaniards: it is an island closer to Tunis than to Brussels. This sea that for millennia has been a bridge between the peoples of Southern Europe, North Africa and the Near and Middle East, is today militarised in the effort to stop migrations: it became the Southern Wall of Europe. Political institutions should deal with this situation without exploiting, for electoral reasons, the easy fears and the growing racism of the populations receiving migrant people.

We cannot ignore that the Mediterranean Sea was and still is a bridge, but also a place of clash and conflict. Nevertheless, Churches can and must give an answer to conflicts and prepare the path towards reconciliation and the common building of a new multicultural society. FCEI member Churches are already involved in the “Essere chiesa insieme” project (“Being Church Together”), aiming to build Churches that are not divided into ethnic groups, but Churches where different stories and cultures meet and experience a life of faith and spirituality together.

EUROPA – Since the end of Second World War Europe took a new symbolic and concrete character. The European integration process, aiming to share resources instead of fighting for them, brought a very long time of peace, without precedents for many countries. Sharing resources also brought to the cohabitation of different cultures, confessions and religions. Thus CEC played an important role of bridge between East and West, North and South. Moreover, this role has been played within countries, where majority and minority Churches began a dialogue which seemed impossible for centuries before.

This has been Europe for Italian Protestant Churches in the past fifty years: the project of a society based on cohabitation, where everyone is granted the same dignity in order to acknowledge and implement human rights. By participating in various European organisations, Italian Protestant Churches came out of isolation and their voice was finally heard. The national ecumenical encounters

with the Italian Bishops' Conference and the Holy Orthodox Archdiocese have been encouraged by a trans-national vision of Christianity and ecumenism. Nevertheless, we cannot be fully satisfied by the achievements, as the *Charta Oecumenica*, European ecumenical milestone, is still a widely unknown document in Italy, especially in the context of Roman Catholicism.

Our particular perspective of minority Churches brought us to reflect on the role of Christianity in the frame of European integration. The debate on whether or not to mention "Christian roots" in the Preamble of the *Treaty for a European Constitution* rang an alarm bell: this is not because we deny Christian roots, but because we lived in the shadow of a majority and State religion, which was more concerned of its link with political power than it was of Christian witness. We will always remember what we experience and have experienced in the past as a minority Church, in a Europe open to other religions, which is becoming multi-cultural and multi-religious. For us, Italian Protestants, *laicità* of public institutions, meaning neutrality towards different faiths and religious confessions, is a *condicio sine qua non* in order to affirm the primal human right: freedom of religion and of thought.

DIRITTI – In Europe today we see the universality of human rights more and more challenged, theoretically by a seducing and dishonest relativism, practically in the daily life of European citizens and migrants in Europe. We have already mentioned the denial of human rights for asylum seekers and migrants. There is also the growing rate of poverty among indigenous people: a frail job market, the difficulty for young generations not only to build, but even to imagine a future, a hostile society towards the poor. All of this brought to the growth and spread of racist and xenophobic attitudes among ordinary people. Italian Protestant Churches are profoundly concerned of such a situation.

Youth condition in Italy is worsened also by an increasing devaluation of culture and education. As a matter of fact, there is no more a direct link between educational level and social position, with a general flattening towards the bottom. This, among other factors, contributes to strengthening criminal organisations, that can more and more easily recruit new people. In this situation, Churches must act with strength and promote Culture, a traditional role for two thousand years of European and Christian history.

Another step behind regards rights of women and of so-called sexual minorities, that are not considered *tout court* human rights, but privileges that may be conceded or not. In Italy, violence against women is a plague, which is not eradicated, but is maintained thanks to a conspiracy of silence. Moreover, we experience the contradiction of mass media talking of violence against women only if committed by a foreigner (thus promoting xenophobia), while quietly ignoring daily violence committed within home walls, much of it ending with death. There is also an increase of intolerance and violence towards homosexual and transsexual people, at all levels of population. While leaving aside the particular and free teaching of each Church, Italian Protestant Churches believe that integrity and dignity of human beings must be not only the aim but the foundation of our societies.

As a conclusion, we want to stress on the violence suffered by the environment, that is a source of our deep concern and that, at the same time, is caused by our own sin. Global warming, pollution, huge production of rubbish, a lifestyle that does not take into account the available energetic resources, privatisation of water are only some of the many examples of the havoc that human beings make of Creation. Moreover, Mediterranean countries suffer the desertification phenomenon. The Seventh Assembly of the *European Christian Environmental Network*, that took place in Italy, was an important occasion for our Churches to reflect and to begin an effective action for safeguarding a Creation, that the Lord entrusted to us, to be looked after for future generations.