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Welcome to General Assembly of CEC

Most Reverend Brothers and Sisters, Sisters and Brothers in Christ Welcome! Bienvenue! Herzlich willkommen! Dobra pozhalovat!

In our host country of Serbia this is the Week of Pentecost. For Western Churches we are just a week or so from Pentecost. Despite this I fear your President – outgoing President! – does not have the apostolic gift of tongues recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. So hereafter in English.

I do not intend to bore you by repeating my written Introduction/Foreword. But I simply remind you that CEC has in these last years been through a *metamorphosis*. We have changed structure and shape. In my written Introduction/Foreword I remind you of the journey from Lyons, ten years ago, through Budapest, five years ago, to today in Novi Sad, Serbia. But after reminding you of our changing history, I also emphasised that here at this Assembly we are looking for a renewed Christian vision for Europe; a Europe wider than the European Union as it is today, but also a Europe with a vision much wider than simple economic growth. So our themes of Witness, Justice and Hospitality.

What is the Churches' contribution to a vision for the Future of Europe?

First, we must remember our history. This is not all good news for a vision of Europe. There was the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. We give it a formal date in 1054 but it happened long before that, East and West having drifted apart with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the rise of the Holy Roman Empire, and the Crusades, and the continuance of the Eastern, Byzantine Roman Empire right up until the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks.

If you look at the modern divisions of Europe for a large part of the last century you will see that the 'Iron Curtain' came down, *roughly speaking*, where Eastern and Western Christianity also divided, or certainly where they met, usually in conflict. From Finland and Karelia in the North, through to the Balkans. Central Europe was a borderland with oscillations between Eastern and Western Christianity depending on the strength of the political powers that prevailed at that time.

And with the emergence of the Nation State in the 16th and 17th centuries also came the Reformation, which (unintentionally) divided Western Europe into Lutheran and Reformed and Counter-Reformation and Anglican camps – and which in continental Europe led to the Thirty Years' War and in Britain in the 17th century to the Civil War, which was also a war between Scotland and England. (I have just returned from a good visit to the General Assembly of the (Reformed) Church of Scotland!)

My point is this: in seeking a vision for Europe the Churches also need to be penitent. My brothers and sister we *too* have contributed to Europe's divisive wounds: *Kyrie Elison*.

I am *not* saying that the divisions of the Christian Church *caused* the terrible history of European wars in the 'modern' era. But they *did* contribute to it.

But not all our history is bad news. Religious tolerance came after the Peace of Westphalia (and even earlier in parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). In the 19th century a few Protestant and Catholic theologians (Schleiermacher and Möhler) began to study

intra-Christian divisions from a non-polemical perspective. Significantly, concerns for *world mission* brought Protestant denominations together in the 19th century, culminating in the Edinburgh Conference of 1912 – ironically two years before 1914. Thus ‘officially’ began the modern ecumenical movement, soon to be endorsed and joined by the Orthodox churches led by Constantinople and Russian theologians and, eventually, in the 1960ies by the Roman Catholic Church. The new ecumenical movement led to continuing contacts even between belligerent nations during the Second World War – as witnessed in the Swedish and British contacts with the Confessing Church in Germany. CEC itself became part of this *good* history during the Cold War, where *uniquely* Christians from either side of the Iron Curtain could meet and pray and deliberate. CEC’s reconciling role continued – usually behind the scenes – in the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland, (please pray for the ‘Brexit’ negotiations that an Irish border will *not* be re-entrenched), and also *here* in Serbia during the Serbian-Bosnian conflict.

On Sunday we shall pray by the side of the Danube, one of the great rivers of Europe. CEC last saw the Danube in Budapest five years ago. Above the Danube here sits the great fortress built by the Empress Maria Theresa as a bastion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire facing *on this side* of the river the Ottoman Turks. This city was once the border of Christendom. On Sunday we shall pray between two of the bridges which NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) countries bombed and destroyed. CEC believes in reconciliation, reconciliation between different political systems, between estranged cultures. And today this includes the complexity and opportunity not only of an ecumenical Europe (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) but also an interreligious Europe (Christian, Jewish, Muslim and others of faiths and yet others of no overt faith).

To help us discern a Christian vision for Europe we have our overarching theme of Witness, with the sub-themes of Justice and Hospitality, (μαρτυρία δικαιοσύνη φιλοξενία). Jesus in St John’s Gospel tells his disciples that ‘you (we!) are (his) witnesses’ (John 15.27) and this is as he promises the Advocate, the Counsellor, the Spirit of truth to his Church.

What then is our witness to Christ as Christians and as Churches in the advocacy of the Spirit? All over our continent are beautiful and historic church buildings, monasteries and cathedrals; monuments of the witness and evangelism of previous ages. But, at least in some places, there are few Christians inside them. How do we re-evangelise a partially secularised Europe? How can the churches be Gospel, good news in sceptical, faith-corrosive cultures? CEC needs to work on this, the big question for the future of the Christian faith in our continent. And we need to work on this question ecumenically, including with the Roman Catholic Church, with which CEC does have a ‘bolt-on’ regular partnership in COMECE and CCEE (Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community and Council of Bishops’ Conferences of Europe).

The re-evangelisation of Europe will require a *dialogue* with our cultures – a point emphasised to me recently by Patriarch Daniel of Romania. I agree. We shall not win hearts and minds by ‘loud-speaker’ evangelism. We also need to remember that Witness is always costly. The word μαρτυρία also came to mean martyr. Not far from the borders of Europe, on our borders indeed, Christians have been killed in the Middle East and North Africa for their profession of the faith of Jesus Christ. Our witness also has to be costly.

And for it to be good news it needs to include Justice. Justice in New Testament times is the opposite of evil. It certainly includes fairness and equity (as in the symbol of Justice as a sometimes blindfolded goddess holding scales in one hand and a sword in another). But in the New Testament Justice combines equity with an awareness of responsibility (*A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* third edition (BDAG) revised and ed Frederick William Danker, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p.247). It has a focus on *redemptive* action. This is why it is the root of the word ‘justification’, so important in theology, especially from the 16th century Reformation. To do justice is also to do redemption. There are profound implications in this Christian vision of redemptive, merciful justice when we think of justice and the contemporary economics

of Europe. Please excuse me as an Englishman for quoting Shakespeare on adding redemptive mercy to strict economic justice – as the New Testament does:

But mercy . . .
. . . is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
. . . Consider this,
That in the cause of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,
And the same prayer doth teach us all to remember
The deeds of mercy.

(*Merchant of Venice*)

Paul teaches us hospitality (Rom.12.13) φιλοξενία, literally the love of strangers, but it is there already in Genesis in Abraham's hospitality to the three mysterious visitors, angels, the presence of God the Trinity – as in the Rublev icon. This is the hospitality of God. And what does this teach us about a vision for Europe, with thousands, millions of men, women and children on and over our borders fleeing from war and destruction in our neighbouring Middle East and North Africa. There are no simplistic solutions and we must be genuinely sensitive to the vast problems faced by the governments of the 'border' countries – Greece, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania and here in Serbia. But how do other European states help those Governments? Hospitality, φιλοξενία is the *opposite* of something we now see in many parts of Europe, xenophobia. Xenophobia is *not* good news. Our witness must be good news, including of course good news for those who are tempted to xenophobia, those who are economically disenfranchised, those who are afraid, who feel marginalised, and whom populist politicians exploit by encouraging disdain, even hatred, of the 'other', 'the stranger'.

CEC's search for a renewed vision, a renewed witness to Christ with justice and hospitality implies a welcoming Church of Christ. Let me end with a poem by an Australian Christian, Mike Riddell, much engaged in the search for new ways of being a witnessing, just and hospitable Church. The poem is *Invitation to the Feast* a kind of modern Psalm 95, also echoing Jesus in St Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 11.28):

Come, all you who thirst,
all you who hunger for the bread of life,
all you whose souls cry out for healing;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are weary,
all you who are bowed down with worry,
all you who ache with the tiredness of living;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are poor,
all you who are without food or refuge,
all you who go hungry in a fat land;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are bitter,
all you whose hopes have tarnished into cynicism,
all you who feel betrayed and cannot forgive;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all who grieve,
all you who suffer loss as a fresh knife wound,
all you who curse the God you love;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are sinners,

all you who have sold the gift that is within you,
all you who toss uneasily in your bed at night;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are oppressed,
all you who have forgotten the meaning of freedom,
all you whose cries cut to the very heart of God;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are traitors,
all you who use your wealth and power to crucify God,
all you who cannot help yourselves;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are sick,
all you whose bodies have failed you,
all you who long above all for healing;
Come, come to the feast of life.

Come, all you who are lost,
all you who search for meaning but cannot find it,
all you who have no place of belonging;
Come, come to the feast of life.

The table of Jesus is your place of gathering.
Here you are welcomed, wanted, loved.
Here is a place set for you,
Come, come to the feast of life.

(Mike Riddell, *Invitation to the Feast*, in *Mass Culture: eucharist and mission in a post-modern world*, ed Pete Ward, The Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford, 1999)

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