

Justice and Peace Europe, 40 years later

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Dear friends of justice and peace!

Today we celebrate the 40th anniversary of our Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions. It will be “a joyful and solemn moment”, as it is written in the invitation for this General Assembly. Exco asked me to give a short speech on the history and the future of Justice and Peace Europe. So this speech should be short, joyful and solemn at the same time. I'll try my best.

28 years participating in the meetings of Justice and Peace Europe have been and still are a truly enriching experience that adds to my sense of idealism.

In October 1983 my first journey as secretary of Justice and Peace Netherlands took me to Paris, for a meeting of the so called “Continuity Committee” of the European Conference. This was not a coincidence. The president of the Dutch commission at that time, Dr Marga Klompé, had been president of the European Conference before, and as “ancien président” she continued to play an important role in the Conference. She was a fervent supporter of our cooperation at the European level, and already during our first encounter, even before I was appointed as secretary of the Dutch commission, she told me a lot about the international network of Justice and Peace, the structure at the European level, and the agenda of the Conference. Later she insisted that I should do my part. So, that's how I got involved.

Thomas Edward Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) once wrote: *“All people dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind, wake in the morning to find that is was vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous people, for they dream with open eyes, and make them come true”.*

In October 1971, 42 delegates of 12 national commissions (Belgium, Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark, England, France, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Switzerland) and of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace came together in Aachen, Germany, to exchange information and experiences between these recently established commissions and to discuss future cooperation. They acknowledged the need for an intensive consultation in view of what they expected: the future integration of Europe.

Someone must have removed the barriers between God and man so that the Spirit spoke directly to these people. They were the dreamers of the day, and their dream became true: they laid the foundation for the European Conference of Justice and Peace Commissions. A “continuity committee” with five members (from Belgium, England, Germany, France, Netherlands and Spain) was asked to prepare the second meeting which took place in Oostende, Belgium, in October 1972. There it was decided that every three years a European Conference should be organised, and that these conferences must be prepared by the “continuity committee”. This committee must also keep in touch with all European commissions, coordinate the activities whenever such is possible, and in exceptional cases act on behalf of the joint commissions. The Belgium commission (only one at that time!) accepted to preside over this committee.

The third European Conference took place in London, 1975; the fourth in Madrid, 1978. By that time commissions from Austria, Portugal and Scotland joined the club. In Madrid a new European presidency was elected: the Dutch commission, and it was decided that the continuity committee should have a rotating presidency every three years. The agenda of this meeting was quite extensive: European development policy, the new style of life, human rights, the relations between the Pontifical and the national commissions, the plan of Brazilian bishops to organize an international conference on domination; letters of protest were sent to the Polish Government, to Czech authorities, to the presidents of El Salvador, Brazil and South Korea, and letters of support to the Argentine and Brazilian bishops.

The 1981 conference in Chantilly, France, made a deliberate and successful endeavour to limit the discussions to one subject. The theme of the Conference was human rights education. The French commission took over the presidency, and the continuity committee was enlarged with a Swiss delegate, as a possible successor to the French. It's no surprise that the 1984 conference in Zürich under the Swiss presidency dealt with "the international banking system and the debt of the Third World".

The conference of 1990 in Dublin was a landmark. The conference theme was "European unification". Several new commissions from Central and Eastern Europe were able to participate. In order to strengthen the cooperation between the commissions a new structure was introduced with an annual General Assembly for all members of the European Conference, and a liaison committee.

The 1991 General Assembly adopted the *Dublin declaration: reflection on Justice and Peace Europe, twenty-five years after "Populorum Progressio"*. It's still a valuable document. Three areas in particular were examined: the question of peace and security in the whole of Europe; exclusion of minorities and marginalized groups; and the relationship of Europe with developing countries of the South.

1993: the two Belgium commissions accepted the presidency, two co-presidents, male and female; they proposed a three year plan "Europe solidaire; solidarity with the South and with Central and Eastern Europe". They also introduced the concept of study days connected with the General Assembly. The Belgium, Dutch and French commissions formed the Working Group Europe and set up a project to strengthen cooperation with the new commissions from Central and Eastern Europe. In 1995 the Austrian commission organised the first encounter with neighbours (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Croatia). A Structural Aid Programme was introduced to support these commissions. Justice and Peace Europe participated in the NGO-Forum of the 1995 UN Social Summit in Copenhagen together with CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis.

The European Conference got a high profile, and this was further developed under the Dutch presidency 1996/1999. The Human Rights Working Group established contacts with the Council of Europe. The Working Group Ecumenical Process was invited to participate in the preparation for the 2nd European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, 1997. Justice and Peace Europe organised workshops on Social Justice, Truth and Reconciliation, and Poverty in Europe.

In 2002 the European Conference obtained consultative status with the Council of Europe. The German Presidency 2005/2008 with for the first time a bishop – president, introduced several new initiatives: the STAR programme to support commissions in Central and Eastern Europe, the Association as a new legal entity of the European Conference, Exposure and Dialogue Programmes, symbolic acts, and concerted actions with a political dimension, for example the project on poverty in Europe with an exhibition in Strasbourg to give expression to the themes of hunger, exclusion and despair.

Looking back at our 40 years history, one can observe the capacity of our European Conference to adapt itself to the developments in church and society, its desire to read the signs of the time and to respond to the new challenges. A history to be proud of and a solid basis for the future.

Dear friends of Justice and Peace. In the 16th and 17th century art we often find the theme of the “stages of life” where people in their forties and fifties are usually portrayed on the top of the “ladder of life”. Those in the forties are in a hurry because there is so much to achieve in a short time to come. To Justice and Peace Europe in its forties I want to say (using the words of Pope Paul VI from *Populorum Progressio*): “We must make haste”.

Cooperation between commissions is the only way in which the challenges of today and tomorrow can be met - even though achieving such a cooperation can be a challenge in itself, and even frustrating at times. And yet there is no other way. The need for cooperation has never been greater. The political and societal issues facing us today are serious: social and economic injustices, migration, unemployment, discrimination, various forms of oppression that restrict human rights, the millions of refugees and displaced people, global warming which endangers life on earth -- they transcend national boundaries. But we also need our Conference as a tool - for learning about each other, and for empowering and supporting each other.

In 1971, 40 years ago, the Vatican Synod of Bishops framed “Justice in the World”, a document which has set the justice and peace agenda for decades. This Synod looked at practical ways to implement the 2nd Vatican Council and gave particular concern on how to articulate the concern for justice as it was expressed in the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. It has become the reason why today our Church has such a variety of justice and peace commissions on all levels, from the Vatican to local parish committees all over the world.

As the 1971 Synod fathers stated: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel”. We need to do more to share the social mission of our Church. This poses a serious challenge for all of us, because as many of us know justice and peace commissions and offices today risk to be downsized or even terminated because of Church politics and financial restraints. But our mandate is still valid. Despite a diminishing support, we will have to continue to call attention to social justice issues. Just as our founding fathers and mothers we should become dreamers of the day; we dream with open eyes and make them come true. Only together we can plan and implement a realistic and effective strategy to strengthen the capacity of our European Justice and Peace Conference and its 30 members to pursue the Church’s social mission in the promotion of international justice and solidarity.

Happy 40th anniversary!