
Conference of European Churches (CEC)
Conférence des Eglises européennes (KEK)
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen (KEK)

Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae (CCEE)
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Joint News Release with the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE)

“New challenges for the Churches’ witness in Europe”

Meeting of the CCEE-CEC Joint Committee in Geneva

The Joint Committee of the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences has underlined the need for common witness by Christians to tackle new spiritual, demographic, political and economic challenges facing the continent.

At its 26-28 January meeting in Geneva, the committee also highlighted the necessity to support members of parishes and local churches who are affected by such developments.

This year's meeting marked the 40th anniversary of the creation in 1972 of the Joint Committee, which is the highest body for dialogue between CEC and CCEE, and takes place annually.

In his opening remarks, the President of CEC, Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, described the current economic crisis as one of the issues “that raise questions about the ability of Europe to bring about a sustainable policy for the European Union”. Such a policy needed to respect at the same time human dignity, the environment and cultural diversity.

The President of CCEE, Cardinal Péter Erdő, from Hungary, noted that the meeting came at the end of the worldwide Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18-25 January 2012).

He described ecumenical commitment as a necessity that needs to involve all Christians rather than being the work of a few experts. “The Catholic Church is committed to this path of ecumenism,” he said.

Working for ecumenism is not only a human effort but also a spiritual task that required the prayers of all Christians in the assurance that visible unity is a gift of God, Cardinal Erdő stated. He spoke of the new evangelisation, which in recent years has guided the work of Catholic faithful. This could not take place without being placed in an ecumenical dimension, the cardinal said.

In a presentation to the meeting on its main theme, Dr Alister McGrath, professor of theology at King's College, London, described the development of a secular or “atheist” position in Europe. Religion is seen as being a private matter that ought not to impact on the public domain. A secular position is regarded, incorrectly, as a neutral position.

Religious institutions had been caught up in a general suspicion of institutions such as governments, banks and corporations “on account of their power, lack of transparency, vested interests, and financial recklessness”. While there is a widespread interest in “spirituality”, this is seen as a personal and individual matter, not necessarily being linked to institutional affiliation.

Moreover, churches needed to respond to a widespread concern following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 that religion fosters extremism. They needed to find ways to be seen as offering both historic and contemporary voices of moderation, Dr McGrath said, “able to generate social capital, promote toleration, and above all to encourage ways of thinking that avoid fanaticism”.

The “new atheism” in some parts of Europe has at the same time generated immense public interest in the issue of God, he noted. Here churches have an opportunity to engage in the intellectual debate, and to show Christian faith as a force for good in society.

Professor Gian Carlo Blangiardo, lecturer in demographics at Milano-Bicocca University, focussed on the demographic challenges facing churches and society. He noted a significant fall in the birth rate in European countries coupled with an ageing population. Such developments are creating significant challenges for European welfare systems. At the same time, demographic changes are leading to new patterns of family life. Marriage rates had fallen almost everywhere during the past 40 years, Professor Blangiardo said, while an increasing number of children are born outside marriage. Against this background, he urged churches to find ways of reinforcing the family.

Alongside discussion of major trends facing Europe, the Joint Committee examined local and pastoral experiences of churches, and theological and practical answers to the new challenges.

The Rev. Cordelia Kopsch from Germany, a vice-president of CEC, said that in many places churches are facing decreasing membership and finances. At the same time, they are trying to deal with a spiritual crisis, the financial and economic crisis, and changes in society, such as a growing number of migrants and the need for more interreligious dialogue.

She urged churches to “withstand the temptation to draw back from their presence in the public sphere because it is the credibility of their public witness which is at stake”.

Mgr Matthias Heinrich, the auxiliary Bishop of Berlin, described how in a largely secular environment his diocese is trying to relay the Christian message through word and deed. This required an “inner evangelization” to strengthen the faith of Christians within the church to equip them for the “outer evangelization” of the wider society.

An evangelizing church needed to open up and not be afraid to enter the public realm. Such a presence could be achieved only “by the testimony of Christians in their working and living environment as well as the presence of the church in the public sphere”. The church should use opportunities such as collaboration with the secular media, being present in the fields of education and culture, and finding ways to demonstrate Christian faith through diaconal activity, Mgr Heinrich said.

The Very Rev. Rauno Pietarinen of the Orthodox Church of Finland described the pastoral challenges at local level that resulted from the current economic crisis. Here the church had the task to bring hope to situations that to individuals appeared hopeless. Archbishop Józef Michalik of Przemyśl, spoke of the encouraging experience of the new evangelisation in Poland. There was, however, still the need for a continuing presence by Christians in the public arena, and there are many areas where the world is awaiting a witness to the courage of faith.

During its three-day meeting, the Joint Committee heard reports on the European economic and political situation, the work of churches with Roma people, and future cooperation on dialogue with Muslims in Europe.

Participants visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, where they met representatives of the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the ACT Alliance, the

international church-related humanitarian network. They also met members of local churches, and were received by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Apostolic Nuncio and the Holy See's Permanent Observer to the United Nations and other International Organisations in Geneva.

The Joint Committee expressed solidarity with Christians facing difficult situations in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, and especially in Egypt and Syria, as well as expressing concern for victims of violence in Nigeria.

Members of CCEE-CEC Joint Committee who participated at the 2012 meeting:

CEC

His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, Ecumenical Patriarchate, CEC President
Bishop Christopher Hill, Church of England, CEC Vice-president
OKRin Cordelia Kopsch, EKD United, Germany, CEC Vice-president
His Eminence Metropolitan Arsenios of Austria, Ecumenical Patriarchate
Rev. Rauno Pietarinen, Orthodox Church of Finland
Dr. Joanna J. Matuszewska, Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland
Rev Claire Sixt-Gateuille, Reformed Church of France

Rev. Dr. Kaisamari Hintikka, Interim Director Churches in Dialogue

CCEE

His Eminence Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, CCEE President
His Grace Mgr Józef Michalik, Archbishop of Przemyśl, CCEE Vice-president
His Lordship Mgr Vasile Bizau, Bishop of Maramures
His Lordship Mgr Matthias Heinrich, Auxiliary Bishop of Berlin
Mgr Piotr Mazurkiewicz, ComECE General Secretary

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The Conference of European Churches (CEC) is a communion of 120 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all the countries of Europe, and of 40 associated organisations. It was established in 1959 and has offices in Geneva, Brussels and Strasbourg.

To the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) belong, as members, the current 33 European Bishops' Conferences of this Continent, represented by right by their Presidents, and the Archbishops of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of Chişinău (Moldova Rep.) and the Eparchial Bishop of Mukachevo. The President is Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Primate of Hungary; the Vice-Presidents are Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa, and Mgr Józef Michalik, Archbishop of Przemyśl. The General Secretary is Mgr Duarte da Cunha. The Secretariat is based at St Gallen (Switzerland).