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NEWS RELEASE

European Christian-Muslim Conference Malines/Brussels, 20-23 October 2008

CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS: EUROPEAN CITIZENS AND PEOPLE OF FAITH From suspicion to trust

The European Christian-Muslim Conference (20-23 October 2008) was attended by 45 Christian and Muslim representatives from 16 European nations.

The Conference was organised by the CCEE-CEC Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe (CRME), an ecumenical body established in 1986 by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) in order to inform and support the Churches in Europe in their encounter with Islam and to increase relations with Muslims.

The Conference was organised within the framework of the European Year for Interreligious Dialogue and with the financial support of the European Union.

At Malines, participants tackled the theme *Being a citizen of Europe and a person of faith. Christians and Muslims as active partners in European societies.*

Three features distinguish our European societies: religious pluralism; State religions and philosophical neutrality; and democratic systems. Today, every major religion has moved from the geographical area in which it was born and has become worldwide. Mobility, migration and means of communication have played a major part in the global presence of religion. In Europe, despite the diversity of the agreements which regulate the relationships between the Churches and the States, one notices that the States are increasingly neutral regarding preferences toward specific religions. On the other hand, in a pluralist society, religions accept the democratic systems of the State for the achievement of the common good. From this starting point, the Malines Conference was not a meeting focussing simply on close relations between participants, but an opportunity to listen, an opportunity for respect and to search for a common future. The Conference was not limited to talking about dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but witnessed a real frank and fraternal dialogue, with the adoption of a common declaration. In this the Conference was an experience of true and proper active citizenship.

Opening the meeting, Rev. Jean-Arnold de Clermont, CEC President, outlined the aim of the Conference as an exchange of the spiritual richness of the religions in order to offer them to a world in search of improvement. If it does not wish to withdraw into itself, Europe cannot avoid dialogue with Islam, just as the Muslim countries cannot avoid dialogue with Europe about human rights and political and religious independence. Being a citizen of Europe and a person of faith means accepting this experience acquired by European culture and, at the same time, demonstrating, through one's own diversity, openness to dialogue and the establishment of a common future.

The Conference then opened with a presentation on the theme of the meeting from both Christian and Muslim perspectives.

The identity of a person of faith, the family, integration and freedom of religion were the themes at the heart of the presentation from Imam Yahya Sergio Yahe Pallavicini, President of CO.RE.IS. National identity does not appear to be opposed to the identity of the believer. The identity of a person of faith is that of a man or woman who, believing in certain spiritual principles and universal laws, respects the law of his or her country and contributes to the richness of his/her society and the culture of his/her people. In reflecting on the family, the Coreis President saw another possible theme for collaboration between Christians and Muslims in Europe. It is in the family, in fact, that the inter-generational transmission of values, such as those linked to the sacredness of life and the human person, happens. To encourage the integration of Muslims in Europe it is necessary to invest in people not in bricks or requalification policies for urban suburbs. An intellectual elite of European Muslims must be created, formed and supported. In the debate on religious freedom in various parts of the world, too, Europe is called to be a model of the collaboration existing between Christians and Muslims who share the principles of respect for freedom of religion and the democratic system.

Europe as a model for peaceful coexistence in the world was also at the centre of the address given by Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, CCEE Vice-President. He identified five areas in which Christians and Muslims are called more and more to become active partners in European societies. First of all, the defence of freedom of religion and of conscience. The search for truth and openness to the transcendent are part of human nature. This search and this openness can only be free. That implies freedom to believe, to express one's faith, to celebrate, teach and manifest it. This religious freedom implies respect for freedom of conscience: that is, the possibility of freely accepting a religion or abandoning it.

Secondly, rejecting exclusion. One of the dangers of the introduction of Muslims into Europe is the situation in which a certain number of immigrants often find themselves – precarious situations on the 'margins' of society, or excluded, which can give rise to a radical rejection of the West.

A third area of work can be identified in the common defence of a certain number of human values: the family, respect for the dignity of the human person, social justice, the environment. The fourth area of work is that of dialogue between cultures: Europe must say to the rest of the world that reconciliation and peace are possible. For this, collaboration between Christians and Muslims in Europe is absolutely necessary. From its origins Europe wished to be more than just an economic adventure, but a spiritual project linked historically to the desire for reconciliation after two world wars. Therefore, at the heart of this project lies the conviction that war resolves nothing. Finally, the last area of work identified by Cardinal Ricard concerned world promotion of human values within the framework of "reciprocity".

Subsequently, participants worked in seminars on the following three themes: the role of religions in secular society; the challenges facing Christian and Muslim communities and how to promote mutual respect and understanding through education.

Christians and Muslims sense that Europe is a real "workshop" for experiencing new relations between them. A workshop for Muslims who see in Europe a new context for the expression of their faith in encountering a secularised, lay society where religion is often excluded or relegated to the sphere of the confidential and private. A workshop for Christians who experience their ecumenical diversity in the dialogue with Islam. A workshop for a Europe reclaiming the legacy of human rights and democracy, but which has often excluded the religious dimension which is an essential element of human identity. Above all, it is necessary that Christians and Muslims work together to promote values of real tolerance and

public spiritedness, to bring about a healing of memories and to make European citizens aware of their roots and deeds in order to understand them, and finally to put back religious anthropology as an essential part of human existence. Then there is also work to be done on public opinion and the media.

The Conference looked with interest at the Catholic-Muslim Forum called for 4-5 November 2008 and the successive meeting of a delegation from the group of 138 Muslim scholars who sent the Open Letter, A Common Word, with Pope Benedict XVI. This expresses a will for dialogue on a spiritual-sacred foundation, free from political and ideological conditioning.

On Tuesday 21 October participants took part in a public event during which they met Dr Jorge César das Neves, an expert on dialogue with religions, churches and faith-based communities from the European Commission, who spoke on the theme *Does politics need religion? Expectations towards Christians and Muslims in Europe*.

The Conference ended on the morning of 23 October 2008 with the adoption of a common declaration (available on the website www.ccee.ch – featured today).

Malines, 27 October 2008

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) is a communion of 125 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches of all European countries, and 40 associated organisations. It was founded 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 and of the Principality of Monaco and the Bishop of Chisinau (Moldavia). The President is Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Primate of Hungary; the Vice-Presidents are Cardinal Josip Bosanic, Archbishop of Zagreb, and Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, Archbishop of Bordeaux. The General Secretary is Fr Duarte da Cunha. The Secretariat is based at St Gallen (Switzerland).