

Protecting Human Dignity at a Time of Economic Crisis:
Final Statement of the International Workshop of Justice and Peace Europe

October 2014

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, representing 22 national commissions of Catholic Bishops' Conferences, has come to Greece for an International Workshop on theme of Human Dignity and Economic Crisis. In Greece the impact of the crisis has been particularly stark and visible, with people taking to the streets to protest about the widespread unemployment and its consequences. We have come here to reflect on the threats to, and offences against, human dignity that have emerged, and learn about models of good practice for the protection of human dignity.

During the workshop we spent time with the NGOs Praxis and Klimaka, which are providing valuable social outreach initiatives. We visited the Amigdaleza detention centre for people seeking asylum and the Society for the Care of Minors, which looks after under-age migrants. We met with representatives of political parties and the proceedings were opened with a lecture from Prof. Vassilis Karydis, Deputy Ombudsman, who outlined current challenges with reference to the relevant human rights legislative framework.

In an address to the United Nations in May 2014, Pope Francis called for an end to the “economy of exclusion” through actions that will have “a real impact on the structural causes of poverty and hunger, attain more substantial results in protecting the environment, ensure dignified and productive labor for all, and provide appropriate protection for the family”.¹ Similarly, the experience of the NGOs we visited underlines the necessity of ensuring that the basic needs of all members of society are met. People cannot access employment and successfully integrate into society when they are homeless, have no income, or require treatment for physical or mental health issues. These organisations have adopted a person-centred approach, which recognises that our initial response to the most vulnerable must be based on need. In the short-term, the community and voluntary sector plays a vital role in supporting the most marginalised and excluded. The sustainability of these initiatives, in the context of sharp increases in requests for assistance, is a major concern.

While NGOs make a crucial contribution to the alleviation of pressing social need, the structural and systemic factors that trap people in cycles of poverty and deprivation can only be addressed by a change of policy at government level. Policy responses should be informed by the holistic approach to complex needs exemplified by the organisations we visited. Investment in models which empower people to integrate in society and make their contribution benefits the whole of society. During our workshop we saw positive examples of social economy initiatives. These should be further developed and explored as a way of helping individuals and communities to become actively engaged in improving their situation.

From the political representatives we learned about the depth of political alienation that has emerged in Greek society. The crisis has been experienced not only as a political crisis, but also a moral and social crisis, which requires a fundamental change in direction. Those who are suffering the consequences of the economic crisis are frustrated at the systemic failures of leadership and policy that have prioritised financial considerations over basic human rights and wellbeing. The challenge for political leaders, at both a national and EU level, has to be to rebuild trust, by clearly prioritising

¹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140509_consiglio-nazioni-unite.html

the needs of people above the demands of the market, thereby inspiring people to re-engage with democratic processes in order to build a Europe of democracy and solidarity. The experience in Greece highlights the need for fairer taxation and investment policies, ensuring that the tax burden is distributed in accordance with the principles of social justice, that tax evasion is effectively combatted and that regulation of the financial sector ensures that financial institutions serve the common good.

Lasting solutions to these problems will need to be supported by policies at European level that put the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre. In ten days' time, on 17th October, high-level government representatives from the 47 members of the Council of Europe will meet in Turin to critically examine the progress towards the implementation of the European Social Charter. Together with other NGOs, Justice and Peace Europe will take part in a parallel meeting to mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. These meetings provide a valuable opportunity to reinforce our commitment to the protection of social and economic rights, enshrined in the Social Charter.

A further priority area identified during our workshop is the area of immigration policy and asylum. In Greece, as in many other EU countries, migrants and people seeking asylum are being kept in conditions that fall far short of our responsibility to protect human dignity. The practice of keeping these people, including victims of violence and trauma, in detention in conditions of imprisonment, is a grave injustice. In such conditions, provision for physical and mental health and wellbeing are glaringly inadequate. The right to family life is not respected. The experience is particularly damaging for young people during critical years of their development.

Solidarity and shared responsibility need to be the defining values of our immigration policy at EU level. In practice, this would mean additional supports for those countries which, for reasons of geographical location, are receiving a higher volume of migrants. Dialogue and engagement with countries of origin will be of central importance. In the case of Greece, an important contribution would be to exempt the Greek Government from the obligation to co-funding that is attached to the EU Refugee Fund. As a result of this condition, valuable initiatives that are supporting the integration of migrants risk losing their funding in the near future.

At the conclusion of our workshop, we wish to express our sincere gratitude to our hosts, the Justice and Peace Commission of Greece and the Greek Catholic Church for their willingness to share their experiences. We thank all the organisations that hosted our workshops for giving us an insight into their work. We take back from this experience many valuable insights for our own national contexts and our work at European level. In the community and voluntary and faith-based sectors in Greece we have seen inspiring examples of people who, in spite of limited means, are making a significant difference to the lives and wellbeing of others. This encourages all of us to begin with what we can, as even small initiatives can make an important impact.

The participants of the International Workshop and General Assembly first met in Athens and went on to Corinth. Thus, the gathering became a pilgrimage as well. On Saturday 4th October they celebrated Mass at Areos Pagos Hill at the foot of the Acropolis, where the Apostle St. Paul gave his famous sermon to the Athenians. The Mass, the first public Mass in modern times for Catholics, was presided by Bishop William Kenney, the outgoing President of Justice and Peace Europe. After Mass participants unfurled a banner which read: "Change life now: all and everywhere", which was the key phrase of St. Paul's sermon. Re-tracing the footsteps of the Apostle, on the following Sunday, the group celebrated another Mass on the site of the ancient Corinth.