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„Do not deny justice to your poor people“

Lecture at the meeting on „New Ways of Solidarity: A joint commitment to combating poverty and social exclusion“

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Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

„Do not deny justice to your poor people“ (Ex 23,6) is one of the commandments given to God's people in the Old Testament. And, with that, something new happens: care for the poor and the weak, for the foreigner, for the ill or the disabled is suddenly no longer a question of charity but a question of rights. The poor who possess nothing they can depend on, the foreigners who were just a reserve of cheap labour, now acquire rights. And with these rights they obtain a dignity which puts them on a level with everyone else – irrespective of their origin or their income.

The starting-point is the inalienable dignity of the person

„Do not deny justice to your poor people“. We chose this title for the common position paper of the Churches in Europe, Caritas and the diaconal organisations because it shows clearly the starting-point for our reflection: every person has a legal right to live in dignity. The realisation of this legal right applies no matter where in Europe somebody lives, who his/her parents are or in which ethnic group he/she was born. In the commandments of the Bible, which are the starting point for our reflection, poverty suddenly acquires a human face. It is no longer impersonal and anonymous. It becomes clear that it concerns every single person and the question of how he or she can lead a dignified life.

Implementation of the new legal basis of the EU

„Do not deny justice to your poor people“. We also chose this title because the Lisbon Treaty has given the European Union a new legal system. In giving the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union the same legal value as the primary law of the Union, and in formulating common goals and values and the social clause, the new EU Treaty offers a new legal basis for the work of the Union which has not yet been transposed into the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Social policy is now, first and foremost, legal policy! Therefore, one of the demands of the Churches, of Caritas and diaconal organisations is to work very consciously for the implementation of the new legal system of the European Union, and to bring into being the corresponding work programming and reporting obligations of the Commission and the Council as well as of the Fundamental Rights Agency. As provided for in the social clause, we would like the fight against poverty and the protection of fundamental rights to become a horizontal dimension of all the activities of the Union and its member states. Only thus can poverty be fought effectively. Otherwise the problem will be that budget cuts in the individual EU member states will produce exactly that poverty which the EU is supposed to be combating.

A new system of subsidiarity in the EU

We are convinced that the values and aims in the new treaty must lead to a new system of subsidiary co-operation in the EU. Already it does not make sense that economic policy decisions are taken at the European level, while social policy decisions remain a quite separate national responsibility. The EU needs a new system of subsidiarity to guarantee coherence between economic, social and environmental policies. This would genuinely be "intelligent, sustainable and integrative" (EU Strategy 2020). The economically most successful countries in the European Union are those which have the most developed systems of social protection - and this is no coincidence. Far from being a mere afterthought to economic policy, social protection and the advancement of the poor and the vulnerable are a crucial prerequisite for a successful economic policy.

This system of subsidiarity should not, however, stop at the level of member states, but it should go on to include civil society organisations such as Churches, Caritas and diaconal organisations as these are closest to the people. The planned platform against poverty can become a model for future policy-making in the EU if the European institutions, the member states and the civil society actors cooperate effectively in it. Therefore, we have very clearly formulated our claim to work with this platform.

Justice in participation and in distribution

„Do not deny justice to your poor people.“ Participatory justice and distributive justice belong inseparably together. Minimum wages high enough for people to live on ("living wages"), adequate minimum income schemes, the fight against homelessness and guaranteed access to services of general interest are core areas in which we must protect the rights of the poor and the excluded much better than we have done so far. It is intolerable that a child gets no chance to make use of his or her abilities and talents in society simply because it was born in a Roma family in Italy or France or because there is still an educational system in Germany which sorts out pupils according to their social origin.

Questioning growth and consumption

„Do not deny justice to your poor people.“ The Bible speaks in remarkable way of "your poor people". Poor and rich, strong and weak, belong together. We are concerned when decision-makers in many areas of the economy and society avoid taking responsibility for the common good. After years in which we have seen economic values taking over all areas of life, making freedom, self-interest and consumption the dominant values, the question is how we can strengthen principles like solidarity, sustainability and restraint again. An important question is indeed how we measure prosperity in our society. It is high time for new indicators which should replace our fixation on the gross domestic product.

A European year of wealth

„Do not deny justice to your poor people.“ The EU has incredible riches at its disposal: 500 million people with enormous potential and – I assume – the readiness to make the most of it. What a waste of resources it is if we deprive 80 million of them of the chance of making a contribution to society because they have no job or because they do not have enough to live on. The Churches, Caritas and Diaconia do not have the ideal solutions to all questions. But we would like to join you into a process in which we think together about what we can do, so that in the end we can say that in fact it has not been a European Year of Poverty but a year of wealth for Europe because it has helped us to bring back into our society the wealth of skills and potential of those 80 million poor people of the EU.