

Dialogue Seminar

**Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion
In the Framework of the EU 2020 Strategy**

Welcome

**by Rev Rüdiger Noll, Director of the Church and Society Commission of
the Conference of European Churches**

Dear M. Thebault,
Dear friends,

On behalf of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches it is my pleasure to wholeheartedly welcome you to this Dialogue Seminar.

I want to thank you, M. Thebault for your warm words of welcome and for your short introduction, which brings us right into the centre of the issues, which we want to address here today in view of the European Year to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion and in view of the EU 2020 Strategy.

Every year, the European Union dedicates the calendar year to a theme, which deserves our special attention. The churches and religious communities have contributed to almost every of these special themes in recent years. I want to recall in particular the many activities of churches in the year dedicated to inter-cultural dialogue. But not often have I seen churches being so much engaged as in this year's theme on combating poverty and social exclusion.

No wonder, though:

- Caring for the most vulnerable in our societies belongs to the core of being the church. And this does not only include taking care of the victims of poverty, injustice and social exclusion, but this also includes the advocacy for the rights of the vulnerable in our societies and for the development of a political framework that aims at avoiding victims.

It is against this background, that we welcome the European Year on Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion and it is against this background

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that we have offered our contribution to this year's theme as well as to the EU 2020 Strategy. And we will continue to do so. Together with Eurodiaconia and Caritas Europe, CEC and COMECE are in the process of organising the next event in the European Parliament in September of this year.

- Churches and their specialised organisations are the biggest non-governmental service provider in the social and healthcare sector in Europe.

One of our strategic advantages as churches in this regard is that we are organised locally with a direct access to the people. As churches we know about people's concerns and their living conditions and the churches offer their good services to those who need them and often depend on them. But besides having access to the people on the local level, churches are also organised nationally, regionally and globally. In addressing and cooperating with the European Institutions, we aim at keeping these different perspectives together. Churches speak from their local experience when addressing governments and political institutions.

- And last but not least, the churches offer an extraordinary network for communication. A single year on combating poverty and social exclusion will certainly not be enough to make a great difference. Special European Years, however, offer an opportunity to raise awareness. The message, which we need to get across in 2010, is: "Poverty and social exclusion is an issue not only for those affected and for politicians; it is an issue and a challenge for each individual."

We are looking forward to an assessment at the end of this year, whether we have made a difference to this effect and we are looking forward to being part of developing the flagship programmes of the EU 2020 Strategy as a longer term perspective beyond 2010.

We are meeting parallel to the informal meeting of the European Ministers for Social Affairs and Employment. We are, therefore, particularly grateful that Commissioner Andor will join us later today coming from the meeting with the European Ministers.

Yesterday, in preparation of today's meeting of the European Ministers, the EU Presidency met with the social partners. At that meeting the Vice Prime Minister of Belgium, Madame Joëlle Milquet said: "this is a key moment for choices to be made on the European level, both regarding the EU 2020 Strategy and the future of economic governance".

Just as yesterday's meeting with the social partners, this dialogue meeting between the European Commission, the EU Presidency and the churches also comes in good time to make its contribution to the process. And it should not be regarded as a single event, rather as a moment of strengthening an ongoing process. The churches stand ready to make their contribution. In this Dialogue Seminar we want to identify concrete possibilities of cooperation with regard to combating poverty and social exclusion as well as with regard to the EU 2020 Strategy. The churches want to be and must be a strong partner for the

European Institutions when it comes, for instance, to establishing a European Social Platform.

Let me close my words of welcome by expressing my thanks to the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), and in particular to Mr Jorge César das Neves, with whom we enjoy a long-standing and fruitful cooperation, for having embarked with us on yet another Dialogue Seminar on a crucial theme. We regard the well established Dialogue Seminars as one element in implementing Art 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on the "open, transparent and regular dialogue" between the European Union and the communities of faith and conviction.

I also wish to thank in advance all speakers and all participants from all over Europe for their participation and for their contributions. Last but not least, I want to include in my thanks all those who have helped in organising this Dialogue Seminar before or behind the scenes.

Welcome to all of you and thank you for coming. I am sure that we are looking forward to an exciting discussion!