Message from His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches

Novi Sad, Serbia, 3 June 2018)

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is exactly five years since the Conference of European Churches (CEC) held its last General Assembly in Budapest, Hungary, asking itself questions about its mission in the context of a Europe in disarray, due to a double crisis: economic and arising from migration. This crisis has left profound impacts on our continent, inviting it to rethink itself as a place of welcome and openness. The temptation to turn in on itself, and to harden identities, has put at risk the European ideal of living together. In addition, European federalism has been imperilled by the revival of nationalism and policies of ‘going it alone’ that favour isolationism and weaken the European fabric.

These difficulties are, however, opportunities for the Christians of Europe to rethink their place, their mission and their vocation. Europe has never needed Christians as much as it does today. The constant commitment of the churches and Christian communities in Europe testify to a true spiritual growth by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The holy apostle Paul offers us a summary: “By the contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” (Gal 5:22-25).

Living by the Spirit is certainly something we must experience in the days that lie ahead. The spiritual life of a Christian is by no means cut off from the world. On the contrary, it forms and develops in contact with the world. Even in its most radical forms, monasticism has never ceased to be in relation with the world, and continues pray for it without ceasing. Therefore we must be aware, not only of the aim of this gathering, but also of the responsibility it brings for its participants, i.e. to truly and tangibly incarnate the fruits of the Spirit, which will permit us to re-establish Christian unity in the communion of the Church of Christ. In the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (2016), we can read: “The Church lives not for herself. She offers herself for the whole of humanity in order to raise up and renew the world into new heavens and a new earth (cf. Rev 21:1). Hence, she gives Gospel witness and distributes the gifts of God in the world: His love, peace, justice, reconciliation, the power of the Resurrection and the expectation of eternal life (Preamble)”.

This General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches invites us to be witnesses to Christ. “You will be my witnesses (Acts 1:8)”. These words drawn from the Acts of the Apostles are not just an instruction, or invitation. They are a commandment
given us by Christ as he rejoins the heavenly Father after his resurrection. The condition of witness to Christ is therefore inseparable from the work of the Spirit, the comforter whom the Logos sends down upon us like a deifying grace. But it is not just a matter of receiving it—we have to live this grace. Because, as the holy apostle James writes: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (Jn 2:17).”

Our churches today are confronted with many great challenges and are called to set priorities. In our opinion, there are three issues that are most urgent, that express the true spirit of CEC and must continue to motivate its work: a) the situation of Eastern Christians; b) human rights, and c) environmental protection.

a) The Ecumenical Patriarchate participates in the regional destinies of Eastern Christians. We think it necessary to do all in our power to allow Christians to stay in this regional cradle of Christianity. Our Christian brothers and sisters constitute a link that connects us directly with the history and economy of salvation. At the same time, they participate in the pluri-confessional and multi-religious destiny of this region. Their fate is also linked to the migration crisis affecting Europe. It is necessary to thoroughly rethink this issue. At the Holy and Great Council held in Crete, the Orthodox Church solemnly expressed its anxiety and concern about the Christians in the Middle East in their precarious situation:

“The Orthodox Church is particularly concerned about the situation of Christians and of other persecuted ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East. In particular, she addresses an appeal to governments of countries in the region to protect Christian populations – Orthodox, Ancient Eastern – and other Christians – who have survived in the cradle of Christianity. The indigenous Christians and other populations enjoy the inalienable right to remain in their countries as citizens with equal rights.

We therefore urge all parties involved, irrespective of religious convictions, to work for reconciliation and respect for human rights, first of all through the protection of the divine gift of life. The war and bloodshed must be brought to an end, and justice must prevail so that peace can be restored and so that it becomes possible for those that have been exiled to return to their ancestral lands (...) (Encyclical, §18).

b) Europe is, and must remain, attached to the protection of human rights. Human rights are at the core of political culture. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948), of which we are celebrating the 70th anniversary this year, calls human rights “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”. Unfortunately, the fact that the West has overemphasised individual rights has led non-Western cultures to assimilate human rights with individualism and to underestimate social values, thereby ignoring their deeper humanitarian content, which is linked inextricably to the values of “liberty, equality, fraternity”.

Human rights are deeply enshrined in Europe’s Christian tradition. Our Churches’ faithfulness to these traditions is in itself a contribution to the culture of human rights and the strengthening of European identity. With respect to the contribution of the Orthodox Church and its theology to European development we consider that it consists in highlighting the social content of freedom, the “culture of the human person”, along with friendly relations and peaceful coexistence among the peoples. In our eyes, Europe is a project based on solidarity, freedom, justice and peace, after the terrible experience of two disastrous world wars, and it is not an economic association operating on the basis of the principle that “the economy is a law unto itself”.

CEC has a vision of Europe as a “common home”. This ecumenical institution underlines the importance of the role of religions as the soul of this continent. The Charta
Oecumenica, a central document for CEC, underlined this back in 2001: “On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail. We likewise insist on the reverence for life, the value of marriage and the family, the preferential option for the poor, the readiness to forgive, and in all things compassion.”

c) Environmental protection is a central project intimately linked to the interrelatedness of our Christian and European identity. The present ecological crisis reflects the spiritual and moral crisis of human beings, the contradictions and impasses of their culture. In this sense, the environmental problem constitutes a spiritual challenge, as the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church reminded us: “The approach to the ecological problem on the basis of the principles of Christian tradition demands not only penitence for the sin of the exploitation of the natural resources of the planet, namely, a radical change of mentality and behaviour, but also asceticism as an antidote to consumerism, the deification of needs and the acquisitive attitude (Encyclical, §14). Environmental protection is a consequence and manifestation of our Christian faith, according to which humankind is “steward, protector and priest” of God’s creation.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is today striving to draw attention to the social repercussions of the environmental crisis. Environmental degradation always brings about major social problems and a poor quality of life. That is why we consider that environmental and social problems must be tackled together. Environmental protection and the struggle for social justice are inseparable. That was also the spirit of the joint message issued by Pope Francis and us on the occasion of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, on 1 September 2017. We reject the cynical position that would claim there is no alternative to the one-way highway of globalisation. The solution resides in an ecological economy and in the principles of social justice and solidarity. This is the form of development that Europe should adopt and not “market fundamentalism”, the greedy exploitation of nature, or the rise in economic indicators at the expense of social cohesion and social rights. The future of Europe is a culture of solidarity.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our European identity is both given and in the process of formation. It is rooted in a long tradition of struggles for freedom and justice. Without reference to this tradition, there could no question of European culture today. The core of European identity is respect for human dignity, as expressed in the tradition of unconditional Christian love and humanitarian rights. In this sense, we reject the term “post-Christian Europe”, and also the ideological post-modern construct of “the end of human rights”. We cannot dissociate the future of secularised Europe with its “Christian past”. Likewise, we cannot imagine the Europe of the future without the universal humanitarian values of freedom, justice and solidarity, such as expressed in the struggle for human rights. In this Europe of the future, the Christian Churches will remain the vital space for living out this freedom, which has been aptly described as higher than all other freedoms “as the heavens are higher than the earth”; that is to say, the freedom as love, as sacrificial renunciation of our individual rights in the name of love of the neighbour “for whom Christ died” (Rm 14:15).

Unfortunately, our confessional divisions considerably weaken the strength of our witness, of our commitment and our influence. That is why an institution like the Conference
of European Churches is duty bound to respond to a double challenge: to seek Christian unity, on the one hand, and to testify to the Gospel, on the other.

In this spirit, we from the Ecumenical Patriarchate extend to you a message of peace and unity, and urgently pray to our Lord that the Holy Spirit may inspire this Assembly that is so greatly needed. May the grace of unity shine in each and every one of you, and may it bring hope that sustains the life of the Church, so that you may be worthy witnesses to the saving work of Christ in Europe and “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1, 8).

Phanar, 3 June 2018

†Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch, and fervent intercessor before God