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In the Old Testament, the two terms translated either by ‘righteousness’ (*zedaqah*), or by ‘doing justice’ (*shaphat*) are often found in parallel. In French, not only *zedaquah* but sometimes also *shaphat* are translated as ‘justice’. Such parallel terms are often found in the Old Testament. But more important still: the two terms suggest more a right relationship than a practice judged in the light of an immutable law. The prophet Micah expresses this understanding of the terms as essentially *relational* when naming the three elements that the Lord requires. *He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:8, NRSV).

‘Loving kindness’ and ‘walking humbly with God’ suggests a relationship, as does ‘doing justice’. All these three elements have to contribute to building the human community.

I am not addressing you as a specialist on questions of justice or ethics in general. I am sharing these thoughts as a churchman who travels many countries in Europe, visits local churches, talks with leaders and represents a small minority church that finds a voice only through its practical work for good and not through an importance acquired in society through history. By the way, I had the opportunity to read Lisa Schneider’s keynote presentation only after writing my contribution, so I leave it to you to discover parallels.

1) “Do justice” – both in practical action in relationships and in supporting a cause at the structural level (advocacy)

Whenever I visit the Methodist communities in Albania, I am profoundly grateful to see among them a very authentic testimony of words and actions that contributes to the good of society. Here is the context: for ten years, a welfare organisation regularly brought supplies of aid and the first Albanians to benefit from it wanted to become Christians and be part of our church. Together we then decided to found a Methodist church. That was ten years ago. We wanted to do it with the Albanians. Sharing the gospel has been accompanied by the question of how we can benefit others. For example, women have learned to sew and earn a bit more to keep their families. Or, to take another example, we consulted agronomists to find out what crops would be most suitable to

plant on the pieces of land that each family received at the end of the communist era and which were often lying fallow. The Methodist members want to bring a ray of hope so that the younger generation stays in the country and does not see its future only in emigrating to other countries. The church's mandate in favour of justice plays out at this level of practical actions, not only in Albania. If – through our members – we do not participate actively at this relational level of doing justice we will lose our credibility as players at the structural level as well.

At the structural level, it is important that the churches take up causes (engage in advocacy). That is the aspect of raising claims and mobilising for a cause, since the law and its application influence the life of the population. Structural questions are of great importance and the church has a duty – sometimes prophetic – to intervene with political authorities, both national and international. Coming from a minority church in Europe, I would like to draw your attention to the importance of coordinating such interventions among the churches. In my opinion, that is one of the two main reasons for the existence and mandate of the Conference of European Churches. In many European countries, one of the churches there is strongly in the majority. It can thus easily apply pressure for a cause in a one-sided way. And unfortunately that is often the reality. For minority churches, it is then more difficult to be present and to take part in championing a cause. This not only impacts on the general public, which hears only the voice of the majority church, but also unfortunately also on the minority churches themselves. Because they and their members are then limited to acting solely in their closest relational field and their gift of speaking out in the public square is reduced. Among the different countries in my episcopal region, Austria is an exception. There is strong collaboration between the churches at the ecumenical level so that even the minority churches can contribute and are, in turn, enriched by collaboration on public positions (e.g. the churches' statement on social policy).

2) The interdependence of topics in a complex world

Righteousness and justice in the Bible are relational topics and not abstract. They serve to create community between human beings and the wider *koinonia* in all creation. And because they are not abstract topics, righteousness and justice are not merely relational in the interpersonal sense; they are equally so in the sense of the interdependence existing between different ethical topics. The official CEC report "From Budapest to Novi Sad" underlines this fact several times, above all the field of economic justice and environmental justice. I am not expert enough to go into the details of such interdependences. But as a theologian and bishop of the church, I would like to underline that it cannot be otherwise when we start from a biblical approach. Life (and survival) on this earth is interwoven with many other facets that influence well-being and its development. The first creation story ends on the sixth day by the comment "It was very

good” (Gen 1:31); coming before the apotheosis of resting on the seventh day, this evaluation was linked to the excellent balance and synergy between all the works created.

In present-day society, there is a fatal tendency - unfortunately again on the rise - to seek simple explanations and blame others. It is true that our world is getting more and more complex. It cannot be otherwise as human beings discover more and more facets of life. Scientific research does not only bring new responses, but, much more, new complexities and new questions. And unfortunately our world has currently a growing number of politicians who repeat facile responses and know who to blame for everything that goes wrong. The voice of the churches on ethical subjects is all the more important – and should be raised as a coordinated public voice. I remain convinced that well-founded positions will be heard and studied, even if the media are more interested in short, snappy tweets.

In a Europe permanently under construction, justice and law play an important role. I have noticed the importance of this in the major economic transformations in the former communist countries of central Europe. The first wave of transformation was uncontrolled, with all the damage that this caused. During the process to become members of the European Union, these countries were obliged to revise, or perhaps enhance, their judicial system. *Public law and independent justice* worthy of the name were among the most important contributions of the European Union – and I say this as a Swiss, coming from a country that wanted to stay outside the European Union. But I say it with great gratitude for what the European Union has accomplished, while knowing that the struggle for independent justice is far from having been won, as shown by the latest examples of some EU member countries in central Europe. Likewise, the war in Ukraine has reminded us of the importance of mechanisms such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (founded in 1973, Final Act of Helsinki signed in 1975, EU as the new name since 1995). The OSCE is the example of a multinational organisation that has not merely brought benefit to the churches (e.g. regarding freedom of religion and of assembly during the communist period). The churches must continue to show an interest in the OSCE if they take seriously their gospel mandate of reconciliation.

The topics of righteousness and doing justice, and of Europe under perpetual construction, have been of equally great importance for the country in which we find ourselves now, and some of its neighbouring countries, several of which used to be part of Yugoslavia, along with Albania. I mean all these countries that are still outside the European Union. Imagine the map: these countries are, towards the North, neighbours of EU members Croatia and Hungary; towards the South, of Greece, a long-time member; towards the East, of Romania and Bulgaria, which have also entered the EU. At present we have an island of countries in the Balkan that are outside the European Union. Are you surprised that these countries are currently on the economic and/or religious radar screen of two big powers – Russia and Turkey? And that the exodus to find work in the EU is

even more serious in these countries than in the countries of central Europe that benefit from the free movement of persons within the European Union? I see and I experience these enormous differences in my trips around my episcopal region and, in our church, we think a lot about the challenge in terms of community and solidarity that they raise for us. The Balkan peninsula – and particularly this region that is still not a member of the EU - has always been the most complex area in Europe. 'Easy answers' are not enough, but the interdependence between these countries and the rest of Europe is undeniable and the role of the churches to be agents of reconciliation remains demanding.

3) Off the beaten track...

When we talk about ethical topics it seems to me that we quote more or less the same biblical texts. I admit to having done just this by starting with Micah 6:8. But our faith is based on stories brimming with the human tension between injustice and justice: the finally moral competition between Cain and Abel; the megalomania of human beings wanting to build the Tower of Babel; the cry to God of the people enslaved in Egypt; the (too) long wandering of people through the wilderness towards the freedom of the Promised Land and the temptation to return to the fleshpots of Egypt. This listing of such examples of Bible stories could go on indefinitely. There is a rich treasure to explore and make fruitful in church communications, among the young and the less young. Many citizens, above all - but not only - in western Europe, no longer know these stories. But it is our fault, as theologians and pastors, if we no longer speak about such stories. They are not appropriate for a short press release or message via the social media. All the same, *we should rediscover the wealth of oral traditions* that still know how to tell stories and which, through these stories, help to enter into the new dimensions of meaning and life experience. A recent sociological study in Slovakia showed the positive effect of profound religious experiences on the integration of the Roma people into society. Stories, either biblical or contemporary, enable us to motivate people to act justly and fairly – much more than the bare facts do. And the world needs women and men who do not just complain but act courageously and, if necessary, swim against the current.

Many official statements by our organisations allude to values that are important for this or that social issue. Or they refer to Christian values for Europe. Certainly, it is necessary for churches to take part in dialogue – and sometimes argue – about values. But talk about values is already based on a certain abstraction of what is at the heart of our faith. Our faith is not based on values but on the Triune God, who has been revealed to us, and the relationship with whom impacts on certain values that we hold dear. Recently in Austria, after an interview between the government minister and all the officially recognised religious leaders, the minister wanted to see the sanctuary in our Methodist building. The superintendent showed it to him and explained that we have a German-speaking parish and also an English-speaking one that brings together thirty nations. The

minister was astonished, then he replied: "Yes, it seems that it is possible if you have the same values." A bit later, alone again, the superintendent said to himself: "It isn't true. These people have values that are often very different, but they meet here because of their faith in Christ." How can we testify to what is at the heart of our faith when we address these ethical questions?

To conclude, I will come back to my opening remarks, which have reappeared in these different thoughts like a leitmotiv. In the biblical context, righteousness and justice express relational truths and not abstract ones. They work to guarantee the good quality of relations lived with other humans and with God. In that, they serve to construct, protect and develop community, both in the church and in the civil community.