

His Eminence Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana Porfirije
Address to the European Parliament on Tuesday, December 4, 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen, members of the European Parliament,

I am very honored and I feel a sense of great responsibility being given the opportunity to address you on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its first article states that: *"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."*

To me as an Orthodox Christian, but surely to every other Christian likewise, as well as to any other person of faith, this can by no means seem unfamiliar, because these words contain the echos of the words of God, regardless of the religious Holy Book in which they are written. For this reason, it is a great honor for me to stand before you, who represent the citizens of the European Union and beyond; and I feel a great sense of responsibility before our God and with reference to the topic which has brought us together and about which we are speaking today.

I cannot help but feel a great sense of responsibility towards those who, 70 years ago, with a faith worthy of admiration and great moral responsibility, adopted this document in response to the horrors people had been willing to commit in the name of their race, religion or belief and nation against those of other races, religions or nations. It was written to defend the equality and freedom of every human being and nation, as well as the equality in well-being of every individual and every state.

I must also point out that after the adoption of this magnificent Declaration, humanity and the world have begun to be better than they had been before it, even though it was never a set of binding rules for individuals or nations.

However, dear brothers and sisters, I am deeply concerned, and I am confident not to be alone in this. In recent years and decades, this idea of human rights has often been transformed into a means of imposing the will of the powerful upon the less powerful, of the more developed upon the less developed. Such imposing does nothing to increase the benefit of human rights; rather, it often leads to chaos, unrest, wars, and drives millions to flee or migrate.

I am confident, dear brothers and sisters, that you all share my modest conviction that the use of human rights as a means of exerting any kind of domination directly destroys the spirit of the Universal Declaration.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights presents us with the difficult, yet in no way hopeless, task of striving together to find the balance between progress in the area of respect for the rights of persons and minorities, on the one hand, and the preservation of the national, cultural and religious identity of individual nations on the other.

Furthermore, I cannot but express my concern about the deviation from, and even the forsaking of, human rights in our European countries, on the Balkan Peninsula, in some of the former Eastern Block countries, and in various parts of the world engulfed in war; and the fact that, from time to time, we can see the renewal of those ideologies which were the reason the Universal Declaration was written.

I am encouraged by the fact that you also have recognized this, and recently passed a Declaration against hate speech with a large majority, the revival of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist politics, and the normalization of fascism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance in the European Union.

As someone who comes from the territory of former Yugoslavia, from Croatia, with the experience of the horrors of the Second World War and the violent breakdown of a common state, I must say that we look to you with anxiety and with hope.

Generally speaking, we have not healed our most recent wounds. We have not restored confidence, especially among young people, in the way that many of you have done between your countries and nations. We have, however, begun to do so, and are committed to this. I am personally committed to this: our local Church promotes ecumenical, inter-religious and world-view dialogue; It cares for the disenfranchised, and It appeals for the respect of human rights and human dignity everywhere and at all times.

I am concerned, nevertheless, because even though we are dedicated to healing the fresh wounds and moving away from the ideologies which led to the breakdown of our common state, we can observe a renewed increase in hate speech in the time of raising populism and historical revisionism aimed at rehabilitating defeated movements, local versions of Nazism and fascism, and denying their crimes. This includes the denial of the victims of the Jasenovac Concentration Camp and of concentration camps for children which existed in the then Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War. This poses a serious threat in Croatia today, to everything that we as Christians and all people of good will believe, and that our predecessors wanted to achieve with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Without any doubt, the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the legislative framework providing the protection of human and minority rights, as well as the anti-discrimination law, which provides for the general ban of and punishment for inciting the use of violence, or national, religious or racial hatred, or any other form of intolerance, for more than a decade now, are in line with the highest European standards and provide the necessary foundation for modern democratic achievements in terms of protecting human rights and dignity.

Nevertheless, in the last few years we witness increasingly frequent violations of human and minority rights, hate speech and the spreading of ethnic intolerance in public sphere and places; this includes numerous physical and verbal attacks targeting persons of Serbian nationality in Croatia, regardless of whether they are public figures or citizens, young or old, male or female. In the years following Croatia's accession to the EU (2013), the number of reported incidents has increased, therefore we would urge Croatian government to implement these good laws that we have and which protect every citizen. As EU citizens are preparing for the next upcoming EU elections in May, I would urge future parliamentarians not to use hate speech against minorities or majorities in order to obtain their votes and not to instrumentalize freedom of religion or belief for the political purpose.

The current Government of the Republic of Croatia is committed to protecting human and minority rights, and therefore enjoys the support of minority representatives. In the actions of the Government and its Prime Minister, we can recognize the effort and good intentions, and we give our prayerful support in the hope that they will persevere and show determination and courage to take concrete steps in order to promote democratic, European values and civil achievements as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the words of the great Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset „civilization is above all a will for coexistence“. However, the necessary prerequisite for the *will to coexist* is the recognizing another's right to life and general human rights.

I pray to God, dear Members of this Parliament, that you will be even stronger in your determination and action not only to preserve but to continue to build and develop the European Union as a place of peace, tolerance and equality. I also pray to God that we, in the European South, may resist the demonic temptation of the ideology of *pure nation and pure soil*.

I pray to our Savior Jesus Christ, who is being born in these very days, to bring His heavenly peace to us, that we may all become brothers and sisters and become closer to each other; for our Christian faith teaches us that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

May God bless you all!