

Your Grace, Bishop Bosse-Huber,
Dear General Secretary Dr. Sorensen,
Dear Brothers and Sisters, participants of the 7th CEC Summer School,

It was a few months before the COVID-19 crisis that I had accepted the invitation to speak at the CEC Summer School on Human Rights. I have to say that I have found this project both interesting and challenging, taking into consideration its developments over the years. The importance of a serious and effective education on human rights is something that our society needs without any doubt, and I am sure you will all agree that as Christians we have a certain understanding of the relationship between Judeo-Christian roots and the international human rights law.

We all know that pastoral care is one of the pillars of our diakonia, no matter our denominations. We strive daily to care and provide for the spiritual well-being our faithful and we try our best to meet their needs. Nevertheless, during the period of the Covid crisis, and I am sure we all agree on that, we experienced an unforeseen situation, that many have compared to the times of the first persecutions, because we were confronted with limitations of our fundamental human rights, acquiring thus an even clearer view on what the consequences of these limitations mean in practice. The theme for our session today fits into this reality - How has COVID affected Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law in Europe?

Democracy, Human Rights and Rule of Law are fundamental European values, fundamental universal values. It took a long time for Europe, as we understand the term today, to build the institutional framework to safeguard and strengthen these values. In the light however, of the pandemic, in Europe as well as elsewhere, there have been countries that chose to limit the voice of the parliaments and tried to find their own way to govern, justifying their decisions on the fight against the pandemic. It is first time in history that the economy came to a halt in favour of the protection of public health. Since the European Union and the Council of Europe are acting as “gate-keepers” of European values, such as democracy, human rights and rule of law I have been monitoring some initiatives that served as means of response of the European institutions in this regard. These aforementioned values aim at the protection of human dignity, which for the Orthodox Churches constitutes the core value that prevails in the Orthodox Christian teaching. It is interesting to observe Orthodox Christian Theology when discussing Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law, for its insight are quite valuable.

Democracy

As democracy has been challenged by populism in several European Countries, the battle against far-left and far-right extremism was only enhanced by the pandemic. I was very pleased to notice that the Council of Europe has issued a toolkit for CoE member states - **Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the COVID-19**

sanitary crisis¹. This toolkit came into being to help the states to ensure the measures in proportionate way and for a limited time. This important document covers the following topics:

- Derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights in times of emergency.
- Respect for the rule of law and democratic principles in times of emergency, including limits on the scope and duration of emergency measures.
- Fundamental human rights standards including freedom of expression, privacy and data protection, protection of vulnerable groups from discrimination and the right to education.
- Protection from crime and the protection of victims of crime, regarding gender-based violence².

There is a pressing need to respect Human Rights, especially so during times of emergency, like those we are currently living in. Legal instruments, such as the aforementioned toolkit, are crucial in these situations because they give us a standard that States should act upon. The European Union Institutions have warned the governments that the restrictions due to COVID-19 need to be balanced in accordance with existing human rights instruments. This year 2020 the world will face the biggest recession in its history as world-wide economy is expected to shrink by 7-12%³. The EU has introduced a recovery package begging at 1-1.5 trillion euros to help with the ramifications.

From my point of view the very core of the concept of democracy was clearly challenged during this pandemic. We should, however, pose questions to these actions: What is the need to safeguard the current economic system? Should we consider transforming the economy by enhancing its social dimension? Are we changing the way we think of our priorities - putting the needs of people first, investing in health, instead of only considering financial profit?

Rule of Law

As for the Rule of Law, I have been pleased to see that for the first time the European Commission launched a consultation on Rule of Law⁴ under the guidance of Her Excellency, President Ursula von der Leyen. The consultation on efficiency and quality of justice, prevention of corruption and assurance of media freedom, access to justice and enabling framework for civil society are the key points that the EU member states, civil society and churches need to continue working inside of the European Union. It is essential that we, as

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/sg-inf-2020-11-respecting-democracy-rule-of-law-and-human-rights-in-th/16809e1f40> 15.06.2020

²

https://search.coe.int/directorate_of_communications/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016809e1f42 15.06.2020

³ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/covid19-democracy-violations-by-guy-verhofstadt> 15.06.2020

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/rule-law-report_en 15.06.2020

Europeans, avoid double standards and remain faithful in keeping European values in a time of continuous change and insecurity.

The Conference of European Churches has emphasised, and rightly so, in many documents that there needs to be internal and external coherence when discussing about the respect for the Rule of Law, Democracy and Human Rights in all EU economic and trade agreements with its external partners. Therefore, I am looking forward to the European Parliament's debate in Autumn, as announced by Commissioner Reynders Didier⁵ and into the final stage of the discussion of this report at the EU Council.

If we want to ensure the protection of our European values, we need to work on that, very hard, together with civil society, businesses and companies, and all the stakeholders of the Article 17 of the EU Lisbon Treaty. As the new EU budget is still not voted in, it would be extremely important that the significant portion of the EU budget is spent for the programmatic activities supporting the work for civil society and the stakeholders of the Art. 17. I would advocate that it would be very meaningful to design the budget in accordance of the protection of Fundamental Human Rights, as both a core value and guidelines, to take such important decision.

Human Rights

We are aware of the EU efforts to create solidarity in Europe, especially so during the COVID-19 crisis. It is a sad reality that Human Rights have been put up to the test by the European member states. When rights we take for granted are taken from us, it should become clearer to our mind and hearts what kind of standards we have today in Europe.

Christ does not discriminate. He gives the same love to every human being. We as Christians should be compassionate about the struggles of all our fellow human beings. The movement "Black Lives Matter" that is rising in the US, as well as all over the world is proof that we all have the responsibility to protect human dignity. There is a structural discrimination issue that we should urgently address. As Christians we have examples in our own history about persecution. As Churches, our ongoing task is to address structural inequalities, build bridges and listen the voice of the oppressed. I also want to express my deep concern about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers that are in a fragile situation, thus not always being able to practice the health recommendations that are essential to stop the spreading of the coronavirus.

During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed the restrictions that the European States have applied with regards to religious freedom and that some centuries-old practices of receiving communion, like in the case of the Orthodox world, were in many cases actually forbidden, if not limited. Speaking from my personal experience in my Metropolis in France, I must tell you that I saw a huge increase of the need of people asking for pastoral care, needing comfort and compassion due to the loss of many lives, an increase of domestic violence, a

⁵ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200504IPR78312/covid-19-debate-with-commissioner-didier-reynders> 15.06.2020

limitation of access to education and a general increase of social insecurity due to the job loss during the pandemic.

In some European countries freedom of religion or belief has its limits and I have been for many years engaged in CEC working on these issues in order to help bridging the gap and finding, in good faith, strategic solutions for certain legal and political challenges. For me, it is crucial that CEC continues to work on human rights education as this is not an easy topic to for anyone to understand and many times it can prove to be very controversial. Now, I am asking myself who else will help people find the notion of justice, who can support the victims of human rights violations if not churches and religious communities together with civil society? Who else will help prisoners, women and children, Roma and Sinti people or any other vulnerable groups? Who else will work on equal justice if not us as Christians? Who else will work on eradicating antisemitism, islamophobia and christianophobia in order to ensure that we all live in a peaceful shared space where there is role and future for everyone?

I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate the members of the Thematic Group on Human Rights of CEC for the program of this year's Summer School on Human Rights. I know that we were initially supposed to meet in Berlin, where EKD would host the event and the topic of this year's SSHR would be a different one. Nevertheless, in a very short time with hard work and dedication we meet virtually online. On behalf of the Ecumenical patriarchate, I would like to thank you and to tell you that we support all the hard work of CEC and I am pleased to be here with you, even if we see each other through a screen.

As we find ourselves at the beginning of the EU German Presidency, I hope that we will have the chance to discuss these issues and that some of the ideas expressed in these webinars will be helpful contributions of our Churches towards the shaping of the future in the discussions within the framework of Article 17 and the EU Conference of Future of Europe.

Metropolitan Emmanuel of France