

Dear Metropolitan Emmanuel,  
dear Archdeacon Dr. Nathaniel,  
dear General Secretary Jørgen Skov Sørensen,  
dear sisters and brothers at your computers all over Europe and beyond,

How much have I looked forward to greeting and welcoming you in Berlin to this year's Summer School on Human Rights. The EKD was very keen to host you in our capital and also to take the assembled participants to some important places and to enable inspiring meetings.

Due to the Covid-19-Pandemic, many plans had to be changed. So, here we find ourselves gathered together behind our screens. But I am glad that, at least, we have this opportunity of a digital meeting. It will never substitute real face to face encounters, but still: We can share our experiences of the last months and reflect on how it affected and still affects so many spheres of life, basically every aspect of our daily routines in life and work and faith.

It is precisely in times of crisis that respect for human rights, democratic life and the rule of law must prove their worth. Since their protection does not only need political institutions and legal instruments but also attentive citizens, it is us – you and me – who bear responsibility – in our churches as well as in public life in general.

With this in view, let me focus my opening remarks on three issues, on which I will now cast only short spotlights. They will, I am sure, accompany us through this entire series of seminars:

**My first spotlight is on ourselves: How do we, as societies, handle the challenges of an unforeseen global crisis of this dimension?**

So called “lockdowns” have catapulted societies into something none of us had a blueprint for. All along the uncertainty, the stress, the sudden loss of so many lives, the care of those suffering from Corona, the fear of what would happen to our families and friends, our neighbours, but also to our jobs, our income, our social and economic security.

Many fundamental rights needed to be restricted. Many interest groups were faced with the same questions: What is more important now – our rights or our responsibilities? But we had to realise that the acceptance of such restrictions by a state which we are used to observing and guaranteeing and protecting them, is an act of respect of and love for our neighbour, especially for those who are the most vulnerable. We had to realise that, for the sake of the other, we had and still have to limit and change our usual way of life.

I am convinced that history presents us with a unique chance to reflect on “lessons learned”. We had been so used to, in so many political debates, that economic arguments were obstacles difficult to overcome. Be it social cohesion, be it the plight of refugees, be it the protection of climate and the environment. But now, in the face of the virus, humankind has, on a global scale, readjusted its priorities. Governments put the protection of human lives

and the functioning of health services before economic considerations. Nations and societies joined commonly into a huge effort to contain the spread of the pandemic – whatever the cost. People changed their routines, sacrificed their comfort, risked their livelihoods to make this possible.

I don't say that no mistakes were made. We were – and are – going down an unknown route without a map. We have to make allowances. We have to be tolerant. But we also have to admit: It worked. In the EU and in many other parts of Europe, we have fought back the pandemic, we have reached a level that we can handle while carefully disconfining ourselves and re-opening social and economic life.

If this was possible to fight a pandemic – can't we build on that for the other global challenges humankind is faced with? As EKD has phrased it in its 2019 publication 'Lent to us is the Star on which we live.': "People are able to do more than calculate!"

Let us take courage from what we have seen people are indeed able to do, if there is a common will and insight in the necessity. Let us take courage from the fact, that the protection of the most vulnerable was, for some weeks, the common goal of a great majority of people and nations. Let us take courage also from the fact, that the Church has moved on into new spaces, in which it will – I am sure – remain present even when physical meetings are possible again.

**My second spotlight is on our fellowship of Churches: What can we, as churches in Europe, as a communion of believers, learn from the experiences of these recent months?**

The pandemic brought another grave novelty: In such a time of greatest vulnerability we could not, as humankind used to for centuries, even millennia, turn to what nurtures and shelters us spiritually, like worship services, Holy Communion, and common prayer. Instead we had and have to observe physical distancing, and use and indeed invent new, digital formats for celebrating the Living God - online. We had, in that respect, become just one more group whose fundamental rights were curbed in order to ensure an efficient lockdown and strict physical distancing.

In Germany we had many discussions about Freedom of Religion and Belief, pondering whether religious communities have reacted too obediently to the restrictions imposed by the state, as churches and places of worship and community were closed for many weeks. But we, too, as so many other groups, put the common good and the safety of the most vulnerable, before our self-interest.

We could do that, because we trusted in our government. We were sure: When the conditions of the pandemic are over, religious freedom will be fully restored. These restrictions were not violations of our fundamental right, but necessary and limited regulations concerning only such expressions of religion and belief as require physical proximity.

In saying this, I also imply: We learned to appreciate the Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief in a new way. We reflected on its function in our societies. We experienced what we were missing, as some aspects needed to be restricted.

This year the European Convention on Human Rights celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary – and we proudly celebrate this jubilee. There will be speeches. There will be publications. But we best celebrate it by living to its standards, by insisting they are for everyone, and by acting in solidarity to uphold the achievements of humanity and the instruments of protection of human rights.

As churches we bear responsibility for the wellbeing not only of our own people, but also for the society we live in. We wish and work for it to become a place that is home to everyone who lives in it, wherever they come from, because each and every human being is vested in dignity by God. The voice of the churches needs to be heard, its message loud and clear: God's love is for His entire creation! And as we act together as Conference of European Churches we demand that the European community must stand together for the sake of its people and in solidarity with those who are in need and seek shelter with us.

The pandemic makes us realize just how much we depend on each other, as people of different churches, different nations, with different backgrounds – yet as human beings and God's children who believe and trust in Him who said: „In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.“ (John 16,33)

**My third spotlight is on Europe's role in the world: How can we become a symbol of hope, how can we live out what we are supposed to be: salt and light to the world?**

I just said: The pandemic taught us to put the love our our neighbour before our self-interest.

But who else is our neighbour?

„Leave no one behind“ – also the catchphrase of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals – is a campaign that reminds us not only of our international obligations, but also of the gospel and our responsibility before God and humankind, for those who threaten to be forgotten and lost – even more in times of Covid-19:

- be they refugees at the borders of our continent;
- be they children, women and men in totally overcrowded camps where there is no chance to protect yourself from the virus
- or be they those in the boats on the Mediterranean Sea, fleeing from violence, war, hunger or climate disasters and from so many places without a future.

Here “Europe”, the EU, as Noble Peace Prize Laureate, must show its humanity and its values. I take it as a sign of hope that movements like „Leave no one behind“ are driven mostly by the younger generation who stand up for a world of sharing and togetherness.

But the world doesn't end at the borders of Europe. While we gained some confidence that we have a clearer idea of what it takes to contain the virus, and therefore restrictions and protective measures can be lifted bit by bit throughout the EU and most of Europe, we are aware of the ongoing, overwhelming crisis in many other countries and the resulting distress. The European Union has launched an Emergency Programme, especially for refugee regions like Syria, Lebanon and Bangladesh to set up, for example, laboratories and emergency clinics.

In the same manner, let us as European Churches also stand by our Christian partners worldwide: in prayer, by practical help, and also through self-reflexion: Because our neighbours are out there, all over the world, and especially in the poorest places, we know that we have to change our way of life into the awe of life. We reject the notion that the pandemic is a punishment of God for not living according to His word, for neglecting and destroying the good work of His hands. But we take the pandemic as a wakening call for us to now take the necessary step from talk into action. It is possible. We can do it: Let's do it.