

Greetings from the Portuguese Council of Christian Churches,

During the emergency situation

The time of this crisis, also in Portugal, came to underline issues related to religious freedom and human rights.

The Pandemic arrived in Portugal at the beginning of March, and for three months, the country experienced a time of confinement, called state of emergency. Churches and Religions have known from the beginning how to assume a great sense of citizenship and responsibility, cooperating with the State for the defense of human life.

However, in Portugal, with the declaration of this state of emergency, religious celebrations with crowds of people were forbidden, and the Churches and Temples had to close their doors. Funerals had to take place quickly and only ten people were allowed to assist those services. All other religious ceremonies were forbidden.

During the state of emergency, religious freedom enshrined in the Portuguese Constitution was limited and even the churches were not allowed, for example, to be open only for individual prayer or self-meditation.

The religious dimension and its importance for the balance and well-being of each person was neglected, even if, for example, it was possible for people to go out sporting for their physical well-being but not allowed to enter in a Church, even maintaining all physical distances as prescribed by law.

There could have been a balanced solution between religious freedom and defense of the rights of life. In this aspect The Portuguese Constitution is clear when it states in Article 19, point 6 - that:

"The declaration of a state of siege or a state of emergency in no case can affect freedom of conscience and religion".

The concern during the state of emergency was restricted to sanitarian and economic aspects, neglecting many other fundamental aspects for the well-being and freedom of people, such as of spirituality and religious experience.

In my personal opinion, this happened, given the fact, that part of the governors of a state that is secular, have a weak sense of the cultural and sensibility dimension, concerning religious matters. There are lay tendencies that pushes the religious dimension only to the private and individuality sphere of each individual.

The recognition of moral authority of Religions has already been lost in public opinion and consequently Religions are set aside. In Portuguese society there is an intentional indifference about religion.

Despite this adverse context, the Churches and Religions in Portugal were able to maintain a responsible and cooperative posture in a context of great collective demand during the state of confinement and emergency. Throughout the state of emergency, the concern of the Churches and Religions was to continue to serve the Portuguese people. They kept a strong connection and relationship with the faithful and particularly with the most isolated, as is the case with the elderly. The community sense of experiencing religion came to the fore trying to integrate everyone. Churches and Religions knew how to be attentive to material needs both providing economic support and meal support to the poorest. On the other hand, through various web platforms, Churches and Religions promoted Celebrations, Bible Studies and spiritual support groups. Once again, Churches and Religions in their discretion were a strong element for society cohesion and support among people.

I would also like to underline that by the initiative of the Portuguese Council of Christian Churches it was possible during the state of emergency to make public, on Easter Sunday, an ecumenical Statement entitled "*United in Love and Hope*". This Statement signed by several Christian Leaders, was very welcomed in Portuguese society and stretched the importance of unity to face the great challenges of present times.

The reopening of Churches and Worship Places in Portugal

Churches and Religions did not reopen their doors in Portugal until 31st May. On that day, Christians celebrated the Feast of Pentecost and it was undoubtedly a great sign of God, given that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Churches in this new period of their Mission.

The Portuguese government, in an Official Statement acknowledged that:

«...the confinement procedures adopted to ensure non-contamination, and the treatment of covid-19, involved restrictions on rights and freedoms, but the religious impartiality of the State does not allow the religious expression of the public space keep being restricted, and also mention that the State cannot ignore religious practice and culture as an integral part of the personality of many, in its primordial dignity.»

Once reopening, the Churches celebrations have been taking place with strong safety and hygiene procedures. There is a contingency plan for each Church and the use of a mask is mandatory for all participants. In my Church of Anglican and Sacramental Tradition and for reasons of hygiene we were forced to suppress the use of the Common Chalice during Eucharist. Holy Communion is only accomplished with the sharing of bread; we also understand that Christ is fully present in consecrated bread. We realize that no religious and sacramental tradition and practice, no matter how respectable, cannot question the protection of human life, which is the most precious gift that God gave us. The sacredness of life is above the sacredness of sacraments and religious practices and must always be based on balanced and well-founded decisions.

We are now concerned with how to integrate the most vulnerable groups such as the elderly and children into the life of the churches.

The way forward

As a positive aspect, I would also like to underline that the Portuguese State was very good at defending minorities by allowing immigrants to regularize their legal situation as earlier as possible in order to give them immediate access to social security and health systems. In this way, thousands and thousands of people felt protected and their work was recognized.

The Churches and Religions were also together on the 22nd of June to celebrate for the first time in Portugal, “The National Day of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Dialogue”. This date was approved in 2019 by all political parties in the Portuguese Parliament aiming to increasingly guarantee freedom of conscience, religion and worship, and also cooperation and interreligious dialogue. All Churches and Religions celebrating this day renewed their commitment to the defense of life and human rights.

This context of crisis that we continue to experience clearly shows the importance of the path of unity among Christians and of Interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Only unity in diversity will allow us to overcome the complexity of today's challenges.

Vila Nova de Gaia, 6 de Julho de 2020

Jorge Pina Cabral, Bishop

President of COPIC