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**Opening speech at the 2008 General Assembly in Belgrade**  
**Report of the Presidency**

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, dear Friends,

Its good democratic practice to start our General Assembly with a review of the past year and an outline of the principles of our common action. This is why I wish to mention some points which were important to our work in the past year.

**We are looking back on an intense year.**

At the outset, we had a meeting in Kyiv. An animated General Assembly and a remarkable workshop provided valuable sources of inspiration. The difficult terrain of post-soviet reality proved to be very instructive and enriching not only with regard to Ukraine, but for all our work at European level. What we experienced in Ukraine certainly enabled a better understanding of what happened in the Georgia conflict in the past weeks. I think that tomorrow in the OPEN SPACE we will have the opportunity to talk about this conflict and its consequences.

In Kyiv we agreed on **two Concerted Actions**. The Action on the proliferation of small arms started in November and led to quite remarkable reactions in some countries. Once again many thanks to the Portuguese commission for its initiative and excellent preparation of this action.

With our second Concerted Action on poverty reduction we were on familiar and at the same time unknown ground. During Lent we published the joint declaration on the reform of the world trade order. But we were more ambitious. We wanted to realize an art exhibition and a catalogue with works of art made available by the national commissions. Unfortunately, the exhibition has not yet been realized. But our

French friends fortunately agreed to see to this part of the Action and to bring it to a good end. What impressed me most was the tremendous participation in this project. 26 national commissions and even the Pontifical Council supplied works of art for the exhibition. A powerful witness of unity. Some national commissions, among them Bosnia-Herzegovina and Switzerland, even organized their own art exhibitions. This Concerted Action reveals something of the European culture which unites us and which is far more than just some common positions.

I must admit that from time to time I doubted whether we will receive enough works of art. Sometimes I thought that maybe we were too ambitious with this project. This is why I am all the more pleased at the Conference's capacity to mobilize forces and at the result of it. I do not want to anticipate the subsequent consultations, especially not the prize award to the commissions which were the first to send in their pictures, but one thing is certain: the realization of such a project, that is something our Conference can be proud of, and it offers encouragement for the future. I am sure that Concerted Actions are an instrument with good prospects.

In Kyiv we also reflected on the founding of a European JP association. After the General Assembly we deliberated with the ExCo about how to realize this idea. So today, I am glad to be able to inform you that the association JUSTITIA et PAX EUROPE has been officially registered. With this, the legal prerequisites for being entitled to file independent applications with the European Union are fulfilled. This association is a further step towards a Permanent Secretariat.

I would like to invite all commissions to join the association which is a sub-body of the Conference. In this context, I am particularly grateful to Cardinal Martino for his explicit encouragement to continue to work towards a Permanent Secretariat. This means a strong motivation for our successors.

Our assembly in Kyiv brought about another result which I would like to mention. You certainly remember the OPEN SPACE deliberations of some commissions on climate change and poverty reduction. The outcome of these deliberations was a **multilateral declaration** which was made available to all participants of the Second World Congress of Justice and Peace Commissions in Rome. And from what I have

heard, this multilateral appearance as well as our cooperation within the European Conference made quite an impression on a number of commissions outside Europe. For me this proves that we are on the right way in consolidating our cooperation with patience and reliability and with mutual respect for our particularities.

Patience and confidence in our decisions also played an important role at the **Exposure** in Albania in October last year on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Populorum Progressio. Unfortunately, the EDP could not be held as scheduled in May. But it turned out good to insist and to make a second attempt in October. Many thanks to the Albanian Commission, to Luigji Mila, its secretary general, and to our friend Archbishop Angelo Massafra for the close partnership we have had the privilege to enjoy during these days. Of crucial importance for our Conference is to learn with and from one another in order to be able to better perform our common task. The Albania EDP was very helpful in that regard.

Based on the very positive experiences with the Albania EDP, the ExCo and the succeeding presidency decided to carry out a new Exposure next year. It will be held in Ukraine and it will focus on human trafficking. Tomorrow we will discuss this in more detail.

I would like to take this opportunity also to recall the **meeting of general secretaries in Palermo**. It was a deeply moving experience and particularly the memorial service at the site of Don Pino Puglisi's murder has left a lasting impression. Noble words such as memory and European solidarity took concrete form and had an effect. Thanks again to the Italian commission for these moving days.

So, looking back at this year, I come to the same conclusion as last year: The general orientation of the European Conference is good. The consolidation process is going on. Our variety is growing, which does not necessarily make our lives easier. We experience the European unification process in very practical terms – with all ups and downs. It is indispensable for our credibility at European level that we take an active and constructive approach to the existing differences in Europe. The future of Europe depends on our ability to cooperate at the same eye level.

This is precisely what we could experience during our workshop in the last few days. In preparing this workshop we often realized that while trying to state clear positions we must be careful not to simplify matters. It is important to get involved, to interact, and it is equally important not to be discouraged by setbacks. The Croatian commission's decision not to participate in this workshop means such a painful setback. It reminds us of the deep wounds that exist in our own midst. All the more we appreciate the presence of our partners from Albania and Bosnia. The ability to come to terms with the influential power of the past on the present depends on our confidence in the message of peace. By taking up this challenge with confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit we deny the finality of violence. The powers of darkness will not have the final say.

## **Thanks**

This is why I would like to express once again my sincerest thanks to the Commission of the International Bishops' Conference of St. Cyril and Methodius, to its president Archbishop Hodshevar and especially to Dr. Daniel Galun. Without their commitment, their hospitality and courage to go long and hard ways with us, this workshop and this General Assembly in Belgrade would not have been possible. Many thanks also to the Serbian Orthodox Church, especially to Bishop Irinej who, in spite of all the differences, dared to travel part of the way together with us. Not to forget all those who supported our project and meeting with their prayers.

We were amply rewarded. The experiences we have gathered here in Serbia, Kosovo and in Croatia encourage us not to content with ourselves with the status quo and not to impatiently ask the impossible.

Let us walk together, steadfastly but not rigidly, patiently but not sluggishly. Thank you very much for the many encouraging words on this path.

## Résumé

My résumé today will be brief as tomorrow we will have time enough to go into detail. But one thing I would like to emphasize once again: the true wealth of our Conference is based on the national commissions' willingness and capacity to cooperate.

This cooperation has taken shape and has been further strengthened. This is a reason to be joyful. I am particularly glad that with the French Commission we have found an excellent successor to the presidency. It is good to be able to place the work in such competent hands.

In future, it will be indispensable that we continue to act as honest and reliable partners. We need to be patient and considerate and we must avoid false politeness. I am glad to have been able to contribute to the renewal of Europe in this forum with you. And I am confident that the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, the patroness of Europe, and the patron saints Cyril and Methodius, Benedict and Edith Stein will continue to bless our work. Thank you.

*subsequently: plenary discussion*