

World Congress of Ecclesial Organisations working for Justice and Peace, October 28th 2004

Situation of the Pastoral Commitment of the Church to Justice and Peace in Europe

Statement by Jörg Lürer, Berlin

Your, Eminencies, your Excellencies, dear brothers and sisters,

Thank you very much for your kind introduction. It is a great pleasure to be able to meet with you all and to exchange experiences on the concrete horizons of our work. My thanks therefore go to the Pontifical Council, in particular Cardinal Martino, for making this meeting possible. I am sure that our meeting will lead to important impulses for our continued work, and that our cooperation will be strengthened.

What I have to say about Justice and Peace work in Europe is based on several years of cooperation and many discussions which I have been able to have in the context of our shared European body, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions. After I got the invitation from the Pontifical Council the head of this Conference, the Executive Committee, has asked me to speak also on its behalf. To address this assembly is a great honour for me, although not a particularly simple one.

In Europe - not to be confused with the European Union - we now have 29 national Justice and Peace Commissions. If I were to speak of each of these Commissions for a minute, my time and your patience would be rightly exhausted. Not to speak about all other organisations working in this field. If I only speak of a few Commissions, I will be accused of bias - perhaps even of displaying my personal preferences. A fair portrayal of this varied work is quite out of the question. It is somehow a mission impossible.

You therefore see before you a suitably intimidated Ulysses who must find his way between the Scylla of excessive detail and the Charybdis of indefinite generalisation. One way or another, the strict court of my European colleagues stands in judgement.

1. The path of Justice and Peace work in Europe

I would like to start by outlining the development of Justitia et Pax work in Europe.

At the beginning, under the shadow cast by the division of Europe and Communist domination, Justitia et Pax, as a legitimate child of Vatican II, was only able to take up its work in the West of Europe. Naturally, work was also done on the topics of justice and peace in the Eastern part of Europe, for instance under the auspices of Caritas. However, the conditions for this were much less favourable, and in the main there was no connection to the Justitia et Pax work in the West. The awakening associated with the Vatican Council put a new swing in the step of the Church's social teaching and its proclamation. Depending on the political and ecclesiastical tradition of the individual countries, the manifestation of Justice and Peace work took a wide variety of different forms. In some countries, for instance in Scandinavia, Justice and Peace was mainly organised on the basis of voluntary commitment. In others, the Church structures were so strong that it was possible to recruit staff. Some countries formed a structure at parish, diocesan and national level. Others limited themselves to the national level. In each case, Justitia et Pax became a concrete sign that the Church was facing the urgent questions of peace, human rights and development with a new openness and consistency. All in all, this created a diverse network of different players.

However, an intensive debate on the international social question was shared more or less by all – true to the motto of Paul VI that development was the new name for peace. Looking to the South was crucial for our work, not lastly also because the colonial heritage was a part of their own national history for most of the then European Justice and Peace Commissions.

The breathtaking changes which took place in 1989/90 led to new scope for action for the local churches in Central and Eastern Europe as well. A Justice and Peace Commission was established in Poland – a country which in some senses formed the avant-garde of the changes – as far back as 1985. The euphoria of the new horizons followed by the bloody wars in the former Yugoslavia provided a terrible and sobering insight into the true condition of our continent. It was also a sobering insight into ourselves. It became manifest how much we would still have to learn if we were to change and renew Europe. Our old views from the time of the Cold War were not enough to help us understand the present. This applied to ourselves, but also to our view of events taking place overseas, as shown not lastly in the Great Lakes region in 1994. The challenges we face have tended to grow rather than shrink in response to the growing dynamics of globalisation. This gives rise to a need for cooperation and exchange. This has been expressed amongst other things in the fact that the ongoing three-year study programme by the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions is particularly devoting itself to that group of topics concerned with "Social Justice in Globalisation".

This growing need for cooperation is also reflected in the fact that the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions has been expanded since 1989/90 to encompass many new Commissions. Several weeks ago, we were able to include in the Conference the Greek-Catholic Commission from Ukraine. As much as we have been enriched by these developments, so it was clear that some things have indeed become more difficult now. The political, cultural as well as church experience and habits which are now gathered in our Conference are extraordinarily diverse – sometimes even contrary. The ecclesiastical and cultural tension between Swiss and Polish Catholicism is quiet impressive not to say most striking, to name but one example.

Added to this, there are quite practical differences in the work emerging from the respective political situations. For the Eastern and Central European Commissions, the questions of the South are not at the centre of their work. Rather, as a rule, they are interested in the debate on the transformation processes underway in their countries, and the associated justice-related problems and risks to peace. This challenges the ways of thinking of the "Old Europe", to borrow a phrase from Mr Rumsfeld, but also the "new" Commissions must occasionally learn more than they would wish, and rethink some old habits in their perception of the world. Added to this, in both the East and the West, the work on topics related to justice and peace certainly continues outside the Justice and Peace family as well. After the decades during which the Continent was divided, we are confronted with the practical challenge of having to find one another again without in the end dealing only with ourselves. The dynamics of globalisation, the questions arising in the context of the events of September 11, and not lastly the process of European union which must be shaped, combine to create an appropriate amount of pressure.

In doing so, we have been able in recent years to experience through all our differences that the basis of joint thought and deed is expanding in the European Justice and Peace family, and that each of us is also reaching a better understanding of themselves as a result of this dialogue.

2. Justitia et Pax as a part of the Church in Europe

However, I would prefer to avoid giving the impression of unbridled optimism about our progress. As welcome as the development of a number of Commissions in recent years is, this should not close our eyes to the fact that the role of the Justice and Peace Commissions in the Church is frequently unclear and disputed. Allow me to describe the situation openly and perhaps somewhat undiplomatically: A number of Commissions are in an uncertain condition. It is not always clear to see that the local Bishops' Conference supports and promotes Justitia et Pax. In some cases, the impression is created that the bishops regard the Justice and Peace Commission as a stepchild they have adopted only in deference to Rome. True love looks different. This results in a variety of patterns. Some prefer to place the stepchild under strict control as an Episcopal Commission not involving lay participation; some would like to assign it to the assistance agencies, and others in turn treat it in a step-motherly fashion in terms of structure, staffing and funding. That this leads to disputes within the family is evident.

What is happening to Justitia et Pax is a little like the Vatican Council. After the added impetus of the awakening is over, and the first major errors manifest themselves, many withdraw and question the entire venture. From this point of view, dealing with Justice and Peace says much about the way in which social ethics are understood within the respective local church. Justitia et Pax is uncomfortable, or at least it should be from a productive point of view. Uncomfortable for a society which all too frequently rides roughshod over the rights and interests of the poor and maltreated. But also uncomfortable in the Church, which, as we already know from the Hebrew Testament, avoids the conflict necessary to follow divine law more frequently than is justifiable. For good and less good reasons. And also within the Church we have to answer again and again the question of whether Justitia et Pax work is really indispensable. Is it work that is necessary, or merely desirable, for our self-perception as a Church? Is it not sufficient if the Church repeatedly calls to mind the principles of its social message?

In a variety of ways, Justitia et Pax work is subject to tension. It is work which aims to call up the conscience of the powerful to represent the interests of the poor and marginalised in their various societies for Christ's and for Man's sake and to enable the poor to take up their own cause. Pope Paul VI once called Justitia et Pax the cockerel on the roof of the Church which was to cry when the World was on fire and to awaken tired Christianity when the need arises. The Holy Father and the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Martino, have given us before and during the Iraq War an impressive witness of this which has been helpful for our work in concrete terms. I would like to take this opportunity, in this place, to thank them explicitly once more for this commitment.

In our everyday and frequently modest work, we naturally know that we are by no means the only cockerel on the roof. Caritas, the large assistance agencies, other departments of the bishops' conferences, to name only a few examples, are also active in this field. Over and above this, this work provides many everyday temptations. There is also a complacency of the prophetic witness which cares little about its ultimate impact, in the same way as there is the self-righteousness of those who are too quickly satisfied by close contact with the powerful and influential. This tension between prophetic witness and a dialogue which is prepared to make compromises has to be stand in a productive way. It is not a matter of dissolving it in one or other direction. This calls for considerable skill in self-critical reflection. It is reflected in a type of speaking which starts with listening. The ability to listen, however, which must prove itself the strongest if one is to hear what one does not want to hear, unknown or incomprehensible things, still leaves room for improvement in the Church in general, as well as in Justitia et Pax in particular. Even if I have seen with pleasure that we have made some progress in this in our own contexts. Nevertheless, and here I would like to include the German Commission and myself explicitly, we still too frequently overestimate the self-evidence of our own manner of thinking and speaking.

To give an example:

The dangers of secular society are frequently put forward in a manner that for my taste is premature, above all by representatives of the Churches in Central and Eastern Europe. The necessary opportunities of freedom are frequently left unstated in these statements. However, "the West" is just as fast to dismiss this justified question as "Eastern backwardness", and in this way the concrete temptation of freedom is dismissed. The debate outlined here naturally does not run simply between the East and the West. It runs through all local churches in Europe and, unless I am mistaken, not only there. In the final analysis, it is always a matter of the question what "in this world but not of it" means in concrete socioethical terms. This translation has both a spiritual and a political side. Both are of vital importance.

3. Political challenges for Justitia et Pax as a church player in Europe

On the spiritual and theological side of this work, we have already had much to consider, and we will still have a roundtable tomorrow. I would like therefore to focus on the political challenges faced by Justitia et Pax in Europe:

Some major contents for our work have already been named. Without going into detail, I would like to outline this with a few key words: The millennium goal, namely to halve poverty worldwide, to create fair trading conditions, deal with migration problems, refine international law, promote democracy and human rights, specifically also the commitment to religious freedom, peaceful settlement of conflicts, violence prevention, as well as promotion of peace and reconciliation processes. Already this short list, to which one could add many more topics, makes it clear: We do not lack challenges. Justitia et Pax has no problem with a lack of content. Our problems lie as a rule in the framework within which we work and in the forms within which we usually do so.

I would like to clarify this. The development of our work is strongly dependent on political trends and needs. This applies in Europe as elsewhere. Against the background of globalisation, stronger international cooperation – occasionally even on a worldwide scale – is highly significant. This is one of the reasons why we are extraordinarily grateful for the invitation and initiative of this World Congress. Transferred to the conditions in Europe, this also means, however, that we need a working combination which corresponds to European political reality. It is seldom, if ever, possible to influence national politics from the parish. Similarly scarce are our opportunities to exert influence with regard to the ever more important European Union and the Council of Europe, if we restrict our activities within our national contexts or proceed without coordination and cooperation as individual national players at European level. The temptation to do so is greater here for the large nations than for the smaller ones. In parallel with the growing significance of work at European level, there is at the same time a growing need for regional cooperation.

We can see this challenge and need for greater cooperation in the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, but we are still at the starting blocks when it comes to actual cooperation. Our heterogeneity is a treasure and also a burden. And we are reaching the limits of our resources. Nevertheless, hopeful approaches can be recognised. The working group on the Great Lakes region, the concerted lobbying on the basis of the human rights report from Bosnia and Herzegovina are among them, as is cooperation between the relevant departments of the US, English, French and last but not least German bishops' conferences in the period prior to and during the Iraq War. These are only a few topical examples.

In order to illustrate the potential offered by this cooperation, I would like to outline briefly our work in support of the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Commissions of the European Conference had decided in 1998 to organise jointly a solidarity conference in Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The path to this step was very rocky. We were to discover that the representatives of the various European Commissions had quite differing views of the war in the former Yugoslavia. The divisions within the European societies, which had made significant contributions to the dynamics of the war, were also reflected in our thinking. In this sense, we were a part of the problem. However, to the extent that we listened to one another and developed a joint perspective on the conflict, in due course we were able to become a part of the solution. The concrete consequence of this conference was the establishment of a European working group to support our partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina in setting up an annual report on the situation of human rights in their country. On the basis of this report, it was then possible for the individual Commissions to contribute the perspectives of our partners in the political debates in the form which suited them best. Above all, it was possible in this ongoing, coordinated and

reliable way to keep awake the question of the future of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was and is all the more important to us as the very success or failure of this peace process helps to establish whether and with which perspectives the European Union will be a player in the international peace question, which in turn will not be devoid of influence on some other conflicts. Against the background of this commitment, we have been able in the last year to launch a declaration by high-ranking European politicians which brought the question of renegotiating the Dayton Agreement back onto the political agenda. The fact that our colleagues in Bosnia were able to gain new strength from the support of European solidarity after their terrible war was certainly not the smallest success of this work. It is not to blow our own trumpet that I am telling you this, but because it shows what can be achieved when cooperation works.

This is an experience which we make in other contexts too. Many of our Commissions in Europe have strong contacts with Commissions and partners on other continents. We have learned that our work does not make sense without these partnerships. These forms of cooperation are one of the main preconditions for effective action, particularly also when it comes to lobbying. Other players also have clever analyses - occasionally even cleverer. However, it is rare to find such a foundation of concrete experience, such a familiarity with the people about whose welfare we are concerned, such a context of players in the North and South, over and above the concrete political and social borders. These are talents which we should seek to develop.

These talents have much to do with being "in this world" in practical terms. It is worth considering which forms and structures we must develop for the work to be truly efficient in the context of our mandate. We must deal intensively with the question of efficiency in political lobbying. This emerges not lastly from the frequently bloody dramas of the questions to be dealt with. There is no historical claim for Justitia et Pax as a structural context in which to hold a specific role within the Church. There are only concrete contributions related to today's problems. I am saying this in particular with regard to the critical enquiries concerning the work of some Justice and Peace Commissions. The flood of paper with which many European Commissions work - including my own - will certainly not wash away the problems of war, poverty and human rights violations. In this practical sense, the "old" Western Commissions can learn a lot from the "new" Eastern Commissions, but above all from the Commissions of the South.

It is vital to our day-by-day work to have a clear view of the preconditions so that Justitia et Pax can apply its interests as a church player in Europe. Despite all the differences in the individual European countries, the following preconditions still appear to me to be common to all:

1. As has already been mentioned, it is vital to our political effectiveness for us to have clear political support from the Church. If we speak, we speak as a part of the Church. Comments from church circles which question the ecclesiastical authority of Justitia et Pax weaken our political presence. It is equally important for Justice and Peace Commissions to appear clearly as a Church player. As a rule, the temptation not to do so is more present in the West than in the East of Europe.

2. Exchange and close networking with our partners must be structurally strengthened and safeguarded. The systematic or at least continuing exchange of experience ensures competence and avoids unnecessary national constrictions (bias). It creates political synergies. Where there are good content-related reasons, networking must develop and become operative cooperation. It is one of our important experiences that the indication that this or that position is also shared by our partners in France, Spain, Hungary or Nigeria, can work minor miracles in the Foreign Ministry. This form of cooperation offers to us not lastly – please forgive my distinct sociological perspective – comparative advantages as against other players within society.
3. The uproar about injustice should not make our analysis less sharp. Our political authority arises from the link between our living witness and a clear and coherent look at the prevailing circumstances. Professionalism, accountability and personal plausibility are major elements of our effectiveness. We will not get away with being imprecise.
4. We must increasingly – in spite of all the national differences – agree that we must, patiently and competently, convince people of our perspectives in the face of the progressing secularisation of the European societies. The classical church proclamation alone, although it doubtless continues to have its indispensable place, will not suffice to anchor our interests effectively in the political arena and in society in the long term. We cannot presume that simply indicating that the Church says this or that is convincing. On the contrary, we frequently have to deal with laicistic tendencies which place the actions of religious formations under a general cloud of suspicion. This situation calls for perseverance. Incorporating the religious dimension of Man into the political debate without creating an impression that it is a matter of only special institutional interests is the actual art. A fundamental openness to ecumenical cooperation and to cooperation with all people of good will without denying one's own identity is another of the major challenges here.
5. We can only develop or retain the necessary credibility, in particular in peace processes, if at the same time we build up a strongly self-critical faculty. Not a few people have had personally difficult and bad experiences with the Church or with its representatives. By being able to give a serious answer to this experience, we can certainly regain much of our lost authority in the medium term, and hence have our voices heard once more. The admission of guilt which the Holy Father gave for the Catholic Church in 2000 is a milestone on this path. The wide variety of positive reactions particularly from the non-church area to the many steps taken by the Holy Father on this path should encourage us to continue this work.

The challenges we face are immense. Even if it does not make things simple: We depend for the strength of our witness in our respective societies on our ability to work more closely together and to develop new forms of collaboration. I hope that this congress will bring us forward on this path. Thank you for your attention and brotherly and sisterly patience.