

**Address to the Conference of European Churches  
Church and Society Commission**

*Seminar “EU Constitution and the Churches”*

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**by**

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Your Graces,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here. I would like to thank your Commission for organising this conference. And for providing me with the opportunity to contribute to the discussions on the role of Church in modern society. Which shows, once again, the resolve of our Churches in making their contribution to European integration.

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We meet today in exciting, but challenging times. We are at a historic turning point in European history. With the enlargement of the Union. As we prepare to welcome ten new Member States next May. Raising our population from 375 million to 450 million. And a new European constitution that is slowly taking shape.

2004 will be a decisive year – as we work towards economic recovery. Against a background of rising unemployment. And with a growing number of those at risk of poverty. The 17th October, just a week ago, was the international Day for the eradication of poverty.

In Europe, despite having the best social protection system in the world, we still seem unable to share the benefits of our advanced societies in an equitable way. One in six Europeans is living on less than 60% of their average national incomes. And one in ten people are at risk of falling into poverty. **Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere.**

As well as the economic and social difficulties that come with enlargement of the Union, we also face particular challenges in the field of discrimination. I am thinking, for example, of the situation of the Roma and, in some countries, of Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as other national minorities. Not signifying a clash of religions, but rather a clash between intolerance and fundamental democratic values. The discrimination we see against these communities is a real challenge for the Union as a whole. We must ensure that our European values, freedoms and rights that have been developed over hundreds of years are not undermined.

But, at the same time, the enlargement of the Union provides us with a window of opportunity for reflection and change. And it is precisely here where the different faiths – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Islamic – can strengthen and guide us as politicians.

I am very conscious of the contribution of the different Churches in preparing the way for the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which is now part of the draft Constitutional Treaty and so given real force. Showing the weak, and the meek, that while some may believe that ‘might is right’, there are other standards in the World. Demonstrating the important role of the Church as a partner in modern society.

The EU’s commitment to achieving a more inclusive society consolidates a large number of issues that are important, and common, to the work of the different churches. Promoting justice, solidarity, the protection of children’s rights, the eradication of poverty, the protection of fundamental rights and cultural diversity. And although the European Union itself has no specific religious affinities, it is steeped in religious and intellectual traditions. And it is these traditions that have handed down the fundamental values of peace, equality, freedom and justice on which the Union is based.

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Which is why religious organisations and the Church can be a powerful social force. With the potential to play an increasing role in promoting peace and tolerance within society as a whole. Acting as a key partner in the struggle against poverty and exclusion. And supporting the Union in its quest to promote peace and tolerance. And to combat discrimination in any shape or form.

Because churches of all faiths address a wide range of issues in their daily work. Maintaining daily contact with real people and real problems. Working with minorities and the marginalised. *This is partnership in action.*

And we have already seen the fruits of such partnership. At national level, for example:

- In Germany and Austria, churches and other religious groups have considerable autonomy in helping to shape civil society. Running kindergartens, schools, hospitals and long-term care homes.
- In France, the government and Muslim leaders have created a body representing the country's five million Muslims – Europe's largest Islamic community. Working together to dispel hostility towards Islam. Combating discrimination according to the Principles of the Republic.
- In Denmark, the Jewish community co-operates closely with the local authorities. Fighting racism not only against Jews, but against ethnic minorities and asylum seekers.

And at European level, for example:

- The CAT – Christian Action and Networking against Trafficking in Women – project, which is funded by the European Commission STOP Programme, has 40 participants across the EU. Joining forces to combat the trafficking of women.
- And in Brussels, last March, I was pleased to see representatives of all faiths taking part in my series of Round Table meetings to develop new approaches to Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. (Observatoire de Vienne).

We must seek out ways of exploiting the full potential of partnership. And I urge all church organisations, of all confessions, to increase their participation in action with other partners. By *partners* I mean:

- Local and regional authorities.
- Non-governmental organisations, who also give a voice to the poor, the homeless, the unemployed.
- Social welfare offices dealing with health, housing and income support.

From policy makers to front-line staff to people living in poverty. Together we can make a real difference.

In all of this, legislation is important too. And, for example, the EU has already created a firm legal base to fight discrimination. Two new directives are due to come into force this year. On racial equality, and wider forms of discrimination. These new rules will have an impact in all Member States, and will help protect and support women and men across the Union who face discriminatory practices, attitudes and behaviour, in the workplace and beyond.

The Church can contribute enormously in this area. Setting an example and supporting EU priorities for jobs for all citizens and for greater social inclusion. Promoting tolerance, diversity and the integration of different cultures. Reaching out to a wide range of people, at different levels.

And, although the Church may not play a direct role in political decision-making in most countries, your full participation and, above all, your contribution to policy-making is crucial.

Which is why I welcome the clear reference in the draft constitution to specific dialogue with Churches and confessional and non-confessional associations. Recognising their specific contribution to public life and underlining the Union's commitment to maintaining an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and organisations.

Some Member States, as well as the Vatican and a number of religious NGOs, have demanded an explicit reference to Christianity and God in a future Constitution.

And, throughout the Convention, churches made valuable contributions. With views expressed by the Church of Greece, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, the Conference of European Churches, the Quaker Council for European Affairs and many others. Voicing their views on a range of issues. Such as social policy and social inclusion. Human rights and anti-discrimination. The quality of life. And the importance of dialogue between the institutions and the church.

A few days ago (8 October), a group of some Members of the EP discussed, once again, the "Christian heritage of Europe" and although the draft European Constitution does not fully respond to some of the far-reaching demands relating to the issue of Christianity, it contains numerous provisions that are of major importance to the role of Churches and religious organisations within the Union. Which I would like to underline.

- Article 51 of Part I of the Draft Constitution integrates the provisions of the Treaty of Amsterdam. Respecting the status of Churches and confessional and non-confessional associations under national law.
- And the articles on the freedom of association, on religious freedom and on religious diversity in the Charter of Fundamental Rights have been integrated in the draft European Constitution. Making them legally binding for the Union, as well as for Member States.

In taking into account diversity as an essential feature of the European model of society, I consider these **neutral** references to religion in the draft constitution to be appropriate. Staying in line with the preamble of the Draft Constitutional Treaty (*"Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanistic inheritance of Europe, the values of which, still present in its heritage..."*). Adding an explicit reference to the Union's religious and spiritual dimension.

This is the model we should try to defend. One which reflects the richness and diversity of our culture through its reference to Europe's cultural, humanist, spiritual and religious dimension. A reference to religion that is acceptable to all, which can unite those who believe in God and those who draw inspiration from other fundamental values of a non-confessional nature.

*Such a text does not utter a judgment on the value of Christianity, or other religious beliefs. Nor does it prejudice Christianity's contribution to European civilisation, both in historic terms and in contemporary terms. Let us work to defend it.*

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I believe we must strive for a Europe where every citizen's needs are met. And where our diversity in Europe is mirrored at every level. In our measures. Our policies. And our actions.

To meet the challenges that we face demands partnership, networking and collaboration. On the direction of such measures, policies and actions. And all of this is fundamental in meeting our most difficult challenges today – discrimination, poverty and social exclusion. Real problems faced by real people.

Which is why this meeting is so timely. Providing us with the opportunity to further explore ideas about how we can bring communities together. About how we can push forward social progress. And overcome the barriers of poverty, exclusion and ignorance that separate communities on cultural or religious grounds. It is about how we can achieve this together.

Thank you for your attention.