

# Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions

*Final Declaration of the International Workshop in Berlin*

*20-22 September 2013*

## **Dealing with a Violent Burdened Past and the Aftermath of Dictatorship as a Challenge to European Societies**

The work of peace calls us to courageous engagement with the reality and threat of violence – past, present and future. In Europe today the violence of our past weighs on the present and continues to cast shadows over our future. Seeking to better understand the causes and consequences of this violence, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions has come to Berlin, from 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2013, for a reflection on these issues informed by the concrete experiences of Germany.

Our particular focus has been the violence of dictatorship, the political instrumentalisation of terror and oppression and the appalling consequences of the war of aggression unleashed by the Nazi regime. The analysis spanned different types of regime, ideology and methods. This has taken us to the former concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, the Topographie des Terrors exhibition in the former Gestapo headquarters, the Stasi museum, the former Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen, and the site of the future Flight, Expulsion and Reconciliation exhibition on the plight of refugees in Europe during the 20th century. Through these visits, and contributions from leading experts in the field, we have deepened our understanding of the nature of this kind of violence and its impact on those affected. This in turn has led us to consider the implications of this past for today, and the lessons to be learned from it for the future.

During our days here, re-tracing the steps of both victims and perpetrators, the inescapable conclusion has been the centrality of human dignity to peace, justice and reconciliation. Reflecting on terror and violence through the eyes of victims the brutal effects are evident – the shattering of a person's self-image, security and connection to society. Challenged to reflect also on the perspective of the perpetrators we have seen too how the practice of violence is detrimental to our human dignity, obliging us to retreat behind uncritical acceptance of rules and systems, becoming part of the machine.

It follows then that, human dignity, the foundation on which all human rights rest, needs to be the guiding value in our approach to the challenges of the past, present and future. Restoring the dignity of victims requires that we listen with compassion and openness to their needs and keep them at the centre of any proposals for reconciliation. All societies moving out of conflict owe a great debt of gratitude to those who bear their suffering with dignity and work for the common good of society. There is need to ensure that this suffering is not exploited by those who wish to

prolong conflict or exacerbate divisions within society or between nations, using the past as a battleground for the present.

In this process we have been confronted with the uncomfortable truth that most of those responsible for the genocide against the European Jews have not been brought to justice.

The majority of the Nazi, Communist and other perpetrators of crimes of war, crimes against humanity and human rights abuses have also not been held to account for their actions. Although nothing can adequately compensate victims for what they have suffered, the work of reconciliation cannot remain abstract. It needs to be grounded in concrete analysis, which exposes and takes account of different levels of responsibility, always with close reference to the needs of victims and the communities involved.

While there can be no blueprint for reconciliation, some clear safeguards against the abuse of the term can be identified. Processes founded on forgetting the past or blocking the victims' search for truth and recognition represent a further assault on their human dignity. Also to be avoided is the generalisation of blame without due regard for different levels of responsibility and the context in which specific actions took place.

Addressing these wounds from the past presents a challenge to all of us on a personal, societal and national level. An openness to self-critical analysis is vital to this process. Reconciliation requires us to overcome the breakdown of trust and restore and renew relationships on the basis of mutual respect. Fear is often a significant obstacle in this process. As individuals and groups we can be afraid to expose our own weaknesses. We may hesitate to claim responsibility for our part in past violence in the absence of the certainty that others will do the same.

Churches have a valuable role to play in providing the moral framework within which the truth about the past can be explored and understood. Churches need to lead by example in this regard, engaging in self-critical analysis on their own role in the time before, during and after dictatorship, grounded in the values of truth, justice and solidarity. Above all, churches can point the way to forgiveness, which offers an opportunity for a new freedom and a deep renewal of relationships. We recognize that the learning process we have undergone here in Berlin is part of a wider learning process in the Church about history, memory and reconciliation. One of the strongest expressions of this process came from Pope John Paul II in the homily for the Day of Pardon (12 March 2000) when he called us to recognize "our responsibility as Christians for the evils of today", asking forgiveness for our part in injustice and offering forgiveness for those injustices inflicted on us by others. At Plötzensee Prison we remembered the sacrifice of Fr. Alfred Delp SJ and Helmuth von Moltke who were executed because their Christian values were incompatible with the practices of the Nazi regime.

Our experience here has confirmed the value of the contribution made by the different memorial sites and historical projects we visited. Such educational opportunities are of particular value for future generations who may not otherwise have the opportunity to gain an understanding of these events. Crucially, they offer a

space where we can educate both hearts and minds. The experience of dictatorship and war, where highly educated people merely followed the logic of the system, is a powerful illustration that a formal education will not necessarily provide all the tools we need for a deep appreciation of the humanity of others.

Our experiences in Berlin during this workshop have challenged all of us as participants to self-critical analysis of our reactions to offences against the dignity of the human person today. We recognize that there are places in our societies where people are kept on the margins, places that may, in the future, become memorials to human rights abuses. Are we merely standing by while the dignity of others is offended and ignored?

Finally, it must be recognized that remembrance of this past is not only painful. We have been inspired by the example of those who fought to preserve their dignity and that of their fellow human beings in the most inhumane of conditions. We are reminded that even seemingly impenetrable dictatorships can fall and that new relationships can be built in their wake. This can be seen, not only in the history of individual nations, but also in the wider project of the European Union itself. These experiences should give hope to other countries currently experiencing, or emerging from, violent conflict.

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions wishes to express sincere thanks to all those who made this experience possible: our hosts, the German Commission for Justice and Peace, the military chaplaincy of Germany for its generous support for our programme, the Maximilian Kolbe Foundations and all our dialogue partners, especially the community of Regina Martyrum, where we celebrated the central symbolic moment of our workshop.

## **Background**

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe) is a European network that today unites 30 national Justice and Peace commissions. Each one is established or recognized by its Catholic bishops' conference. The secretariat of Justice and Peace Europe is situated in Brussels (Belgium).