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Press Conference to present the Third Edition of the European Catholic Social Days (Bratislava, 17-20 March 2022)

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the Third Edition of the European Catholic Social Days on the theme “Europe beyond the pandemic: a new beginning”, to take place in Bratislava, Slovakia, from 17 to 20 March 2022.

The initiative is promoted by the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), the Council of the Bishops’ Conferences of Europe (CCEE), and the Slovak Episcopal Conference, in collaboration with the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

The speakers were His Eminence Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., archbishop of Luxembourg, president of the COMECE; His Eminence Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Archbishop Gintaras Grušas of Vilnius, president of the CCEE; and Archbishop Stanislav Zvolenský, metropolitan of Bratislava, president of the Slovak Episcopal Council.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich

Dear friends,

[COVID-19 pandemic & European transitions]

Today, the world remains embedded in a global health crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic still wreaking havoc. The EU was quick to react at its first stage and manifested its allegiance through the historic recovery plan *NextGenerationEU* coupled with a massive vaccine strategy, “not only for Europe’s own safety and protection, but also for [...] people living in poorer nations”[1]. Nevertheless, the consequences of the pandemic

have shaken the apparent certainties of our political, economic and societal systems, and exposed our vulnerabilities.

Let us not forget that the COVID-19 pandemic has come at a time already marked by demographic imbalances, technological disruption, and ecological injustices.

[Aim of the 3rd European Catholic Social Days]

In this context, we recognise the need to bring together the voice of the Catholic Social Teaching and Practice. And so, twelve years after the first European Catholic Social Days' held in Gdansk (2009) and seven years following the second edition of this event in Madrid (2014), the Third European Catholic Social Days will be held from 17 to 20 March 2022 in Bratislava.

With an eye on "Europe beyond the pandemic" towards "a new beginning", the event will be the occasion to reflect on the importance of solidarity and social justice in a Europe in transition. Inspired by the Gospel and the Catholic Social Teaching, over 300 delegates sent by the Bishops' Conferences of Europe - amongst which young people, academics, EU and national politicians and Church representatives - will come together to contribute to the process of discernment on key social issues in Europe. Our aim is to reflect and debate on the way forward towards a just recovery in Europe, and through this reflection, contribute to the rebuilding process from a Christian perspective.

[Main Topics of the 3rd European Catholic Social Days]

Three main transitions shall be explored during this 3rd edition of the Social Days:

- First, the demographic transition and family life
- Second, the technological and digital transition
- Third, the ecological transition

[1 Demographic transition and Family life]

One of Pope Francis' Dreams for Europe is "a Europe that is a family and a community"[2]. The first session of the Social Days will give the opportunity to reflect on the sense of community and to highlight the family as the first community. Family is the future of Europe and must be supported by adequate social policies to cope with the real 'demographic winter'.

We will also approach the issue of the population decline, the growing rural-urban divide in Europe, and the importance of family as the nucleus cell of society. Acting as a community includes developing a spirit of fraternity and solidarity against individualism and conflicts, in order to face together Europe's challenges.

[2 Technological and Digital transition]

The digital transition is one of the key pillars of the EU recovery plan. EU leaders agreed that at least 20% of the funds under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the main instrument of the EU recovery package, will be made available for the digital transition.

In the past years, the EU has been actively accompanying the digital transition. At this time, the EU is working to develop a new set of rules that will create a safer and more open digital space, through the Digital Services Act package. Furthermore, the EU is also regulating Artificial Intelligence.

However, we must not forget that investments in "new technological and scientific knowledge must be placed at the service of mankind's primary needs, gradually increasing humanity's common patrimony[3]."

This is why, during our second main session, delegates will be asked to analyse the digital and technological transition, judging on its ethical and anthropological implications, and discussing how digitalisation can help everybody in the pursuit of a dignified life.

[3 Ecological transition]

Solidarity will be necessary to tackle one of the greatest challenges of our time, climate change. Pope Francis drew the world's attention to the "integral" dimension of this crisis in his encyclical letter *Laudato si'*: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." [4]

Ecological recovery is also a key pillar of the EU recovery plan, and the European Green Deal is at its heart. This strategy will support the EU ambition to become the world's first carbon neutral continent by 2050. In order to achieve this a total of 30% of the EU funds has been made available to fight climate change.

To deliver on this ambition, the European Commission adopted a climate package on 14 July 2021: the so called "Fit for 55" Package, which makes reference to the EU's objective of reducing its carbon emissions of at least 55% by 2030.

In the aftermath of COP26, the third session of the Social Days will be the occasion to debate on the urgent need for an ecological conversion and the challenge to shape this transition for the benefit of all, as one human family, as indicated in *Laudato si'*[5].

[A Call for transcendence - An invitation to rediscover the profound Europe's deep roots]

While reflecting on these key social issues touching our society, the 3rd edition of the European Catholic Social Days will also take place at a crucial moment: towards the end of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It will hence be an opportunity to rediscover the soul of Europe and in this endeavor, heed to Pope Francis call: "Europe, find yourself, be yourself![6]". In his message, the Holy Father invites us to reconnect with Europe's deep identity and history. To rediscover the dreams that inspired Europe's founding fathers. The European Union must return to its spiritual origins and "this crisis is a spiritual opportunity for conversion"[7]!

"Today, as many in Europe look to its future with uncertainty, others look to Europe with hope, convinced that it still has something to offer to the world and to humanity. The same conviction inspired Robert Schuman, who realized that "the contribution which an organized and living Europe can bring to civilization is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations". It is a conviction that we ourselves can share, setting out from shared values and rooted in the history and culture of this land."[8]

United with Pope Francis, let us all dream of "A land open to transcendence, where believers are free to profess their faith in public and to put forward their own point of view in society." For, Man is a being of "flesh" but also a "spiritual" being. And as His Holiness points out, "it is evident that a culture or political system that lacks openness to transcendence proves insufficiently respectful of the human person."[9]

Pope Francis reminds all Christians that today we have "a great responsibility": and "are called to serve as a leaven in reviving Europe's conscience and help to generate processes capable of awakening new energies in society". As Christians, we are urged to "contribute with commitment, courage and determination to every sector in which we live and work."[10]

[Conclusion: A Call for Solidarity & Social Justice]

As Christians, we must place both man and dignity of the human person at the heart of European reflection. Already in 2017 Pope Francis said: "Europe finds new hope when man is the centre and the heart of her institutions."[11]

The principles of solidarity and social justice can be guiding principles to build a different model of society after the pandemic.

At the end of the first edition of the Catholic Social Days in Gdansk, participants encouraged all of us "not to be afraid. Solidarity - they stated - is the basis of our common future".[12]

Selfish behaviour and materialism must give way to solidarity, as the current health crisis has shown. We must let the principle of solidarity guide our actions and remain united throughout Europe to share the burden of its socio-economic implications.

Thank you for your attention.

[1] <http://www.comece.eu/eu-foundational-principles-demand-vaccine-equity>

[2] Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe, on the 40th anniversary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the European Union, and the 50th anniversary of the presence of the Holy See as Permanent Observer at the Council of Europe.

[3] Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 179.

[4] Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home, 139.

[5] Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 13.

[6] Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe.

[7] Regaining hope and solidarity. Message of the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union to the European Institutions and the Member States, 18 November 2020.

[8] Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe.

[9] Ibid.[10] Ibid.

[11] Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Heads of State and government of the European union in Italy for the celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the treaty of Rome, 24 March 2017.

[12] <http://www.comece.eu/site/fr/notretravail/communiquedeprime/2009/article/8079.html>

Intervention of Archbishop Gintaras Grušas

The third European Catholic Social Days continue CCEE's commitment to work for a stronger and integral European society. Since the celebration of these days in Madrid in September of 2014, they have become a priority event of CCEE and mark an increasingly fruitful cooperation with COMECE, who had organized the first European Catholic Social Days in Gdansk in 2009.

This year, the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe celebrated its 50th anniversary, which we commemorated at the Jubilee Assembly in Rome last September. The meeting was an opportunity to analyze the current situation in Europe and to identify the most significant elements influencing the ecclesial and civil fabric of our continent, while recalling its Christian roots. It was also an opportunity to renew our commitment to build a Europe founded on dialogue, fraternity and social friendship in the perspective of *Fratelli Tutti*, and following the exhortation of Pope Francis who, in Santiago de Compostela, invited us bishops to work "for a new European humanism, capable of dialogue, integration and generation" so that Europe can "grow as a family of peoples, a land of peace and hope" (Santiago Assembly Message).

Since its establishment CCEE has been a sign of the Church's sincere and attentive closeness to the beloved European continent as it faces the challenges of an ever-changing world. In these 50 years, "we have seen great changes in Europe: political, social, cultural, demographic, economic, as well as changes in the Church, but we have also noted the many challenges that the peoples of Europe face today" (Grušas, homily at the Closing

Plenary Mass). Challenges of the times, such as the difficulty of dialogue, mistrust in encountering the other, the dominant materialistic culture, which press both Christian faith and religion, and human civilization in general.

To the European continent "sick with fatigue" (these are Pope Francis' words), we are called to announce Jesus Christ, the true hope of Europe since He is the truth, and only the truth sets us free. In the opening Mass of our Plenary Assembly, Pope Francis urged CCEE not to fall into discouragement and resignation as "we are called by the Lord to a splendid work, to work so that his house may be ever more welcoming, so that everyone may enter and dwell in it, so that the Church may have its doors open to all and no one may be tempted to concentrate only on watching." The three verbs: reflect, rebuild, and see, which he called to our attention as Christians and pastors, are the basis of our commitment for the future. We want to reflect today on "how many people no longer hunger and thirst for God! Not because they are bad, but because there is no one who can give them the appetite for faith and rekindle that thirst that is in the heart of man."

We want to work for the future: "rebuilding, Pope Francis reminded us, means becoming artisans of communion, weavers of unity at every level: not by strategy, but by Gospel."

We want to show Jesus. "So many in Europe think that faith is something already seen, that it belongs to the past. Because they have not seen Jesus at work in their lives. This divine love, merciful and shocking, is the perennial novelty of the Gospel. It does not ask us to demonstrate, it asks us to show God, as the Saints did: not with words, but with life."

The Church's contribution to the reconstruction of Europe from a Christian perspective also comes through the Social Days. Starting from the current social issues that affect European societies, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and aware that the Gospel offers the criterion of true secularism that does not exclude loyal and respectful collaboration for the integral good of society, we want to analyze those issues that we believe are fundamental for a just social, economic and ecclesial recovery, working together with European peoples and governments, to a recovery that leaves no one behind.

The theme of the Days is subdivided into three thematic areas: demographic transition, technological and digital transition, and ecological transition, which will point to the fact that the first step for a just recovery is to invest in the family and in the defense of human life. This highlights the need to take care of the younger generations, who are the protagonists and not just spectators of this renewal; to take care of the most fragile social realities, of the poor and migrants, so that a dignified life may be offered to all; to take care of the environment that surrounds us, starting from a profound ecological conversion to which the Holy Father calls us in *Laudato si'* and making our own his "urgent invitation to renew the dialogue on the way in which we are building the future of the planet" (n. 14).

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the COMECE, Pope Francis invited Europe to rediscover itself, to be itself: "you, who have been over the centuries a forge of ideals and now seem to be losing your momentum, do not stop to look at your past as a scrapbook."... "Do not be afraid of your millennial history, which is a window on the future more than on the past." And he added: "Today, while many in Europe are questioning themselves with mistrust about its future, many are looking at it with hope, convinced that it still has something to offer the world and humanity".

This is our wish and our commitment for Europe.

Intervention of Archbishop Stanislav Zvolenský

Thank you for the floor!

Ladies and gentlemen, let me first of all stress that it is an honour for me, as the President of the Slovak Bishops'

Conference, and for the whole Church in Slovakia, to be able to host this great event. We welcome this opportunity and will gladly make every effort to ensure that the Third Edition of the European Catholic Social Days will be a useful and stimulating event both for the Catholic Church and for the whole of European society. I would like to briefly present the programme of the Social Days, which is of course still being finalised at this time, also in view of the circumstances we are experiencing due to the COVID 19 pandemic. God willing, we will host the Third European Catholic Social Days from 17 to 20 March 2022 in the capital of Slovakia, Bratislava. At the outset I will remind you that all the details of this event, as well as the possibilities of registration and participation, then the interim reports, etc., will be published on the official website catholicssocialday.eu, which is already active. There you will also find the official logo of the event: The iconography of the logo recalls the figure of Saint Martin of Tours and the medieval tale of his conversion to Christianity after meeting a half-naked beggar on the outskirts of the city of Amiens in northern France. Martin cut his cloak in half to share it with the beggar, who appeared to him that night in a dream and in a vision turned out to be Christ. Saint Martin of Tours is the patron saint of Bratislava, and Saint Martin's Cathedral in Bratislava is the largest and one of the oldest churches in Bratislava.

As for the programme of the event, after the registration of the participants on 17 March there will be an opening celebration in Saint Martin's Cathedral, followed by a reception at the venue of this international meeting, the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Bratislava.

On 18 March, in the morning, the programme includes an introductory analysis of the social challenges in contemporary Europe and an outline of a possible path of renewal. The socio-economic aspect of this analysis will be presented by Professor Cécile Renouard and the theological-anthropological aspect by Professor Miloš Lichner. The afternoon will be devoted to the issue of demographic change and family life: the intention is to discuss the demographic decline and the growing disparities between rural and urban areas in Europe, as well as the role of the family - the elementary cell of society - in this context. The main speech will be given by His Excellency Dubravka Šuica, President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Democracy and Demography. This will be followed by round tables and workshops. The working groups will comprise between 10 and 30 participants, with a moderator and a secretary. In the evening of the same day we are planning an ecumenical prayer with the Sant'Egidio Community in the Cathedral of Bratislava.

On 19 March, the programme will focus on technological and digital transformation, reflecting on its ethical and anthropological implications, as well as on the question of how digitalisation can help in the quest for a dignified life. The opening address will be given by Msgr. Paul Tighe, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture. In the afternoon, the programme will continue with the theme of ecological transformation: the focus will be on the urgent need for ecological conversion and the challenge of leading this transformation for the benefit of all people, in accordance with the encyclical *Laudato si'*. Suggestions relating to this third part of the debate will be the focus of Professor Alessandra Smerilli from the Holy See's Dicastery for Integral Human Development. As on the previous day, on 19 March both blocks of the programme will be complemented by round tables and structured workshops.

On the last day of the programme, Sunday 20 March, we will collect and evaluate together the results of the different workshops and the conclusions will be discussed in plenary. So, this is, of course, a very simplified programme of the planned third European Social Days. Thank you for your kind attention. I reiterate my gratitude that Slovakia and our Bishops' Conference will have the opportunity to participate in the realisation of the event; we hope that it will be received with interest, either in presence or to be and online, according to circumstances and possibilities in March 2022.

Thank you all!
