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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **“We have a hope the world seeks”**

**Statement at the end of the CCEE 2013 Plenary Assembly** Bratislava, Slovakia, 3-6 October 2013

The annual Plenary Assembly of the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe took place in Bratislava (Slovakia), on the occasion of the 1150th anniversary of the arrival of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Slovakian lands, and upon the invitation of H.E. **Mgr Stanislav Zvolenský** local Archbishop and President of the of the Slovakian Bishops' Conference. Among others, the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops (Holy See), **Cardinal Marc Ouellet** and the Apostolic Nuncio to Slovakia, **Archbishop Mario Giordana**, attended the meeting.

### **Pope Francis' message**

In the message he sent to **Cardinal Péter Erdő**, CCEE President, Pope Francis expressed his appreciation and closeness towards the work of the Bishops' Conferences in Europe, in particular for the food for thought provided on the topic of secularity and the promotion of a culture “that joins faith and reason, truth and freedom, in constant harmony”. During the proceedings, the Presidents repeatedly thanked the Holy Father for his teachings, his testimony and his missionary example, addressing him a letter themselves, in which they expressed their profound communion with the Successor of Saint Peter.

### **New CCEE member**

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*The Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) encompasses the current 33 European Bishops' Conferences, represented by their Presidents, the Archbishops of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of Chişinău (Moldova Rep.), the Eparchial Bishop of Mukachevo and the Apostolic Administrator of Estonia. The current President is Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Primate of Hungary; the Vice-Presidents are Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa, and Mgr Józef Michalik, Archbishop of Przemyśl (Poland). The General Secretary is Mgr Duarte da Cunha. The Secretariat is based at St Gallen (Switzerland). [www.ccee.eu](http://www.ccee.eu)*

Following the favourable opinion expressed by the Congregation for Bishops (Holy See) The CCEE Plenary Assembly unanimously accepted the request by H.E. Mgr Philippe Jourdan, Apostolic Administrator of Estonia, to become a member of the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe. Therefore, CCEE is now composed of the Presidents of the 33 European Bishops' Conferences, the Archbishops of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of Chişinău (Moldova Rep.), the Eparchial Bishop of Mukachevo and the Apostolic Administrator of Estonia.

### **Renewal of the General Secretary**

Mgr Duarte da Cunha was unanimously reconfirmed for a further five-year term (2013-2018) in his capacity as CCEE General Secretary.

### **Meetings with the local authorities**

In his intervention at the opening of the meeting, Prime Minister **Robert Fico** highlighted that in Slovakia, Church and State have been engaged in an effective collaboration for the good of the Country's citizens. During a meeting with the participants, **Ivan Gasparovic**, the President of the Slovak Republic, recalled that true secularity is the one that respects and appreciates the religious dimension of a society. According to President Gasparovic, the concurrence with the celebration of the 1150th anniversary of the arrival of Saints Cyril and Methodius is a reason to appreciate the spiritual legacy of the Thessalonian brothers, which contributed to the building and the system of values of European civilization. The meeting's closing dinner was also attended by **Jan Figel**, Deputy Speaker of the Slovak Parliament. He recalled that Christian values are the foundations of the building of the present European community.

### **God and the State. Europe in the midst of Secularity and Secularism**

The main topic of the Bratislava meeting was meant to verify the space recognised to religion - and therefore the role of religious communities - in the European countries' societies, squirming between secularity and secularism.

The introduction was entrusted to Prof. **Emila Hrabovec**, a lecturer of history, who presented the conclusions of a survey carried out within the Bishops' Conferences. Then, Prof **Francesco d'Agostino**, lecturer of philosophy of law, Dr **Martin Kugler**, Director of the Observatory on Discrimination and Intolerance against Christians in Europe and **Cardinal Dominik Duka**, Archbishop of Prague, analysed in depth some aspects of the issue of secularization from a philosophical and theological viewpoint. Taking into consideration the present situation in Europe, they discussed the modalities of a greater testimony of faith in a secularized Europe.

The survey's conclusions, the presentations and the debate that followed enabled the participants to outline some general trends and define some working prospects. In particular - although the idea of secularity as separation between Church and State is commonly accepted - the survey revealed that not in all cultures the term secularity expresses the same concept, as is indicated by the many terms used to define it (neutrality, tolerance, correct, benevolent separation, etc.). This is due to the fact that the concept of secularity in Central-Easter European countries is a imported concept,

foreign to many local cultures. In fact, what clearly appeared was the identity of the Catholic faith that always focused on this separation between Church and State. This does not mean that the State is uninterested in the religious phenomenon or that the State must have a sort of religion *of the neural and secularist State*.

Going back through to the different fields touched upon by the questionnaire (education, university, administration, but also teaching of history, etc.), **Prof Hrabovec** pointed out that in different fields of social life one often notices the interference of a certain secularism and the attempt to build an exclusively negative image of the church and faith. The Church's response cannot be one of closure, turning into a fortress in Europe. Regardless of what happens, Christians have a clear identity, based on their faith, which is alive and awakens hope: a key word that repeatedly appeared in the debate, and at the centre of the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, which celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Christians are the carriers of a hope, an experience and faith content that is interesting for everyone. Repeatedly, the Bishops expressed the conviction that the hope that the Church brings is something that the world seeks. And this same hope must give Christians the courage to tackle difficult situations with a spirit of opening to people's questions, first of all looking at the Church's evangelising mission, which – following its Lord – feels questioned by all that belongs to the life of man. It's not about being superficial or lacking critical judgement on the world, or keeping within what is usually considered the spiritual setting. Therefore, Bishops propose a positive and proactive approach towards reality and social dynamics. Some priority areas have emerged from the debate that need a clear reflection by the Church: the educational issue, the youth pastoral, the topic of family pastoral and family care as well as the topic of unemployment, especially youth unemployment.

Prof. **D'Agostino** provided a philosophical overview starting from Pope Benedict XVI's interventions on Europe and Europe's mission in the world. **Dr Kluger** highlighted that the observation of acts of religious discrimination and intolerance is an "alert system" at the service of evangelization and social cohesion. Lastly, **Cardinal Duka** underlined how important it is for the Church to participate in the public debate, not to defend privileges or its niche within society, but for the common good of Europe. Although the world is secularized these days, this does not mean that the Church does not have a space where it can express itself. The experience of totalitarian regimes that many European countries suffered drives the faithful not to have a "Church of silence" again. Therefore, for the Bishops a healthy secularity guarantees the freedom to announce the Gospel and the social doctrine of the Church, which is the source of that heritage of hope and humanism that is the basis of the fabric of European civilization.

During the meeting, the Bishops showed their appreciation for the service to the Church and society that the Permanent Representation of the Holy See to the Council of Europe and ComECE carry out within the European Institutions.

The Plenary Assembly is a privileged place that favours personal meetings among the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences and enables the sharing of demanding challenges and urgent matters. Among them, the following have emerged:

- The situation of Christians in Bosnia-Erzegovina, a country that still seems to have been forgotten by the international authorities. Faced with the continuing of this “unresolved injustice”, the Bishops all over Europe - besides expressing their solidarity with the local Church - join their voices with those of the citizens of the country so as to obtain a true political commitment to solving this problem. .
- The failed enforcement of the Bucharest court’s rulings with reference to the demolition by the mayor of the Rumanian capital of a large building built next to the city’s Catholic cathedral attracted the Bishops’ attention.
- The issue of refugees coming to Europe calls for actual solidarity by the European States, so as to prevent situations similar to the one recently occurred in Lampedusa from happening again.
- The situation of the Church in Slovenia about which the Bishops were informed is a complex one, too. They expressed their closeness and solidarity with the local Bishops and the Catholic people.
- The economic crisis in various European countries also has great repercussions on the European Church. Christian communities often find themselves with many requests for help which they cannot fulfil, owing to a lack of resources. The call for greater solidarity between rich and poor countries was often highlighted.

Lastly, the participants received the personal testimonies of **Mgr. William Shomali**, Auxiliary Bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, who presided over a prayer vigil for the Holy Land, and **His Beatitude Ignace Youssif III Younan**, Patriarch of Antioch of the Syrian Catholic Church, on the dramatic situation in the Middle East and the Holy Land and the situation of great suffering of Christians, who are forced to leave their land. As for the situation in Syria, Bishops expressed their hope that the diplomatic initiatives in course will be efficient and namely avoiding any hypocrisy among those who say they want to solve the problem. Joining the Holy Father, The Bishops ask for the pathway of dialogue to be more decisive and for prayer to be accompanied by political decisions that should lead to an immediate cease-fire and an end to the access into the country of weapons that fuel the war.

The Light and the grace of the Liturgy of the Hours and daily Eucharist guided the proceedings, which culminated in a pilgrimage to the Nitra Cathedral, which enshrines the relics of Saint Cyril, and in an act of entrustment of Europe to the protection of Saints Cyril and Methodius, patron Saints of Europe and Apostles of the Slavs. As a witness of the spiritual and liturgical wealth of the Church in Europe, there was the celebration of the Divine Liturgy in the Greek-Catholic Bratislava Cathedral, presided over by His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk and animated by the beauty of the singing and the intensity of the prayer of the local community.