

Facing our Fears and re-connecting the World

A background note to the Justice and Peace Europe Concerted Action 2023 - 2024

Faced with multiple crises in an increasingly fragmented world, we are confident that humanity has the creative and spiritual resources to face its fears, to re-connect and to rebuild a shared 'juridical, political and economic order'. This is the core message of the 2023 - 2024 Concerted Action of the European Conference of Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe). It is inspired by the remarkable foresight of Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*.

Mutual assistance between countries proves enriching for each. A country that moves forward while remaining solidly grounded in its original cultural substratum is a treasure for the whole of humanity. We need to develop the awareness that nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved. Poverty, decadence and suffering in one part of the earth are a silent breeding ground for problems that will end up affecting the entire planet... Never has it been more evident than in our own day, when the world is interconnected by globalization. We need to attain a global juridical, political and economic order which can increase and give direction to international cooperation for the development of all peoples in solidarity. (FT 138.139)

1. An ocean of fears

In his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis discusses the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus speaks of a man wounded in a robbery who is lying on the ground by the roadside. Several people - including two clergymen with high social status - walk past him and look away, only one, a man from Samaria, pities the wounded man and helps. Looking at the present time and its crises and problems, Francis confronts us with a question:

will we abandon the injured man and run to take refuge from violence, or will we pursue the thieves? Will the wounded man end up being the justification for our irreconcilable divisions, our cruel indifference, our internal conflicts? (FT 72).

Climate crisis, the pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine, the energy and food crisis: the great crises of our time are truly frightening. Fear warns us of danger. It reminds us to be cautious and to carefully consider the consequences of our actions. Fear should not stop us from acting. In this sense, fear should move and enable us right now to address the injustices and inequalities underlying the visible crises to allow every human being to live in dignity.

Yet, fear has the potential to divide. The fear of being attacked themselves or getting their hands dirty prevented the passing clergy from helping the victim of the robbery. When the ghosts of fear multiply, they appear as important and infinite as an ocean. Then the ocean of fears mutate into paralyzing anxiety. For us, too, the temptation to be guided by fear of personal disadvantage and to abandon the needy to their fate, is great.

Often, fears and anxiety are used deliberately to manipulate and preserve or even increase existing injustices and inequalities. A frequent outcome is that the legitimate fears of those most disadvantaged receive little serious attention in public debate. Yes, we often

feel helpless because our institutions are neglected and lack resources, or simply serve the interests of a few, without and within. Indeed, 'globalized society often has an elegant way of shifting its gaze. Under the guise of being politically correct or ideologically fashionable, we look at those who suffer without touching them. We televise live pictures of them, even speaking about them with euphemisms and with apparent tolerance. (FT 76)

These divisive, paralysing effects of fear that emanate from the multiple crises are reinforced by a lack of trust in multilateral institutions and of their ability to reach fair compromises. In a fragmenting world the financial resources of these institutions are diminishing, and their political support is drying up. We are experiencing a drought of global institutions. This reinforces insecurity and perpetuates injustice. Currently, this can be observed worldwide in a wide variety of contexts, at all levels, in governments, in companies, in international organisations, in society, in ourselves personally. Here are some examples.

Security

The invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has raised fears of a new World War. In addition to the best possible control of escalation, we must, however, act to protect and support the people of Ukraine and defend human rights and international law whilst deploring all the victims of war and violent conflict. Russian authorities deliberately exploit fears of a nuclear disaster as well as the dependence on Russian gas and oil to divide Western societies, thereby destabilising them and isolating Ukraine. Our past failures in the expansion of renewable energy and in nuclear disarmament efforts have made us vulnerable. Part of the Western Europe population, blinded by short-term economic advantages, have ignored the fears of Russia's neighbouring countries. Until today countries like Ukraine and Taiwan are concerned of being abandoned if the cost of support becomes too high in the perception of Western societies.

The Executive Committee of Justice and Peace Europe highlighted on 31 August 2022 that efforts for a universalisation of the Treaty on the Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) have so far been insufficient. Past failures in disarmament have a double payback: in that weapons are used by criminal actors to inflict unimaginable suffering, and in that the threat of using weapons of mass destruction prolongs existing suffering as fear stifles effective interventions: <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/dokumente/JPE-Statement-on-UN-nuclear-disarmament-conferences.pdf>

Climate and Environment

Heat waves, droughts, floods and other extreme weather events - we are already experiencing the frightening consequences of man-made global warming. Especially among many young people the fear of the climate crisis and its consequences ("eco-anxiety") has become a considerable psychological burden. Many are angry and frustrated. Even more react with disillusionment and resignation. Interest-driven, manipulative strategies for instrumentalising fear can be observed. For example, oil companies promoted the concept of the individual ecological footprint to distract from the need for systemic change and their own responsibility as massive polluters. As in the current energy crisis, public debate on the socio-ecological transformation often reveals the fear of losing prosperity.

Even before the war in Ukraine and the rise of tensions between the People's Republic of China and the West, the international community was in danger of falling short of the targets agreed in the Paris Climate Agreement by far. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change has so far

failed to mobilise the efforts needed to meet the 1.5° target. On 4 October 2022, the General Assembly of Justice and Peace Europe had therefore called for a significant increase in efforts: <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/dokumente/210924-ELSiA-letter-to-eu-leaders.pdf>

Health

The Covid-19 pandemic has made us aware of our vulnerability. Many worried not only about their own health and the well-being of family and friends but also about the economic consequences of the pandemic. Contact restrictions limited our social life and forced us to deviate from some daily routines thus affecting the mental health of some. Regarding the access to vaccination some governments unduly prioritized their own populations. Even within Europe, solidarity proved to be fragile. Many played down the pandemic and some even denied the pandemic outright or portrayed it as a conspiracy of an elite or foreign power.

Even after the experience of the pandemic, many states continue to oppose effective strengthening of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Justice and Peace Europe and SECAM issued a joint statement on 15 February 2022 calling for the World Health Organisation (WHO) to be given more and more flexible funding, better governance and a clearer mandate: <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/home/meldungen/JPE-SECAM-joint-statement.php>

Migrants and refugees

Fear of migration is growing in Europe. Driven by populist parties, the fear of losing our social welfare system, our culture and our traditions is growing more and more intense in all countries, and the European Union continue to reinforce its external borders with the effect that caring for migrants and refugees is outsourced to other countries with little respect for human rights. Free movement of people as a universal human right seems to be forgotten.

“In some host countries, migration causes fear and alarm, often fomented and exploited for political purposes. This can lead to a xenophobic mentality, as people close in on themselves, and it needs to be addressed decisively. Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. Hence, they ought to be agents in their own redemption. No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human.” (FT 39)

Economy, Trade & Finance

During the pandemic, global inequality has worsened. Especially in many countries of the Global South, where states could afford little or no support payments to absorb losses caused by the pandemic. Existential economic fears were widespread in addition to fears about health. Overall, we see a *global context dominated by uncertainty, disillusionment, fear of the future, and controlled by narrow economic interests [...] [,] major political crises, situations of injustice and the lack of an equitable distribution of natural resources [...] [, and] the deaths of millions of children - emaciated from poverty and hunger.” (FT 29)*

Attempts to address and overcome these injustices are met with massive resistance, especially in the Global North: debt relief for the world's poorest countries, for example, could enable urgently needed investments (e.g. for strengthening local health systems and building a sustainable economy). However, the fear of losing out remains high among creditor nations and their populations, even in cases where such steps are required mostly to stabilise the interconnected, interdependent global economy. Accountability of companies on human rights, environmental and transparency standards remains

insufficient. In general, taking up economic challenges remains a matter of the nation state or regionalised as in the case of the European Union instead of focusing on the global common good.

The European corporate sustainability due diligence directive is yet to come and it is far from clear whether the European institutions will be able to come up with a bold solution that will effectively counter human rights violations, environmental and climate degradation in the Global South and fully includes financial services. With other Catholic organisations, Justice and Peace Europe had called for a strong European legislative initiative on human rights and environmental due diligence on 10 February 2021. However, reforms are also needed at the level of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

2. Truth and Human Dignity are our living resources to deal with fears

Dealing with fears requires discernment. We need to ask ourselves honest questions and rely on a strong compass to seek orientation.

Asking honest questions and relying on a strong compass of values: human dignity

- How can legitimate concerns be distinguished from excuses and manipulations?
- How can the forgotten fears of the disadvantaged be brought to the fore in the process of crisis management?
- How can acceptance for necessary but (supposedly) unpopular measures be promoted?
- How can the fractures caused by the fears be healed and inter-personal divisions overcome?

The encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* offers central benchmarks to guide us in dealing with our fears, in evaluating arguments and in our actions in general - human dignity and universal human rights:

Every human being has the right to live in dignity and to develop in a holistic manner; this fundamental right cannot be denied by any country. People have this right even if they are unproductive, born with limitations or have developed them. This does not diminish their great dignity as human persons, a dignity based not on circumstances but on the intrinsic value of their being. Without respect for this fundamental principle, there will be no future for fraternity or for the survival of humanity. (FT 107)

Respect for Human rights based on the inalienable dignity of every human person can guide our actions in all areas, politics, economy and society. They must never be degraded to a bargaining chip. This implies that we place them before our eyes and walk towards them in all things.

Searching, finding and accepting truth together

In today's globalised world,

the media can help us feel closer to each other and develop a sense of the unity of the human family, which in turn can inspire solidarity and serious efforts to create a more humane life for all [...] The internet in particular offers immense opportunities for encounter and solidarity. This is something really good, a gift from God. (FT 205)

However, while digitalisation and social media offer new opportunities to socialise across borders, the increasing importance of digital communication in society also has downsides: *Paradoxically, we have certain age-old fears that technological development has not been able to eliminate; indeed, these fears have been able to hide and spread behind the new technologies. Even today, outside the old city walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be*

trusted, because it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the "barbarian" from which one must protect oneself at all costs. (FT 27)

In social media, too, we retreat into our own bubbles, meet strangers with suspicion or even begin to fight them, thus creating a "culture of walls" (FT 27). In doing so, we are often inclined to accept only the information that fits into our own worldview. We are tempted to block out information that is uncomfortable because it demands effort or even personal sacrifice. For this reason, *we must learn to expose the various ways in which truth is manipulated, distorted and obscured in public and private discourse" (FT 208). "We must constantly reassure ourselves that today's forms of communication actually guide us towards generous encounter with others, honest pursuit of the whole truth, service, closeness to the underprivileged and promotion of the common good. (FT 205)*

3. Irrigate multilateral cooperation, communication and community

Building bridges: renewed multilateralism

The scale of the global challenges poses the danger that we will retreat in fear into the national context. As a result, there is a growing danger that the international space will become a lawless arena in which stronger states can oppress weaker ones and human rights violations can be committed without being punished, and the ecological foundations of human life are exploited and destroyed. This tendency must be opposed clearly and decisively. The principle of the rule of law must be upheld and multilateral cooperation strengthened: "Courage and generosity are needed in order freely to establish shared goals and to ensure the worldwide observance of certain essential norms. For this to be truly useful, it is essential to uphold 'the need to be faithful to agreements undertaken (pacta sunt servanda)', and to avoid the 'temptation to appeal to the law of force rather than to the force of law'" (FT 174). Instead of "disguising false intentions or placing the partisan interests of one country or group above the global common good" (FT 257), "preference should be given to multilateral agreements between states, because, more than bilateral agreements, they guarantee the promotion of a truly universal common good and the protection of weaker states" (FT 174) and their populations.

To achieve such a strengthening, reforms of the existing international organisations are necessary to increase the efficiency of their work and to ensure that their work is oriented towards the universal common good, human rights and the rule of law. To this end, it is necessary that they be provided with a clear mandate and sufficient resources. Furthermore, it is crucial to overcome structural inequalities that are still inherent in the structures of many organisations. To prevent a preponderance of privileged special interests, cartels and monopolies of powerful economic actors must be counterbalanced to ensure that the interests of the disadvantaged and particularly vulnerable are not ignored.

Reinventing communication

Searching truth humbly and collectively with extensive listening can help us towards a more constructive communication. This applies to the media world, political discourse, but also to our personal communication:

- **Taking human dignity as a compass:** Constructive communication requires that human dignity is recognised and respected as a fundamental, elementary truth. "The dignity of others is to be respected in all circumstances, not because that dignity is something we have invented or imagined, but because human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects and contingent situations" (FT 213).

- **Learning to distinguish real from deception:** Constructive communication requires "clear thinking, rational arguments" (FT 211). However, the real and the deceptive are often confused. To do this, it is necessary to improve "media literacy" in all age groups.
- **Facing one's own past and taking responsibility:** Coming to terms with one's past is a prerequisite for constructive dialogue and for peaceful, fear-free coexistence in general. "When conflicts are not resolved but kept hidden or buried in the past, silence can lead to complicity in grave misdeeds and sins. Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved in conflict, resolving it through dialogue and open, honest and patient negotiation" (FT 244). This dialogue is made possible by openly admitting mistakes. The rights of the victims must be respected.
- **Promoting a new culture of encounter and inclusive participation:** Constructive communication includes the disadvantaged and particularly vulnerable. "We need constantly to ensure that present-day forms of communication are in fact guiding us to generous encounter with others, to honest pursuit of the whole truth, to service, to closeness to the underprivileged and to the promotion of the common good" (FT 205). we have to get away from "empty diplomacy, dissimulation, double-speak, hidden agendas and good manners that mask reality" (FT 226).
- **Giving hope:** "Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile" (FT 55). Too often our communication leans towards the negative ("negativity bias"). In the media world, it is worth strengthening movements such as "Constructive Journalism" and "Peace Journalism".

Strengthening community

To face our fears and overcome the enormous challenges that we are facing, we are relying on community. "No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together" (FT 8). In the siblinghood of all people lies "a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure" (FT 8). "Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal" (FT 30). It is exactly the opposite that we need to promote: "it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes" (FT 30).

(International) exchange and training programmes such as the Erasmus programme can facilitate encounters and promote a culture of mutual respect and an appreciation of diversity. In order to address not only a small, privileged group of people, it is essential to open cultural exchange programs and opportunities to people of all social and economic backgrounds.

As a Church, we should strive to make our own parishes more places of encounter and to make the good news from the Gospel as a source of hope tangible there - beyond the boundaries of the parish - not only through words but also through deeds. In doing so, it is important to also open up for encounters with those who are far away from the Church.

Conclusion

In 2023 - 2024, the European Conference of Justice and Peace Commissions will continue their long-term work on social justice on the basis of this background note. They will draw particular attention to social fears that are ignored, but also work to deconstruct fear and anxiety which threaten to manipulate European citizens. Inspired by *Fratelli Tutti* they will also seek to develop events and venues to address the risk of fragmenting multilateralism.