

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/communiquusdepresse/2009/article/8079.html>

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