

JUSTITIA ET PAX EUROPA

‘The Gift of Freedom: A History of Transitions and Challenges’

FINAL DECLARATION

VILNIUS, LITHUANIA 17-21 SEPTEMBER 2010

The international workshop and general assembly of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, representing 31 national commissions from throughout Europe, took place in Vilnius, Lithuania between the 17th and 21st September, hosted by Archbishop Sigitas Tamkevicius of Kaunas and the Lithuanian Justice and Peace Commission.

The theme chosen for the international workshop was ‘The Gift of Freedom: A History of Transitions and Challenges’, in recognition of the fact that 2010 is a very special anniversary for Lithuania, marking twenty years since the re-establishment of independence after the end of Soviet rule. During this workshop we met with people of all ages and from many different backgrounds who presented a range of experiences and perspectives, giving us an insight into the difficulties Lithuania has overcome in its struggle for independence and the challenges that remain as a result of its painful past.

This is a nation whose strong faith and cultural identity enabled it to survive multiple occupations during the twentieth century, culminating in nearly five decades of soviet rule. Between 1940 and 1990 the country lost approximately one third of its citizens. The social fabric of the nation was severely damaged during this time and yet the spirit of its people remained unbroken.

We learned of the many ways in which people demonstrated their opposition and resistance to Nazi and Soviet rule, and the centrality of their Christian faith and the support of the Catholic Church to many of these endeavors. We heard inspiring first-hand accounts of personal sacrifice and the values that motivated people to risk their lives for the defense of freedom and human rights. Lithuanians have much to be proud of in their history, which is a lesson in faith and courage for all of Europe. A central element of our workshop was a commemorative ceremony at the Parliament building in the centre of Vilnius, remembering those who risked and sacrificed their lives for freedom.

Understandably, scars from the past can still be seen in Lithuanian society today. We were encouraged by what we saw of the efforts to address past injustices through restitution processes, which provide tangible evidence of a willingness to give recognition to the victims of injustice. The difficulties inherent in ensuring that such processes truly benefit those who have suffered most should not be under-estimated. We welcome recent initiatives aimed at addressing outstanding issues, such as the restitution of property, and hope that this important work will continue. It must also be acknowledged that, in a time of limited resources and global economic crisis, there are often difficult choices to be made between paying for the wrongs of the past and investing in the future.

Not all injustices can be addressed through material and financial compensation. The experience of other European nations has shown that the question of acknowledgement and responsibility is fundamental to the process of building a new future. The experiences in our workshop underlined the contrast between the unequivocal condemnation of the crimes of Nazism and the efforts made to hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions, and the international silence

surrounding the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the USSR. Truth and justice continue to be denied to many and processes of renewal and re-building relationships in society are hindered where the perpetrators of violence and injustice remain in power.

Closely linked to questions of truth and justice is historical memory. At the Paneriai memorial to the victims of the Nazi occupation (1941-1944) we saw efforts to accommodate a plurality of different memories and identities in a single location. This is already a sign of hope. We must be courageous in facing up to the difficult questions arising from our past, such as collaboration. Memories, presented as an invitation to dialogue, can help create spaces where people from different perspectives can share experiences and work towards healing.

Our experiences here have led us to reflect on the meaning of freedom and the responsibilities that accompany it. True freedom is not achieved in a moment, but is a continual process. Threats to freedom take many forms: they can be military, political, social, economic or moral. All of us, throughout Europe, need to be vigilant to new forms of threats to freedom.

We also need to reflect on the meaning of justice, in particular, through our experiences here we saw clearly that justice and peace do not necessarily go hand in hand. Addressing the injustices of the past can lead to the opening of old wounds. As Christians we wish to emphasize the importance of forgiveness in the reconciliation process. Although forgiveness is a personal and spiritual experience and not something we can legislate for, there is much that society in general, and the Church in particular, can do to create the conditions that could allow forgiveness to take place. Forgiveness can truly set us free from the wounds of the past. We are confident that Church and society in Lithuania will do all that is possible to achieve this.

A further issue we dealt with during the course of our workshop is migration. Long a feature of Lithuania's history, the current phase of economic migration presents both opportunities and challenges for this society. Increased freedom of movement throughout Europe is a positive development, but it is equally important that the right social, political and economic conditions are created to enable those who wish to stay in Lithuania to remain here.

Our sincere thanks to all those who made this experience possible. First and foremost, we wish to thank our hosts, Cardinal Audrys Backis, Archbishop Sigitas Tamkevicius, Bishop Gintaras Grusas and the Lithuanian Justice and Peace Commission. We thank all those who gave their time to address the members of our group, without them this experience would not have been possible.

Lithuanian history is part of our European history and knowledge of this past is important for all of us. We take away with us from this enriching experience the challenge to communicate what we have learned here in our own nations as a contribution to building a better future for the whole of Europe.

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe or CEJPC) is a European network that today regroups 31 national Justice and Peace commissions. Each one is established or recognized by its Catholic bishops' conference. The secretariat of CEJPC is currently situated in Paris (France).