

Press release - June 16, 2015

“Living together and disagreeing well” discussed in Brussels

A high-level meeting organized by the European Commission brings together 15 religious leaders

The European Commission invited 15 religious leaders, 5 women and 10 men that represent Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Mormon communities in different parts of Europe, for a discussion on ideas and experiences on the topic “Living together and disagreeing well”. Cardinal Reinhard Marx, Archbishop of Munich and President of COMECE and Maria Voce, President of the Focolare Movement, represented the Catholic Church.

Frans Timmermans, first Vice-President of the Commission and Antonio Tajani, Vice-President of the European Parliament, who is responsible for the implementation of dialogue, introduced the discussion. In his opening speech, Timmermans emphasized that dialogue *“has never been more important. Our societies face fundamental changes, and churches and religions are among the actors that can play an important role in promoting social cohesion and bridging divides. The religious leaders here today are partners for the European Commission as they can share their experience in fighting against fundamentalism and discrimination”*. Trajani said that these social illnesses *“can be defeated if we stay together. Dialogue between religions is crucial to defend the values of our societies. European institutions should foster this dialogue, not only at the level of religious leaders and theological experts but also where youth are concerned. We need to invest more, not only in our economy but also in the future of our youth”*.

Cardinal Marx asked: *“Do we consider religions as a heritage of the past or as an important contribution towards the future of society?”* And the Chief Rabbi of Brussels Guigui insisted: *“We need to strengthen the moderate religions in Europe, where the sense of history, of memory and of an open and tolerant religious dimension is lacking”*.

In the dialogue that continued during the working lunch after the press conference, Maria Voce reaffirmed: *“Experience shows that problems cannot be solved in a global manner, because needs vary. The needs of a small town are not the same needs of a metropolis or a rural area. The intelligence of love is required to understand the needs and find the answers. And these answers can be found if the local people and the different ethnic groups feel part of the same community and work together as protagonists to improve youth employment, integration in schools and harmony between families”*. She quoted some successful examples, such as the ones promoted by the City Association for Fraternity. More than a hundred cities are members of this association, which emerged from the Focolare Movement’s social dimension. It promotes projects that aim at implementing the principle of fraternity. The latest awarded project is the one in Cannes, France, where an intense friendship between Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews is helping them to discover not only faith but also the wealth and beauty of their different communities, thus managing to change the face of some districts in the city.

“We, leaders of religious movements” concluded Maria Voce, *“must not be pessimists; we must be the voices of hope. I know this is difficult but it can be achieved. If we do it together, we stand a better chance. We definitely need an art that has to be learned. Chiara Lubich called it ‘the art of loving’”*.

Contributions from this high-level meeting will feed the first Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights in the European Union. This will be held in Brussels on 1 and 2 October 2015 and the theme will be *“Tolerance and respect: preventing and combating anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe”*.

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