

## Opening of Athens Conference

Athens 17. October 2018

Dear General Secretary of the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe, dear Torsten  
dear Katharina Stamm, representing the Diakonie Deutschland,

Dear participants to this European Asylum Conference in Greece 2018,

I am very pleased and honoured to open **this second part** of the European Asylum Conference in Athens, and welcome you all. It is the first time I have taken part in a Conference organized by CCME. I am looking forward to discussing and reflecting on the work and strategy of the institutions in Greece as well as the work of NGOs and the churches in advocacy and practical support to the migrants.

I bring you warm greetings from the Conference of European Churches. As you all know, nowadays the Churches in Europe are deeply concerned by the situation of migrants and refugees in Europe. The policy of the EU and EU member states in trying to close borders, ignore refugees rescued from the Mediterranean, and forget those who lose their lives trying to cross into Europe, cannot leave us unconcerned and indifferent. As Christians we spiritually have a nomad identity and we are called to love and take responsibility for these our neighbors and to welcome them.

I considered that it was important for me, as the new President, to attend this Conference especially when I remember these words of the CEC constitution: *“The Conference commits itself, on the basis of the conciliar process of justice, peace and the integrity of creation, to continued work in particular on asylum and migration, and on diaspora and migrant Churches.”* **Furthermore for nearly 20 years the CEC and CCME have worked together on migration and integration, refugees and asylum, and against racism and discrimination in Europe.** By attending this Conference I wanted to show both my personal interest and CEC’s interest in cooperating with the CCME. We want to continue to strengthen this long-standing cooperation and are thankful for the common trust we share as we journey together.

Dear Torsten, we have both recently taken up new positions, but are both equally committed to implementing a co-operation agreement signed by our organizations in 2017 to continue to strengthen the joint witness and service of the churches and church-related organisations in Europe with and for migrants, refugees and ethnic minorities. I would also like to express my thanks to *Diakonie Deutschland*, who have been the very effective co-organisers of this Conference. Their commitment and contribution has made it possible to revitalise the tradition of a European Conference on Asylum.

I regret that I was not able to be with you in Chios to see the work being done there with and for the migrants - but I have heard about some of the alarming observations you made about the condition of refugees stranded there, and the impact this is having on the local inhabitants who feel left alone to cope with the situation. This is a situation which exists on the very doorstep of Europe and we really need to remind the wider European public about this.

As we know, the migration policies in Europe reveal both the inconsistencies of the European political project and the obvious lack of solidarity and a common vision of European states. This is not a migration crisis, but a systemic crisis of the European project as revealed by the migration issue – and it is a crisis where women, children and men seeking asylum are the first victims.

Many analysts talk about a crisis in values, a lack of a common narrative, the absence of a European societal contract. Raphaël Glucksmann, a French essayist, illustrates it in an essay with the significant title "les enfants du vide" (the children's of vacuum). The absence of a common framework of reference makes Europe appear to be cut off from its roots, Judeo-Christian of course, but also humanist. Seventy years ago the right to asylum was included in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948). This was reinforced by the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 and its additional protocols, which spelt out the rights of refugees, including access to social rights, equivalent to those available to the citizens of the country granting protection.

CEC and the member churches consider that this issue is very relevant to the future of our continent. At the CEC General Assembly held in May 2018 in Novi Sad, the theme was "You shall be my witnesses: hospitality, justice, hope". There the Assembly expressed its concerns about the current situation in a public statement, widely directed to the migration issue.

The situation you observed in Chios is the result of a policy which keeps refugees either outside or at the borders of Europe. Many churches have expressed concern about this. The CEC General Assembly stood firmly against this policy, because it has resulted in making crossing the Mediterranean Sea an important route into Europe and this is one of the most dangerous passages in the world. The General Assembly also challenged the notion of safe third countries. We will probably speak more about this later.

The vision of the churches on the migrant issue is one of "solidarity first". Solidarity and sharing are essential in these situations. Solidarity means that stronger shoulders carry more than weaker ones but that everyone contributes where they can. As many of you will know this calls into question the current *régime* of the Dublin Convention.

At the same time, solidarity is also something for churches and NGOs to exercise – not only with refugees, but also with each other, across Europe and with the organisations here in Greece. I hope our days together will contribute to this.

For far too many Europeans migration is an abstract issue. Bear in mind that Emmanuel Levinas has said that it is the face (le visage) of a person which awakens compassion and solidarity. To see someone's face you have, however, to meet him or her. Statistics, figures

can just prompt fears. A personal encounter is needed, because it is the only way to break down prejudice.

The CEC Assembly noted that lengthy periods in camps are detrimental to the well-being of people and offered help from the churches and NGOs in the reception areas.

The fate of those dying when trying to cross the Mediterranean or other external borders of Europe is sadly a frequent topic in the news these days. **As you will know, every June CEC and CCME commemorate those who have died trying to get to Europe.** Furthermore the way in which those rescued are turned away from harbour to harbour for days, forced to endure being crammed together unworthily because of an unworthy political game between European states can only be seen as a disgrace to countries that are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention.

The CEC General Assembly therefore recommended continuing the search and rescue operations at sea and creating safe and legal channels into Europe, taking up the positive examples given by churches in Italy (for example Sant Egidio) and other countries which have facilitated safe access to their countries.

Last but not least, our assembly called for ending the criminalisation of solidarity or humanitarian assistance to undocumented migrants i.e. by helping them to access health care or housing – based on our understanding that EVERY human is created in the image of God.

Considering the political exploitation of people's lack of knowledge about migration and their fears, especially in the time to the coming election for the European Parliament, the General Assembly added that *"building Europe for all citizens requires that we set signs of hope rather than spreading fears. Policies and living together in Europe should not be determined by fears, but by making space for encounter available."* The General Assembly therefore recommends and repeats the statement "have no fear" from the Lunteren Conference, held in 2016 by CCME, CEC, WCC and the Dutch Protestant Church.

I am looking forward to being with you for the next days and repeat the best wishes of CEC for this event with the following words in mind: "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind". 2 Timothy 1:7.

Thank you for your attention

Christian Krieger

President

Conference of European Churches