

It is once again a distinct privilege and a great pleasure to be invited to and involved in the Religious Leaders' Meeting as the President of CEC initiated by the office of the President of the European Commission, His Excellency José Manuel Barroso.

Allow me first of all to convey to you, Mr. President, as well as to all those participating in this gathering, the warm and sincere prayers of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for our deliberations today. As is well known, inspired by a commitment to personal freedom and human rights, but also to social justice and environmental awareness, His All-Holiness has pioneered a series of conversations with other faiths, dialogues with other churches, and exchanges with policy makers.

Our conviction, Your Excellency, as Orthodox Christian leaders, is that the dignity of the human person and the regard for community constitute the fundamental principles that define the boundaries and criteria within which we are able to function honorably and justly as human beings in a global world. Furthermore, it is within this context that the Conference of European Churches, and in particular the Church and Society Commission provide the forum in which churches in Europe can cooperate for the promotion of these principles and values that are universally accepted.

In light of the recent G8 Meeting in Deauville, the Ecumenical Patriarch addressed a message to our Religious Leaders Summit in Bordeaux, stating that "the world of faith can prove a powerful ally in efforts to address issues of social justice." Indeed, Your Excellency, religion can be a major force of change in our communities if it is able to – or, more critically, if it is given an opportunity to – sit at the same table with political

leaders in order to reflect on ways of responding to the unique, albeit common challenges that we face.

This is surely what it means to enjoy "a partnership for democracy" and a mutual understanding of "a shared prosperity," which are the governing themes of our meeting today. It is my firm conviction that the world of faith can prove a powerful ally in efforts to address issues of democratic rights and liberties. For religion provides a unique perspective – beyond the merely social, political, or economic – on the need to eradicate poverty, to provide a balance in a world of globalization, to combat fundamentalism and racism, as well as to develop tolerance in a world of conflict.

Whether we are dealing with environment or peace, poverty or hunger, education or healthcare, there is today a heightened sense of **common concern and common responsibility**, which is felt with particular acuteness by people of faith. Nevertheless, this sense of "sharing" or "partnership" requires a change in our mindset – what in religious circles we refer to as repentance or *metanoia*. It calls for change in both policy and practice; it involves courage and sacrifice; and it demands of all of us the willingness to become communities of transformation.

Therefore, we need here to underline that our freedom is not only personal but interpersonal. As human beings, we cannot be genuinely free in isolation, repudiating our relationship with our fellow humans. We can only be genuinely free if we form part of a community of other free persons. Freedom is never solitary but always social. **We are only free if we learn how to share**, if we make an effort to include others. To turn away, to refuse to share, is to forfeit liberty.



And this is perhaps the defining characteristic of our changing society in Europe. The world as we have known it over the last few decades now appears to be changing dramatically. Events within and outside our continent – whether the hopeful “Arab spring,” as it is called, or its many and manifold consequences – are obliging us to revise our understanding of community; they are mandating a reconsideration of the principles of democracy; they compel us to reflect on what it means to be a European citizen today.

One thing is certain: any revision, reconsideration, and reflection will inevitably be based on the need to share. The parameters of our world will be shaped by our willingness to remember and to realize that we are – **essentially and profoundly – united as human beings and collectively responsible for one another.** Our integrity as human beings is ordained by our willingness to share – to share our democratic values, to share our prosperity, and to share our planet’s resources.

In very simple language, this is what in religious terminology is called “compassion” or “love.” But its ramifications are more than merely pious or religious: they are radically spiritual, moral, social, and global.