

## **European Forum of National Laity Committees**

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"Human Dignity in a changing Europe –  
A Christian response"



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### **Global poverty – a European and Christian response**

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I thank the organisers of this conference for their invitation, allowing us to focus on a theme of great relevance for European Christians today: the challenge that poverty in a globalized world presents to us, as Christians and as Europeans. Because of my experience with the Community of Sant'Egidio both in Europe and in Africa, this issue is very close to my heart, one to which I am deeply committed.

Since the end of the cold war in 1989, we have been living in a period of globalisation, characterised by the tremendous growth of a market empire, which no one can escape. The Western–American model has become the dominant one throughout the world, turning every man and woman into a hard-working consumer. As a result of the dominance of the market, we evaluate everything in terms of money and consumption. We live in a time of globalised materialism.

However, this economic globalisation has not brought with it the worldwide progress and well being, peace, and unity so hoped for. Some, like Francis Fukuyama, thought that globalisation would herald the victory of democracy and peace in the world'. But we continue to live in a world of chaos filled with conflict, one which offers few promises of freedom. Gaining ground, globalisation has transformed China into a capitalist country, as well as one of the major players in Africa, yet it has not succeeded in turning it into a democracy. It has also turned India into a capitalist country. It has brought brands and products to the whole world, which has effectively become one big market. Although globalisation has broken down many borders, this seemingly borderless world is throwing up new walls behind which the poor are increasingly forgotten. New walls and new forms of 'apartheid' between rich and poor are being built. The increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots, both between the North and the South, and within the cities of both the North and the South, is certainly one of the main sources of fear, insecurity, and, ultimately, violence.

Andrea Riccardi, the founder of Sant'Egidio, has called war 'the mother of all poverty'. In times of war, the rich become poor and the poor, poorer still. And in countries ravaged by war, any aid efforts are merely a drop in the ocean. As Ban Ki-Moon, secretary general of the

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United Nations, states in a recent report on the Millennium Goals to be met by 2015: ‘Armed violence, conflict (inter-State, civil and criminal) and the resulting breakdown of the rule of law, justice and security are also a major threat to human security and to the hard-won Millennium Development Goal gains.’<sup>iii</sup> Yet, at the same time, we see that poverty and injustice often lead to violent conflict or war. In fact, increasing inequality is currently one of the greatest threats to world peace. We see how much of the world’s population has no access to health care, education, food and drinking water, or shelter, and thus has absolutely no future prospects. As that great master of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, put it, ‘Poverty is the worst form of violence.’ Peace and justice are inseparable in a world that is increasingly resigned to the existence of vast regions of despair. Peace is not possible when entire peoples, and even continents, can envisage absolutely no future for themselves.

In 2000, as you all know, the 189 members of the United Nations agreed on a global agenda for Development and on a set of concrete and measurable development objectives known as the Millennium Development Goals: goals for ending poverty and hunger, for universal access to primary schools, for gender equality, for child and maternal health, for combating HIV/AIDS, for environmental sustainability and a global partnership, all with the aim of reducing global poverty by half. Now, in 2010, with just five years to go, I fear it is safe to say that the world is not going to meet these goals, even if significant progress has been made by some countries in combating extreme poverty and hunger, improving school enrolment and child health, expanding access to clean water and HIV-treatment, and controlling diseases such as malaria and measles. But even if there is progress in some fields and some countries, the overall picture is not good. If you take the number of hungry people in the world, you can see that it is not dropping but still rising: from 873 million in 2004-2006 to 1.02 billion during 2009, the highest level ever. In his report *Keeping the Promise*, Ban Ki-Moon warns: ‘With five years to go to the target date of 2015, the prospect of falling short of achieving the Goals because of a lack of commitment is very real. This would be an unacceptable failure from both the moral and the practical standpoint. If we fail, the dangers in the world – instability, violence, epidemic diseases, environmental degradation, runaway population growth – will be all multiplied.’<sup>iiii</sup>

And, of course, it is already clear that the fall-out from the current global economic and financial crisis of the past two years, with the richest nations having seen their debts increase dramatically, will not foster the willingness of populations and governments to invest more in developing nations and the realisation of the Millennium Goals. The West is increasingly cultivating the idea that public assistance does not work or that enough is already being done, even if the West still spends more on cosmetics or on pet food than on international aid, or even if it is known that the money sent home by migrants from poor countries is much more important and effective than all public help combined.

By far the most dramatic fall-out is the situation on the continent of Africa, where macro-economic progress has not translated into greater welfare for the population, owing to corruption, to a lack of ways of redistributing wealth, and especially to armed conflicts. The vast majority of conflicts occur there, despite only sporadic coverage of these wars by our media. Over the last few decades, drought and hunger have been commonplace. The food crisis of 2008, when food prices doubled in a few months time, revealed the vulnerability of Africa and was a possible harbinger of food crises to come.

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The problem is not limited to Africa: food riots also occurred in poverty- and natural-disaster-stricken Haiti and Bangladesh. Furthermore, the brunt of the damage caused by ecological problems will be borne by the poorest parts of the world: the risk is that they will pay the price for the consumption of the world's rich. An AIDS patient in Europe can be treated; in Africa, all too often, he or she still brings infected children into the world and dies. And then there are the tens of thousands of child soldiers in the world on whose faces despair is etched. How long will it take before the frustration and despair of millions in the southern hemisphere drive them into the hands of some extremist promising retribution for their humiliation? It comes as no surprise, therefore, that those hoping to escape crime often choose to migrate. Migration, as I understand, will be another topic of this congress, so I will not dwell on it here.

The situation is grim, and what can Europe's Christians do in the face of these enormous challenges? Sometimes Christians succumb to the general sense of powerlessness and despair that is common in western societies. We feel that we have lost influence, both as Europeans and as Christians. But I believe, strengthened by the experience of the Community of Sant'Egidio, that Christians as 'creative minorities' can still make a difference, can still prepare a better future for humanity.

The Gospel of Jesus still is a powerful source of indignation in front of a world that seems always more ready to accept as natural the inequality between rich and poor. Think of the Gospel image of the rich man, 'clothed with purple and fine linen', who feasted extravagantly every day, and the poor Lazarus, longing to eat what fell off the rich man's table. But, as the evangelist Luke notes bitterly: 'Instead the very dogs would come and lick his sores'<sup>iv</sup>. Isn't this an image of today's globalized world, where the fortune of the fifteen richest people on earth is greater than the entire BNP of sub-Saharan Africa? Where the fortune of the 225 richest people on the globe is one thousand billion dollars, as much of that of two and a half billion people? It is not just about a rich North and a poor South; this inequality is more and more present in northern societies, where the poor are increasingly present, and also in many southern societies, where a class of the rich—sometimes exceedingly rich—is growing quickly, in the midst of oceans of extremely poor and illiterate people: think of countries such as India, Mexico, and Nigeria, where one finds extremely wealthy business people, but where the overall poverty figures are still terribly high.

Christianity is still one of the strongest spiritualities and movements of thought that foster a more equal world, more justice for the poor of the earth. Think of the long history of social thinking in the Catholic Church, including the latest encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, which contains a strong and profound reflection on how to build more justice in the world's social, economical and political systems. In many countries in Africa, such as Nigeria, I see a potentially wealthy nation, which unfortunately lacks systems of thought for redistributing wealth.

Christians of course can ask their governments, by means of protests, petitions, advocacy work, to invest more in bilateral and multilateral aid, and they should do so. But a Christian, in a globalized world, can also take personal action and make a difference.

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Let me offer the example of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay community in the Catholic Church which, since its very beginning after the Second Vatican Council, has been strongly committed to service to the poorest, to interfaith dialogue, and to peace building.

I'll take the example of the HIV-Aids pandemic: ten years ago, around the year 2000, we were profoundly shocked by the fact of the discrepancy in treatment between the rich and the poor world: if one had Aids in America or Europe, from the mid 1990's on, one could be treated with a cocktail of anti-retroviral drugs (the so called 'tri-therapy') and not die any longer of the terrible disease. In the West, as a matter of fact, Aids became a 'chronic' disease, which could not be healed but could be treated. In poor countries, and especially in Africa, this was not the case at all: while a lot of emphasis was put – also rightly – on the issue of prevention, the life-sustaining therapy for those afflicted with Aids was accessible only to the wealthy and mighty. It was thought, in many academic circles but also in the political and NGO world, that it was impossible to implement tri-therapy in poor countries, with poor health structures: people would not like to undergo the tests; they would not take the drugs as faithfully as required; there was even the risk that the HIV-virus would become resistant and thus threaten western Aids patients.

This meant that millions of people were condemned to death; and in fact, Aids in Africa became sheer genocide. The Community of Sant'Egidio judged this situation intolerable: Africans continued to die while the therapy to treat Aids existed<sup>v</sup>.

For this reason Sant'Egidio developed its DREAM program.<sup>vi</sup> DREAM means Drug Resource Enhancement against Aids and Malnutrition. In this program the therapy was provided free of charge to those suffering with AIDS, especially pregnant women, their partners, and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, the program was implemented according to western standards: we did not accept the widespread idea that lower standards were good enough for poor Africa. In the beginning, there was a lot of scepticism, but when people saw the results of this project, the international community started to become convinced. We could demonstrate, for instance, that even illiterate African women were very faithful to the therapy. The babies born to women living with HIV-Aids were born healthy in 98 percent of the cases, which is an incredible result (without the therapy half of them would have been born with the HIV-virus). Moreover, in our program we continued the full therapy for the mothers after their pregnancies, so that they were able to take care of their children. I have seen with my own eyes how the therapy performed miracles: women on the edge of their grave found new life, new strength. Introducing Aids therapy means assisting in the resurrection of Africa. These women, who found new life thanks to DREAM, became our best collaborators to show other women, and eventually men, that they should be tested, that even a positive test did not mean a death sentence any longer. Helping people to live with HIV-aids, and to live well, is an especially effective way to combat the stigma, to combat ignorance and silence regarding HIV-Aids, that still is very strong in African societies.

This program started in Mozambique and is now implemented in ten African countries, as an integrated part of public health service. DREAM also helps to train medical doctors, nurses, health workers and pharmacists according to the best western standards.

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In the last decade, the discourse on HIV-Aids has changed, and providing access to full antiretroviral therapy in Africa became an aim of the international community. Especially in recent years a lot of work has been done: ‘the proportion of people receiving antiretroviral therapy increased from less than 5 per cent of those in need at the beginning of the decade to 42 per cent in 2008; and the number of women receiving treatment for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV trebled, from 15 per cent in 2005 to 45 per cent in 2008.

This was an unexpected evolution that no one had dared to hope for. As Peter Piot, head of UNAIDS between 1995 and 2009, has stated: ‘In 2001, in the Commitment Statement of the extraordinary session of the United Nations, you do not find one precisely defined goal with regard to access to antiretroviral treatment. Almost all African, Asian, and European countries were opposed, except the Ibero-American countries, the Caribbean and France and Luxemburg. At the end of 2008 we could provide treatment to almost four million infected people. Who would have thought that?’<sup>vii</sup> Sant’Egidio is happy with this evolution and is proud to have played a pioneering role in this growing awareness and action.

Of course, the challenges are still enormous – for every two people starting antiretroviral treatment, there are five new HIV-infections. Human resources and training of health workers is still an enormous challenge, as is enhancing the overall level of the health care in poor countries, like most countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

I’ve told this story at some length because I was asked to do so. There are other experiences of the Sant’Egidio Community – like the Bravo-program, which leads to the birth registration of millions of children in Africa, the work to abolish the death penalty, or the work for peace and conflict resolution in different war-torn countries – which I will not speak about for lack of time but which also show that a Christian community that does not want to live for itself but for the world can make a difference.

Today, resolving the problem of poverty, fostering development, can seem a very technical affair. Of course, specialized knowledge is necessary, experience to be built upon, refined, challenged, improved. But the difference that Christians can make is the love and passion for the poor that they put into this work. For them, it is not just a work; it is not just a human passion, for loving the poor is loving God himself. In the gospels, we see Jesus identifying with the poor and the infirm, the sick, lepers, widows, orphans, foreigners, and prisoners. He invites his disciples to love those who have been marginalised: ‘Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’<sup>viii</sup> It is common knowledge that it was largely Christians who founded and developed the advanced social welfare facilities introduced first in Europe and later elsewhere. In his beautiful encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, Benedict XVI calls on Christians never to lose sight of the most specific aspect of their service to others: ‘Love – *caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society.’<sup>ix</sup> For the Pope, ‘loving personal concern’ is the very thing every person needs, something a mere bureaucracy cannot guarantee. Charity and love are essential in times when materialism predominates and care for the vulnerable is dehumanised through technology- and management-driven institutionalisation.

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‘You will always have the poor among you,’ Jesus said<sup>x</sup>. Rather than being a fatalistic invitation to do nothing to combat poverty or exclusion, these words are actually motivated by sheer common sense, a not uncommon feature of the gospels. Every society has its poor; poverty is a perennial problem, even though its outward appearance may change over time. For that reason, Christian charity and solidarity should not be limited to demanding better policies or encouraging the poor to assert their rights. Indeed, perhaps the emphasis in Christian praxis has shifted heavily towards the arenas of politics and justice over the last few decades. Instead, these words challenge us to create structures that are more inclusive, but also to build communities around the gospel in which people turn to God and open their hearts to the poor and the infirm.

Where more people model their lives on the gospel, there will be more charity and solidarity, and less exclusion. Where more people believe in the power of prayer, the resort to violence will be less frequent. Where more people spread the gospel of charity, there will be less pessimism and despair. Particularly in our cities, a true Christian life has an important function in bringing about peace, probably even more so than in the past. It represents the spiritual dimension of the heart and human dignity in these materialistic times that reduce people to consumers. When introduced to the gospel, people without roots confronted by relentless globalisation are freed of their fear. It gives them a way out of the impasse of the consumer-oriented ‘me-culture.’ It gives them the courage to face our changing world with love and compassion. It helps them find the road to resurrection through all their suffering. The gospel helps us to trust in God, who intervenes in history through our hands. For that reason, the Bible offers hope for the future. As the prophet Isaiah says: ‘See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?’<sup>xi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, 1992.

<sup>ii</sup> Ban Ki-Moon, *Keeping the promise: a forward-looking review to promote an agreed action agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015*, February 12, 2010, par 45.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* par 4.

<sup>iv</sup> Gospel of Saint Luke 16, 19-31.

<sup>v</sup> Leonardo Palombi, *Diplomazia sanitaria contro l’AIDS*, in Roberto Morozzo della Rocca (ed.), *Fare Pace. La Comunità di Sant’Egidio negli scenari internazionali*, Milan, Leonardo International, 2010, p. 260-289.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://dream.santegidio.org>

<sup>vii</sup> Peter Piot and Michel Carael, *Over aids*, Houtekiet, 2009, p.94.

<sup>viii</sup> Gospel of Saint Matthew 25,40.

<sup>ix</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, encyclical letter, 25/12/2005, 28, b.

<sup>x</sup> Gospel of Saint John 12,8.

<sup>xi</sup> Isaiah 43,19.