

Standing together for peace – The Inaugurating meeting of the ECRL

Nov 12, 2002 | Statement

As part of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (Religions for Peace), a worldwide coalition of multireligious councils committed to peace, we have established ourselves today as European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL). We acknowledge the bloody history of religious conflicts in Europe, as well as current attempts to twist religions to fuel the fires of ethnic conflicts both here and around the world. Our religious communities in Europe have long worked to reject this misuse of religion. The establishment of the ECRL builds on our common rejection of this misuse of religion and signals our commitment to work together for peace.

Respectful of our religious differences, we are representatives of both the three religions historic to Europe and six more recently established here. We are members of religious communities with profound visions of the dignity of the human person. These religious visions embrace, but also go beyond social, economic and political spheres of life, and they give roots to profound commitments to the common good.

As European religious leaders, we are committed to working together to end conflicts, to re-affirm religious condemnations of terror, and to promote justice and peaceful coexistence among the diversity of peoples, religions and traditions in Europe.

We establish the ECRL at a crucial time. Europe is undergoing a negotiated process of historic changes, which must involve the free development of her diverse religions, traditions, and cultures. The process of European integration must lead to a united continent, built upon and respectful of its diversity, not a mono-cultural uniformity. In particular, decisions made in the various institutions responsible for the political integration of Europe should take into account the diversity of religious traditions and cultures and the voices of their representatives. We commit ourselves to the clarification of shared values that respect diversity and support the common good, and we hereby call on politicians on the national and continental levels for a serious, systematic and ongoing dialogue, as we work together to build Europe as our common home. In particular, we recognize the importance of the work of the European Convention; in the constitution to which it will lead, we call for recognition of the importance of religion in Europe and for appropriate mechanisms of dialogue with religions.

As the social fabric of the continent transforms, there are many challenges to common living. Unemployment and social exclusion create breeding grounds for tensions within many countries. Asylum seekers and refugees are increasingly met with closed borders. Extremist parties thrive on xenophobia and social dissatisfaction. The Roma or Sinti population is still experiencing oppression in many places. Solidarity with the poor weakens. The trafficking in young women, the illegal trade in and use of drugs, and Mafia-like practices are increasing and threaten our societies. Practical responses to these challenges are required, but they must be based on moral values and education. We are committed to working together, as leaders and through our religious communities, to build the shared moral consensus essential to addressing these challenges.

The role of religion is paradoxical in relationship to conflict. Religion may be exploited for hatred and warfare. Religious wars, crusades, pogroms, and jihads have marked the history of Europe. Our religions teach us that this is wrong. We are committed to engaging the deep moral resources of our religious traditions for peace, justice, truth and reconciliation. As political fundamentalists attempt to misuse our religious traditions, we recognize our responsibility to demonstrate the capacity of our religious communities to work together for the common good.

Concretely, painful experiences in the Balkans and Chechnya show us that conflicts cannot be solved by violence and terrorism. We condemn terrorist attacks, like the recent one in Moscow. We appeal for a peaceful solution to every conflict and are committed to their just resolution. As part of the Religions for Peace network, independent national Interreligious Councils in the Balkans and Russia are working to end these conflicts. While these national multireligious efforts are essential and must be strengthened, they also need reinforcement by pan-European multireligious solidarity and advocacy. We are committed to providing a multireligious European platform to advance needed efforts for peace and reconciliation among our religious believers and in the political arena.

In an increasingly globalizing world, Europe is challenged to contribute to peacemaking efforts in other parts of the world. As religious leaders, we are concerned over the prospect of war in Iraq. All possible means should be extended to solve the conflict peacefully. We applaud the effort to solve the crisis through diplomacy and note in particular the importance of the unanimous strategy agreed upon by the United Nations Security Council. We hereby appeal to the political leadership in Iraq to comply with the UN resolution. We also appeal to the international community to enforce the relevant rule of law consistent with widely accepted moral norms that restrict the use of force, and with deepest concern for the suffering of the Iraqi people.

The ongoing and unresolved conflict in the Middle East also engages us as European religious leaders. It is critically important to understand the role of religion in this conflict. The Oslo process did not succeed in part because it did not take seriously enough the religious dimensions of the conflict. Major efforts must be made to support cooperation among the religious communities in the Holy Land toward the establishment of shared moral foundations essential for a just peace. We are committed to supporting the religious communities in the Middle East in their search for peace.

As the ECRL works with our European religious communities and institutions to end conflicts, to re-affirm religions' rejection of terror, and to promote justice and peaceful coexistence in Europe and the world, we are aware that our religious traditions, each in their own way, call us to hope. Strengthened by hope, we accept the challenge to build peace together.