

# European Council of Religious Leaders



## Now More Than Ever, We Stand Together

### Statement by the European Council of Religious Leaders on Coronavirus Pandemic

April 2020

Europe and the world are currently facing one of the greatest crises in modern history. CoVID-19 is a disease which has attacked the physical, mental and social fabric of all our lives. Tens of thousands of people have died; health systems are overstretched; and the livelihoods of billions of people are endangered. It is a time that is unsettling and frightening for everyone. As people of faith we draw on the teachings and wisdom of our diverse religious traditions as a source of refuge and comfort. And whilst we celebrate the diversity of religion, in times of deep crises it is our common belief in benevolence and solidarity that can make the biggest difference.

Spiritual and psychological sustenance is an area in which religion has a long history and many resources. Our practices, faiths and beliefs are helping sustain people in these frightening times; and in response to social-distancing religious communities are finding new and innovative ways of coming together and worshipping. As leaders and representatives of European religious communities we strongly encourage everyone to follow government advice and policies which will help reduce the transmission of the virus and save lives.

We are full of admiration for the doctors, nursing staff and countless helpers working tirelessly to help others, regardless of their own wellbeing. We pray for their safety and their strength as they continue their extraordinary efforts. Religious organisations and communities across Europe are also responding to need; supporting our stretched health services, and playing a vital role in supporting the most vulnerable members of our societies. The European Council of Religious Leaders – RfP (ECRL) is humbled by the response of those inspired by their faith to help others in this time of greatest need.

Belief in both religion and science is not antithetical; and we offer our sincere gratitude to the scientific community who are at the forefront of the global fight against the virus. As a community of religious leaders we strongly reject and condemn any claims that the current crisis is some form of divine punishment or retribution. This misguided thinking contradicts everything we believe and strive for in our religious service and traditions.

The ECRL acts as a 'critical friend' to governments and multi-national institutions. We are grateful to the politicians who have responded with the calmness and decisiveness this drastic situation requires. Extremely difficult demands have been made of many people, with families, livelihoods and businesses adversely affected. We recognise that these measures are necessary for protecting the vulnerable and sick, and encourage governments to do everything possible to support all those affected by these extreme measures.

In recent days world leaders have warned against the dangers of increasing nationalistic tendencies, division, and blame evident in some political rhetoric(1). Our different traditions make clear that we are both responsible for, and dependent upon, each other. The ECRL models in our actions and unity an unequivocal rejection of ideologies based on fear and division. As leaders involved in interreligious dialogue and multireligious action, we know from experience that we are stronger when we stand together. We strongly believe that cooperation across national borders and between European countries is vital to dealing with, and recovering from, this crisis.

The UN Secretary General António Guterres has also rightly expressed significant concerns about the devastating impact the virus could have in developing countries where health systems are weak and many of the most vulnerable people in the world live(2). He has also called for a global cessation of armed conflict. Whilst we recognise that a government's first responsibility is protection of its own citizens, we ask governments to ensure this global problem receives a truly global response; and that developing countries and the most vulnerable people in our global community are not forgotten. Healthcare provisions and resources need to be shared evenly across the world wherever they are needed – and we need to ensure no one is left behind.

As part of the global Religions for Peace family, we reaffirm the spirit of shared human security and wellbeing underscored at the recent World Assembly in Lindau, and support calls for global cessation of violence. We also endorse Religion for Peace International's call to engage with the "Faith for Rights" framework in response to CoVID-19(3).

The Greek term metanoia means a change in one's thoughts and actions as the result of deep personal and spiritual reflection. This crisis provides an important opportunity to strengthen bridges between faith-based communities, governments, and civil society. Diseases such as CoVID-19 do not recognise religious, ethnic or national identities and boundaries – and neither should love, compassion, equity and responsibility. It is our hope that this testing time will ultimately serve to bring us closer together in understanding, in love, and in global solidarity.

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1 'Five World Leaders: No Time for Geopolitical Turf Battles' FT.Com 30.03.2020.

2 <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/all-hands-deck-fight-once-lifetime-pandemic>

3 <https://rfp.org/statement-by-religions-for-peace-on-coronavirus-crisis/>