

Speech by President Buzek
Combating poverty and social exclusion
- an imperative for European governance -
religious leaders' meeting

Brussels -
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Your Eminences
Your Excellencies
Your Lordships
Madame, Gentlemen

I am delighted to be with you today for this, sixth, annual meeting between the EU and leaders of Europe's churches and religions. Starting as a Commission initiative, the meeting has become a fixture on the calendar of all three institutions. Meanwhile, the interaction has deepened, allowing joint reflection on important areas of EU policy. This year, of course, is the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Dear friends, exactly 400 years ago today, on 19 July 1610, Michelangelo Merisi died in Porto Ercole on the Tuscan coast. The greatest works of this artist - known as Caravaggio - deal with biblical themes. He was not alone. Europe's great achievements in the spheres of art, architecture, science and education owe a great debt to a long history of fruitful interaction between the secular and religious worlds.

In the European Union, and in our Member States, we have a clear separation of church and state. Each has its own area of activity; this constitutional separation helps assure religious freedom - freedom from interference in administrative and theological matters. The Lisbon Treaty follows this tradition. Article 17 goes on to recognise the specific contribution that religions make to our society.

This year's annual gathering is the first to take place since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force. The dialogue between the EU institutions and Europe's churches and religions is now a legal obligation. The European Parliament is keen to play its part in the dialogue. I have designated one of Parliament's Vice Presidents to take specific responsibility for ensuring relations with churches and religions.

Vice President Laszlo Tökés of Romania may be known to many of you, having previously served as the Lutheran Bishop of Timisoara, Transylvania, where the engagement of his church in public life played an important role in bringing an end to the Ceausescu dictatorship.

COMECE and the CEC, representing Europe's Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches, recently made a joint submission on how they would like to see Article 17 implemented on the working level. I will meet their Presidents in September to discuss the proposals; and I will ensure that Parliament's Bureau and administration take appropriate administrative measures to provide for a regular and meaningful dialogue on the working level.

The "specific contribution" of churches referred to in the Treaty is nowhere more evident than in the important fight against poverty and social exclusion. This is why I have invited Caritas Europa and Diaconia Europa to present their work in this field at a conference and exhibition to be held in the European Parliament in Brussels on 30 September.

Dear friends, we must not forget that the current economic crisis is first and foremost a human crisis. Behind all the statistics are real men, women and children who are struggling to cope, to hold onto their job or their home; or perhaps, having lost a job, to provide the daily bread for their family.

The number one priority of the EU at this time is to restore social and economic security. It is obvious that churches are especially well-placed to contribute to this aim. So the EU needs the churches and we value the role you play.

Solidarity is directed towards recognising the inherent human dignity of the poor and marginalized as the measure of a fair and just society. We are all God's children. The promise of a better life for all, starting with the most vulnerable, must always be at the heart of the European political project.

Public solidarity and private solidarity are complimentary. The combat against poverty and social exclusion is a work of partnership on all levels - local, national and European.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the faith-based organisations that, on a daily basis, help the poorest, the most vulnerable in our societies.