

**Celebrating the 40th anniversary of the
Conference of European Churches (CEC)
1959 - 1999**

**CEC
at
40**

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Memories for the future

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“The Contribution of Eastern Orthodoxy to the Christian Culture of Europe, Past and Present” was the title of one of the main speeches at the first CEC Assembly in January 1959. It was given by Metropolitan Jakobos of Melita, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (at that time he was the Patriarchate’s representative to the World Council of Churches; later he was Archbishop of America). It was the time of the Cold War and the East/West division of Europe. For this reason, but also because of the new tensions of today, it seems important to remember what the Metropolitan was emphasising in Nyborg, namely that despite our confessional differences, the various parts of Europe belong to one another. He went on to highlight three priorities which, he said, were common to the churches of both parts of the continent:

- the **ordinance** given to them by God, to lead the world to Christ;
- the **task** of combatting secularism and upholding spiritual values;
- the **responsibility** to work together, to “build a new and freer Christian world, more conscious of its responsibilities”.

These were programme guidelines which were to cover CEC’s entire spectrum of reflection and action during the next 40 years, and which continue to be relevant, especially today. Taking into account similar voices from other Orthodox member churches, as well as the ecclesiological basis, that “European” and world-wide Orthodoxy form one single unity, one recognises quite naturally that in CEC (as in the ecumenical movement itself), Orthodoxy is not merely a guest whom one receives amiably and bears with patiently. Orthodoxy has been a pillar of the ecumenical movement from the beginning and shared fully in its life; joy and pain, responsibility and guilt for warm and cold currents, for steadfastness and for rifts, for times of difficulty, disorienta-

tion, optimism, quarrels and reconciliation in the house. Without Orthodoxy, neither the CEC nor Europe itself can be fully European. Both would be merely the West. If the isolationists among the Orthodox, and the autocrats in the West, should gain the upper hand and decide how things should go - a tendency which is becoming stronger - then there is a great danger that Kosovo will prove to be a microcosm of the near future, and not only for Europe!

For 40 years the CEC member churches have been working for an integrated, democratic Europe of peace with freedom, justice and solidarity, without "curtains" - iron or otherwise - without walls, without murderous conflicts, without forced partitions, as on Cyprus.

That first step in Nyborg was followed by a give and take among the member churches which was rich in blessings, between East and West, North and South, with member churches joining one after another, including the Autocephalous and Autonomous Orthodox Churches of the continent. Looking back over 40 years, many "magnalia Dei" ("God's deeds of power" - Acts 2.11) are recalled where God's great goodness and loving-kindness (Titus 3.4) has shone through our human weakness and inadequacy.

This brief contribution of mine has neither the intention nor the wish to attempt an evaluation. As the most long-standing member (since Engelberg, 1974) of the CEC Central Committee, I would rather try, through a few memories, to give partial answers to the question of why CEC has been and will remain of value for us Orthodox people.

The first encounter with CEC, which for my church as well as myself was to be rich in consequences, was the meeting of the Presidium which we hosted at the Orthodox Academy of Crete in March 1974. I had extended the invitation at Engelberg during a preparation meeting for Assembly VII. In Greece the military junta had been in power since 1967, and from its first day I had been in conflict with it, as were later our Metropolitan Irineos of Kissamos and Selinon and thus the Academy as well. This Presidium meeting was marked by two events.

- The first happened the evening of 23 March. Our Bishop Irineos, who as Metropolitan of Germany and Central Europe had resided in Bonn since 1972, gave his usual Saturday sermon on Radio Munich's Greek programme. But this was an unusual address: it was a call to Greeks to yet more vigorous

resistance against the junta. Since it was also broadcast in Greece, this appeal aroused great suspicion on the part of the military and their supporters.

The next day I received news from Constantinople that the junta was urgently demanding the immediate suspension of Metropolitan Irineos. Members of the Presidium and others in attendance, including Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, went straight to the telephone to urge church leaders and governments to stand by the Patriarchate and the Bishop. The full dynamic of ecumenical solidarity was there - not for the first or the last time!

- The second: On 25 March we Greeks celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, as well as our national holiday (the beginning of our liberation uprising in 1821). Nikiphoros, then Metropolitan of Chania, had invited the Presidium to a festive worship service downtown. The holy liturgy was celebrated by two Orthodox clergy, His Holiness Patriarch Alexy (at that time Metropolitan) and Bishop Antonie of Romania, along with Nikiphoros. At the end they brought greetings in the name of the churches of Europe. There stood all the officials, the generals and ranking functionaries of the dictatorship, still full of irritation about the broadcast from Munich. And as if this were not enough, both clergymen spoke out loud and clear of what had long been in their hearts, which they could not say back home. Antonie (who spoke in English, with the present Metropolitan of Chania translating into Greek), recalled that the Greeks living in Romania had begun the 19th-century uprising there, and praised the Hellenes as the fathers of democracy and of freedom as a fundamental value! Alexy continued with a spiritual commentary on the Annunciation, the beginning of our liberation through Jesus Christ, who forbade that anyone should again be submitted to a yoke of slavery! It was not hard to see that the ruling powers needed all their strength not to lose patience altogether, and the crowd needed all theirs not to let their joy overflow in shouting. Later I heard that the secret police were completely confused, apparently they hadn't known that I understood any "Communist" languages! The evening before, Alexy and I had agreed upon the content of his speech, which I then "translated" in church...

Another aspect of life within CEC which I would like to mention here is that of its broad contact with ordinary folk, both within its member churches and beyond among the peoples of Europe. This has always been and remains a burning concern, but only rarely realised! Basel, Graz, some of the Assem-

blies and events with a certain amount of public participation were more the exception than the rule. This is why we like so much to remember, for example, the Third European Ecumenical Encounter in Riva del Garda and Trento, in October 1984. In Rovereto, we - representatives of CEC and CCEE, together with many local people - held a litany and prayer for reconciliation and peace. In the historic Trent Cathedral, together with thousands of rejoicing people, we were able to confess our faith together in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed (without the "*filioque*") and proclaim it as the source of our hope for Europe and for the world.

In general, however, experience with regard to the "grassroots" was usually the same. We stayed together despite all tensions, but only **among ourselves!** At one point I felt led to, and justified in, publishing some thoughts under the title "Ecumenism on the Sidelines". On that occasion we, 40 representatives of CEC member churches and 40 Catholic bishops, had spent the days from 16 to 20 November 1981 in Lögumkloster, with almost no contact at all with our surroundings and the churches of that country. We felt as if we were shut up, or locked up, in a fortress! This is an image which unfortunately represents, in my memory, CEC's laborious efforts to be "present" in the West, where most of its activities have taken place.

The image in the East was no better, although noticeably of a different kind. I can hardly remember any large gatherings of people sponsored by CEC. But I am still cut to the quick by many a look of amazement, of embarrassment or of silent hope and delight, for example in the eyes

- of a policeman searching my suitcase at Moscow Airport, who, on catching sight of my Bible with its cross on the cover, gazed at me wordlessly;
- of that obviously new convert who completely unexpectedly met, in his new (Baptist) congregation, an Orthodox clergyman and even received a greeting of love and a blessing from him;
- of a pious Orthodox who was astonished to see Orthodox bishops, even Patriarchs, welcoming pastors of both sexes (!) wearing Lutheran collars, as if it were the most natural thing in the world!

As for the Orthodox "grassroots" in particular, it must be said that CEC is still far from making contact with it, despite efforts to bring meetings, con-

cerns and messages to the ordinary folk in Athens, Bucharest, Leningrad, Sofia or elsewhere. Political and ideological compulsions and a usually subconscious mistrust of ecumenism, surround CEC's efforts towards communication with barriers which are difficult to surmount. This is fed by tradition and contemporary experience (of proselytising) and therefore effectively resistant, even towards church leaders and circles.

Against this background, CEC Assembly VIII on Crete, 18-25 October 1979, appears in its own peculiar light.

Great was the surprise of the members of the Presidium and Advisory Committee at their joint meeting, 19-22 May 1976 in the Ukraina Hotel in Moscow, and especially the justifiable annoyance of General Secretary Glenn Williams, when I completely unexpectedly invited them to hold Assembly VIII on Crete with us as hosts and not in Sterling as was already being planned! Actually there was no invitation from my church (the Ecumenical Patriarchate) at that point. I took this bold step on my own personal responsibility and risk, but the invitation was soon officially confirmed. The main reason for daring to do this was the unending moaning of various CEC bodies about the Orthodox' joyful readiness to be at centre stage as representatives, but to lag way behind when it came to ecumenical commitment! After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing and with patient placating of the General Secretary's not unjustified uncertainty, in the end over 400 participants came to our Orthodox Academy and its surroundings.

Glenn Williams later wrote in the official report of the assembly: "In two ways it was a memorable gathering. First, it was the first time a CEC Assembly had been held on the soil in which the old Orthodox Church was rooted and on which its faith is alive, now as then. Secondly, it was the first opportunity CEC has had to hold its Assembly in southern Europe. These two circumstances decisively influenced and enriched the meeting." A remark by OKR Claus Kempers made sense to everyone who was there: "Such a spiritual community - a communion in the Holy Spirit - can neither be planned nor achieved by organisation."

Nevertheless, in the power of the Holy Spirit we were free not only "for the world", but especially for our own "world" of Orthodoxy. As never before in a CEC context the East could articulate its voice clearly, could speak of the

reconciling and uniting power of the Holy Trinity and of other truths and values which are foundations of the whole Christian *koinonia*, and could also make broad interpersonal communication possible. High-ranking representatives of church and state, along with almost all the people of the city of Chania and the wider region, which through years of work had been made receptive to ecumenical concerns, respectfully received worthy guests from all over Europe and beyond.

Just this hospitable climate in the “cradle of Europe” was the right one for the vision of an ecumenically integrated Europe. This vision became clear in the message from the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, read to the Assembly by Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Myra (now of Ephesus). The Patriarch recognised the improving relationship between CEC and the Roman Catholic Church, and added: “We officially express our wish to see this church become a full member of the Conference of European Churches.” The Patriarch is no longer living. The vision must not die!

No more should we now, on the threshold of the new millennium, lose from view, and especially from our hearts, the real vision with which the ecumenical movement began. In this conviction, I would like to close with words from my report to the CEC Central Committee in Iserlohn, in 1994: “Let us all resolutely apply our energies in common so that nothing is lost of what God the Merciful has given us during this century on the path towards unity.”