

INTERNATIONAL ECUMENICAL STUDY MEETING ON XENOPHOBIA AND POPULISM

jointly hosted

by The World Council of Churches & The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development
in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

Concept Note

Purpose

Convinced of the pivotal role that the churches can play in the task of promoting a just and healthier human society, the World Council of Churches and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity [Holy See], undertake to host a symposium that brings together some ecumenical leaders and experts from around the globe to reflect on and study the current phenomenon of xenophobia and populism in the society, especially in reference to the global migration and refugee crisis. In view of organizing a world conference on the same theme, with greater participation in May of 2018, this study meeting intends to explore how churches can give leadership in working together to proactively address this growing fear and to find constructive responses shaped by Christian spirituality and traditions of respect for human rights and human dignity.

Background

The world today, sharply marked by expanding globalization, mass-migrations, unprecedented levels of human displacement due to poverty, wars, ethnic conflicts, climate catastrophes, and violence at all levels, is increasingly challenged by the alarming phenomenon of xenophobia [xénos/stranger+phóbos/fear]. Fear or hatred of anything strange, foreign, alien, different, i.e. what is perceived as constituting an ‘other’, is penetrating all sectors of the society – social, cultural, political and spiritual. It permeates the media and is influencing public policies and opinions, thus threatening the human and moral values of the society.

The UN has recently characterised societal responses to the global migration and refugee crisis as marked by ‘toxic’ fear rooted in xenophobia and encouraged by populist politics.¹ Pope Francis condemns intolerance in all its “...forms against minorities, marginalized, migrants because of religious convictions or ethnic identity... often motivated by mistrust and fear of the other, the foreigner...” and by manipulation of “...biased generalizations to feed on hate and xenophobia.” He cautions that for Christians the whole phenomenon “... must be interpreted, in opposition to a self-enclosed and secularist mentality, in the light of the unique, God-given dignity of each human person.”² The WCC General Secretary, Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, affirms the role of the churches in such a society thus challenged by growing contradictions to build ‘... trustful relations, opening the doors for cooperation and dialogue, and to advocate for peaceful, diplomatic and political solutions.’³

¹ UNHCR Annual Consultation with Non-Governmental Organizations, Geneva, 14-16 June 2017: <http://www.unhcr.org/annual-consultations-ngos.html>

² POPE FRANCIS, Address to the delegation of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, Vatican, 24 October 2013: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/october/documents/papa-francesco_20131024_delegazione-simon-wiesenthal-center.html; Message to the world meeting of popular movements, Modesto, California-USA, 16-18 February 2017. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170210_movimenti-popolari-modesto.html; Address to the National Directors of the Pastoral Care for Migrants of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Europe [CCEE], 22 September 2017: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170922_direttori-pastoralimigranti.html.

³ Rev. Dr. OLAV FYKSE TVEIT, WCC Secretary General, Address to the Wittenburg Ecumenical Assembly, 25 August 2017:

Rationale

In the context of the complex global migrant and refugee crisis, the churches cannot remain silent or indifferent but be conscious of their missionary and moral mandate to seek realistic and constructive ways of addressing xenophobia and populism. Indeed, migrants and marginalised minorities figure prominently in the membership of many church communities giving them extra incentive for this task. From the outset, it is of paramount importance that the roots of such fear and its impact on the host society are comprehensively studied, mindful that societal responses based on fear are not limited to any particular social class, political party, or religious affiliation. The reality in question demands from the churches deeper understanding, better cooperation among parties with differing viewpoints, and realistic life-giving responses to the phenomenon and its underpinning manifestations of racism and discrimination. A holistic and cohesive approach by the churches, in the light of the Christian principles and values of caring for the vulnerable and being a “neighbour” to all in need, is required to ensure the protection of human rights and equal dignity for all.

We believe that overcoming xenophobia and populism is an ethical and pedagogical challenge both for the churches and the society. For the churches this is also a theological challenge and involves self-examination and humble acknowledgement of our own vulnerability to the corrosive power of fear, associated prejudice, and discrimination which threatens the unity of the Body of Christ.

Objective

Hence this symposium/ study-meeting of ecumenical leaders and experts intends:

- to deepen churches’ understanding of xenophobia and the corresponding rise in populism in relation to the migration and refugee crisis,
- to discern the means of greater collaboration and common actions, including the best use of media tools, to transform this increasing and dehumanizing reality of intolerance and hate based on fear to fostering and promoting a culture of respect, solidarity, and social cohesion,
- to promote systematic ecclesial capacity building on the best practices for addressing xenophobia and populism, informed by Christian values of justice and compassion and rooted in trustful relationships and open dialogue, and
- to plan and prepare the world conference on xenophobia and populism to be held in May 21-24 2018.

Symposium

The symposium will be held at the Hotel Casa Tra Noi in Rome, in the vicinity of the Vatican, from the afternoon on Wednesday 13th December till noon on Friday 15th December 2017. There will be 15 delegates from each party: the World Council of Churches and the Holy See, comprising of theological, juridical, political and pastoral experts on the issue.

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