



Second European Ecumenical Assembly - Graz
Reconciliation: Gift of God and Source of New Life

THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR EUROPE

Emmanuel Agius

At the present juncture of human history, two tendencies of global proportions can be observed: on the one hand, spectacular advances in scientific technology, medicine and communications have opened immense possibilities for enriching the quality of human life; on the other hand, there is a growing consensus that the dominant economic system is impoverishing vast number of people. This system is causing drastic depletion of resources, massive pollution of air, water and soil, and the destruction of other living creatures throughout the world. Through the depletion of the ozone layer, extensive soil erosion, the extinction of species and global warming, current economic patterns threaten the regenerative capacity of the biosphere.

European countries must not remain mere spectators in front of today's critical environmental conditions. For the European continent contributed immensely to the present environmental degradation. The European countries are in more than one sense the source of this problem. The pattern of production and consumption practised in Western Europe are the potential roots of both regional and international disorder and conflict. In fact, the very detailed report on the state of the environment in the European Community published in April 1992 together with its proposal for a fifth environmental protection action programme speaks for itself. The conclusion drawn in this report on the issue of air, water and soil pollution, nature conservation, the urban environment and waste management are very clear. Despite the measures taken over the past ten years, the state of the environment has, on the whole, deteriorated drastically, which means that there is still an urgent need to take action.

Discourse about ecological responsibility has therefore a special relevance to the European continent. Europe has a special responsibility. When speaking about the urgency of change, Europe must take a leading role to implement this change. The resources of the earth which God destined to all humankind, are not distributed justly, for the Western European industrialized countries are consuming a great share of these resources. This injustice must be redressed for the benefit of all present and future generations!

What is the role of the churches in Europe in this situation? Because of their special role in civil society the churches cannot remain indifferent in

1 ethical discussions. Historically, they formed the moral and ethical foundation of so much of European society. So influential was the church in this continent, that Europe may still be considered in many respects as a Christian continent. Though in some countries the church has become a minority, however the Christian message still shapes the identity of European culture. European Christians have therefore a vital role as partners in dialog-ue with politiãans to address the key issues of our times. The social and political challenge of European Christians is to join European institutions in the search for a viable model for sustainable development.

At the end of the second millenium, Europe is experiencing major and profound changes. People in East and West are coming together to build their "common home", but the house rules are not always known or mutually agreed. The "New Europe" which is emerging has brought about anxieties concerning its reconstruction and development. What Europe are we aspiring to? Can churches face the challenge to give a 'soul to Europe'? What attitude will Christian faith exert on today's commitment to the unification of the continent and to the building of a new Europe? More correctly, what impact will Christian faith exert within the hearts and psyche of the 'new Europeans'?

When we Christians examine Europe's vocation, we have to confront the challenge of the ecological crisis in the light of the Scriptizres and identify the criteria which ought to guide our response. We have to read correctly the signs of our times. The credibility of our message in Europe and beyond depends on our churches' ability to offer a vision out of the deep sources of our traditions, and to indicate alternative lifestyles. Churches must become a living witness of these alternative lifestyles! The churches' mission is to present a vision for sustainable development which unites economic, social and environmental spheres, and bring a much needed spiritual dimension to the ecological crisis. Churches must not remain silent and indifferent. Cin the contrary, their voice must be proclaimed because they have a special role in civil society.

The Graz Ecumenical Assembly is a "divine kairos" for Christian churches, bearing grace, tidings and appeals from God for a 'new Europe'. The challenge of the churches' "new evangelisation" for Europe is not a project aiming at the 'restoration' of the Europe of the past. Evangelisation must reach not just individuals but cultures as well. Indeed, the new evangelisation reveals the relationship existing between the Gospel and today s culture of consumerism.

The urgency of this mission has seeped unfortunately very slowly in our churches' consciousness and conscientiotcsness. The irrationality vvch characterize today's ecological situation in Europe was for decades only slightly recognized by the churches; the commitment of many Christians for the consorvation of creation was only their second or third priority. However, the churches' awareness of the ecological crisis lately has

2 increased considerably. In fact, more and more church-related organisations and movements have become involved in the ecological movement. Many churches have done important studies and are engaged in stimulating Christians to respond positively to their responsibility tovwards creation.

ZNill this Ecumenical Assembly in Graz bring about the final change? Is a common commitment possible to give a common witness? Two years ago an attempt was made in this direction. Under the patronage of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European Bishops' Conference (CCEE) an ecuznenical meetin on "Environment b and Development" was convened at the Orthodox Academy near Chania in Crete. The consultation meeting brought together representatives from all Europe in order to exchange ideas and share their commitment in the field of the environment. This assembly reveals that ma ny churches are taking important initiatives. Another consultation mceting was convened at the National Park of Cireeo, Sabaudia, Italy, for the churches and their organisations in southern Europe.

What follows is inspired mainly by the reflections and conclusions contained in the final reports of these two consultations both of which focus on the responsibility of the European churches to give credible witness in ecological issues.

1. The Concept of Sustainability

The Bruntland Report and 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development have helped to draw the world's attention to the issue of sustainable development. The definition of the term 'sustainability' is elusive. Indeed, its very vagueness has lent its popularity. Some take it to mean that old-fashioned economic growth, qualified by a few environmental cautions, can continue. Others understand it to require a radical redirection of the world's economic processes. Still others, observing the tension between economic growth and ecological sustainability, see it as a contradiction in concepts.

At the Crete and Circeo consultation meetings, participants emphasized the importance for European Christians not only to recognize the magnitude and complexity of the ecological challenge, but also to resist in their social and political action the temptation to discount the problem by excluding from consideration certain dimensions implied in the concept of sustainable development. It is therefore the task of the churches to inspire their members by removing the smoke-screens which blur the concept of sustainability. The following paragraphs are added to highlight four important aspects without which the concept of 'sustainability' would be incomplete:

3 a) When assessing how sustainable a particular mode of development might be, it is necessary to take seriously into account the probability of risks that it might pose in the future. Technological development has altered the nature of human action which can now, more than ever before, have consequences which extend far in space and time. Reports on the ecological crises give whole lists of dangers and suggestions how to overcome these dangers. The general tendency is to analyse each single situation and to propose adequate solutions. Each problem is tackled on its own. Some statistics prove the dangers, while other statistics propose solutions. However, the crux of the problem is that the single dangers of the contemporary situation are accumulating global future risks and burdens.

There can be no sustainability unless risks are conscientiously calculated and avoided. Ecological problems are world-wide because the consequences of our actions on the present and the future know no frontiers, neither geographical nor ideological. These risks may be caused to the natural environment, to the next generation in the so-called developed world, and to the present generation in the developing world. Responsibility is the fruit of foresight. Therefore, risks need to be analysed by considering the following steps: taking into consideration all the possible consequences of our actions, or lack of action; the possible scale on which such consequences could occur; the probability that such consequences might actually occur. It is often the case that avoiding one set of risks involves accepting -- or even seeking -- others.

Given the complex world we live in today, opting for one specific strategy in one particular segment of the economy may well entail serious risks in different sectors. In avoiding such risks a set of guiding principles may be applied, amongst which the following are most evident:

a) the best evidence principle. This means that we should obtain the best evidence before weighing up what action to take to resolve an environmental problem, especially, if large resources are likely to be involved. b) the precautionary principle. This recognizes that there are limits to how far we can expect "best evidence". We still need to understand much about the effects of human activity on the environment. Where a threat to the environment is serious and imminent, we cannot afford to wait for a higher degree of proof before acting to prevent damage. Thus for global warming, although the correlation of atmospheric emissions and climate change still awaits confirmation, we cannot wait until we see full evidence, because by the time we do so, much serious damage will have been done.

Undesirable effects on the natural environment are to be restricted in order to safeguard the quality of life of both present and future generations. The amount of today's risks are endangering God's order of

4 creation. What right do we have to create more risks and burdens for far-distant unborn generations? The opportunities for both present and future generations to live well should not be reduced by our current economic development. But we have to fulfil this duty not to compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, at the same time as we have to meet the needs of the present generation. The opportunities of future generations can only be guaranteed if the present generation does not deplete the stock of nature, but rather

preserves and maintains it. We have to keep in mind that we did not inherit the world from our ancestors, but we borrowed it from our children.

Europe reaches sustainability when its countries remain as rich in resources and opportunities for future generations as were inherited from the past. In practice, this means that renewable resources are consumed no faster than they can be renewed, that non-renewable resources are consumed no faster than renewable substitutes can be found, that wastes are discharged at a rate no greater than they can be proceeded by nature and human devices. This aspect concerning our responsibilities for future generations is a central point for Europe. European countries are responsible for the ecological destruction. Europe cannot be concerned only with its own destiny, nor care only for its own future. It is not a matter of a future for Europe, but rather about the role of Europe for the future world.

b) For the churches, sustainability is inseparably linked with a renewed call to justice and peace. Our ecological responsibility demands a strong commitment to justice and peace in a sustainable society. The world is entrenched in a deadly form of injustice. While a few of the inhabitants of the world enjoy an unprecedented affluence and power, millions languish in crushing poverty, hunger and oppression. Sustainability presupposes willingness to share the gifts of creation within the limits imposed by humanity. Churches are called to be the voice of the voiceless and to be the advocate of the powerless who are suffering from poverty and exploitation. International justice demands that the fundamental needs of all must be met. Intergenerational justice inspires our churches to be concerned for the life of future generations: they should inherit a planet whose resources allow them to develop and enjoy life with dignity.

There will be neither peace nor justice if not within a creation respected for itself by everyone. It is therefore imperative that Christians and the churches recover the meaning of sin by rendering it more comprehensive and by identifying also as sin every offence against the creation of God. Violence towards creation is a sin against God. St. Ambrose (c.337-397), bishop of Milan, referred long ago to "injuries done to nature". Together with the apostle Paul we can affirm that the creation groans because of the grave forms of violence done to it. Violence is exercised by human beings on creation through wastage and the lack of respect for its resources. This leads to the extinction of many species of animals and plants, the

5 reduction of genetic diversity, destruction of habitat, and the permanent pollution of many rivers, lakes, seas.

Sustainability presupposes peace and at the same time conditions it. Conflicts and wars represent an acute danger not only to human life but also to the integrity of the environment; they must therefore be avoided on this ground. Old differences and long-standing ethnic and cultural rivalries, which for many decades were dormant, are now resurfacing with a vengeance. The resurgent nationalism is becoming a serious threat for Europe's stability and peace. It is evident that violence - present or potential - remains a critical issue in the Mediterranean and in Europe. For all those devoted to peace, justice and integrity of creation, solidarity and reconciliation are essential and urgent imperatives for all.

These present negative energies in Europe have to be checked by the establishment of a true culture and a true pedagogy of peace. In some European regions, one gets the impression that people are cohabiting rather than cooperating. Non-violent means should be sought for preventing and resolving conflicts. As to the positive side, we can perceive powerful dynamics of peace and reconciliation in many places, thanks to the commitment of many persons and institutions, including churches.

c) There can be no justice and peace without radical changes. In place of the present growth-oriented, throwaway pattern of consumption, new models are required. It has become more and more clear that there are limits to human expansion on planet Earth. There is mounting evidence that some human activities already exceed the limits of the earth's carrying capacity. The concept of 'environmental space' has already gained ground. Environmental space is the total quantity of energy, non-renewable resources, agriculture land and forests that we can use globally without impinging on the access of future generations to the same amount. Each person in the world has the right (but not obligation) to use an equal amount of environmental space in terms of global resources.

Given the limited "environmental space" available to Europe, it is evident sustainability in each European country cannot be reached without a radical change. The crises cannot be solved simply by a new orientation of society. Those who are committed to ecological movements are correct in claiming that what we need is not a matter of correcting but rather of altering radically the current course of events.

The roots of the ecological crisis is the consumption-greed in the so-called developed world. In 1970, the 20% rich of the world's population uses 73.9% of the global resources. In 1989 this had increased to 82.7%. The 20% of the very poorest has 1% of the total resources at their disposal. It is not the law of nature that it should be this way: We cannot claim that we do not know these facts. We do know, and the churches are called to be a prophetic voice in our Western world. Sustainable development cannot be realised without a radical change of direction. When terms like

"sustainable growth" or "sustainable development" are used, often the assumption is made that the present course of society can essentially be maintained. We understand sustainable growth to be a contradiction in terms. Human demands on creation must not grow, but be reduced. Wherever possible Christians may join forces with people of other religions and other philosophical persuasions and seek to build up the consensus which is needed for change.

A major shift in patterns of production and consumption is called for, beginning with the wealthy nations. The dominant 'development' model is called into question as economically and environmentally unsustainable, morally unjust, and spiritually debilitating. In view of the principle of sustainable future which requires an equitable sharing of resources, the countries of Western Europe must assume a special responsibility for making changes in their patterns and levels of growth and consumption.

Each European country must first of all quantify the current state of their environmental space. It is imperative that each European country becomes aware, for instance, that it has a limited amount of agricultural land that must be used sustainably; that it has a limit to CO₂ emissions; and that it has a finite amount of non-renewable resources. European countries must strive to reach sustainability within a period of one generation. The year 2010 is considered as far enough away to redistribute most categories of the environmental space to a large extent. Central and Eastern countries need also to act urgently to address their serious pollution problems. A society that takes seriously into account the limits set by God, distinguishes itself from a society that is inspired by consumerism, as many Europeans are living nowadays. The future of Europe will be better off with our altered behaviour to consumerism.

Vested interests in industrialised societies are powerful and are too often firmly opposed to enlightened voices calling for protection of the environment and the ecosystem. Because of the determined effort to undermine the seriousness of problems still arising from ecological irresponsibility in industry, the churches must be resolute in their determination to play a prophetic role in defence of the integrity of creation and against injustice.

d) Sustainable development in Europe cannot be reached unless we set limits to technological efficiency. The shrinking of resources indicate that technology must be kept within limits. Energy is one of the cornerstones of the European economy. But it also causes some of the heaviest damages to the environment in Europe, especially global warming. Europe is using far too much energy. It still has a far greater dependence on fossil fuels. If Europe's energy consumption were made global, catastrophic environmental damage would ensue.

The problem of road and air transport and mobility has emerged as one of the central issues in sustainable development for Europe. Environmental reports indicate that the European transportation system needs a fundamental re-orientation from its current unsustainable policy. Some claim that the "polluter pays policy" needs to be applied seriously. Moreover, energy consumption must be reduced in order to mitigate the effects of global warming. The industrialised countries are causing the majority of these emissions. Since developing countries are aspiring for further development, developing nations are expected to significantly increase their emissions over the next decades.

The ecological crises confronts the churches with a central message of the Christian tradition. For hundreds of years asceticism was a self-evident attitude against consumerism. This tradition

has been lost during the last years of development. Is it not perhaps the responsibility of the churches in Europe to rediscover the meaning of asceticism in today's culture? We need to change our lifestyle. The urgent need for reconciliation -- between industrialised and developing countries, between rich and poor within each country, and also between humankind and God's creation as a whole impels the churches to encourage Christians to rethink their very lifestyle. A sustainable society requires sustainable lifestyles.

Churches should not only emphasize the urgency of adopting a lifestyle inspired by simplicity of life and sobriety, and the rejection of a consumeristic mentality, but they must also be a credible witness. Churches ought to be good examples in practising a sustainable lifestyle which reflects the wholeness and holiness of creation. We must realize over that it is life which renders precious what we possess, and not our possessions which make life precious. In other words, we must rediscover poverty (in the sense of sobriety) as a positive and liberating challenge and as an opportunity through the recovery of the meaning of fasting, asceticism, the Sabbath rest and the Jubilee year.

2. Theological Insights

Is this holistic interpretation of the future and of sustainability present in our churches? Are the above-mentioned perspectives an integral part of the churches' witness? The answer to these questions is unfortunately in the negative. The churches were so much involved in issues of justice, particularly about the technological and economical development of southern countries which cropped up after the second World War, that they have generally been slow in responding to the threats to the environment. In the post-World War II, development policies adopted by many governments and supported by churches were built around the notion of ever-increasing 'growth' which meant the production of more and more goods. People everywhere believed that there is no foreseeable limit to this kind of growth. This utopia caused immense environmental harms to the detriment of both present and future generations.

The churches' involvement in environmental issues is at its infancy. Even today some churches do not recognise the urgency of a Christian response to the dangers and risks faced by humanity. Moreover, the belief that this new mentality about ecological responsibility is too pessimistic and the result of a doomsday mentality, was supported by a number of churches. Unfortunately, the rich heritage of theological insights on our ecological responsibilities went into oblivion for many centuries. The rediscovery in our tradition of the theological underpinnings of sustainability is of utmost importance because, for us Christians, we do need to know not only what we have to do to save our one and only Earth, but above all we have to know why we have to do it. Churches should never cease to proclaim this message.

How could we explain this situation? The message of Crete states clearly that the hesitancy of the churches towards the ecological crisis is not a matter of chance. The reason behind this hesitancy is the fact that the churches were not theologically and spiritually prepared for the ecological crisis which is more than a new theme for reflection. In order to grasp the crux of the ecological problem, a radical change was needed which does not come overnight. Theological assumptions need to be renewed and rethought. In order to overcome this problem, theological reflections are needed not only on academic levels, but also in the sphere of people's life - sermons, the liturgy, the spiritual life and daily living. Ecological concerns must move to the centre stage of the churches' pastoral ministry.

Ecological responsibility is an essential part of the Christian faith. St. Basil's teaching lies in the management, not selfish exploitation; it involves a concern for both present and future generations, and a recognition that the world we manage has an interest in its own survival and well-being, independent of its value to us. It is important to observe that the churches' support for the concept of sustainable development is a corollary of the Christian belief of the universal destination of created goods. Early Christian theologians insisted that all earthly goods belong to all generations. Since material goods of the earth are the common patrimony of all humankind, both present and future generations have the right not to be excluded from access to the earth's resources. Note the rich theological insights of the following words, written not by a contemporary theologian but by St. John Chrysostom (c.370-407) who lived in the fourth century:

I mark the wise dispensation of God ... He has made certain things common, such as the sun, air, earth, and water, the sky and the sea ... Their benefits are dispensed equally to all brethren ... And mark, therefore concerning things that remain in common there is no contention but all is peaceable. But when one attempts to possess himself of anything, to make it his own, then contention is introduced, as if nature herself were indignant.

9 The Crete report indicates that above all the attitude of human beings towards nature had to be rethought. Who are we in our relationship to God and to creation? The Scriptures speak about a particular image of the human person before God. The human person has above all other created objects the ability and the consciousness to praise the Creator. The human person is a part of nature not apart from nature. The human vocation is to live in communion with creation. Beyond doubt, this image of the human person vis-a-vis creation was underestimated for many centuries.

Another important point is God's continuing presence in creation. God has not only called the universe into existence. He is present in its continuing life. God cares not only for human beings but for all creation. Destruction of creation is therefore disregard of God's presence: it is a sin against God. Every attack on the creation is an insult to the Creator. As the poet T.S. Eliot states: a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God.

With what hope should we face the future? Between the present reality and the eschatological fulfilment of God's kingdom, we have to construct God's kingdom on earth. "Thy Kingdom come" is our daily prayer. This perspective confirms the conviction that human history is future-oriented. It offers a motivation for a critical attitude towards our relationship with creation. In history, the power of God's kingdom is already at work. We need to rekindle our faith in God's Spirit who is striving; to renew the earth and to lure it to its final fulfilment. Our selfish and exploitative attitudes should never hinder the work of God's Spirit present in creation.

What is lacking, however, is hope and confidence in the future. Churches must proclaim a message of hope in the face of every sign of destruction. This hope in the future, which is in God's hands, is not fatalism. The hope of God's kingdom is a source of freedom. God's grace in Jesus Christ and the renewing equality of the Spirit should be a source of joy, inspiration and encouragement. Precisely because hope frees us from the ideology of growth and progress, it gives us the strength to face the challenge.

3. The Responsibilities of European Christians

The process of economic development in Europe, both East and West, over the last decades has caused environmental and human damage. Moreover, there are imbalances between the Western- and the Eastern European countries; between the rich and the poor within European countries; between most of the countries of Europe and developing countries and between present and future generations. What does this mean to European churches? What role do European Christians have in their social and political commitment? Let me consider reflections: !

10 1. Time is ripe enough for the European churches to start collaborating more closely with each other and with all relevant organisations in the environmental issues. In many countries Christians have become active in ecological movements. It is interesting to note that this Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz coincides with the meeting of Government representatives, experts and NGOs held at the U.N.O. in New York to examine critically the implementation of Agenda 21 during the last five years since the Earth Summit was held in Brazil. To ensure the implementation of sustainability in all countries, Agenda 21 encourages countries to develop their own national, local, subregional and regional strategies. It is therefore the responsibility of European Christians to collaborate and coordinate actively with all relevant agencies, such as governments, NGOs and the scientific community, to adopt concrete programmes for the implementation of Agenda 21. European Christians must engage themselves strongly in campaigns to promote a sustainable Europe. Moreover, in some countries structures have been built which make the churches' commitment for the conservation of creation easier and stronger. However, the networking of these activities and collaboration in European countries is at its initial stage. It is of utmost importance that this cooperation will

continue to develop. It is a fact that the ecological crisis will never be solved by one country, so much so it can be solved by a particular church. More than in any other area, the churches on a universal level must cooperate with each other in environmental issues.

2. In Europe there must be more and more dialogue between the West and the East. I think that the churches have a responsibility to foster and promote this dialogue. In the last decades we had in Europe two systems and ideologies which though at loggerheads with each other, both promoted the ideology of economic growth. Now, we are all faced with the consequences of this philosophy. The important question we have to raise is the following: to what extent are European Christians in a position to bring together the West and the East? The lack of economic development is responsible for much of the damage in Central and Eastern European countries. Now it is believed that the 'blessed' Western European system will bring prosperity and will solve the ecological problem. Spreading a 'Western' model of society to Central and Eastern European developing countries through the use of developmental aid needs to be questioned by European Christians active in socio-economic and political life. In Crete participants from Central and Eastern European countries expressed their view that the consumption-based society characteristic of Western Europe at present is not the model they would wish to follow.

3. The future of Europe's future is possible without concession for southern countries. Maintaining living conditions in European countries must not be dealt with in isolation from issues of justice and development in the countries of the Southern hemisphere. The system which is responsible for today's destruction of nature has its roots in us.

11 Knowingly or unknowingly, the southern countries are affected by the development of today's technology and industry. Development and protection of the environment in the industrialised countries must be sustainable world-wide and open up opportunities for developing a dignified and ecologically-friendly living standards in the developing countries as well as in the countries of Eastern Europe which are undergoing a transition. Thus the future of Europe is linked with the future of southern countries. Environmental studies and reports on ecology wrongly treated the Western and Southern crisis as two independent problems. Can the churches in Europe serve as a guardian to protect the interests of southern countries?

4. At the Circeo meeting, churches, Christian associations and ecumenical organisations living in the South of Europe expressed their concern for the future of the Mediterranean Basin whose situation is particularly serious. They observed that the Churches has taken little notice of the problems faced by the Mediterranean countries. The region constitutes one single geographic, economic and ecological unit which cannot be politically managed without recognition of its unified character. A large part of the pollution of the Mediterranean waters originate in countries of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. Addressing the problem requires therefore a pan-European political cooperation. Sensitive ecosystems, such as the coasts and arid lands, have suffered destructive industrial, tourists and agricultural development. One estimates that there was a loss of 60 % of the coastal zones since 1940. Strongly marked by violence, the Mediterranean region is characterised by economic, social and cultural conflicts caused by severe disparities between the North and the South of Europe. Faced with this cluster of problems one notes the lack of success in negotiations between governments of Mediterranean states who appear unable to arrive at a consensus. The role of the churches is to help reach this consensus, through cooperation with other religions. During the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Barcelona (1995), countries surrounding the Mediterranean basin declared to establish "a zone of peace, stability and security in the area, including the possibility of bringing into cooperation for this purpose a Euro-Mediterranean pact". Churches must first be aware of this Declaration and then co-operate with government and non-governmental organisations to implement its objectives. Though it might appear difficult to implement, this attempt would strongly contribute to the process of reconciliation in the Mediterranean region.

5. Not only intra-religious but also inter-religious dialogue is a challenge for Christians in Europe. Churches have the responsibility to instigate the closest and most urgent cooperation not only between Christians of different confessions, but also with non-Christians in the area of environmental reflection and action. The question of our future is common to all of us, regardless of religious confession. The importance of promoting dialogue and cooperation

between the monotheistic religions in the Euro-Mediterranean area cannot be overstated if peaceful

coexistence is to prosper in the region. The three religions share the common belief that we are responsible and have common stewardship of the planet-earth entrusted to us by God.

These questions indicate that the issue about the future must become an important item on the European churches' agenda. We must go a step further beyond discussions and meetings. We need a European Council for the Environment, which will have the mandate from the church to debate theologically, spiritually and pastorally about the future of Europe. Is this ecumenical meeting in Graz not an opportunity to take a decision in this direction? The European Council for the Environment will act as a guardian for the interest of both present and future generations. In this way the churches would fulfil an advocacy role with regard to the ecological crisis.

The process begun in Basel and continued in Graz cannot be arrested. On the contrary, it must be taken seriously and accelerated. The current challenge of the survival of our common heritage in the Euro-Mediterranean region is unprecedented. Let us hope that the mechanisms already established as well as the good will of all Europeans and their churches would meet this challenge!

