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Europe is worth it

Stimuli from the Episcopal Working
Group on Europe

15 November 2021

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Foreword

The European Union (EU) is perhaps the most significant undertaking for cooperation between countries since the Second World War. But how is the EU? What path will European integration take in future? And what do the Church and Her faithful have to do with this?

The present expert text discusses why a Christian commitment to this peace and democracy project which is unique worldwide is worthwhile. “Europe is worth it” is the title and the message of this fundamental text with which the Episcopal Working Group on Europe of the German Bishops’ Conference reflects on the situation in the EU, and formulates perspectives for the future. The text targets a broad public, taking up a position towards the outside, and addressing the topic inside the Catholic Church in Germany. Three aspects are particularly important to me below with which I would like to provide an insight into the text.

Firstly, one focus is placed on the significance of Christian convictions for Europe, as well as on the role of the Church and of Her faithful for the paths of European integration. This is closely related to the public nature of the Church’s actions in the sense of Diaconic-political actions for the well-being of society. Pope Francis emphasises this for instance in Chapter 8 of his Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* when he writes: “[The Church] ‘cannot and must not remain on the sidelines’ in the building of a better world, or fail to ‘reawaken the spiritual energy’ that can contribute to the betterment of society.” (276). If the Church wishes to do justice to this mission, She must be able to put forward Her message also under changed societal, cultural and political conditions. The Church

will become a learning organisation – publicly credible and effective as a witness to Christ – if she participates in the debate asserting Her message within society with strong arguments and with good reasons. The text describes this role of the Church as a bridge-builder and mediator, and hence links amongst other things to the Joint Statement *Vertrauen in die Demokratie stärken* (Strengthening Trust in Democracy) published in April 2019 by the German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany.

Secondly, the guiding central concept applies that political structures alone do not make good policy. As a project of freedom and democracy, the EU cannot live and survive on its own strength. The perception of the human person and of society in Germany and the EU, rather, requires that the binding nature of universal values not be placed into perspective since these values form the basis for a responsible shaping of policy and society. Although these values can be given rise to by different means, they are nonetheless regarded as indispensable. A Christian position is also more than able to connect to a European solution focussing on the application of values integrating different religions and world views. The fundamental Christian understanding is that every human being is a person with his or her own inalienable dignity. This brings us to a criterion which must act as a yardstick in all individual and public actions, the application of which is not exclusively bound by a Christian justification context. This criterion cannot create clarity in matters of concrete political controversy. It is thus also not to replace political and societal debates, but to offer an orientation within such debates. The provisions contained in the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) and in the European Treaties are based on principles which have largely been formed and also influenced in the

Christian faith, such as the dignity and freedom of the human person, solidarity, or subsidiarity. These indispensable foundations of democracy, European integration and the Christian faith are brought together by the present text on the European debate with questions of political programmatic.

Thirdly, it is shown that the democratic community, and co-existence in the EU, are therefore subject to written and unwritten prerequisites. Democracy rightly incorporates political controversy and societal dissent regarding the paths towards the correct, just shaping of society. European coexistence does not require agreement to be reached on the genesis and foundations of the inalienable values underpinning and structuring the EU. A major risk nonetheless arises if these values themselves are placed in question or into perspective. There is then a need, together with all those who defend these values, to strive on the basis of our Christian self-perception to defend with all our strength what for good reason is non-negotiable: Fundamental values and rights such as peace, freedom and human dignity can only be comprehensively guaranteed if they are and remain institutionally anchored. In order to protect these inalienabilities, people are needed who act together for the European idea because they are filled with the certainty that a free, fair, decent life is not possible if these prerequisites are not met.

The present text therefore particularly stresses, in terms of its plea, the application and defence of these inalienable values and norms of our democratic society in the EU. That this Christian perspective remains recognisable and effective in our Europe united in diversity depends above all things on the courageous efforts of Christians for the convictions of our

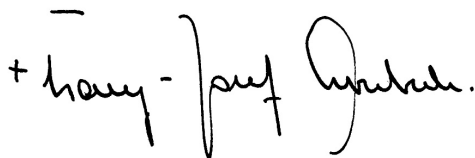
faith, for the goals of European integration, and for the foundations of democracy.

The text consequently bases its considerations on a three-tiered structure: The first chapter outlines the particular value attaching to the EU as an integration project, against the background of historical developments, and discusses the current situation in the EU with regard to its understanding of itself. The second chapter explains the relevant socio-ethical foundations of the Church's societal and European commitment in terms of Her Diaconic-political mission. On the basis of these socio-ethical considerations, the third chapter develops an outlook for four selected policy areas: (1) As a basis for societal cohesion and participation, democracy is firmly linked with the rule of law. (2) Responsibility for Creation is stressed as a constant for a decent life, including that of future generations. (3) Digitality is understood as a shaping momentum in need of ethical guidelines for modern societies, lending concrete shape to the principles of the Christian conception of the human person. Finally, (4) questions are discussed related to displacement and asylum as both a European and a global challenge. The final chapter binds these aspects together, and underlines the constructive contribution made by the Churches and religious communities to European integration as a project of peace and democracy.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the Episcopal Working Group on Europe of the German Bishops' Conference for their considerable and varied commitment, as well as for their fruitful, creative work in drawing up this expert text. I would like to thank the members and advisors of the Commission for Society and Social Affairs for their guidance in drawing up the text, and for their helpful comments. I would

like to sincerely wish the expert text a broad, profound echo,
as well as an effective, sustained resonance.

Bonn, September 2021

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Franz-Josef Overbeck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first part "Franz" is written with a small "F" and a long horizontal stroke. The second part "Josef" is written with a small "J" and a long horizontal stroke. The last part "Overbeck" is written with a small "O" and a long horizontal stroke.

Bishop Dr Franz-Josef Overbeck

Chairman of the Episcopal Working Group on Europe of the
German Bishops' Conference

Introduction

The process of European union has been a project made up of countries working together that is unparalleled the world over in the more than seventy years that have passed since the Treaty of Paris and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community. Today's European Union (EU) has become a major factor in the lives of people on our continent. This is demonstrated in abstract terms for instance in the promotion of the peace and well-being of people in the EU, and in a process in which all European countries and cultures have been increasingly growing together. Over and above this, it is specifically revealed in the growing relevance of decisions taken by the EU for everyday life in Europe. Let us take a brief look at all the things that we would have to do without if it were not for the EU, and we can imagine why European integration is perhaps the best political achievement, and the greatest peace project, since the Second World War.

That having been said, despite the indispensable contribution that the EU has made towards the creation of a peaceful, prosperous continent, Europe has been confronted by challenges in recent years which have once more placed societal and political cohesion in the EU on the test bed. So far, the EU has proven the strength of its community particularly also in difficult times. The EU and its Member States nonetheless reveal their shortcomings when it comes to dealing with present-day crises. Commendable achievements of solidarity – such as comprehensive financial aid to overcome the sovereign debt crisis, and joint efforts to manage the COVID-19 pandemic – contrast with long-unresolved divergences in areas such as asylum and refugee policy in which the EU Member States have been acting long since more like a profoundly disunited group of egocentric

nation-states. This makes it extremely difficult to look for convincing European methods: Some stakeholders appear to have little interest in reaching a compromise, and frequently remain stuck in positions instead of aspiring to constructively seek solutions. The intention here is not to create the impression that the EU should be reduced to the role of a mere crisis-solving body. On the contrary, the indispensability and relevance of the EU are proven afresh each day in its extensive, binding framework for the life of people in Europe to enable us to live in peace, friendship and freedom.

The Catholic Church has been a proponent of the process of European union since its inception, and continues to guide this process constructively. This applies both to the Holy See, which maintains diplomatic relations with the EU, and to the bishops' conferences, which have developed structures of their own within which to observe and accompany political processes in Brussels at the level of the EU in the shape of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)¹.

¹ The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), established in 1980, is made up of delegated bishops from the participating Bishops' Conferences and associate members. COMECE maintains its own secretariat in Brussels, very close to the European Parliament. One of its most important tasks is to maintain contact with the EU institutions and to observe and guide political processes in the EU in those thematic and policy areas which are of particular interest to the Church. COMECE informs the Bishops' Conferences about these processes, and communicates their positions and views on European integration with the European institutions and authorities. When its Statutes were amended in 2017, the word "Community" was replaced by "Union" in the name **Commissio Episcopatum Communitatis Europensis**.

The Church in Germany² also makes a multifaceted, constructive contribution towards these processes.

We, the Episcopal Working Group on Europe³, wish to make our contribution to the debate on the future of Europe with the following considerations. To this end, we would like to offer some input from a Christian perspective regarding the (future) development of the EU. We are aware and acknowledge in this process that this debate is primarily also conducted by people of other confessions and among a broad secular public. This having been said, the present text discusses the contribution that can be made towards European unification on the basis of a Christian commitment, and reflects on today's European challenges for

- (1) democratic cohesion,
- (2) responsibility for Creation,
- (3) the responsible structuring of the digital world, and
- (4) the contribution that Europe can make towards coping with global displacement movements.

Christianity has done a great deal towards shaping the values and principles on which the European Union is based. Solidarity and subsidiarity, which are also codified as principles in the European Treaties, are not only formulated as abstract recurring themes in Catholic social doctrine, but have been repeatedly fleshed out in their conclusions. We are convinced that we share a sense of solidarity and subsidiarity with many Europeans, re-

² For an example of the European commitment, see the German Bishops' Conference on the topic page at: <https://www.dbk.de/themen/engagement-in-europa>.

³ Cf. the list of the Episcopal Working Group on Europe of the German Bishops' Conference at the end of this publication.

regardless of their religious and philosophical convictions. We regard ourselves as being in harmony with those convictions and principles, which form the foundation for the European integration process. This includes first and foremost human dignity and freedom as expressed in the Christian conception of the human person, as well as the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and the aspiration towards the common good, formulated in Catholic social doctrine, amongst other places. What is more, the Church also stresses the need for all actions to be sustainable. Christians are called on to reflect on these foundations over and over again, to incorporate them in the debate within society, and to take up a commitment to these values and principles in the State and in society.

We are convinced that the EU offers the right framework in which to meet the challenges of our time. The search for common European methods stems not only from an idealistic motivation for a united Europe, but also happens out of sheer necessity: Nations cannot unilaterally develop convincing responses to climate change and to questions of displacement and asylum, or indeed to new global epidemics or worldwide economic and financial crises. The value of pan-European rules is frequently demonstrated in everyday situations, such as taking up the free movement of persons on the part of commuters or travellers. European environmental legislation, and coordination between the EU Member States in the social sphere, are also crucial to the EU's progress. Europe can only be successful in this respect if it sees itself as a community of solidarity in which Member States or interest groups do not narrow-mindedly cling to the defence of all the advantages that have gone before, but are prepared to accept mutual compromises as well as burdens in order to promote the European common good. The EU risks suffering serious damage or even failure if, for example, national isolationism and unilateralism are propagated more and more

frequently. Instead, all of us in Europe should seize on the opportunities that the EU offers, especially in today's crises, in order to solve problems and to shape our coexistence.

I. Europe proves itself anew every day

Why is the commitment to Europe and to cohesion in the EU worthwhile? Why is it worthwhile from the point of view of the Catholic Church in particular, and in light of a socio-ethical evaluation? The answers to these questions must take into account a dichotomous assessment of the current situation in the EU: On the one hand, for instance, the increased voter turnout in the 2019 European elections compared to 2014 is evidence that the population in the EU attaches considerable importance to the manner in which the European project is constructed. On the other hand, the 2019 election results show an increase in the number of Eurosceptic votes in particular. Moreover, parties which advocate a return to national or even nationalist policy approaches have achieved success in national and regional elections in many Member States. They are now represented in most Member State parliaments, and in the European Parliament.

If we look back on the history of European integration, we can see that cooperation has not by any means always been harmonious as the European community has grown together. On the contrary, many refer to European integration as a story of crises. Europe as a project of peace, which began in the mid-20th Century, has often been exposed to considerable criticism in the past, with Member States going it alone, and with setbacks. To quote but a few examples: the Empty Chair Crisis in the 1960s, the Eurosclerosis of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the controversies surrounding a European Constitution at the

beginning of the 2000s. The European integration process is once again in a phase today in which the EU and/or its mode of operation are being explicitly placed in question in some quarters.

Moreover, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (Brexit), which was completed on 31 January 2020, represents a turning point and a signal, given that this involved a country leaving the EU for the first time in its history. Much criticism has been levelled at the campaigning and disinformation on the part of some of the protagonists. That having been said, Brexit shows that the 2016 Leave referendum in the United Kingdom lent a voice to the perception of a majority of those who voted that membership of the EU was not the best way forward for a European country. Although Brexit represents a profound watershed in the history of European integration, its chaotic evolution, as well as the consequences for the economy of the UK, have highlighted to many other countries the usefulness of and benefits ensuing from membership of the EU. This has meant that the (emotional) attachment of many Member States to the EU has been enhanced, to some extent as part of a backlash to Brexit.

Our positive response to any pessimistic view of the EU is therefore that the European Community, and later the European Union, have repeatedly dared to take courageous steps at decisive moments, which – in an interplay of deepening and enlargement – have made possible and sustainably promoted the progressive growing together of the European peoples, the development of pan-European political structures, as well as the emergence of a European identity. These steps include the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979, the completion of the internal market, together with the introduction of a common currency, and the accession of a large number of Central and Eastern European countries to the EU in the 2000s. The accession of these countries is an important stage in the growing

together of the European continent, for whose division into East and West at that time Pope John Paul II used, among other things, the image of two lungs, including in the speech that he gave to the European Parliament in 1988⁴. The Union should not forget its success story with regard to bringing together the peoples of Europe. It should be recalled that the common political will in the EU to create a pan-European democratic, constitutional order for the benefit of the European people and its countries has achieved great things, and can continue to do so. Europe proves itself anew every day.

1.1 The EU and its self-image

The current crisis coincides with a period in the history of the world in which a growing number of countries, both inside and outside Europe, are turning away, at least for a time, from multilateral policy approaches, i.e. from international cooperation based on common rules. It is encouraging that the USA has effected a powerful shift (back) towards multilateralism with its most recent change of President. Even so, individuals and parties who promise their electorates material progress, or the preservation of a status or status quo that is perceived as providing security, with egocentric national strategies, continue to achieve high approval ratings for a time, or even to hold governmental responsibility, in many democracies around the world, and also in the EU.

⁴ Cf. Pope John Paul II: Speech during his visit to the European Parliament (Palais d'Europe, Strasbourg, 11 October 1988), 5, in: L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English, No. 47, pp. 11 and 12, retrievable at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1988/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19881011_european-parliament.html (21 October 2020).

The inception of European integration was associated with the goal of structurally overcoming violent conflicts and wars by means of economic, cultural and political integration. The guiding perspective, at the beginning of European integration in particular, was to establish a peacetime order between the European nations that serves among other things to defend freedom and promote prosperity. This also includes the question of social justice. As the decades passed by, the European economic and legal community was expanded to include the dimension of a political union with a democratic structure which is organised on the basis of subsidiarity and solidarity. All these aspects are equally part of the notion of the EU, which as a community that is “united in diversity” seeks to help its Member States and their peoples to work together to achieve more democracy, greater prosperity, and international legal certainty, as well as to guarantee their freedom(s) and the full enjoyment of human rights.

The last few years have nevertheless made it clear that fundamental disputes are increasingly being fought out between the EU Member States and in their societies over the goals of the European Union and how they are to be achieved. This applies to the goal of peace, but also for example to the goals of securing freedom and guaranteeing economic prosperity and well-being. The respective priorities of the Member States are the roots and drivers of many of today’s divergences in policy on Europe between the Member States, as well as of different manifestations of their search for identity. Perceived shortcomings in the structures of the EU, and prejudices vis-à-vis a united Europe, must be discussed openly in order to (re)highlight and enhance the character of the EU as a project of peace and democracy that goes far beyond the absence of war. It is necessary and desirable to struggle for common goals for the EU – as long as this does not lead to backward-looking or reactionary concepts such as a “Europe of fatherlands”. This necessitates

the EU constantly re-examining and sharpening its self-image in terms of common, shared priorities and perspectives.

1.2 A change of generations and experiences of crisis as a paradigm shift

The discussions about the priorities and perspectives of the integration process can be traced back, among other things, to a general change of generations, as well as to concrete reactions to crises. The generations which were forced to personally experience the horrors of the Second World War, National Socialism, the inhuman crimes of the Holocaust, and the consequences of nationalism, have now been followed by generations for whom a peaceful, democratic continent is a matter of course. The same applies to those generations in the countries of the former Warsaw Pact who, for example, associate the Soviet Union with oppression and foreign rule. Many young people still reflect on the experiences and attitudes of their parents and grandparents. The danger is nevertheless increasing that the advantages of a united Europe, the vulnerability of a democratic order of peace and freedom, and the anticipated consequences of nationalist and authoritarian aberrations, will fade from the collective consciousness, or suffer distortion within this framework. The latter is especially true when the EU and pan-European rules are perceived as authoritarian or as a threat to one's own identity. Europeans have a duty to remember, and the EU must live up to its essence and its claim to be a project of peace and democracy. Let us not forget that it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this in December 2012. It and all of us in the EU must do justice to this award again and again.

The credo of “No more war!” is an indisputable part of the legitimization of the EU. The inception of European union saw a

rapid shift of attention to also include economic issues and economic integration. Above all, the experience of economic crises has often fuelled doubts about the EU as a socially-, economically- and politically-just system. The succession of global crises served as a catalyst for growing scepticism vis-à-vis democracy, globalisation and Europe. While these events were not and are not confined to Europe, they have nonetheless taken on a particular shape in the EU. For instance, the financial crisis of 2008/2009, and the Euro sovereign debt crisis of 2010–2012, not only led to a severe recession, but also highlighted and reinforced existing shortcomings in the construction of the EU, as well as social grievances in the EU Member States. Even though European integration was and is reduced to economic interests at times, it seems to many people to be inadequate to balance the costs and benefits of specific integration steps, both then and now, in purely economic terms. This may be partly due to the fact that the far-reaching integration of the internal market was not and is not universally associated with the achievements of prosperity alone, and with economic and personal freedoms, but in many cases with pressure to change and compete, as well as with the restriction of protective rights and privileges that previously existed on national markets. Whilst it is true that the Member States have been able to successfully and quickly contain the acute symptoms of the crisis and the risks through extensive emergency and reform measures, some European countries have fallen far behind in terms of the economic harmonisation process of the EU's economies. This was and is associated with considerable social hardship for sections of the population in these countries. The policy towards particularly hard-pressed countries has however also to some extent polarised the population and alienated them from the project of European integration, also in countries such as Germany which

have weathered the period of economic recession comparatively well.

The economic crises have been followed by the challenges posed by the influx of large numbers of people seeking protection in the EU, which has become the focus of public attention since 2015 at the latest. This development, which is frequently described as a “refugee crisis”, has on the one hand prompted a large number of people – many of them acting out of a Christian motivation – to show tremendous commitment, but at the same time it has triggered massive fears and concerns in some quarters. A policy of the EU Member States that was not sufficiently based on solidarity, and which was correspondingly uncoordinated, at times presented a very poor picture in terms of cohesion, a common will to solve problems, and ultimately a basic humanitarian consensus among the European peoples. In this context in particular, public discourse frequently referred to aspects of security, and threat scenarios were constructed multiple times. The discrepancy between the ethical claim of the EU and the reality of its actions can be seen more than ever in the conditions in the camps for refugees, including at the external borders of the Union. This has fuelled scepticism towards the project of European integration, especially when it gives the impression that the EU is either not showing solidarity with people seeking protection, and with EU Member States at the external borders, or is being centralist with regard to national freedom and self-determination.

Large sections of the public in Europe and in the world are moreover criticising what they see as insufficiently decisive action to halt or at least mitigate man-made global warming. The scientific community has been pointing out the dangers of climate change and of the decline in biodiversity for years. The younger generation in particular has however been diagnosing a policy failure with regard to this problem for some time. The

impression arises that it is only since the effects of climate change have been so clearly visible and tangible that any action has been taken (and that even that has been too slow). This is perceived as another crisis (“climate crisis”). The EU’s climate policy action is sometimes seen as better than that of many of its Member States, but in most cases it is still not perceived as being sufficiently vigorous. A comprehensive new direction in the political actions of the EU and of its Member States, as well as in people’s individual conduct, is called for in this context in the direction of a sustainable way of life and of doing business in order to preserve the Earth for us and for future generations.

1.3 Trust enhances the ability to act – The ability to act enhances trust

These developments pose a considerable risk to the EU, especially if they cause European integration to remain static, or if the EU proves unable to act. The challenges outlined above cannot be mastered with national approaches alone. The EU is therefore not part of the problem, but part of the solution, and it is indispensable when it comes to coping with the crisis: Supra-national responses are called for. The EU is a potentially capable player in developing and implementing viable multilateral policies in a democratic multi-level model in order to meet many of these challenges. That said, the EU is dependent for this on the commitment of those with political responsibility, as well as on the trust and commitment of the population at large. Dwindling support for the “Project Europe” weakens the EU’s capacity to act, and thus (to an even greater extent) its problem-solving capacity. As a consequence, this is encouraging the (further) alienation of many people from the European project. In addition, there are already long-lasting political divergences be-

tween EU Member States, rooted in the diverging objectives pursued by European integration. These are apparent, for example, between some Northern and Southern European countries when it comes to economic and budgetary issues – as expressed for instance in rescuing the Euro, and in the response to the coronavirus pandemic – or between some Western and Eastern European countries on issues related to asylum, migration and integration policy.

It is necessary for those bearing political responsibility to find ways to restore and enhance confidence in European integration, to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU, and to improve its political functionality. This is not only important for the domestic peace and economic prosperity of a capable EU, but is also a geopolitical necessity. European integration and joint action on the part of the EU are the most promising course to steer in international relations if Europe is to have a voice of its own, and to make it heard, amongst the major powers and superpowers such as the People's Republic of China and the USA. This should of course not be confused with “Eurocentrism”. Assuming global responsibility is part of the EU's self-image, and it corresponds to the Christian conviction. It contributes to the EU's credibility if it acts in accordance with this self-image by defending and living its principles – first and foremost solidarity – and its conception of the human person, both internally and externally.

1.4 The COVID-19 pandemic as a new European acid test

The EU seemed to have disappeared from the scene during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the Member States took up the reins, and reacted on the European stage

with rapid, uncoordinated border closures. The containment of pandemics through physical barriers is a recognised non-pharmaceutical measure. However, instead of entering into an additional commitment at an early stage to render mutual, cross-border medical assistance over and above this, the EU Member States lapsed into national reflexes, and this led to an initial competition for scarce medical resources such as protective equipment. The shortage of vital goods was not dealt with in a coordinated manner in Europe, but each country initially focused exclusively on protecting its own population. Europe-wide coordination was also hampered by the European Commission's limited capacity to respond to the cross-border health crisis due to its limited competences in health policy.

The picture has changed to some extent since then, but remains mixed overall: The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have long since turned into the most serious global health and economic crisis of the post-War period. This recession has affected the economies of the EU in different ways. Countries in Southern Europe, for example, which were already in a fragile economic and financial state before the pandemic, have been hard hit. Against this backdrop, the EU was able to agree on the "NextGenerationEU" post-COVID-19 recovery plan to a tune of 750 billion Euro. This package is to particularly help the severely affected countries to recover from the crisis and its consequences. This is where the EU and its Member States – despite all the disputes in the details – are showing solidarity and an ability to act which is remarkable and gives cause for hope. At the same time, the coordinated procurement of vaccines at European level was the subject of some fierce public criticism from the beginning of 2021 at the latest. However, it is important and right that the joint procurement of vaccines has largely prevented a problematic national scramble between EU

Member States to purchase vaccines, which could have been harmful for everyone.

Coordinated European action to combat COVID-19, and to prevent and manage pandemics and health crises, will become increasingly important in future. Steps in this direction include the proposal of and the discussion concerning the creation of the “European Health Emergency Response Authority” (HERA) as a new EU authority for crisis preparedness and response in health emergencies. A key measure here is the establishment of the “HERA Incubator” as a public-private cooperation scheme to pool knowledge and data, experience and resources from the EU. Looking beyond the borders of the EU, it is to be welcomed that the EU and individual Member States are engaging financially and with technical expertise in international initiatives such as “COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access” (COVAX), which aims to ensure the fastest possible global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. In doing so, the EU is sending an important signal for global solidarity in this worldwide pandemic.

The EU can make an essential contribution towards recovering from a variety of crises by taking a solidarity-based approach. Beyond combatting pandemics, the EU should make even greater use of its potential to create a (more) positive dynamic in other pressing policy areas such as responsibility for Creation or issues of displacement and asylum. This would enable it to help people in a visible, concrete manner.

2. Socio-ethical reflections on the Christian contribution to Europe

In Christianity, we believe in a kind, just and loving God. This forms the basis for the societal engagement of the Church and the faithful, who want to lead a life as disciples of Jesus Christ, who is both an example and an aspiration for us. Against this background, it is part of the Church's efforts to accompany political and societal processes, and to offer a Christian orientation and justification for a targeted engagement in politics and society. This happens in the continuous, self-critical reflection on one's own role and with an awareness of the dangers ensuing from misusing religion. Politically-instrumentalised terms such as that of the "Christian Occident" can thus be unmasked. On the basis of Her self-perception and of the Christian conviction, the Church is able and willing to force a human orientation and to serve as a bridge-builder between different religions, cultures and world views.

Pope Francis explicitly stresses in his Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* that "the different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society" (271). Pope Francis stresses that "our witness to God benefits our societies" (274). This public character of the Church's activities, and the mandate of the Church and of the faithful to use their diaconal-political work for the good of society, is highlighted in the following passage from *Fratelli tutti*:

"For these reasons, the Church, while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere. On the contrary, 'she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines' in the building of a better world, or fail to 'reawaken the spiritual energy' that can contrib-

ute to the betterment of society. It is true that religious ministers must not engage in the party politics that are the proper domain of the laity, but neither can they renounce the political dimension of life itself, which involves a constant attention to the common good and a concern for integral human development. The Church ‘has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities’. She works for ‘the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity.’” (276)

The protection of the inalienable dignity of all members of the human family is central to the Christian conception of the human person, against the background of the Biblical foundations and the Church’s tradition. At its core, this sacrosanct, inalienable, equal dignity can be derived from a Christian perspective, founded on Creation theology, of the fact of humans having been made in the image of God, as well as in Christological terms from the fact of God becoming man. This is traditionally expressed in the Church’s social doctrine through the fundamental “principle of personality”. This universal claim related to human dignity also implies that, at global level, human vulnerability absolutely must be respected and human dignity protected. This is especially true for the most vulnerable, such as children, women, minorities, religious groups and, in principle, all the oppressed, persecuted and suffering. In the course of the Enlightenment, the inviolability of human dignity has not only found its way into state Constitutions, but has even become the starting point of many Constitutions of Europe, for example of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) of the Federal Republic of Germany, but also of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which became part of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009.

Catholic social doctrine is convinced that people’s well-being can only be achieved if it is structurally guaranteed. It therefore does not depend on the lawful behaviour of individuals alone,

but can only be achieved through state institutions and structures, and therefore also through transnational and international ones. Pope John XXIII wrote in 1961 in his Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* that “individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings”, and that they are “raised in the plan of Providence to an order of reality which is above nature” (219). Societal commitment based on a Christian conviction must therefore of necessity have a political dimension, and today even a global one.

It is on such a basis that human rights can also be established for a global order. The truth is that, although the Catholic Church Herself helped to establish social human rights in the 19th Century, She struggled for a long time to recognise the rights of freedom and political participation. This is especially true for the human right to freedom of religion. The Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* (1965) of the Second Vatican Council however showed that freedom of religion is to be protected explicitly also on Christian-theological grounds. It has been at the forefront of the Church’s social proclamation and advocacy for human rights since Pope John Paul II at the latest. Pope Francis affirms in his Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* that “one fundamental human right must not be forgotten in the journey towards fraternity and peace. It is religious freedom for believers of all religions” (279).

It is, in turn, the principle of universal human dignity that gives rise to the fundamental requirement that people must have the freedom to follow their own ideas of a “decent life”, as long as they do not unfairly restrict the fundamental rights and freedom of others. This applies not only to individuals, but also to groups of people, for example religious communities or groups of individuals who feel that they belong to a common culture. The associated freedom claims have been associated by Chris-

tian social ethics with the principle of subsidiarity. This principle, in the shape of a prohibition of the presumption of competence, raises the principle to the status of a norm that higher political units may only restrict the scope of the lower ones if they are not in a position to take care of their own well-being. In its specific form under EU law, the principle of subsidiarity has been explicitly enshrined in the Treaties of the EU, most significantly in Article 5 TEU. The principle of solidarity and the normative measure of justice go hand in hand with the principle of subsidiarity.

The anthropological fact that human beings are fundamentally dependent on one another, and therefore cooperation is not only advantageous but indeed indispensable, is a phenomenon to which Oswald von Nell-Breuning referred as human beings' "mutual dependence" (*Gemeinverstrickung*) and "mutual responsibility" (*Gemeinverhaftung*), and forms the core of the demand for solidarity among human beings. Acting as a further central principle of the Church's social proclamation, solidarity encompasses the obligation to render assistance among people, nations and countries. Solidarity and subsidiarity must always be thought of together. The principle of solidarity applies to all those who can take responsibility for others, and at the same time requires a certain degree of proportionality, so that it must not be exaggerated in view of the responsibility and willingness of the individuals. Justice and fairness mean in this context that common rules can be embraced by all. Burdens of solidarity are to be imposed on everyone in as equal a manner as possible, and in proportion to their respective capabilities, but not (even) more. Unequal obligations and distributions necessitate a special justification, and must for instance reflect higher needs or service(s). Only then can they be referred to as "just". A legitimate representation of one's own interests, which among other things is basically useful for the functioning of political pro-

cesses, must be subject to moral standards and serve the (global) common good. It must not lead to the justification of purely egocentric actions on the part of individuals, societal groups or institutions.

Christian ethics assumes in general terms that the scope of ethical norms and principles is extended to humanity as a whole (“global justice”), as well as to future generations (“intergenerational justice”). Worldwide interconnections and interdependences (“globalisation”), as well as the long-term effects of human activity on the entire planet (“anthropocene”), mean that humankind will only be able to have a peaceful future with the aid of both global and intergenerational justice. It is already the case today that the great justice-related problems of humanity can neither be formulated for the realm of individual nation-states alone, nor can they be adequately solved at their level. There are many problematic consequences of today’s human lifestyles for the future, for example those in Western countries, which accelerate climate change. Christian social ethics calls for the present generations to sustainably assume responsibility for future generations and for the entire planet in their economic activities, actions and lives, and to equitably take the needs of both into account (“sustainability”). Pope Francis has therefore prominently recalled two particularly important elements of ecclesial social proclamation in his social encyclicals: In *Laudato si’* (2015), this is the responsibility for Creation as the common home in intergenerational justice⁵. *Fratelli tutti* (2020) places the focus on the fraternity of the human family, which also includes future generations.

⁵ This aspect is central in *Laudato si’*. Cf. Pope Francis: Encyclical *Laudato si’* on care for our common home (24 May 2015), Vatican City, 159–162.

The EU has a particular responsibility here: Firstly, the processes of industrialisation and globalisation have decisively emanated from Europe in historical terms, and in terms of cultural history. Secondly, European thinkers in their own intellectual history, in which Christianity plays an essential role, have produced characteristic ideas of humankind and its relationship with the world. On the basis of these ethical foundations, the EU and its Member States have committed themselves to orientating their own actions in the global context towards human dignity, and to aligning their standards with this. Pope Francis wrote an open letter on Europe to Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin in October 2020⁶, in which he referred to the words said by Pope John Paul II at the Europeistic Act held in Santiago de Compostela on 9 November 1982: “Europe, find yourself! Rediscover your most deeply-rooted ideals. Be yourself!” Pope Francis postulates elsewhere in this letter: “The uniqueness of Europe rests above all on its conception of the human being and of reality, on its capacity for initiative and on its spirit of practical solidarity.” On the basis of the ethical norms of personality, solidarity, subsidiarity, global and inter-generational justice as well as sustainability, which stem from Christian ethics and social proclamation, Europe can make a credible contribution to the present and to the future of our world.

⁶ The Pope wrote the abovementioned letter on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the EU, as well as of the 50th anniversary of the presence of the Holy See as a Permanent Observer to the Council of Europe.

3. Current perspectives on selected policy fields

A shared policy based on solidarity, as well as on ethical principles, cannot and must not be shaped in a purely sectoral manner, but must be conceived and understood comprehensively and across policy fields. Perspectives for four selected policy fields are developed against this background which are particularly urgent in light of the above considerations: (1) democracy as a basis for societal cohesion and participation, (2) responsibility for Creation as a constant for a decent life for all, including future generations, (3) aspects of digitality as a momentum shaping modern societies requiring ethical guidelines, and finally (4) questions of displacement and asylum as a global challenge.

3.1 Democracy and cohesion

Achieving a united Europe within an EU context is conditional on trust being established in the European institutions, in their capacity to act, and in their willingness to act for the benefit of all people in the EU and beyond. Such trust must be based on democracy and the rule of law: The institutions and bodies of both the EU and of its Member States need democratic legitimation in an increasingly integrated EU. This legitimation must be established through sufficient, constantly-updated input from the will of the citizens of the Union. The latter take part in the elections at Member State level and in the elections to the European Parliament. In addition, they express their views in the processes of opinion-forming in the Member States and in Europe. At the same time, the question arises of the EU strengthening its representative democratic structures, the functioning

of its institutions, and its participatory elements. People in the EU have the opportunity to actively shape the future, and are called upon to do so, amongst other things through civic engagement. In this context, civic engagement and a European public discourse are essential elements of the cohesion and of shaping the EU together. Importance attaches in this context to the creation of bridges for getting to know and understand one another, for example in the shape of Europe-wide exchange programmes. Finally, the “Conference on the Future of Europe” can also contribute to a critical and unifying European public sphere, something which is crucial for strengthening democracy in Europe. Responsible individuals from parliaments, and from executives at all levels, are called upon within and outside of this Conference to discuss the pressing European issues of the future in an intergenerational and results-orientated manner, particularly taking into account stimuli from societal forces as well as from citizens. It is a promising approach to enhance representative democracy at European level through broad, consistent participation on the part of citizens in the future shaping of the EU. The EU will benefit greatly from drawing the strength of inspiration and innovation from society, and from citizens’ everyday lives and creativity.

The Church also wishes to make Her contribution to this process, and to bring Her positions into the discourse. In the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis aptly describes the public character of the diaconal-political mission of the Church and of the faithful for the good of society. From Her self-understanding, and in terms of Her Christian conviction, the Church must not be indifferent, but is to serve in our society as a religious, cultural and philosophical bridge-builder and mediator for democratic cohesion. In this sense, She can and wishes to contribute to the unification and integration of Europe, for example by creating and maintaining platforms and spaces for encounters

and discourses. Furthermore, She reminds the EU of its ethical responsibility, and above all urges the protection of the inalienable dignity of all members of the human family.

A solid, reliable foundation for shaping the future together is the character of the EU as a community based on the rule of law. This community is founded on the binding, obligatory element of common contractual agreements, as well as on common legislation derived therefrom. In doing so, it is dependent on the observance and enforcement of the jointly-established law and on the rule of law in all Member States. The union of Europe presupposes confidence in the peace- and democracy-securing function of the law and in its binding effect at European and Member State level. This is a condition for common action in individual policy areas, and for comprehensive projects such as the Single Market or European citizenship. Although the EU does not embody the “classical” statehood of a nation-state, the rule of law in the sense of all sovereign powers being bound by the law, the separation of powers, and the guarantee of fundamental and human rights, form an essential part of the Union’s foundations.

In this sense, the EU Treaties establish the rule of law as a principle on which the Union is founded. At the same time, the Union confirms that the rule of law constitutes a value that is common to all Member States. With the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, all Member States most recently committed themselves in Article 2 TEU to principles which characterise the Union and its Member States: “the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities”. This should also determine the EU’s actions vis-à-vis the outside, as codified in Article 3(5) TEU.

Recent years nevertheless show that the rule of law can come under pressure and experience restrictions as a result of political developments in Europe as well. It goes without saying that, in a democracy, political and legal discussions are held about concrete aspects and characteristics of the rule of law. However, if structural and de facto changes in individual EU Member States do not (or no longer) meet the requirements of the rule of law as a common European structural principle of state-building, these should be designated as such, and reforms called for. The existing mechanisms for monitoring the rule of law appear only partially effective in halting undesirable developments in individual Member States, and where necessary revising them. The conditionality regulation agreed at the end of 2020, according to which the disbursement of funds from the EU budget to Member States can be withheld in the event of violations of the rule of law, is a promising approach to ensure the validity of the EU's common principles.

The defence and promotion of the rule of law is very closely linked to the realisation of freedom and human rights as a whole, as well as to democratic will-formation and decision-making. Democracy needs to be linked to the rule of law in order for human rights to be realised on the basis of the freedom and equality of all people. The Constitutions of the Member States and the Treaties of the EU, together with the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, contain inalienable fundamental and human rights. Such rights, which shape the actions of the Union and of its Member States in a legally-binding way, guarantee a space of freedom to each individual. This anchors a concept of the human being as legally guiding, which corresponds to the Christian conviction that the human being is a free person

endowed with equal, inviolable, inalienable dignity.⁷ The rule of law and democracy, as well as fundamental and human rights, thus ultimately serve to guarantee the freedom of the individual and the possibility of freedom of personal development. These European principles in turn have an impact that reaches far beyond the borders of Europe. That said, they require courageous and constantly-renewed advocacy for their value and validity in the EU and in its Member States.

The following aspects appear to be particularly relevant, in summary and against this background:

- Among many other aspects, cohesion in the EU and its capacity to act are essentially based on democracy and the rule of law. The bodies and institutions of both the Member States, and of the Union itself, require democratic legitimacy. Enabling the active participation of people in the EU, and at the same time demanding that they make use of such opportunities, ensures that these institutions and bodies are bound by the will of the citizens of the Union.
- The fundamental and human rights which are legally binding on the EU and on its Member States give the individual, who is endowed with inalienable rights, a central place in all its activities. They formulate the demands which the bodies and institutions of the EU and of the Member States must make on themselves in order to bring about the best possible realisation of fundamental and human rights. This must be visible to people in the Union, since this is the only way that trust in the integration process can be established.

⁷ Cf. on this Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der EKD (Hg.): *Vertrauen in die Demokratie stärken. Ein Gemeinsames Wort der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz und des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*. Gemeinsame Texte No. 26, published in German (Bonn/Hannover 2019), p. 24.

Fundamental rights and human rights should also determine the external actions of the EU and of the Member States.

- The rule of law and democracy ultimately serve to guarantee the freedom of development of the individual. The unconditional validity of these principles promotes the credibility of the EU. Developments at European level, which provide that the implementation of the EU budget is subject to the rule of law, can help ensure the validity of the rule of law in the Member States.
- The Church often contributes Her positions to the public discourse in many ways, and can serve as a religious, cultural and philosophical bridge-builder and mediator for democratic cohesion in our society. Moreover, She reminds the EU of its ethical responsibility, and above all urges the protection of the inalienable dignity of all members of the human family.

3.2 Responsibility for Creation

The “Care for our common home” formulated in the Papal Encyclical *Laudato si’* moves wide sections of society today. The concerns of the Pope and of the Church regarding responsibility for Creation are underpinned and fuelled by the commitment of the youth-inspired “Fridays for Future” movement, and the long-standing commitment of many players (also in the Church) for a better environment, to protect the climate and preserve biodiversity. Especially due to the concerns and preoccupations of young people, awareness of these issues as problems has grown strongly in recent years in the political arena, the economy and society. This dynamic offers to the EU, as a community of law and responsibility, as well as an economic area, a major opportunity to develop new sectoral and cross-border re-

sponses to these existential global questions, and to get their implementation underway.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has repeatedly focused on the Christian responsibility for Creation, and in particular on the protection of the climate. In doing so, he concurs with those who unambiguously acknowledge that global warming is man-made. The Pope advocates that both national and international politics, as well as individual action, should be based on scientific knowledge of climate change and its consequences.⁸ Climate protection is only one contribution to the preservation of Creation, albeit a very important one. A holistic approach and an awareness of the planet's capacity limits are needed in order to set a framework for policy.⁹ Along with climate protection, such an approach encompasses sustainable energy management, protection and restoration of biodiversity, and sustainable agriculture. Measures for climate and environmental protection, and for a globally socially-acceptable transition and reconciliation, are two sides of the same coin. Policies for the protection of Creation must focus on the whole person, and on all people: There is a need for solidarity with the poorest in the world, who are often hardest hit by man-made climate change. At the same time, the social dimension of climate protection on the ground, and those people who are affected by structural changes in the course of climate and environmental protection-orientated measures, must not be forgotten.

Climate protection must not be misunderstood as a mere steering task for the political arena. Rather, there is a need for continuous coordination and cross-sectoral cooperation between the

⁸ Cf. Pope Francis: Encyclical *Laudato si'* on care for our common home (24 May 2015), Vatican City, 15.

⁹ Cf. Pope Francis: Encyclical *Laudato si'* on care for our common home (24 May 2015), Vatican City, 14–15, 23–26.

political arena, the economy, science and (civil) society as part of the framework made up of Member States, Europe and the international community. The Church in particular, together with the individual and collective responsibility of all believers, must make its contribution to the preservation of Creation out of a Christian commitment. The Catholic Church in Germany has been guiding developments in this area for a prolonged period.¹⁰ She emphasises that the responsibility for Creation is at its core a question of justice: It is a matter of global, intergenerational and ecological justice¹¹. As a universal Church, the Catholic Church stands at the side of the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged in all countries. She calls for solidarity with those people who are and will be worst affected by climate change. The Church's credibility includes setting an example and reducing Her own ecological footprint.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): *Ten theses on climate protection. A discussion paper*. The German Bishops – Commission for Society and Social Affairs No. 48 (Bonn 2019); cf. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): *Der bedrohte Boden. Ein Expertentext aus sozioethischer Perspektive zum Schutz des Bodens*. Die deutschen Bischöfe – Kommission für gesellschaftliche und soziale Fragen No. 44, published in German (Bonn 2016); cf. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): *Empfehlungen zur Energiewende. Ein Diskussionsbeitrag*. Die deutschen Bischöfe – Kommission für gesellschaftliche und soziale Fragen No. 37, published in German (Bonn 2013).

¹¹ Cf. Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): *Climate Change: A Focal Point of Global, Intergenerational and Ecological Justice. An Expert Report on the Challenge of Global Climate Change. With a Foreword by the President of the German Bishops' Conference*. The German Bishops – Commission for Society and Social Affairs/ Commission for International Church Affairs No. 29 (Bonn 2006).

¹² Cf. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): *Unser Einsatz für die Zukunft der Schöpfung. Klima- und Umweltschutzbericht 2021 der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz*. Arbeitshilfen No. 327, published in

Pope Francis states in his Encyclical *Laudato si'*: “A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time”¹³. The Church considers this “ecological debt” to mean that it is of central importance that the EU and the European industrialised nations adapt their own climate protection policies in line with the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015, and do everything in their power “to keep the increase in the average global temperature below a threshold of 1.5°C”¹⁴. The Preamble of the Paris Agreement already lends expression to the need for the major economic nations to play a leading role in climate protection and in the development and establishment of sustainable lifestyles, as well as of appropriate consumption and production patterns. This im-

German (Bonn 2021); cf. Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference (publisher): *Responsibility for Creation as a Mission for the Church. Recommendations for Action on Ecology and Sustainable Development for the German (Arch)Dioceses*. Working Papers No. 301 (Bonn 2019).

¹³ Cf. Pope Francis: Encyclical *Laudato si'* on care for our common home (24 May 2015), Vatican City, 51.

¹⁴ Original quotation in German: „um den Anstieg der globalen Durchschnittstemperatur unter einer Schwelle von 1,5°C zu halten“; Stellungnahme des Kommissariats der deutschen Bischöfe – Katholisches Büro in Berlin – zum Vorschlag einer Verordnung des Europäischen Parlamentes und des Rates zur Schaffung des Rahmens für die Verwirklichung der Klimaneutralität (Europäisches Klimagesetz), COD 2020/0036, published in German, (at: <https://cutt.ly/DgFTCIk>). Cf. furthermore: Stellungnahme des Kommissariats der deutschen Bischöfe – Katholisches Büro in Berlin – zum Entwurf eines Gesetzes zur Einführung eines Bundes-Klimaschutzgesetzes und zur Änderung weiterer Vorschriften (Drs. 19/14337), zum Klimaschutzprogramm 2030 der Bundesregierung zur Umsetzung des Klimaschutzplans 2050 (Drs. 19/13900) sowie zum Entwurf eines Gesetzes über ein nationales Emissionshandelssystem für Brennstoffemissionen, published in German (at: <https://cutt.ly/wgFT628>).

plies the promotion of international networking and alliances for climate and environmental protection. Similarly, there is a need for solidarity within the EU, in which economically strong Member States not only take a leading role in the necessary transformation process, but also support the structurally weaker countries in a manner which expresses a responsibility for Creation, and is socially acceptable. In this context, the direction is to be advocated that has been taken by the “European Green Deal”, which was initiated by the European Commission in 2019 and for the implementation of which many steps have already been taken. The “European Green Deal” presents the concept of a comprehensive reorientation of the economy and of society towards sustainability, which – if it is designed in a manner orientated towards public welfare – contributes in the long term to the well-being of people and of Creation as a whole.

In summary, the following aspects prove to be particularly relevant for the topic of responsibility for Creation:

- From an ethical perspective, assuming responsibility for Creation requires a cross-sectoral approach which furthermore transcends policy areas and is holistic in nature, encompassing all aspects of responsibility for Creation, especially conservation of biodiversity¹⁵, and also keeps in mind the social dimension of climate change and its mitigation.
- The preservation of Creation, and global and local social reconciliation, must not be played off against one another,

¹⁵ Cf. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): *Vom Wert der Vielfalt – Biodiversität als Bewährungsprobe der Schöpfungsverantwortung. Ein Expertentext der Arbeitsgruppe für ökologische Fragen der Kommission für gesellschaftliche und soziale Fragen der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz*. Arbeitshilfen No. 323, published in German (Bonn 2021).

but are two sides of the same coin.¹⁶ The EU must take this into account when shaping its policy and, with the preservation of Creation, focus on the protection of people, and of vulnerable persons in particular, as well as of current and future generations.

- The current societal dynamics in climate and environmental protection concern existential global issues. The EU has a major opportunity to develop and implement new sectoral and cross-border responses. The “European Green Deal” initiated by the European Commission is heading in a good direction to contribute to the long-term well-being of people and of the whole of Creation.
- The responsibility to preserve Creation is an ever more urgent, global, intergenerational as well as ecological justice-related issue for the Catholic Church in Germany, and as a universal Church. The credibility of the Church includes setting an example and reducing Her own ecological footprint.

¹⁶ Cf. German Bishops’ Conference Commission on International Church Affairs (publisher): *How socio-ecological transformation can succeed. An interdisciplinary study within the framework of the dialogue project on the contribution of the Catholic Church to a socio-ecological transformation in the light of Laudato si’*. Research results of a study by the ‘Global Economy and Social Ethics’ expert panel No. 22 (Bonn 2021).

3.3 Digitality

Digitalisation¹⁷ now permeates virtually all areas of life, and has unexpectedly experienced a further powerful boost in the coronavirus pandemic. Social, economic, academic and professional, but also ecclesial, life would have virtually collapsed in the pandemic without digitalisation. It is of the utmost importance for the economic future of Europe, and for the coexistence of societies in a political union of knowledge, education and freedom. The almost complete interweaving of analogue and digital realities is often described by the term “digitality”.¹⁸ The shaping of digitality cannot be limited to individual policy fields, but is a cross-sectoral, cross-policy-field task that urgently requires ethical guidelines.

¹⁷ Here at least, “digitalisation” is defined in the sense of, firstly, the conversion of information and communication into digital formats (digitisation), including their processing and storage, and, secondly, the digital modification of objects (tools, devices and vehicles). The process of digitalisation is also referred to as a “Digital Revolution”, especially in its political, economic and societal implications. A technological upheaval taking place through digital technology and “computerisation”, and an associated social change in almost all areas of life, are leading to a digital world, or also to digitality.

¹⁸ The Group of Experts on Social Media, convened on behalf of the Commission for the Media of the German Bishops’ Conference, has drawn up an evaluation on the topics of “Digitality” and “Artificial Intelligence”, which was published in November 2020 via the German Bishops’ Conference’s *Clearingstelle Medienkompetenz* (Media Literacy Clearing Centre). Cf. Expertengruppe Social Media: *Digitalität und Künstliche Intelligenz: Technik im Dienst des Geist-begabten und Selbstbewussten Menschen*. Clearingstelle Medienkompetenz der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, published in German, <https://medienkompetenz.katholisch.de/files/2020/11/Thesenpapier-Digitalitaet-und-KI-20.11.2020.pdf> (12 May 2021).

The Church considers there to be a need for a socially-just, ethically-responsible shaping of digitality, for example in the evaluation of the use of artificial intelligence (AI)¹⁹. A European approach to shaping digitality can, on the one hand, distinguish itself from the highly-individualistic American model, which is characterised by large digital corporations and commercial interests; on the other hand, it can offer a convincing alternative to the more collectivist, state-orientated Chinese approach. At the same time, such an approach must remain connectable and competitive in the global context. A particular challenge for the EU is therefore to find, implement and actively represent in the global context a specifically European way of using (digital) technology and shaping digitality, based on ethical principles. The socio-ethical conviction applies that all technology must serve human beings – and not vice versa.

In order to achieve this, the debate on ethical responsibility with regard to the consequences of digitalisation and the use of AI must be intensified as part of a broad socio-ethical discourse. Points of orientation here are constituted by relevant statements made by institutions with especial expertise in this field. At EU level, for example, this is the “European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies” (“European Ethics Council”), while for Germany, for instance, the Federal Government’s Data Ethics Commission is worth mentioning. Although such assessments do constitute valuable contributions to the ethically-responsible shaping of digitality, they do not represent an end point. The question pursued in this debate is that the fundamental and

¹⁹ Here at least, Artificial Intelligence (AI), as a cross-disciplinary sub-area of computer studies, is defined as artificial, computer-based systems which are able to “learn” on the basis of the available data, and which simulate “intelligent” behaviour via algorithms. This enables them to independently pursue specific goals, depending on their programming, with a certain amount of autonomy.

human rights guaranteed in the European Treaties (such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights), and in the constitutions of the Member States, must also effectively protect the individual from disproportionate interference in the sphere of freedom and privacy in the digital context. Moreover, only joint solutions at EU level offer the opportunity to establish a European practice in the use of digital technology, and to promote the EU in the international arena. It is highly welcome that the EU's agenda for a digital future for Europe takes full account of aspects of the ethics of digitality. A digital strategy for the EU is one of the Commission's priorities for 2019 to 2024. In addition, the European Council of Heads of State and Government held a special meeting on 1-2 October 2020 addressing the digital transformation, and asked the Commission to present a comprehensive digital compass setting out the EU's concrete digital goals for 2030. One measure in this context is for instance the Commission's proposal for a legislative package, including a "Digital Services Act" (DSA) and a "Digital Markets Act" (DMA). The European Commission furthermore submitted proposals in April 2021 for a comprehensive concept for the legal regulation of artificial intelligence. Although this emphasises "human-centred" AI, it is the concrete design that matters in terms of ethical requirements. In addition to the fundamental trustworthiness of technology, there are many questions regarding the safety of users, the protection of their fundamental rights, and the obligation to assume (human) responsibility.

Catholic social doctrine offers important starting points for in-depth reflection: From a socio-ethical point of view, human beings must always be at the centre of the use and (further) development of technology. In contrast to machines, humans are created by God, and are called on to live in freedom and to exercise responsibility. In this respect, from a Christian perspective, machines never can and never will be the "foundation, the

cause and the end of every social institution” (219), as Pope John XXIII puts it in the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), in relation to the human being. There is a need to have an unambiguous legal regulation of the use of processes that are controlled by algorithms, for example with regard to transparency, to surveillance (by humans), and to the consideration of the harm that might ensue from algorithmic systems. This applies against the background that dilemmas can also arise in digital contexts, which – especially with regard to algorithmic systems – cannot be resolved ethically. Examples of this are questions concerned with “autonomous driving”. Furthermore, the use of so-called “fully-autonomous weapons systems” is controversial, where no human decision is to be taken between the use of algorithms and the taking of human life, and which should be completely banned.²⁰ Where digital systems can make “decisions” themselves by means of appropriate algorithms, it must always be clarified in advance at which points the decision must of necessity be the preserve of humans. Machines cannot take ethical or moral decisions, but can only use their algorithms to perform weighing up processes and reconcile one risk with another. The blanket approval of the use of machines to take ethically-sensitive decisions is therefore completely unacceptable without an argumentative link back to humans.

In the field of information and communication technology (ICT), digitalisation touches on the question of the “truth”, for instance through changes in the public discourse culture, which is increasingly shaped by digitality and by new ways of perceiving reality. For example, AI influences public opinion and so-

²⁰ On the approach of the Holy See to this issue cf. for instance: The Caritas in Veritate Foundation: *The Humanization of Robots and the Robotization of the Human Person. Ethical Reflections on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems and Augmented Soldiers*. Working Paper (Chambésy 2017).

cietal discourse through “social bots”, and by promoting the spread of false information (fake news). This in turn can foster the polarisation of society, political radicalisation, as well as hatred and incitement.²¹ In order to enhance the credibility of information, of cohesion in society, and of trust in the State’s ability to act, the EU and its Member States must also ensure in the digital context that there is a transparent link back to the human being and to his or her specific individual responsibility, to the consistent defence of the dignity of the individual, and to the protection of fundamental and human rights. Considerable potential exists at EU level, and there is a need to develop and implement a European path to digitalisation that focuses on ethics and responsibility, and which subordinates all forms of technology to the well-being of people, placing people as persons, whose freedom is based on responsibility, at the centre.

The opportunities of digitality will however only be realised if it is possible to use the technology correctly. This includes, firstly, empowering the people who use the technology, secondly, placing the responsibility for its use with the people and, thirdly, the goal of the common good. This is essentially about trust and cohesion: If it is increasingly possible to participate in public discourse, in political processes, in economic developments, or in administrative procedures (only) with the aid of digital technology, unhindered access to this technology, and thus the possibility of societal involvement and democratic participation, must be ensured for all people.

²¹ Cf. on this Chapter 2.4 *Demokratie im digitalen Zeitalter*, in: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der EKD (Hg.): *Vertrauen in die Demokratie stärken. Ein Gemeinsames Wort der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz und des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*. Gemeinsame Texte No. 26, published in German (Bonn/Hannover 2019), pp. 20–22.

Questions of data processing and data protection are related to ethical standards of digitality. The Christian concept of the human person forbids reducing human beings to data and algorithms because humans, given that they are persons, are more than a calculation of their characteristics. This is especially true when data which have been collected and processed in this context – regardless of whether in private or state hands – can be centrally aggregated and used to pursue economic and/or political interests. It is unacceptable from a socio-ethical perspective, and runs counter to the dignity of the human person, to evaluate or categorise people solely on the basis of their data, using algorithmic calculations. Given the breadth of the discussion on data protection, questions of transparency, explicability, the potential for control by humans, and the definition of “privacy” within the meaning of data protection, seem particularly relevant. It is in this context that we recognise the European concept of data protection, as it particularly finds expression in the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)²², as part of an agenda to implement Europe-wide standards and advocate them at global level.

For at least the ethical dimension of the discourse on shaping digitality, the involvement of the Church, as well as Her active guidance of developments, make it possible to help shape necessary debates and opinion-forming processes in order to highlight the positive aspects of these technologies and to place them in a Christian-motivated context of responsibility. This includes the Church standing with Her faithful in opposing a one-sided view of the world, countering extremist and/or inflamma-

²² Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC.

tory positions, and also serving as a bridge-builder and mediator in the digital domain as part of opening and maintaining platforms and spaces for discourse.

The following summarising aspects are particularly noteworthy:

- Questions related to a digital society form a cross-sectoral task transcending policy areas whose challenges for the EU include, in particular, the development and implementation of a specifically European path for the use and (further) development of digital technology, based on the ethical principles of the EU.
- From the perspective of Catholic social doctrine, human beings must always be at the centrepiece of the use and (further) development of technology. For the good of the people, responsibility must lie with the human person, and not with technology. If digital systems are to make “decisions” themselves through algorithms, it must therefore always be clarified in advance at which points the decision absolutely must be reserved for humans.
- A human being as a person is more than the sum and/or combination of his or her data. A continued debate on the ethical and legal boundaries placed on the use of data and on the use of algorithms is necessary.
- The further development of ethical standards in digitalisation must be at the centre point of digitalisation policy. Without questioning technological progress in general terms, safeguarding people’s individual rights must form part of this policy area. This is expressed for example in the guarantee of equal access to digital technology, or in safeguarding rights of personality in the digital world.
- The Church’s contribution essentially includes the active accompaniment of societal developments, and Her advoca-

cy for shaping digitality in a manner that is socially just and ethically responsible. The Church takes responsibility for our society by serving as a bridge-builder and mediator, also within a digital framework. This includes actively opposing a one-sided view of the world, as well as hatred and incitement in the public discourse.

3.4 Displacement and asylum

The debate on how a common European asylum and migration policy should be structured²³ has been part and parcel of the EU since its very inception. Protecting the dignity of people who have been displaced, and who are seeking refuge in Europe, is an ongoing challenge for the EU. This issue has taken on a new urgency since 2015, when a historically large number of people seeking protection reached the EU's borders as a result of wars and persecution. It has had the potential to polarise societies and Member States of the EU since that time at the latest. This controversy has temporarily boosted right-wing populist parties in many EU Member States and contributed to a (perceived) division into different groups of EU Member States.

A responsible policy, committed to European values and international agreements, as well as to the protection of human dignity irrespective of origin and ideology, must not resign itself to the status quo. The previous arrangements within the

²³ The following publication comprehensively addresses the topic of migration: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland/Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): *Migration menschenwürdig gestalten. Gemeinsames Wort der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz und des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland in Zusammenarbeit mit der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland*. Gemeinsame Texte No. 27, published in German (Hannover/Bonn 2021) – official English translation forthcoming.

Common European Asylum System (CEAS) have not, or at least not sufficiently, contributed to a unification of the Member States' asylum systems and to an attitude of solidarity among the Member States. For example, the Dublin rules on responsibility for the reception of refugees place too heavy a burden on the countries at the EU's external borders. At the same time, they offer too few positive incentives for sharing responsibility equitably between the Member States. Legally-binding minimum standards for the reception of refugees and for the implementation of asylum procedures are still often disregarded. The repeatedly-reported "push-backs" at the EU's external borders, and the deplorable conditions in Member States' reception centres, constitute a breach of the applicable law. Not only the receiving countries, but indeed all EU Member States, bear joint responsibility, and are called upon to rectify these deficiencies.

European asylum policy must also be seen against the backdrop of the global situation: The number of people having to flee war and persecution has risen to new heights in recent years. The vast majority of people who leave their countries as refugees live in low- or middle-income countries. As a result, the countries of the industrialised world only make a comparatively small direct contribution to this task which is incumbent on the entire global community. The shortcomings of European asylum policy so far are more than a failure of policy pure and simple. They represent one of the most profound crises of the European integration process to date in terms of the rule of law and morality. While it is recognised that there may be limits to the EU's reception capacities, and that it is in principle legitimate for countries to manage immigration, the EU is far from having reached the limits of its reception capacity in recent years. When people seeking protection find their lives in danger on their way to Europe, when they are denied rescue at sea and die, while at the same time those with political responsibility make a

name for themselves by refusing to help, this constitutes a rejection of fundamental European values. All this shakes the ethical basis of the European integration process down to its core.

This failure of the EU in asylum policy, caused above all by the EU Member States, renders a new orientation indispensable. Any new model must be based on the inviolable, equal dignity and the freedom of the individual, as well as on the principle of solidarity. From a Christian perspective, the preferred option for the world's poor, weak and defenceless is obligatory as a guiding principle. At the same time, it should be noted that only those approaches will have a chance in European asylum policy which also take into account aspects such as the potential overburdening of communities.

In this respect, it is to be welcomed as a matter of principle that the European Commission has tried to tackle a comprehensive reform of the previous dysfunctional system with the new migration and asylum package that it presented in autumn 2020. This package is however to be judged ambivalently. It rightly stresses the principle of solidarity and the obligation to involve all the EU Member States. However, it is highly questionable whether, for example, the contribution of the Member States should be limited to efforts to repatriate rejected asylum-seekers ("repatriation sponsorships"). The policy area of asylum policy shows, as an example for other areas, that it is not possible to reach sustainable compromises if individual countries insist on their unilateral preferences, or if the EU goes as far as bowing to the reluctant stance taken up by Member State governments.

A reform of European asylum policy should aim first and foremost to comprehensively enforce existing European law, unlike in the past: Every person seeking protection must receive a fair procedure based on the rule of law, and be accommodated and treated in a dignified manner. The solidarity of the EU States,

both inter se as well as vis-à-vis the non-European countries of first reception, is indispensable in this regard. More safe access routes to Europe must be opened up for displaced persons. The concern that people to whom protection status cannot be granted leave Germany or the EU is justified. The guiding principle must however be for them to return safely and with dignity.²⁴ The verbs used by Pope Francis in his *Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018*, and confirmed in the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, work well as guiding principles to structure an ethically-justifiable asylum policy: “Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating”²⁵. The Church engages in public advocacy for displaced persons and for those in need. Over and above this, church initiatives provide assistance to displaced persons within and outside Europe.

In summary, the following criteria appear to be essential for the assessment of all new developments in EU asylum policy:

- No compromises may be made with regard to the guarantee of protection and compliance with the strict prohibition of refoulement in accordance with international obligations. The EU must not shy away from taking up clear positions: Governments of EU Member States which deliberately violate these obligations – even with the approval of majorities of their electorates – are on a path which, in the final analysis, alienates the EU’s peace and democracy project from its roots and core ideas.

²⁴ Cf. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Hg.): „*Auch für sie tragen wir Verantwortung*“: *Kirchliches Engagement für Geflüchtete angesichts von Rückkehr und Abschiebung*. Die deutschen Bischöfe – Migrationskommission No. 45, published in German (Bonn 2017), p. 9.

²⁵ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018, 14 January 2018, Vatican City, retrievable at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.pdf (21 October

- The principle of solidarity must also and especially be the guiding principle for asylum policy in particular. A widely-differing burden on Member States is not acceptable. The EU should also provide positive incentives for the reception of displaced persons.
- The EU, as well as its Member States and their societies, must make a contribution towards tackling the global displacement movements that is commensurate with their level of prosperity. It is therefore crucial when making an ethical assessment of the new European asylum rules for people fleeing from war or for other reasons to actually still be able to gain access to protection in the Member States of the EU in significant numbers.
- Tackling the causes which force people to leave their countries of origin must remain an important objective for the EU. Importance attaches in this regard to European foreign and security policy, and to a certain extent to the EU's cooperation for development, which ultimately also concerns the question of providing adequate resources.
- The Church is called upon not to let up in Her personnel, financial and ideational commitment, and thus to make Her own visible contribution towards the protection of the dignity of all people worldwide. This is also expressed in the exhortation of the EU to defend the inviolable, equal dignity and freedom of the human person, as well as the principle of solidarity, and to act according to its ethical principles.

4. Christian perspectives for a Europe shaped jointly

The European Union and its Member States act out of the conviction that they wish to achieve the objectives set out as fundamental values in the Treaty of Lisbon, namely “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights” (Article 2, first sentence, TEU), and to do so together, on the basis of principles which they have derived from the heritage of their religious and philosophical intellectual history. As the Episcopal Working Group on Europe, we share this conviction. In order to promote the European integration process, we would therefore like to bring ethical considerations into the debate and provide stimuli for a Christian contribution to a community-orientated development of the EU and of a united Europe.

The EU offers an indispensable framework in which to tackle the current challenges in Europe, but also global problems. Solving the existential challenges facing Europe and the world in the 21st Century requires collaboration between the regions, the Member States and the EU according to their respective competences. Political and democratic structures alone do not however make for a promising climate policy; global pandemics must be resolved with the support of all concerned, and the new world of digital communication needs to be used in a legally-regulated, constructively-exercised manner. As political actors, the EU and its Member States need the support of a well-meaning, loyal citizenry, whom they represent. The Churches and religious communities can make a major contribution here: The EU is based on a citizenry that is still largely socialised along Christian lines, but which is also founded in other religions and traditions of thought. This should be understood as a

high-level philosophical treasure of people in the EU, through which honesty, acceptance, fair behaviour and an orientation towards the common good are promoted.

In the spirit of Jean Monnet, Europe should help create a better world. European integration must therefore not be (mis)understood as a purely technocratic, state approach to solving problems. The Christian message of the inalienable, equal dignity of all human beings, and the consequences that follow from it, is quite definitely a universal message that shapes the European unification in a special way. The EU can only be successful in the long run if it defends, without compromise and in close European cooperation, the equal dignity of all human beings, including the dignity of future generations and of those who do not live on this continent. Catholic social doctrine has broadly developed the consequences of the universally-orientated Christian commandment of love for the constitution of social institutions in its principles (personality, solidarity, subsidiarity and, more recently, increasingly sustainability). These socio-ethical principles are and remain highly relevant for the European institutions and policy approaches. It is very much in line with the global Christian tradition that the EU and the people of Europe should shoulder responsibility worldwide. If the EU wishes to do justice to its religious and intellectual heritage, then solidarity and preservation of Creation within the EU must be linked with global solidarity and sustainability as a guiding principle for the international orientation of the EU and its Member States.

All these principles are not merely abstract concepts. This contribution has in fact shown that, with regard to the current controversially-discussed topics (1) democracy and cohesion, (2) responsibility for Creation, (3) digitality, and (4) displacement and asylum, concrete ethical conclusions can be drawn from an attitude guided and shaped by these principles. As the

Episcopal Working Group on Europe, we are committed to the common normative foundation of Europe, which for us in Christianity is essentially nourished by faith in a kind, just and loving God. This requires the courage to endure critical challenges and to openly address European and global problems together. This includes criticising shortcomings in policies on issues of displacement and asylum, calling for enhanced climate policy efforts on the part of the EU and its Member States, and resolutely confronting threats to the rule of law in the EU. Many issues affect several policy areas at once. Examples of this are linking digitality with questions of democracy and the rule of law, or the European Commission's ambition to use its digital strategy not only to influence societal change, but at the same time to contribute to European climate neutrality. Fundamental and human rights must be guaranteed in all policy areas which grant to the individual inalienable rights, and thus place the individual human being at the centre of all action.

Fundamental rights and human rights, as well as democratic and constitutional structures, however also empower people to take action. The Christian Churches, and explicitly the Catholic Church, encourage all people in Europe to strive for a strong, effective EU, as this will guarantee our common future in peace, freedom and well-being. All three dimensions mentioned in this text as examples can be justified from a Christian perspective in terms of the EU's objectives: peace, freedom and human well-being, the latter especially with regard to greater social justice. Out of Her self-understanding and Christian conviction, the Church must and always will serve as a religious, cultural and philosophical bridge-builder and mediator in European debates and conflicts about different weightings of these goal perspectives, and in the quest for the common European essence. In this sense, She is able and willing to contribute to the unification and integration of Europe. As a universal Church

and global player, the Catholic Church can create a platform for encounters and discourses with people from different cultural areas. This enables Her to create important links for international cooperation and solidarity, through which knowledge of one another, understanding of one another, dialogue with one another, and life with one another, can be promoted across national borders.

We are aware and acknowledge, as part of our European commitment, that the commitment to the EU is also essentially supported by people of other faiths, and by a broad secular public. Those who therefore exclude other religions and world views on the pretext that the success of the EU is essentially connected with a religiously-homogeneous “Christian Occident”, in our eyes not only fail to recognise the inclusive and appreciative nature of Christianity, but also the riches of the historically traditional religious and philosophical diversity which continues to characterise the European continent today. The positive and appreciative description of a “culture of the Occident” must therefore refer to the unifying features of the common peace and democracy project that is Europe, which above all encompasses human rights and democracy, as well as the rule of law and legal certainty. This makes it possible to develop the peace and democracy project that is Europe in mutual trust between the EU, the Member States, civil society and the different religious communities in a sustainable, constructive manner. This common goal should be worth every effort to us.

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