

# First Catholic Social Days for Europe, Gdansk 8th - 11th October

J o u r n é e s  
S o c i a l e s  
C a t h o l i q u e s



pour l'Europe

*“The Social teaching of the Church is not a cold doctrine or ideology. It requires conversion on our part. It is applied not through structural reform alone, but through the formation of men and women who live out its principles, especially the dominant principle of Christian love, which requires that we give not just things and technology but of ourselves. The social teaching of the Church is an instrument which draws out of the teachings of Jesus Christ social consequences formulated in such a way as to give that teaching citizenship also in a secular world.”*

**(Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, Opening Address for the First Catholic Social Days for Europe, 8-11 October 2009)**



IRISH CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
COMHDHÁIL EASPAG CAITLICEACH ÉIREANN

## **Nicola Rooney, Research Coordinator, Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs & member of the preparatory committee for the First Catholic Social Days for Europe**

Being part of the preparatory committee that helped shape the First Catholic Social Days for Europe, organised by COMECE, was an extremely interesting and worthwhile experience. This event, held in Gdansk, Poland from 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October, was an ambitious attempt to engage Catholics from across Europe in an examination of the current economic, social, political and cultural challenges we face in all our countries, informed and inspired by the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church. The organisers set themselves a difficult task with approximately 500 participants, nominated by their Bishops' Conferences, together with representatives of other faiths, coming to Gdansk for the event. A key challenge was to ensure that there would be opportunities for those in attendance to actively participate in the proceedings, combined with spaces for informal discussions, reflection and prayer. The chosen theme 'Solidarity – the Challenge for Europe' allowed extensive scope for an exploration of a wide range of issues that included human rights, the family, the economy, EU politics and the environment.

In the reflections that follow, Irish participants in the First Catholic Social Days for Europe have highlighted aspects of the event that impressed them personally. A key moment, mentioned by several participants in their reflections, was the address by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin entitled 'The concept and reality of solidarity in the European Union – a reflection on the basis of the Social Teaching of the Church'. In this thought-provoking reflection, which set the tone for the event,

Archbishop Martin underlined the significance of the theme of solidarity, arguing that in the context of the European Union, solidarity is closely linked to participation. The other Irish contributor to the event was Prof. Maureen Junker-Kenny, Associate Professor of



Theology in Trinity College Dublin, who gave an interesting and informative presentation as part of the panel on 'The Human Person and its Rights', exploring how human dignity is the joint reference point and criterium of both the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church and of European Conventions. Copies of these speeches, together with other texts for the event, are available on the COMECE website: [www.comece.eu](http://www.comece.eu).

For all the Irish participants a key question was how this experience could be replicated on a smaller scale in the national context in Ireland. This is perhaps the most important challenge we will take away from Gdansk.

## **Julia Hynes, Lecturer in Philosophy, St. Malachy's Seminary, Belfast**

While attending the lectures at the recent conference, Solidarity – the Challenge for Europe, in Gdansk between 8-11 October 2009, the words of Pope Leo I came to mind and may indeed summarize the theme of the entire conference. He said 'Awake, O man and recognize the dignity of your nature! Remember that you were created in the image of God'. St Leo the Great's (400-461) challenge is thought to be one of the earliest and most profound statements about human dignity and indeed mirrors the challenge for Europe in which Solidarity includes considering the human person, the family, work, poverty, social protection, economic regulation and the Global Common Good.

If I don't recognize my own dignity and the dignity of the other person (any other), then I do an injustice to myself and to the other individual. There are two aspects to dignity, viz. form and content. In formal terms, a person will always have supreme value through his or her human dignity, as it is inalienable, i.e. it cannot be bartered or removed. However, by virtue of the maltreatment meted out to a person, one may never in fact have one's dignity recognised. At the conference in Gdansk we were reminded how, on the 1 September 1939 at Westerplatte in Poland, the attack on the Polish strongholds marked the beginning of a war that was to prove uniquely horrific, within which acts of internment, torture and murder were perpetrated upon the innocent. The Solidarity movement, now 20 years old, still seeks to recognize the dignity of each member of the human family and the sacrifice of our ancestors.



## **Sylvia Thompson, Kerry Diocesan Justice, Peace and Creation Committee and Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs**

The map said it was "*Left as a smoking heap of rubble in 1945*". So we realised we were walking on a ground of suffering and hope, despair and endurance.....

Gdansk was a time to hear of the many questions facing our European family and in particular the family in the EU.

The opening presentations set the scene in a challenging way: that the principles of economy cannot be separated from their social dimension, but that as we aspire to riches the temptation to egoism is found along the way (sound familiar!) and the Mayor of Gdansk spoke, sharing his hope that these days would help us to be that much needed *salt for the earth*.

It was a time for immersion in the social teaching and it was sobering to hear Jan Olbrycht [MEP, Poland] speak of how economy had become *a goal* rather than *an instrument*, but challenging to be reminded continually to look at the effect our choices will have on the future, and to have a new dream for the EU (Prof. Paul Dembinski, Directory of the Observatory for Finance in Geneva).

Maybe the closing words of our prayer on Day One:

*"Let your light soak deeply into our minds"* need to be a daily prayer for us all.

We are only too aware of our individual, communal, national and EU temptations to do the opposite...this was a call to answer that bigger call.

**Orla McCarthy, Head of Religious Studies in Little Flower Girls' School, Belfast and Leader of the Youth Faith Development Team in Holy Family Parish, Belfast**

My focus is very much one of education and youth, fuelled by a real desire to pass on the faith in a meaningful and concrete manner. For me, Archbishop Martin's opening statement placed the whole conference in the context of hope for the future – 'we need a new generation of Europeans on the world scene.' Working with young people on a daily basis, I have a genuine belief that our youth have the potential to be that new generation if given the chance.

Solidarity was the theme of the Conference and, for me, this Solidarity was found in a particular way during the informal meetings over coffee or at meal times when we were afforded the opportunity to meet fellow Catholics from many different European countries, to share stories and experiences and to really see what is happening in our Church on a European level. In many ways, the experience reminded me of the great World Youth Day events in that the universal Church became very much a reality and suddenly we were challenged again to think outside our local Church to look at the bigger picture.

As I have said, I came to the Conference with the young people in mind and a number of features struck me – Archbishop Martin claimed that we need, 'a new generation of young Christians to be participants, to be there to shape the future of the Europe in line with Catholic Social Teaching.' This was music to my ears. Young people have the energy, enthusiasm and vision to make a difference if given the chance. The principles on which Catholic Social Teaching is based, the Common Good and the Gospel, is not an area which is delivered explicitly in our Religious Education Programmes in any worthwhile detail. For me, this was a challenge to take away with me. As I listened to the many speakers emphasise the common good, human dignity and living faith, I was struck by how inspiring such a conference would be for young people, especially for Irish young people.

The Conference in Gdansk emphasised the practical implications of Catholic Social Teaching and the challenges of presenting these to our leaders and Governments to ensure our faith remains the credible and relevant force it should be and needs to be on our world today. Professor Maureen Junker-Kenny stated that, 'Every human being has the opportunity to change himself and the world.' Surely this is our responsibility as adult members of our Church, to present the Social Teaching to our youth and encourage them to put it into real terms for our world today. The final statement of the Conference provided a number of points of reference which young people could fully adhere to and use to come up with their own ideas of how to translate this valuable teaching into their own lives. Now we are back home, could the call be to replicate the Conference for our Irish youth? After all, they are our future?

**Bishop Alan Abernethy, Church of Ireland Bishop of Connor**

As an ecumenical visitor it was a privilege to be invited and to share in the "Gdansk Experience". It was delightful to share in the Irish humour and "Craic". The depth of information shared from around Europe was very helpful, not least in issues surrounding family.

From my own viewpoint it was very helpful to see how politicians were able to share their insights from a faith basis. To have politicians committed to faith and policy was encouraging and challenging for my perspective.

## **Kate McQuillan, Church Liaison Officer, Trócaire**

Archbishop Martin's opening address at the first Catholic Social Days for Europe held recently in Gdansk, Poland summarised all that was good and noble about Catholic Social Teaching and suggested very practical ways CST can and should impact on the entire concept and reality that is the enlarging European Union.

He spoke of the need to move beyond a kind of "practical atheism" that sees Christians divorcing faith from everyday life. Being a citizen of Europe requires instead recognition of the centrality of Christian love at the heart of all human engagement because ultimately humanity and human society are "redeemed by love".

Setting the tone in this way, Archbishop Martin, and indeed many of the speakers that followed his opening address, spoke of the need to re-orientate ourselves as individuals and as a society. Gdansk became a kind of symbol of that re-orientation; an intersection point in history between two fundamental biblical orientations; justice and love.

It is this re-orientation that these First Catholic Social Days for Europe called on us to trust. As we prayed together in Westerplatte, as we celebrated Eucharist in some of Gdansk's oldest Churches, as we shared with one another our own stories of life-giving 'solidarity' and perhaps most of all as we were invited to listen to the story writ large in Gdansk itself of the profound and powerful impact of real Solidarity in action in the 1980s, we were called to recognise this re-orientation for what it truly was; the whispering of the Spirit among us calling us to love, to justice, to standing with one another and to peace. These days then became for me what the invitation to the Conference suggested they might; not only a time to learn more but also a space to re-connect with why we should, as Christians, always seek to love one another more.

## **Garry O'Sullivan, Editor, Irish Catholic**

Standing in the shipyards of Gdansk surrounded by the iconic cranes, the word Solidarity seemed to be ringing in my ears. Even as I write, Berliners and the world at large are celebrating the fall of the Berlin wall, arguably, the first cracks in that wall started in Gdansk with Lech Walesa and his hardy ship workers.

The concept of solidarity has come to mean so much more than what is often seen as a historic workers movement but was in truth a social movement. The Archbishop of Gdansk told the Catholic Social Days for Europe conference that we should keep saying the word Solidarity, "keep finding its colour, its dynamics, its currency for a contemporary Europe and the future of Europe."

It was this definition of solidarity as a living concept, not just a historical movement, that impressed me about the Catholic Social Days and that in times of crisis, it is never more necessary and yet easily forgotten by our own self-interest.

Former MEP for the Netherlands Ms Maria Martens told the Conference that "Solidarity is a very difficult thing, it almost goes against our nature. In times of crisis people go back to their own interest, it is a reflex of human nature. The founding fathers did not go with this reflex."

What I took away from the Conference, especially from Archbishop Martin's words, is that we are all called to be founding fathers, re-founding the solidarity of Europe over and over again in our lives, that it is the spirit of what Europe means if it is to have meaning and that we are its guardians and are charged to keep that flame of solidarity alive if we want a world without walls.

## **Bishop Noel Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor and Leader of Irish Delegation to First Catholic Social Days for Europe**

The value of an event like the First Catholic Social Days for Europe is that it broadens our perspective – which can be confined to the national and/or local dimensions – making us aware of the vitality of the multi-national Catholic and Christian commentary and discourse on matters of public life and policy.

The Gdansk gathering is yet another event which shows that the insular judgement and fear that regards mainland Europe as somehow anti-Christian and anti-religious is simply untrue.

The experience in Gdansk enabled our participants to connect with representatives from 29 European countries, sharing information and experiences. To see and hear politicians, economists, financiers and others articulating a professional position inclusive of and enhanced by, their Christian faith was invigorating. The sense of engagement and communion in thought reflected in the debate was enhanced with well-prepared liturgies.



We all, as Christians in Ireland, need to develop an articulate, informed and educated understanding of the intellectual wealth of our faith and its capacity to elucidate and enrich complex reflection and debate on key issues in local, national and international affairs.

All those who took part in this event are to be thanked for their contribution, especially the members of the preparatory committee chaired by Bishop Piotr Jarecki, Auxiliary Bishop of Warsaw and COMECE Vice-President. As leader of the Irish delegation I was impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of our delegates, and particularly proud of the contribution made by Nicola Rooney to the editorial team that drafted the final message for the event. The thought-provoking reflections delivered by the Irish speakers, Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin, and Prof. Maureen Junker-Kenny of Trinity College Dublin, were the subject of much comment and praise. Finally I would like to complement Mr. Stefan Lunte, who, together with the COMECE General Secretary Fr. Piotr Mazurkiewicz and the other members of the Secretariat, worked hard to prepare this worthwhile event.