

Speech for 6th of June 2023 in Rome (final version) CAPP, Rome,

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Your Excellencies, Madame Chair, Reverend Fathers, Ladies and Gentlemen

It was back in 1965 when I heard in school for the first time about “the social responsibility of property” which gave me the first idea of the pillars of the Social Teaching of the Church, Common Good, Personality, Solidarity and Subsidiarity. I was very interested in the explanation of our catechist and learned to see this Doctrine also as an approach for reconciliation with the working class and members of the Socialist Party, an important initiative of Cardinal König, then Archbishop of Vienna; it was at a time were being Catholic and being at the same time Socialist was beyond the scope of imagination. Some years later I started my corporate life in industry and tried to apply what I had understood from the Social Teaching. In the eighties the principles of “shareholder values” became more and more the mainstream of industrial and financial thinking. Only a few people were questioning these ideas and asked instead for “stakeholder values” and the hegemony of common good over individual benefit. Those few were mainly representatives of the Social-Market-Economy and well anchored in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and politically often considered as Christian Democrats. In the nineties, I had a wonderful time when the corporation I worked for decided to expand into the former Communist countries of Central Eastern Europe; my shareholders agreed with me to apply more the principles of “stakeholder values” so that we could set a practical example to our new colleagues in these countries why finally the western system prevailed over the communist command economy. In order to foster the Social Teaching in my home country of Austria, some friends and I founded in the zero years an association of Christian entrepreneurs and executives which organized a congress of some 300 participants every second year to spread the thinking of the Social Teaching into the daily life of secular business.

After my corporate life, I got more and more engaged with Aid to the Church in need, commonly known as ACN, and had for the last five years the privilege to

be in charge of this global organization, which stands for a pastoral and spiritual charity.

I welcome this event here in Rome as it allows me now, a week before I will step down as the responsible for ACN, to speak about two challenges for our Church which fascinated me for decades:

- the application of the gospel in the secular world formulated as the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church
- the mandate for all Catholics to evangelize and the wish to support those who dedicate their lives for this most important task.

I am convinced, that it is not only a nice occasion, but also an absolute must, that two Pontifical Foundations whose missions are to contribute to a “more just and fraternal world”, get to know each other better and elaborate on how to interact with complementarity.

After this introduction let me present ACN, its mission and practical work.

ACN was founded in 1947 as a Catholic Charity to organize actions of solidarity to help displaced Catholics in Germany after the Second War. By requests of the popes since then, ACN spread out all over the world and focused as a spiritual and pastoral charity to serve the Church wherever she is persecuted, discriminated against, or merely lacking the financial means to assume her mission. In 2011 ACN was elevated to a Pontifical Foundation; its activities are based on three pillars:

- information,
- prayer and
- material help.

ACN is only financed by donations of private benefactors and institutions. ACN is not accepting any contributions from states in order to maintain its independence for continuously serving the Church. ACN consists of 23 National Offices all over the globe and an operational head office in Königstein, Germany. Our seat is in the State of the Vatican, our president is Mauro

Cardinal Piacenza, and we depend on the Dicastery for the Clergy. In 2021 we were enabled to collect over 130 mio € and to finance over 5000 projects in more the 140 countries mainly in Africa, South-East Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe or Middle East.

Looking at the pillar “help”, with which ACN serves the Church, please note that we are concentrated in supporting pastoral projects and not humanitarian ones:

What are pastoral projects? E.g.:

- education and formation of priests, seminarians, members of orders and catechists. Our benefactors help to avoid that any vocation can't materialize due to missing financing. Therefore, one out of eight seminarians is supported by ACN.
- existence help for religious orders and Mass intentions for priests. This is now a very important part of our support to the Catholic Churches in Ukraine where we increased our help enormously thanks to the generosity of our benefactors since the start of the war. We agreed with the archbishops of the two rites to undertake all efforts to ensure that priests and religious can remain with their flocks even when they are displaced or forced to emigrate. So, it was truly reassuring when the bishop from Odessa stated to us over phone recently: “Look, I have 68 priests in my diocese and not one of them left his place.” Worldwide our benefactors support priests in need with Mass intentions. Every 17 seconds somewhere in the world a Mass is celebrated “per intentionem donantis”.
- construction of churches, seminars, parish halls,
- transport facilities to promote the faith, everything from cars to bicycles, but also boats and sometimes donkeys.
- We provide spiritual literature like the children's Bible (translated into more than 190 languages with a distribution of some 50 mio copies). For many, the Bible is often the only book a person has in his life.
- ACN is also publishing the YOUCAT series; initially a catechism for young people written by young people and by a seasoned group of priests and experts. YOUCAT has not to be seen as books only, but stands for a whole system of evangelization by means of print and digital media as well as by

a chain of working groups in different countries where young people study the catechism together.

Exceptionally, ACN will also provide emergency help in situations where Christians are threatened to become annihilated or to be expelled from their homes. This is still the case in some parts of the Middle East and in an increasing number of states in sub-Saharan Africa. There we help to rebuild destroyed houses, we provide food and medical supplies and- very importantly- we offer opportunities for trauma healing. In the past years, I had several occasions to meet our project partners in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon and I am deeply touched by the overall appalling situation there, but I am strongly impressed by the testimony of faith and of Christian Charity given by the ground staff of our Lord: the religious sisters and brothers and the priests active there. When you had once the chance to visit the psychiatric hospital of Beirut where the Franciscan Sisters of the Cross care for over a thousand mentally ill persons who are very often just abandoned by their families, you will always keep this humbling experience close to your heart and with a great respect. When you see Christians and Muslims cooperating in trauma healing for people who were persecuted and tortured by IS in Iraq, you see demonstrated that there is a chance for reconciliation.

ACN was taking care of consoling Christian families who were victims of the civil war in Syria by distributing Rosaries blessed by the Pope. An Icon of Our Lady was specially written for the Syrian people and placed in a shrine near Homs. I was invited to attend as this was marked by a large public procession where all the Christians of this region carried the Icon from church to church accompanied by groups of scouts with drums and trumpets. An unforgettable event, one which I never thought could be possible.

In addition to the material help to the suffering and persecuted church, ACN developed over the years sustainable activities in the field of advocacy and defense of religious freedom. We give our brothers and sisters a voice when they are deprived of it by persecution and discrimination mainly by totalitarian regimes. Our advocacy office at the EU organization in Brussels organizes regularly meetings of representatives of these churches with the responsible politicians there.

Every second year ACN publishes the “Religious Freedom Report” which provides the interested public with an in depth analysis of the situation of religious freedom in more than 190 countries all over the world. This report includes the situation of all religions and not to Christians only. ACN is convinced that the right of religious freedom is directly linked to the dignity of each individual and has, therefore, to be granted to everybody and by all governments. Unfortunately, the acceptance of this basic human right is deteriorating for years and the next report which will be published by the end of this month will not show any improvement.

We have to take into account that more than 67% of the world population – 5,2 billion human beings - live in countries where the basic human right of religious freedom is not respected. In 26 countries people are persecuted due to their faith and in 36 countries people are discriminated against because of their religion. The main reasons for this violent intolerance is totalitarian regimes like in China, North Korea, Nicaragua or Eritrea, ethno-religious nationalistic states like India or Myanmar, Islamic States like Iran or Saudi-Arabia or failing states where criminal bands and terrorist groups destroy state infrastructure and where an amalgam of corruption, poverty, unemployment etc., create a fertile platform for Islamist hate preachers, e.g., Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, parts of Nigeria, and parts of the DRC. These facts stand for all religion-related persecution.

The studies show us that more than 350 mio Christians live in states where persecution exists. This does not mean that all these 350 mio suffer all the consequences of persecution, but they survive in states where they are not secure. Can we really imagine what it means when my job or the future education of my children are at risk only because I went to church regularly?

We have to accept that in our world persecution of Christians exists and to a larger extent than ever before; people who think that persecution of Christians only happened during the times of the Roman Empire turn a blind eye from the reality of today. To make the public react against this unacceptable fact, ACN organizes every year the “Red Week” in November where public buildings and churches are lit in red to raise awareness of the persecution of Christians. This illumination takes place globally (e.g., Italy: Colosseum) and is accompanied by events where people give testimony.

While our pillar of “material help” is focused on the persecuted Church, ACN is also providing help to the Church in the Northern Hemisphere by our two other pillars, by prayers and information. We know that all the contemplative orders, which are supported by ACN pray permanently not only for the donors, but also for the good development of the Church in our countries. It was really heartbreaking to read all the messages of spiritual support we received from many of our project partners during the beginning of the pandemic in Europe.

Our communication team at the head office and the press work of our National Offices is supplying the interested public, as well as church institutions, with a flow of information about the global situation of religion and Church in addition to publications like the RFR and brochures like “persecuted and forgotten” which raise public awareness of the permanent crimes of persecution and discrimination against Christians. With CRTN (Catholic Radio Television Network, we make available an experienced team that produces films to document the situation of our suffering and persecuted brothers and sisters all over the world; these films are then distributed by the major Catholic TV networks as well as by secular media.

How do we evaluate the situation of Christians in the Western world? We see more frequently signs of what Pope Francis named already in 2015 “polite persecution” where the mainstream opinion wants to restrict religion and faith to the privacy of the conscience and to the inside of churches, mosques or synagogues (*Evangelii Gaudium*). We see people employed in the public health services deprived structurally of their freedom of conscience and forced to do things they don’t want to do. We learned that public servants, or even judges in Western Europe, intend to ban citations from the Bible as they consider them “hate speech”.

Sure, in the majority of “Western” countries Christians still manage to live in a comfort zone, but we have to realize that intolerance against the teaching of Jesus is increasing and Christianity is losing relevance. For centuries we have been the mainstream in Europe, or as it was said in a homily during a Red Wednesday Event in 2022: “for much too long we have been the soup and not the salt!”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you asked me how I see the future of CAPP for the Church in need. For me it seems quite clear: CAPP has the important mandate to spread the thinking of the Social Teaching of the Church all over the globe and to make the world of business and finance aware that there is a way to build a more “just and fraternal world” as Pope Francis is postulating it in *Fratelli Tutti* where the common good prevails over the individualistic greed for more. As I had the great opportunity to learn these days here, you all do already a marvelous job in this field. Please continue and even increase your efforts as it is pivotal to provide the secular world with an alternative to an increasingly individualistic, selfish environment which sees human beings as the measure of all things and is denying the existence of God.

I think both our organizations have the unique opportunity to reach out to many people and to motivate them to explain and promote our values. You as members of the CAPP, and due to your many engagements in the secular world, have access to many people who could become more aware that it is now time to promote human dignity and religious freedom. ACN is also engaged for this purpose not only by hundreds of co-workers- many of whom act already as lighthouses of the faith- but is also mobilizing some 400.000 loyal benefactors worldwide.

I would like to suggest that both organizations cooperate in becoming more vigilant and identify the multiple threats to our freedom of religion. We have to observe the development of society, states and international institutions. We cannot rely with certainty that future democracies will continue to protect and to defend the human right of religious freedom. We should always bear in mind that “the liberal secularized state thrives on conditions that it cannot guarantee itself!” (E.-W. Böckenförde) Therefore the freedom, which is granted by the state, has to be regulated from within, from the moral substance of the thinking of the society. What could be more appropriate to serve as the yardstick for this engagement with the changing world than the Social Teaching of the Church?

We have to acknowledge that the Catholic Church in our countries has lost influence and relevance due for many reasons: secularization and individualism are one group, power abuse and covering up are another.

So, obviously we are now only one voice among equals. But, as those responsible for important Catholic organizations, we can demonstrate how we

can contribute to a better and more fraternal world by living the Social Teaching and the applied Charity for the suffering. There are many occasions to stand up and explain by clear and concrete statements for what we stand for and how our mandate to follow Jesus is truly viable. We have to avoid being lured into “compelled speech” and so, by hiding our real opinion, to damage our Christian values. Certainly, we are entitled to claim the same level of tolerance for our faith as it is arrogated by people for their different or opponent views and attitudes.

The permanent testimony of faith by our persecuted brothers and sisters could help us to realize better what Jesus is asking from us in our relatively secure environment: to continue to walk the talk of the Social Teaching and of Charity and to look fearlessly and confidently into the future.

We have celebrated the Solemnity of Pentecost just a few days ago. In one of the hymns sung we asked the Lord: “Send out your Holy Spirit and the face of earth will be renewed!” If we really believe this is true, let us use our common strength to contribute to this renewal and make the change!

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