
Mons. Overbeck (COMECE) ,“it was not a failure in the workings of the world but a challenge to our faith and to the meaning of life”



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[Bishop of Essen \(Germany\) and Vice-President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, whom we asked for an assessment of the past year, including on a personal level. **What are your first thoughts?**](#)



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Two images remain etched in my memory: Pope Francis' prayer for an end to the pandemic in an empty St Peter's Square and the long line of military vehicles in Italy transporting a dramatic number of victims. However, I wish to point out that the pandemic is not an apocalyptic event but a natural phenomenon and a challenge. It was a disaster but today it requires decisive and effective action to contain the damage and its manifold consequences. **What are the lessons learnt during the past year of pandemic?**



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It gave everyone hope that the situation would get better soon. German philosopher Immanuel Kant asked, "What can I hope for?". For Kant, it is the task of religion to answer this question. As Christians, we too are called to respond in a way that paves the way for a distinctive future, the future of living with God. *We eventually realised that in this new path, we will no longer return to the way we were before. The experience of the pandemic will leave long-lasting marks, new habits.* Finally, the impact of the lockdown on the environment revealed the extent of human impact on our ecosystem. The forced lack of movement and activity gave respite to the natural environment. We should draw lessons from this experience for the future. **The Coronavirus forced humanity to face up to its weaknesses, especially in Europe, where the individual considered himself invincible. The Coronavirus was not a machine failure in the mechanism of the world. Rather, it represents a challenge to our faith and to how we should face life, especially for us Christians.** In a way, this

obliges us to carry out an individual and collective examination of conscience and ask ourselves: How do we react in crisis situations? How can we safeguard the common good, and especially the poor and the most fragile among us? How can we do justice to this situation? **Europe now finds itself poorer and weaker. The epidemic has impacted national economies. There are more poor people. What is the "plea" of these new poor to national governments and the European Union today?**



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There is a cry of despair emanating from feelings of uncertainty and helplessness hitherto not experienced to such an extent. Many people have lost their jobs, others can no longer continue with their work activities. Many others are still confined to their homes and have few options for overcoming these crisis situations. The cry for help is thus expressed: "Do something! Don't forget us." In my capacities as COMECE Vice-President, I see a great danger in EU governments thinking of themselves first and putting their own interests first. This leads to nothing. That's how the European countries acted in the beginning. Fortunately, today it is clear to all that we can only overcome this together and with a common economic, political, social and cultural project. *In this respect, I would like to mention Pope Francis' letter to Europe, expressing a dream and indicating a path of fraternity and solidarity and a politics that places the human person and his/her inalienable dignity at the centre of its action.* **Vaccines are welcomed with hope, but there is still a long way to go. Which is the right approach during these months of struggle and resistance?**

Overcoming the coronavirus threat with lasting successful measures remains the overriding priority. This also includes the fair distribution of vaccines. Even though vaccination campaigns are underway virtually everywhere, the effectiveness of the vaccines is not certain. Consequently, the ongoing pandemic requires us to adopt responsible behaviour at all times, in the knowledge that we are mutually dependent, always and everywhere. **People are afraid. There is hardly a family that has not suffered a sad bereavement. What is your message to the men and women of Europe today** After so much suffering in this year of pandemic, we need sources of comfort and hope. We were confronted with reality and we came to realise that our lives are fragile and finite and that death is a part of life. A few days ago we celebrated a prayer in my cathedral for the people who died from COVID-19, together with all the bishops of Europe, as a sign of closeness and sympathy. *During this time of Lent, which accompanies us to Easter, I would like to reiterate the words of St John Paul II, "do not be afraid", words that are more relevant than ever today. With him, I repeat today: let us draw hope from faith and let us put our trust in God Who is stronger than death.*

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