

**DIALOGUE SEMINAR***Roma inclusion: a need, a challenge and a duty*Monday, 27 June 2011, Brussels  
BERL Room 9**MGR JÁNOS SZÉKELY**

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Let me greet you all who take part in this seminar with a traditional Roma greeting:

*O Del andas tume! Baxtali detehara te del o Del!*

Welcome! May God grant you a lucky morning!

## 1. The Three Pillars

From a social point of view the Roma people in Europe have to face two great challenges; those of *unemployment* and lack of education. Let me illustrate this situation with a few statistics regarding Hungary. Approximately 7% of Hungary's population is Roma that is to say about 700,000 people. The majority of them were in employment until the change of regime. During communism it was compulsory for everyone to work and vagrancy was punished. This posed no special difficulties for the Romas. They found employment mostly as unskilled labourers, mainly in heavy industry, in the construction industry and in agriculture. So the Roma people in Hungary were part of the working population.

The Roma people were well integrated into Hungarian society in the first 300 years of their life in Hungary, working as gunsmiths, traders and musicians. From the arrival of the Roma people in 1416 (Brasov - Kronstadt) until 1761, when Maria Theresa issued enlightened decrees aimed at assimilating them, there had been no significant conflicts between them and the rest of the population. During the battles against the Turks the Roma people were able to make themselves useful through their flexible guncraft and trading as well as other similar activities. This historical experience shows that if a place is found for the Roma in society and in the world of work there need be no significant tensions between Romas and non-Romas.

Coming back to the present situation, after the change of regime the great majority of Roma people in Hungary found themselves out of employment in the space of just a few years. There are a number of reasons for this. To mention just a few: an unthought-through economic policy which regards free competition as its only guiding principle, the lack of education and motivation on the part of the Roma people and prejudices against them prevalent in society. By 1993 only 28.6% of the Roma population capable of work was in employment. In 3 years about two thirds of the Roma workforce lost their jobs. And this has been the situation ever since, for almost 20 years now. This is the main reason for our current social problems.

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The other main problem is the *lack of education*. Approximately 80% of Roma children in Hungary complete their primary school education, about 21% of them enter some kind of secondary school education establishment (a vocational school or a grammar school) leading to a baccalaureate and only about 10% of them actually get one. Roma youth studying in higher education make up only 2-3% of the student body. These data, though excellent compared to those of most other European countries, are tragically poor compared to those of the whole of the population in Hungary.

Therefore the **two major pillars** of the solution to this problem are *creating employment* and *providing education*. These two pillars can only be effective if they go hand in hand. If there are no job opportunities there is no motivation to study. If someone is not well qualified he/she will find it very hard to get a job.

However, there is a **third**, very important **pillar** of the solution. This third pillar is *the human heart*. As Blessed John Paul II put it in his Encyclical, *Redemptoris missio* „... a people's development does not derive primarily from money, material assistance or technological means, but from the formation of consciences and the gradual maturing of ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. Man is the principal agent of development, not money or technology.” (nr.58, quoted by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, in Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies, 2006, Introduction)

The Church has an important role to play in this very area, in the area of forming the human heart and person. This is where she should make even more effort and be even more open to taking the Gospel to our Roma brothers and sisters.

## 2. The key element in job creating projects is the human person

Creating jobs should be the chief goal of all European Roma strategies. Especially in East European countries like Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, etc. there is a significant Roma population living below the poverty line. The number of Roma people out of work is about 240,000 in Hungary, 200,000 in Slovakia and 1 million in Romania. This Roma population is settled but will take to the road if its livelihood is threatened. It is in the interest of West European countries to find jobs for this huge mass of people at the places where they live. This is the only way to avoid a large scale migration from these countries.

*The key element in job creating projects is the human person.* Many European Union and government projects lead nowhere because there was no local authority figure who could have supported them. Let me recall one of the projects of the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service. Tarnabod is a small, out of the way village in Eastern Hungary with a Roma majority. The village was characterised by total hopelessness, there were only a few people living there who had jobs. The Hungarian Maltese Charity Service bought a house in the village and one of its people started being there for an 8 hour day and sometimes even longer. He worked his garden, kept livestock, and began to get to know the village

people; the exploiting money lenders, those who wanted to work, those who frequented the local pub, etc. His first idea was to buy a minibus since it was difficult for the people to get to their workplaces and they found it hard to pay the fares. This meant that within 6 months they were able to find work for about 20 people. His next idea was to replace the old electricity meters with ones that operated on a pre-payment system. This brought about a huge change in the way of thinking of the families as they could see on the meter how their money was running out and it put a stop to them getting into debt and losing their properties. Finally, they established a plant processing hazardous waste from batteries, computer parts, etc. This also provides a livelihood for about 20 people. Today the village gives the impression of a living community full of hope, where people tend their gardens, keep animals, plan their futures and make it all happen.

I consider it vital that the European Union re-thinks its project support strategy. In my opinion, with every project the suitability and reliability of this local authority figure or community living with the locals, is the key factor. Churches could play an important role in organising the personal side of the projects since they are present in every single village. Likewise organisations that have already proved themselves in Hungary like the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service, the Network for Ecclesial Social Pedagogy, the Blessed Ceferino Foundation, The Marist Brothers, Ceferino House, etc.

### 3. The priority of creating jobs and providing education against the defending of rights

In his Encyclical, *Caritas in veritate* Pope Benedict XVI calls attention to the fact that „individuals’ rights, when detached from a framework of duties, which grants them their full meaning, can run wild...if they are not to become mere licence.” (nr.43) The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People emphasized that „...an indiscriminate defence of all aspects of Gypsy culture, without making due distinctions and the related evangelical discernment, are therefore not beneficial to the cause of evangelisation itself...” (Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies, nr.39.) „Activities that produce easy money, on the borderline of or even beyond legality, should therefore definitely be given up... it contributes to fuelling the prejudices of *gažé*.” (ebd., nr.42.)

It is vitally important to defend every human being’s rights and to stop all possible forms of discrimination against human beings, even to impose some kind of punishment. However, it is just as important to remind people of their duties in society. The over-emphasizing of the defence of rights and the separation of these from the duties of creating jobs, taking part in education and integrating into society is wrong and damaging. In the long term it increases social tensions and the gap that exists between different segments of the population.

I would consider it right if a great part of the enormous amounts of money spent on the defence of rights and anti-discrimination projects was spent on social projects instead. I consider it important that certain benefits, for example social benefits, should be linked to duties such as a readiness to work and children being sent to school. It would be important to ensure that more and more social benefits are not made in cash.

#### 4. Inclusion and the Building of Bridges

The Church plays a prophetic role (and could do so even more intensively) with forming communities in which both Romas and non-Romas live the Gospel as brothers and sisters. The members of such communities could bridge the gap between the Roma community and the majority society. Groups like these can realize and live a Christian community and an inclusion that is not a utopia but a reality.

It would be important that the Church expresses this inclusion. We should create a Roma face of the Church; a liturgical music and style that signals to our Roma brothers and sisters that they are most welcome in the Church together with their language and culture. It was in this spirit that we translated the Bible into the Romani (Lovari) language in Hungary and we composed a Holy Mass based on traditional Gypsy melodies in both the Hungarian and Roma languages. We also produced a book called *Ethnography of the Roma* which, we hope, will be a complementary course in many schools.

It would also be important to express the inclusion of the Roma people with symbolic gestures. It would be pleasing to see elements of Roma culture in the squares of big cities and towns, for example murals of Roma artists on buildings, statues, flags and museums showing their lives, as well as restaurants offering Roma food and music. We are planning to erect a chapel consecrated in honour of Blessed Ceferino in a district most densely populated by Gypsies using the typical motifs of Roma art. It would be important to introduce holidays celebrating the 600 year presence of the Roma people in Europe with the many positive moments and events of this common history. It would also be important to project a realistic, balanced and positive image of the Roma people in the media and to employ Roma actors and announcers.

This is a huge task and there is a lot at stake here. We can only build a peaceful Europe with an evangelical spirit if we respect and appreciate each another. The inclusion of the Roma people could create a new richness and vitality in many areas of life. May God grant that it be so!