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CEC - speech

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, it is my honour to greet you as guests and participants of this gathering, my pleasure to wish you successful and fruitful labour in the days to come and my privilege to address you and share with you some thoughts that have occupied me in recent days.

The very thought that there are people gathered here from many European nations with the desire and the mission to hear, understand and support one another makes me happy and fills me with hope. In the 2018<sup>th</sup> year after Christ's birth, more than ever we need holiness and gentleness as virtues of the soul and as ways of thinking about the world around us. We need voices that encourage, that bring calm, that support and that spiritually feed and strengthen the modern man and the modern woman. In a world that is primarily orientated towards the material and the transitory, we need bridges of love more than those of concrete.

In recent days, in the country I live in, I have witnessed the destruction and burning of bridges between people. Just a few days ago, the collection of signatures was completed for two referendum initiatives. One of them demands that parliament deratify the Istanbul Convention, that is the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The second initiative seeks an amendment to the Constitution, and to electoral law, and is directly and primarily directed towards deprecating the status of ethnic minorities – and one in particular. Apart from a reduction in the number of members of parliament, the initiative seeks to deny to MPs representing ethnic minorities the right to vote in support of any option when a government is being formed and to deny them a vote on the budget. This would enshrine in law the status of first- and second-class citizen. The people behind these political initiatives are very successful when it comes to violence against those who are weaker, oppressed, different. Not so long ago, by way of a similar campaign, they succeeded in changing the Constitution in order to prevent same-sex marriage. As for women, people of homosexual orientation, ethnic minorities, single parents and other 'non-standard' families – targets so far for the attacks of these groups – the story is not over, in fact it is just beginning. I say all this because those heading these initiatives declare themselves as Christians – Catholics – because they take special care to emphasise that aspect of their identities and because they come from church circles or are very close to them.

Even as Pope Francis, supreme pontiff of the Catholic Church, is taking steps forward which fill the hearts of believers of many faiths with hope, and even the hearts of atheists around the world, and like an impassioned builder is building bridges large and small, roads, highways, railways and tunnels between people, seeking to come closer to them, there are people who do not wish to hear, understand or support those they have labelled as different. There are people misusing the lack of awareness on the part of the public, manufacturing unfounded fears and manipulating them in order to achieve their objectives. They cloak themselves in Christianity, morals and virtues, compromising them and trampling the basic message, principle, manner and purpose of this religion – love.

This account – and it is not an isolated one – should serve as a warning to us and as food for thought. Have we listened, have we heard the people around us, those that are different to us? Do we offer enough love and support to those who are weaker? To those

who are oppressed? Have we – when necessary – said ‘enough!’ sufficiently loudly and clearly? Are we building this world only for ourselves and for those who are like us?

Are we building bridges towards those who are standing by us, or towards those standing opposite us?

Jelena Nestorović, 28/05/2018 Zagreb