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The war in Ukraine as a challenge for dialogue, reconstruction and peace in Europe

A discourse contribution from the point of view of a catholic relief organization

Keynote speech in the framework of the International Meeting for Peace:

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(The spoken word is valid)

Ladies and Gentlemen
dear friends!

First of all, allow me to express my sincere gratitude that I, as the head of a Catholic relief organization, can speak here today in Rome at this international meeting. Since its foundation, Renovabis has always seen itself as a platform for dialogue between peoples, religions and Christian denominations and has always wanted and still wants to make an active contribution so that the people in the 29 countries of the formerly communist-ruled area in Europe can build and shape their societies and their future together in freedom and peace.

Which brings us to the subject of my brief contribution today. For Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which is contrary to international law and has reached a further escalation stage in recent days with kamikaze drones destroying the vital infrastructure of Ukraine, has changed everything. This is especially true for our work as a Catholic relief organization. In the 30 years of our existence in Ukraine, we have supported more than 6000 projects with a total volume of well

over 120 million €, and have mainly done reconstruction work, but in the course of the war, for the first time, buildings that we had supported were destroyed. In the first weeks and months of the war, there was no longer any question of reconstruction work. Instead, rescue operations and emergency and disaster relief were on our daily agenda.

We had to help implement emergency plans. We had to work to alleviate daily distressing emergencies. No seminaries, schools, libraries or kindergartens were to be financed, but the installation of air-raid shelters, mobile kitchens, the purchase of emergency generators and horrible dictu also the purchase of thousands of body bags landed on my desk for approval. Mattresses had to be bought, mobile toilets, various other aid services for the refugees had to be purchased and financed. There were so many tasks that we had to organize and finance together with our partners on the ground that my staff had to work from morning to night to be able to handle all the emergency projects as unbureaucratically as possible and yet as correctly as necessary.

In all these challenges, we were helped by the trust that our partners in Ukraine have placed in us over decades. This makes the work easier, because trust reduces complexity and eases the need for critical control.

Be that as it may, Renovabis has been able to finance 140 projects with a total amount of approximately 10 million € since the beginning of the war until today.

The task we are facing now is again different from the one of the past months: In the coming years, it no longer means primarily to launch emergency programs: Rather, reconstruction work will soon be the order of the day. There are already numerous ideas and concrete plans for this. For us as a church relief organization, however, this

reconstruction work will probably look very different from what we were used to in the past thirty years!

We will no longer be able to invest primarily in stones, but will have to invest in heads, hearts and souls!

Dear friends! We must come to terms with the traumatic experiences of millions of people, develop and strengthen the resilience of the victims of war, flight and numerous human rights violations. Our task as an aid organization will be to encourage people to rebuild the country themselves, to stay in their homeland, to defend and further develop the pluralistic society for which Ukraine was actually attacked by the Russian Federation. The people of Ukraine are facing a huge challenge to draw strength from the freedom of speech and thought and to believe in the future of their country and their people. Renovabis will try to realize all this with its partners in very different projects.

But Renovabis is not only an ecclesiastical aid organization. Since our foundation we have always seen ourselves as a platform for dialogue and peace. Enabling dialogue will be another challenge we face with our partners. How can it be possible in the future to create a corridor between Ukrainian people and Russian people that will make it possible to talk to each other, to exchange ideas about guilt and suffering, to listen to each other, possibly to forgive each other, and at some point, when the people of Ukraine will be ready to do so, also to participate in a process of reconciliation?

One thing is clear: as long as this terrible war rages, only the cry for peace can be heard, sometimes -of course enough- the cry for revenge. Therefore, the weapons must be silenced as soon as possible. Only then will the silent voice of peace be heard again. When that will be the case is not for us to decide, but for the victims of aggression who want to fight back and regain their undisputed rights. But when the weapons are silent, we must be there to facilitate formats

of conversation. Then we must make it clear that we do not associate selfish interests with this dialogue, but are oriented toward peace and the well-being of the people.

How can this succeed? My friends, I am convinced that the churches in particular can and should play an important role in this work for the future.

The churches, especially in Ukraine, have played a major role in building trust in the last decades since the country's independence. It was the churches that did not allow themselves to be compromised by the communist system, that worked partly underground, partly as martyrs, but always very close to the needs of the people. This has given them a great leap of faith, especially in Ukraine. We as the relief organization Renovabis have therefore consciously worked with our church partners on the development of civil society by supporting the construction of universities, the founding of a Ukrainian social academy, and the expansion of Caritas organizations. The goal of all this was to be close to the people, to understand their language, to know their needs and to be taken seriously as a partner in their needs, concerns, but also in their hopes.

We have also tried to support the ecumenical dialogue between the two Catholic denominations and Orthodoxy. This dialogue has not become easier after Russia's invasion, but it is actually even more urgent. The divisions that are evident within the Orthodox Church do not make it any easier to work for peace on the basis of an equal and honest dialogue. But we are convinced that without the constant effort of dialogue, which with God's help will lead to a common prayer for peace, it will not be possible to give peace a chance at the end of this terrible warlike conflict after a long and certainly painful process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Because Ukraine is crying out for this peace in dignity, Europe is crying out for it, the whole world and the whole creation! This is the ancient and yet so current psalmody of humanity!

The fact that we are united with the many people who, especially in the community of St. Egidio, are actively involved in peace on a small and large scale, and who pray daily for peace in the world, makes me grateful and confident. It shows me that peace has a chance, because, as the Holy Father Francis says, "We are all brothers and sisters!"

Thank you for your attention