

Keynote speech : "Giving a voice to the victims of wars".

(Check against delivery)

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

dear friends!

The victims of wars bear witness to the truth in their suffering and dare to cry out for peace in their often hopeless situation:

But what testimony do the victims of the wars give us?

They give us, as already indicated, above all a witness of the truth. In doing so, they are fulfilling what belongs to the fundamental task and mission of the Church: bearing witness to the truth - even to the point of martyrdom!

Here in Berlin, the city so intertwined with German history, and where ideological and political systems distorted the truth, I also think first of the martyrs of the last century - especially Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg. He was a priest who could not help but publicly denounce injustice again and again, crying out from the pulpit week after week for truth and peace, following not the government but the commandment of Jesus Christ. And I think of Edith Stein, she searched for the truth in her teaching and her life and paid with her own life by the pure speaking of that truth that before God all human are equal.

Even today, there are governments that give themselves a Christian appearance, but in reality devote themselves to war and oppression, even allowing themselves to be worshipped by representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. My friends: It cannot be that a church sanctifies war, because we know that only peace is holy!

As the head of a Catholic relief organisation that has supported numerous peace initiatives and projects since its foundation, I am grateful to be able to take part in this international meeting again this year and hope that our discussions will not only be a platform for dialogue, but that our own cries for peace in this world will also be heard. However, this can only be achieved if we bear witness to the truth, for it is always the first casualty of any war.

Our continent, which is often described as peaceful, has not only been at war again since the fighting in Ukraine, but has been ravaged by violent conflicts time and again for decades. In the 1990s, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose new constituent states and their nations fought and still fight relentless battles against each other, had a formative influence. These regions, supplemented by all the other states of East Central Europe and Central Asia, have been the regions of action of Renovabis since 1993. Here we invest not only in stones, but really in people, in order to strengthen their peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, however, both the post-Soviet area and the Balkans have repeatedly become conflict regions that require our special attention.

My first look is at the Balkans - as recently as May, the situation in Kosovo has once again come to a head, leading to escalation and violent riots. For decades, unrest has continued in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, which has repeatedly led to outbreaks of violence. Among these, the massacre in Srebrenica stands out in particular for its inconceivable brutality and contempt for humanity: more than 8,000 Bosniaks, mainly men and male adolescents, were killed at that time. Each victim was also someone's son, brother, husband, or father. This created immense suffering on the families left behind. To bear witness to the truth, the "Mothers of Srebrenica", for example, joined forces. Their protest was a cry for justice. Working for true peace is also promoted by Renovabis in projects such as the "Schools for Europe", where a multi-ethnic and multi-religious approach has been used for

more than a quarter of a century to work for reconciliation, encounter, and dialogue. Here, too, the motto is that a responsible and truthful culture of remembrance helps to ensure that future generations can go into a good future in peace and harmony.

My second focus is on the Caucasus. There, Georgia has become the plaything of Russian imperial politics since 2008. The freedom of the people in this country to take their own sovereign path towards Europe is permanently thwarted by Russian troops in the occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In Armenia, too, with its remarkable state, cultural, and religious tradition as one of the oldest and richest political landscapes in Europe, the cry for peace is once again being heard.

The Armenian Apostolic Church, with its impressive history and precious cultural artefacts, has repeatedly been the victim of political and nationalistic violence and is thus representative of Armenia's political tensions with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Here it is the Church itself with its faithful who become witnesses of the truth. Here too, since the 1990s, it has been conflicts that have flared up again and again, not only in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which belongs to Azerbaijan under international law but is ethnically and culturally Armenian, but increasingly also in the heartland itself, as can be seen in the dispute over the use of the Zangazur corridor and the Lachin corridor.

Renovabis is ready to help where we can, as most recently in 2020 through emergency aid for evacuated families, which we provided together with Caritas International and the church institutions in Armenia. I was in Armenia myself in March and returned to Germany strengthened by a sincere desire for peace. After talks with the Deputy Foreign Minister, a lecture at the Diplomatic Academy, and also an exchange with Catholicos H.H. Karekin II, it became clear that everyone is longing to settle the smouldering conflict with Azerbaijan and for

peace. However, under the principle of "Audiatur et altera pars", I also met with representatives of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Germany, as well as the Ambassador himself, to get their views on the conflict. Despite the differences in our assessment of the conflict, we agreed that the churches can play a role as mediators. This influence is also recognised by Azerbaijan, which has had a resident ambassador to the Holy See since this year.

In this situation, we urgently need a commitment from the world community, from the United Nations, the OSCE, and the EU. We cannot enter into new energy dependencies while allowing the threatened destruction of Armenian cultural assets to go uncriticised!

My third and last look is aimed at Ukraine - since last year we have been tragically experiencing the suffering of the population there. One example, which once again shows that families in particular suffer as victims of wars, can be seen in the abduction of children from eastern Ukraine far into the Russian hinterland. The offer of a temporary trip from the combat zone to a quiet summer camp turned into nightmares for thousands of Ukrainian children - in foreign lands, the children found themselves in political re-education camps or were passed on as presumed orphans to families loyal to the regime. According to UN assessments, these are clear war crimes! These innocent children, who are separated from their families and have to find their way in a new environment, are not only suffering victims, but martyrs who can contribute a lot to truth and peace in a free and peaceful world with their witness.

Another frightening example that even pastoral commitment to Greek and Roman Catholics in the occupied territories can lead to arrest is seen in the case of Redemptorist Fathers Ivan Levytskyi and Bohdan Heleta. The two priests have been in detention since November 2022. They are accused of having stored weapons and explosives and of having had contact with the Ukrainian secret service. To date, there is no reliable information on their fate and whether they are still alive. The

Greek Catholic Church has information that the imprisoned priests are being tortured - methods reminiscent of past Stalinist times. This war "produces" countless martyrs in its brutality!

I can promise you that we are doing everything we can to help the people in Ukraine - but especially with the last example, our calls for diplomatic efforts by our Federal Government or the European Union are going unheard. Why is the fate of these people not publicly acknowledged? After all, our society must dare peace!

I could give many more examples. We all know them from the media and everyone could probably contribute more from their own activities. But it is not enough to talk about **the** victims of war and violence. One has to give a voice to these new martyrs of our days.

We all have to use our possibilities to influence and try ourselves as multipliers to make people's suffering known, to let them tell their stories and in this way to have the audacity to dare the beginning of peace. After all, every real and just peace is a fruit of truth!

As the Renovabis relief organisation, we are active everywhere in Eastern Europe where the future of the people is at stake. We see that peace is needed for this not only in the numerous reconstruction applications we receive, but also in the sometimes very drastic testimonies to the brutal truth of war, for example when people apply to us for funding for body bags.

We help wherever we can and give people a voice, such as tomorrow at our Renovabis International Congress in Munich, where, among others, the human rights activist Irina Shcherbakova from Memorial, an organisation that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year, will speak.

Let us dare to give a voice to the victims and let us also dare ourselves to be witnesses of truth, to draw attention to the suffering in the world. Well, then the cry for peace becomes a cry of hope for the world.

Thank you for your attention!