

Volodymyr Bureha,
Professor of Kyiv Theological Academy

Presentation of the group “Reconciliation in Europe”

The origins of the project “Reconciliation in Europe – mission of the Churches in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Germany” dates back to the 1940s-60s. In that time, after the end of World War 2., Germany and Poland faced the difficult task of mutual reconciliation.

During the war the Poles were severely repressed by the Nazis. In total, about 7 million Polish citizens died during the war years. In terms of population, it was one of the highest rates of human casualties during World War 2. After the war, as a result of the Potsdam Conference, Poland received the Upper Silesia, Pomerania and East Brandenburg, formerly the parts of Germany. The German population was then forcibly evicted from those territories. In total, it was about 12 million Germans. That fact complicated greatly relationship between Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany. The leadership of West Germany disagreed with the decisions of the Potsdam Conference. Therefore, establishing diplomatic contacts between the two countries was initially impossible.

In such a situation the religious organizations played an important role in establishing dialogue between Poland and West Germany. That applied to both the Catholic Church and Evangelical Churches. Those churches had high authority in both countries and were, therefore, able to take on the confrontation between the two peoples.

Between 1954 and 1968, these were the German and Polish churches that became one of the main channels for establishing fundamentally new relationship between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland. In particular, both – the German and Polish Churches, recognized mutual responsibility of the parties for the tragic events of World War 2. and the post-war period, and initiated systematic exchange of letters and memoranda, holding meetings and conferences. This was the source of the German-Polish reconciliation.

In 1965, the Evangelical Church of Germany published an “Eastern Memorandum” (Ostdenkschrift), which called for abandonment of former German territories that had become part of Poland after the war. In fact, it meant recognizing the

existing border between Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany. In such a way, the Evangelical Church of Germany facilitated the formation of a “new eastern policy” of Federal Chancellor Willie Brandt. Since that time the process of establishing partnerships between West Germany and its eastern neighbours began.

In 1970, an agreement was reached on the basics of normalization of relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland. Since then, contacts between both countries became more intensive. In particular, contacts between churches were made more active. In 1974, Commission for Contacts between the Evangelical Church of Germany and the Polish Ecumenical Council was established. It should be noted that the Polish Ecumenical Council consisted of the Evangelical Churches, the Old Catholic Churches and the Polish Orthodox Church. After 1974, contacts between those churches and the Evangelical Church of Germany became regular. In general, the interaction between Poland and Germany bore important fruits for all European security. After collapse of the communist bloc in 1989, the German-Polish border was able to preserve peace, that was the result of the hard work of previous years.

On May 29-31., 1995, at the regular meeting of the Commission for Contacts between the Evangelical Church of Germany and the Polish Ecumenical Council, the 30th anniversary of the Eastern Memorandum was celebrated. It was then that members of the commission expressed the view that the Eastern Memorandum was a creative challenge for churches in new situation. The fall of the iron curtain between Poland and Germany could not mean that this curtain had simply moved to the east. Therefore, in new situation, the Churches of Germany and Poland had to develop their contacts with the churches of the countries on the eastern border of Poland – Ukraine and Belarus. Cooperation became particularly important in the context of the gradual expansion of the European Union to the East.

At the same time, it was realized that developing contacts with Ukraine and Belarus would be impossible without involvement of new partners. In particular, it was about an active involvement of the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. As a result, the initiative was joined by the Conferences of Catholic Bishops of Germany and Poland, who helped to establish contacts with Catholic bishops in Belarus and Ukraine.

As a result, a completely new project was launched, called “Reconciliation in Europe – mission of the Churches in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Germany”. Thus, in 1995 the “Reconciliation in Europe” group was founded. It was then that the overall concept of the project was formed. It was attended by the representatives of four countries: Germany, Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. The group included representatives of the Evangelical Church and the Roman Catholic Church from Germany, the Evangelical Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Roman Catholic Church from Poland, the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church from Belarus, the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Catholic Church, and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church from Ukraine. Therefore, the group is international and inter-denominational.

The project “Reconciliation in Europe” was first presented in 1997 at the Assembly of the Conference of European Churches in Graz (Austria). There took place the first working meeting of the group. In total, over the period from 1997 to 2018, more than 20 meetings of the working group were held, which took place alternately in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. The latest social challenges in Central and Eastern European regions were discussed.

During that time, the group prepared and held 16 international scientific conferences. Six of them took place in Poland, five were held in Belarus, and five were hosted in Ukraine. Today we are opening the 17th conference of the “Reconciliation” group.

Various relevant issues were discussed at the conferences. Here are just a few examples. In 2009, a conference on the topic “Churches in Ukraine in the face of modern social crises” was held in Odessa. In 2010, Conference “Migration in Central and Eastern Europe: Problem of Reconciliation and Coexistence of Cultures” took place in Kamien Slanski, Poland. In 2011, “Churches in service to the needy. Opportunities for cooperation with non-church organizations” was hosted in Minsk.

In 2013, conference “Reconciliation in Central and Eastern Europe. New Challenges” (special attention at this conference was paid to the Volyn tragedy and its consequences in Ukrainian-Polish relations) was carried out in Warsaw. In 2014, “Problem of the Death Penalty in Belarus” took place in Minsk. In 2015, “Road to the Future through Reconciliation” was held in Kharkiv.

In each of the countries, traditionally during the conferences, the group paid special attention to the local issues. In particular, the relationships between Christian churches in Ukraine were discussed on the conferences in Odessa, Kyiv, and Kharkiv.

In addition, during the conference time in each of the three countries, the group members had meetings with leaders of the local Churches. In different years members of the group met with the head of the Polish Orthodox Church His Beatitude Metropolitan Sawa, the heads of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church His Beatitude Lubomyr Husar and His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Metropolitan of Minsk and all Belarus Filaret, the chairman of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Belarus Metropolitan Tadeush Kondrusevich and other well-known hierarchs.

Today the Polish Ecumenical Council is coordinating the work of the group. At the same time, group members in concrete countries play key role in the preparation and holding of conferences.

In the final part of my presentation, I would like to mention those who have been active in our group over the years. One of the group's initiators and its active participant was Archbishop Jeremiah of Wroclaw, who represented the Polish Orthodox Church in our group. From him we, the members of the group, learned hard work and genuine Christian love. I think anyone, who had fortune of communicating with this eminent person, remembered his wisdom and deep faith. The bishop retired to the Lord in 2017, after a serious illness.

In the first ten years of the existence of the "Reconciliation" Group, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was represented by professor of the Kyiv Theological Academy Archpriest Vasyl Zaev, who died in 2008. Bishop Klaus Wollenweber, who represented the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, had been working in the group for many years, now he is retired.

The most experienced members of the group for today are, undoubtedly, the priest Zygfryd Glaeser, who represents the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, Mykola Matrunchyk from the Orthodox Church in Belarus and Helmut Wiesmann from the Roman Catholic Church in Germany.

The members of the group have formed friendly relationships during these years. We seek to demonstrate, by our own example, the possibility of genuine reconciliation

between Christians. We believe that the current conference in Ukraine will contribute to the social understanding that our Motherland needs so much.