

Member churches and organisations of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe and the Conference of European Churches

5 June 2020

**Commemorate Persons who lost their lives on their way to seek safety – Recommended date: 21 June 2020**

Esteemed church leaders, Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Dear Friends,

Tragedies in the Mediterranean region unfortunately continue – 1,283 persons are recorded to have lost their lives in 2019, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and during the first three months of 2020, more than 200 deaths were counted. While total figures have decreased in the last years, the likelihood of dying has increased. New dangerous routes, for example across rivers at the EU's external borders, remain largely unmonitored. Particularly painful is the fact that several boats were known to be in distress over the (western) Easter weekend in the Central Mediterranean. Yet, several Mediterranean states delayed the deployment of rescue vessels and it is until today assumed that several of those on the boats in danger have drowned over Easter. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/calls-in-italy-to-rescue-people-at-sea-after-fears-of-more-migrant-deaths>)

Since 2000 more than 30,000 people are reported by IOM and other sources to have lost their lives on their way to Europe, drowning at sea or in rivers, suffocated in containers on trucks or ships. Due to higher numbers of casualties, the attention had mainly focused on Italy and Malta. The situation at the Greek and Spanish borders as well as the EU's Eastern borders however requires attention, too. The circumstances of the death of two men who were shot at the Greek-Turkish border in early March still need to be fully investigated. More than 100 MEPs have asked the European Commission to investigate rumours that Greek border guards were responsible (MEP Tineke Strik's twitter of 12<sup>th</sup> May 2020, 1.58 PM [https://twitter.com/tineke\\_strik/status/1260177579815899137](https://twitter.com/tineke_strik/status/1260177579815899137) ) The fate of those still in

international waters or waters of North African countries is often unclear and their numbers increase as EU member states send boats back to Libyan waters. (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/19/exclusive-12-die-as-malta-uses-private-ships-to-push-migrants-back-to-libya>)

As the EU's fundamental rights agency documented, search and rescue operations by civil society have in recent years been systematically sabotaged and criminalised by EU member states. (cf. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2019/2019-update-ngo-ships-involved-search-and-rescue-mediterranean-and-criminal>). The spread of COVID has brought most operations to a halt. For those few cases where rescue operations still happened, major problems arose as EU countries had declared their harbours "not safe" for disembarkation. A compromise between some EU member states had been reached in 2019 and clarified how to disembark and relocate those rescued at sea – a demand CCME and CEC had together with ACT formulated in an open letter in July 2019. Malta has however in recent weeks complained that the help that was promised has in reality not materialised. The EU's new naval mission around the Libyan coast IRINI has deliberately been designed in a way to avoid that any shipwrecked migrants might be found by the military vessels deployed.

Churches in Europe have responded to the ongoing loss of life at the borders of Europe by offering practical solidarity, but also by advocating for safe and legal ways for refugees and migrants to enter Europe. Churches in several countries have concretely offered to host those rescued at sea or relocated in order to unblock political impasse and allow for disembarkation. Churches are in several places supporting or launching search and Rescue initiatives.

CCME together with partners a few years ago launched the "Safe Passage" project. An exchange between churches for safe passage has been thus facilitated. Projects for sponsoring safe refugee arrivals through resettlement, humanitarian visa/humanitarian corridors and other pathways have been undertaken by more and more churches in Europe. On political level, the EU in December 2019 pledged for more resettlement in 2020 – however arrivals have come to a standstill due to COVID.

The General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches held in Budapest in July 2013 renewed the call on churches to "to commemorate those who have died on their journey to find a dignified life in Europe through an annual day of prayer." In past years, many churches and parishes across Europe have taken up this call and held commemoration services, prayers or vigils around 20 June, International Refugee Day. This year we wish to recommend holding services of commemoration on 21 June, the Sunday after International Refugee Day (20 June). In some countries, other dates during the course of the year may be appropriate.

We would like to reiterate the call of the 2018 General Assembly of CEC and thus appeal to churches across Europe to commemorate the persons who have lost their lives on their way to Europe. We have in 2018 updated the material initially produced together with the

German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum, supported by the Evangelical Church in

Berlin, Brandenburg and Silesian Oberlausitz and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). CCME has published material which can be used for worship or intercessions during a service. This is available in English and German and can be found on the CCME website. ([https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-0618\\_Commemoration\\_Day\\_June\\_2018\\_\\_00000002\\_.pdf](https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-0618_Commemoration_Day_June_2018__00000002_.pdf))

It is obvious that the ways we can commemorate this year will be very much impacted by COVID 19. While many churches have successfully worked with virtual encounters in recent weeks, some elements central to commemoration like the symbolic lightening of candles may not be possible. At the same time, virtual encounters might offer new possibilities to share the stories of some of those who are known to have died on the way to safety in Europe.

In this period of Ascension and Pentecost filled with hope and light that are intended for all humankind, we are deeply saddened and disturbed that the way of the cross, of suffering, hopelessness and death, continues for thousands of our human brothers and sister on the outer borders of the European Union.

As churches and Christians our divine calling is to be witnesses and servants of the Resurrection and of a new life in justice and peace for all, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or religion. We therefore know that we are part of the global fellowship with Christians across the globe remembering those affected in their respective region and the causes of their displacement.

Let us jointly remember the documented as well as the undocumented persons who have died at European borders, let us share our sorrow in prayer. If you were able to inform us about your activities, we would be most grateful.

With our best wishes and greetings,



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