**Rev. Roman Buchta Ph.D., Professor of the University of Silesia**

**Director of the Catechetical Department of the Archdiocese of Katowice**

**President of EuFRES**



**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

it is a great honour and joy to welcome all the participants of the 21st European Forum for Religious Education in Schools - Poprad 2024. I would like to welcome those of you who had already been with us in the previous years and have been looking foreward fort he next meeting and those who are with us for the first time. Thank you for accepting the invitation, for your presence and for your readiness to contribute to the work of the 21st Forum by delivering papers, meeting in language groups and participating in plenary sessions. I hope that, as it has been the case during the previous meetings, this event will be a time of creative scientific reflection, a time to seek up-to-date solutions to the difficulties of teaching religion at school in the time of crises, but also - last but not least - an opportunity to enjoy your presence.

Before all else, I would like to thank the EuFRES Board of Trustees for preparing our meeting. Thank you for your presence at the organisational meeting last April in Poprad, thank you for all the online meetings, for countless emails and phone calls. A special debt of gratitude goes to the hosts of this year's 21st Forum, Rev. Prof. Tibor Reimer - Dean of the Faculty of Theology of Comenius University in Bratislava and Secretary General of EuFRES. A word of thanks goes to Mr Roman Vitko – the former director of the Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre in Poprad, who has been very generously involved in the preparation of our meeting from the the very beginning. Also, I would like to thank all the members and supporters of EuFRES. I wish to express my gratitude to everyone who contributed in any way to the preparation of this meeting!

On behalf of the participants of the XXI EuFRES Forum, a special word of gratitude goes to the institutions that support us through financial, substantive or organisational support. I would therefore like to thank the Renovabis Foundation, the Roman Catholic Parish in Poprad, the Cyril-Methodian Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology of the Comenius University in Bratislava, the Society of St. Francis de Sales, the Catholic Pedagogical and Catechetical Centre in Poprad, the Archdiocese of Madrid and the Archdiocese of Katowice. On behalf of us all, I would like to thank you for your kindness and all the forms of support.

I extend a very warm welcome to the invited guests - especially this year's speakers. I would like to welcome Father Professor Zbigniew Formella of the Salesian Pontifical University who is with us today. I welcome Prof Claudia Gärtner from the Institute of Catholic Theology at Dortmund University of Technology, who joins us spiritually and will deliver her lecture thanks to the benefits of the Internet.

The work of the XXI EuFRES Forum will focus on the theme:

**Resilience and Christian Hope. Religious teaching as a vital source of impetus**

**in times of crises**

In the most recent 2020 Directory for Catechesis, we find the following statement: "the teaching of religion in school has undergone many changes over the years" [[1]](#footnote-1). I am sure that many of us, who for years have been making an effort, both in their own country and within EuFRES, to search for an adequate form for the school teaching of religion, would agree with this statement. As we read further on, "what gives the teaching of religion at school a special characteristic is the fact that it is called to penetrate the cultural field and to enter into relations with other disciplines of knowledge"[[2]](#footnote-2). This statement should be understood as a guideline, or even as an objective of our actions: to penetrate the field of culture and to enter into relations with other fields of knowledge. This is not an easy task, for we can see that cultural changes are taking place extremely rapidly, as if before our eyes. Mass introduction and use of digital tools causes profound and complex changes on many levels. The cultural, social and psychological consequences of these changes still remain to be identified. This is especially true with respect to children and young people who are the addressees of religious instruction. It has to be openly acknowledged that in the present situation, "in many cases [teaching religion at school] is the only opportunity for pupils to encounter the message of faith"[[3]](#footnote-3) . Moreover, this is the only chance to learn about the identity of Christianity and to form Gospel-inspired social attitudes[[4]](#footnote-4). School religious instruction, seen as an original form of ministry of the Word, makes the Gospel present in a systematic and critical personal process of cultural assimilation. At the same time it has an inherent cultural and social dimension, which is integrated into the human community[[5]](#footnote-5). It is in this community that "the joy and hope, the sorrow and the trepidation of contemporary people" are united.

At a time when the components of "sadness and trepidation" prevail in human life over "joy and hope", they become sources of various crises. Such a situation demands that the teaching of religion in schools should be a dynamic reality, open to socio-cultural and religious changes. The teaching of religion, in order to live up to the mission that flows from its nature, must be sensitive to recognising the "signs of the times". Only then can it effectively accompany children and young people, both in times of "joy and hope" and in times of "sorrow and trepidation"[[6]](#footnote-6).

Recent years have been marked by various crises. After the coronavirus crisis, it is primarily the war in Ukraine. In addition, we face the climate crisis and the economic crisis. UNICEF has prepared an analysis of the mental health situation of children in Europe. According to the report, 19% of boys in Europe aged 15 to 19 suffer from mental health disorders. Among girls, the figure is more than 16%. Furthermore, nine million adolescents in Europe (children aged 10-19) are suffering from a mental health disorder. "The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the lives of young people. It has also highlighted some of the factors that put our mental health at risk: isolation, family tensions or loss of income," said Queen Mathilde, Queen of the Belgians at the presentation of the publication in Brussels. "We must do everything to strengthen and improve our health and social systems to ensure that every child has a happy childhood."

Taking into account the context indicated, the invitation to participate in the XXI EuFRES Forum poses important questions: what should a modern religious education look like in response to the crises of our time? Can religion be a source of resilience? Does religious education help in emerging from the crisis? In the search for answers, we want to look at religious education and discuss its potential as an important stimulus and source of impetus in times of crisis. The guiding theme of the meeting will be the contribution of religious education to the formation of the mental attitude of resilience and the virtue of Christian hope in times of crisis. Undertaking a scientific reflection on resilience within the framework of the EuFRES Forum is an expression of the "entry of school religious education into relations with other disciplines of knowledge" postulated in the Directory. I hope that our meeting in Poprad will be a modest contribution to the search for theoretical answers and practical solutions to the questions posed.

I would like to ask Rev. Prof. Tibor Reimer - Secretary General of EuFRES - to chair the rest of the meeting.

1. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis* (23 March 2020), 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation „Verbum Domini“* (30 September 2010), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educare al dialogo interculturale nella scuola cattolica. Vivere insieme per una civiltà dell`amore* (28 October 2013), 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis*, 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World „Gaudium et spes*“(7 December 1965), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)