

# **EDITORIAL**

GUY SELDERSLAGH, SECRETARY GENERAL

We are sending you this 7th newsletter of the European Committee for Catholic Education, a few weeks after the cancellation of our General Assembly, which should have been the opportunity to meet and exchange in Athens. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since our last meeting in Malta last November. Last Thursday, May 7, there were about 144,000 deaths in the various member countries of the CEEC as a result of the Covid 19 epidemic. That is more than half of the deaths worldwide. Europe is at the heart of the pandemic. The macabre figures cover thousands of human tragedies within our families, our schools and our institutions, particularly affecting the oldest and most fragile.

In most of our countries, as you will read through the testimonies of those who have contributed to this newsletter, schools are closed, students and teachers are confined in conditions of comfort, which vary greatly. The support and administration services and the umbrella organisations we lead use telework, thus imposing unprecedented working conditions on us.

While the severity of the pandemic seems to be slowly regressing, the prospects for a return to a normal situation - as before - are also receding. It will take time to return to the pre-coronavirus situation. We face new tasks that are as unique as huge: enabling the children, pupils and students who attend our schools to continue their education successfully, in new conditions that no longer automatically require that they all attend school regularly.

Although situations vary greatly between our countries, we probably have much to learn from each other. Various approaches and strategies have been deployed to enable each of us to manage pedagogical and school continuity in our own national context. It is with the conviction that there is an interest in learning from what is being done elsewhere, that we will propose to you in the next few days a short survey, to find out about the situation in your country and to discover the new practices you have initiated. Following this, we will propose to CEEC members to meet in a videoconference to exchange on the results of this survey.

In these difficult times for everyone and also for our Catholic teaching, I believe that we must pass the Pope's message of hope on: "Do not be afraid" It is by combining responsibility and fraternity that we will make room for hope.

# **CONTENT**

### **EDITORIA**

Guy Selderslagh, Secretary General PAGE 01

### CEEC ACTIVITIES

Athens GA

Interview with Manuel Barrios PAGES 02 TO 03

# NEWS FROM OUR MEMBERS

Covid 19 situation PAGES 05 TO 10

CALLS AND
INFORMATION
PAGE 11

CALENDAR Page 12



# **CEEC ACTIVITIES**

### GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN ATHENS

Following the Covid 19 epidemic and the decision of the Greek Ministry of Health on 8 March to forbid all meetings, congresses, conferences for 4 weeks on Greek territory, we were forced to cancel the CEEC General Assembly that was originally scheduled to take place in Athens on 20 and 21 March 2020. For practical reasons, such a meeting cannot be postponed. Our next General Assembly will therefore be held on 20 and 21 November 2020 in Madrid (Spain).



### INTERVIEW WITH FATHER MANUEL BARRIOS

At their meeting last February, the members of the Executive Bureau had the opportunity to meet Fr Manuel BARRIOS PRIETO, the new Secretary General of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE). We come back to this interview with some excerpts:

What is COMECE, of whom is it comprised, and what are its objectives?

COMECE was set up in 1980 with the aim of entering into a political dialogue with the EU institutions to promote Catholic perspectives of the Common Good, in accordance with Article 17.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. The Commission has a Standing Committee consisted of a President and several Vice-Presidents, as well as a Secretary General. COMECE has an assembly which brings together twice a year the bishops delegated by the EU episcopates and two observers from Switzerland and Serbia.

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MANUEL BARRIOS





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MANUEL BARRIOS



### What are the main areas in which this commission is active?

COMECE is active in three Commissions (respectively Social Affairs, Legal Affairs and External Relations) and two Working Groups (on Migration and Asylum, and Ethics). More specifically, COMECE is active in several working fields, namely justice and fundamental rights, ecology and sustainability, migration and asylum, ethics, research and health, religious freedom, intercultural dialogue and education, social and economic policies and external actions.

# What about your function as Secretary General? Do you pursue any particular objectives?

I took office in September 2020. You should know that the term of office of the Secretary General is renewable every 4 years and can be renewed twice. My function also requires me to be the President of the two COMECE working groups. For my part, I wish to strengthen COMECE's relations with the bodies and associations with which it works. This is one of the reasons why I have come to your meeting. Furthermore, following the European elections last May, we are currently working to re-establish contacts with people who are sensitive to our cause and active in the European Parliament.

Catholic Education in Europe is currently facing many challenges. We think in particular of the shortage of teachers, the difficulties of teaching religion, the financing of Catholic schools, or the threats from politicians to the freedom of Catholic education. The CEEC aims to inform, defend and promote the interests of Catholic Education in Europe, so how can COMECE support our action?

It is important to work together on these questions and to respond to the challenges that Catholic Education is facing. I suggest that we appoint a contact person in this area. This person could then talk to the people in charge of these questions, such as the different congregations in Brussels (Don Bosco International...), Commissioners and MEPs... The Commission is accustomed to organising seminars at the European Parliament to raise awareness of certain situations, or used to holding meetings behind closed doors with MEPs and European Commissioners. We could therefore highlight these challenges confronting Catholic Education in Europe.

Gathered during the meeting and transcribed in the form of an interview by G. Vallée



# **NEWS FROM OUR MEMBERS: COVID 19**

### **ALBANIA**

Albania is being hit hard by the Covid 19 epidemic. Since 10 March, the country has been in a lockdown phase. Unfortunately, the number of people infected and hospitalised is on the rise. This dramatic situation can be explained in part by the fact that Albania was hit by a terrible earthquake in November 2019. The state of emergency for natural disasters has been extended until 23 June. This government decision was criticised by civil society and the opposition party, judging the new measures in contradiction to the constitution, human and fundamental rights: for example, daily outings limited to 90 minutes for a single person per home, and only to go to the supermarket or pharmacy, with authorisation (to be requested in advance via an online form), under penalty of a fine or imprisonment. In addition to these restrictions, measures have been taken for the gradual reopening of certain activities considered as less risky. In addition, the country has been affected for 4 years by a shortage of doctors and nurses due to massive emigration. The authorities then decided to call on retired or student doctors and nurses, with the promise of higher salaries. More than 2,000 doctors and nurses responded.

Concerning education, the closure of schools has been extended and the Minister recently stated that schools and universities would not open until September, with the exception of pre-vocational training. Online education is therefore organised by schools, and lessons are also broadcasted on national television. Education representatives are currently working on proposals for the reopening of schools, and mainly on the organisation of schooling in compliance with the hygiene measures in force. According to the figures provided by the Ministry, about 97% of students have followed distance learning. However, according to the National Commission for Catholic Education in Albania (KKEKSH), these data are distorted since none of the Albanian Catholic schools was invited to participate in this survey. In addition, the online tests conducted during the period of confinement encountered many technical problems for both teachers and students. According to the instructions provided by the Ministry, these will be included in the final marks and added to the pre-confinement student grades.

Since March, the coronavirus epidemic has hit Europe and the world. The world of education has not been spared, and many schools had to close their doors. In order to report on the situation and to support those involved in education, the European Commission regularly offers articles and reports in English available online. On our part, due to this exceptional situation, we invited the representatives of the CEEC member associations to express themselves on what they were experiencing in their country, at a national and regional level, as well as within the Catholic network. The reports received were then summarised and sometimes translated. To consult them in their original language and in their entirety, please follow this link. If any problem, please contact the secretariat: ceec@ceec.be





### ALBANIA - FOLLOW-UP

From the economic point of view, the network of Catholic schools in Albania, which represents 58 schools, is excluded from the financial aid proposed by the government. Indeed, none of its institutions meet the eligibility criteria for the proposed assistance; on the one hand, because they do not pay income tax; on the other hand, because they are nonprofit organizations. Since the month of March Mgr. Angelo Massafra, the President of KKEKSH and its national coordinator, Sr. Teuta Buka, have repeatedly called on the Prime Minister, Mr. Edi Rama, and ask to include the employees of the schools in this financial assistance programme. The two letters sent are still unanswered at the moment. Various contacts (with parents, other schools, municipalities, the Ministry of Education...) were made. More recently, the Commission has approached representatives of other religions for their support and together they have drafted a third letter.

The critical situation in Albania brings several observations and initiatives within the Catholic network: to prepare the teachers better for online and distance learning; to consider the different groups and levels of education in order to manage this crisis; to plan and program the school year 2020-2021 taking into account the lack of state financial support for schools; to propose an adequate educational plan for the reopening of pre-school and school establishments and day centres by consulting a group of experts composed of psychologists, doctors, security experts, economists, computer specialists and parents' representatives; to ensure the economic survival of the institutions of the Albanian Catholic network; compensate for the lack of consideration of the government, the impossibility of paying the salaries of employees and the impossibility of parents to pay school fees, the lack of human resources, the lack of training of educational personnel; ensure that all students are included, using an innovative and digital teaching method, provide psychological support to children, parents and teachers, organise the summer months as a period of remediation and psychological support for children, encourage young people to be proactive through activities and interaction with network actors, include parents in these challenging levels through surveys and other proposals.

### BELGIUM - FLANDERS

Since March 16, students have no longer school. required to attend Nevertheless, teachers have not been placed on leave as the schools remain open. Teachers provide childcare for parents who need it. Until the Easter holidays (4 April), teachers took initiatives with remedial classes. From 20 April (after the Easter holidays), teachers were invited to offer their pupils new content and teaching materials (4 hours/day). digital platforms, almost all primary and secondary schools are providing distance learning, especially "pre-teaching", which is used as a strategy to improve pupils' learning in the coming lessons, when schools reopen.

Flanders aims to partially reopen schools from 15 May. The Minister has reached an agreement with Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen and other representatives of the schools (as well as the trade unions) on the first steps for pupils to return gradually to the schools.

In the meantime, Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen has developed its <u>website</u> and offers several topics on the organisation of education during the coronavirus crisis. We pay a lot of attention to distance learning and support for learners in difficulty. Another page deals with situations of increased stress in families. An interesting page describes stories of teams of teachers and how they cope with these exceptional challenges. Of course, we also have a section with FAQs (on HRM, pupil evaluation, childcare, learning, fundraising for laptops, ...)



### **SWITZERLAND**

Switzerland. the situation of Catholic/private schools is the same as that of public schools: since 16 March 2020, all schools have been closed and will remain closed until 10 May. After that, primary and secondary schools (up to 9th grade) will reopen. In a second phase, secondary schools, vocational schools and universities will resume their activities on 8 June. Of course, all of them will have to observe the rules of hygiene and social distancing.

Closed schools do not mean that there is no teaching.

Courses are given online, students receive assignments and exchange information via video conference. It seems that distance learning is working quite well.

However, the transition to digital education has been a very big challenge. The Association of Catholic Schools in Switzerland supports its members by providing useful information, such as legal and economic issues, as well as tips for distance learning.



### **GERMANY**

In Germany, each federal state decides on issues related to education field and schools in consultation with the federal government. The Federal Ministry of Education, on the other hand, deals with overarching issues of the education system at national and international level. Since 16 March, all schools have been closed and digital teaching has been introduced.

The federal government has agreed on an emergency equipment programme worth 500 million euros to enable schools to support pupils in need through digital education at home. In addition, it is planned to provide schools with the necessary equipment for the creation of online courses for vocational education. The implementation of this programme, organised by the federal states, will have to be adapted in accordance with the gradual reopening of schools (currently in preparation) and by ensuring that the risks of infection are limited.

At the national level, schools will gradually be opened on 4 May 2020 at the earliest, starting with final-year pupils. Due to the different examination and holiday periods in the regions, these pupils must take their exams, particularly for the secondary school leaving certificate. The aim is to assess as uniformly as possible throughout Germany, while taking account of the specific features of the regions and setting up clear guidelines.

By the end of April 2020, further steps and a teaching approach taking health and safety measures into account, including the respect of social distancing in the classroom with a reduced number of pupils, should be established.

"Our society is currently living in an exceptional situation that has never been seen before and that also puts the educational system to a severe test. I am sure: We will all work together to accomplish this tour de force in the service of the children and young people, our teachers, who are incredibly committed, the parents and the entire school family", said the President of the Conference of Ministers of Culture, Ms Hubig.



### FRANCE

France entered the period of confinement on Tuesday 17 March. Since that date, schools have no longer taken in pupils, except for children whose parents work in the health sector. Continuity of learning is ensured thanks to the use of digital platforms. However, this method of teaching causes difficulties for pupils who do not have sufficient computer resources, and who then find themselves more isolated. Answers will have to be found to this is a situation. It should also be noted that Catholic schools have been particularly solicited because two thirds of parents in the health sector enrolled their children in Catholic schools, thus representing on average, 20% of the pupils per school. The teaching staffs welcome them on a voluntary basis.

On 3 April, the Minister of National Education announced that the final exams for the Baccalaureate would not take place. The marks for this examination will be based on the continuous assessment of the year. One question currently remains, i.e. the organisation of schooling at the end of the lockdown. At the national level, a gradual resumption of classes from 11 May is announced. It will take account of class levels, the respect of health instructions and welcoming pupils in small groups. In the schools, many questions are being asked about how these announcements will be implemented in practice.

Probably thanks to their autonomy and to the quality of the relationship between educational communities, Catholic schools show a certain agility in adapting to the constraints of this situation. We observe the emergence of initiatives promoting solidarity, fraternity and commitment to the common good. In this regard, the Laboratory for initiatives of the General Secretariat has proposed to keep a <u>digital logbook</u> in which those involved in Catholic education can share how they experienced the lockdown on a personal and on a school level.

### GREECE

The Greek population is currently forbidden to travel without a valid reason. Travel is allowed if one goes to the work, to the supermarket, pharmacy, or bank, to visit a vulnerable person, to walk a pet, or to exercise and practice sport around one's home. At the same time, any gathering of more than 10 people is prohibited, even in open space. To prevent the spread of the virus, the Greek government decided on 11 March to close all schools in the country until further notice. In order to ensure the continuity of learning, schools keep on teaching online.

In addition, the Greek government has taken certain financial decisions, namely that private teachers will have to be paid normally as they work normally, albeit via videoconferencing. As for administrative and technical staff, they may not be paid as long as the containment measures last.

Finally, Greece is still awaiting government decisions on a number of issues, including the extension (or not) of the school year, university entrance exams, etc. All these decisions will play an important role on school fees for the year 2019-2020, and will meet (or not) the demands of parents for reimbursement of these fees.





### **IRELAND**

All schools have been closed since 13 March and the Irish population is operating under a strict social distancing regime with few businesses open and very little movement on the streets. The closure of the schools has not meant that teaching has stopped. Indeed, on-line teaching has suddenly become the norm through various different platforms where teachers and students can keep in contact on a daily basis. At primary level (5 to 12 years), the class teacher can arrange their own times with their students while at second-level (12 - 18 years), the normal school timetable has been used so that teachers can make contact with their classes.

One major concern has been the widening of the gap between students from advantaged backgrounds (who have access to things like laptops and books at their homes) and students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have much greater difficulties in accessing materials. Difficulties also persist for pupils with special needs and those who usually receive school meals. Maintaining a positive approach among young people is therefore also a matter of concern. The current restrictions are due to continue until 5 May, with a possible easing and partial reopening of schools in May and June. On the other hand, primary school students usually make their communion during the month of May, but with the churches closed, there is great uncertainty as to how this sacrament will work.

Finally, secondary school pupils usually sit two state exams in June each year: the Junior Certificate is taken at the end of the third year (15 years) and the Leaving Certificate at the end of the sixth year (18 years). In the current circumstances, the Department of Education has cancelled this year's Junior Certificate. However, the Leaving Certificate must proceed as it is the basis upon which University entry is decided in Ireland. At the beginning of April, the Department announced that the exam will be postponed until July or August, and teachers and principals are currently in active discussions to determine the practical arrangements.

### ITALY

Since 5 March, Italian schools have been closed and distance learning has been introduced. The final exam of the first cycle has been cancelled and the final exam of the second cycle (at the end of high school) will be limited to an oral test which should be held in June. It has not yet been decided whether this will be carried out in the schools or online since the date for the reopening of the schools is not yet known.

As far as Catholic schools are concerned, they have promoted the use of various tools for distance learning activities. For example, training has been organised to support teachers, digital devices have been distributed to the most disadvantaged, and a specific approach to people with disabilities has been provided. This has strengthened the closeness between schools, children and families. On the other hand, the Italian Church has paid attention to Catholic schools. Many bishops have sent video messages to schools, especially on the occasion of Easter. The work of the associations that bring together headmasters, leaders, teachers and families of Catholic schools has been important. One slogan that sums up these efforts is: "Let's stay at home, stay connected, stay in solidarity".

In recent weeks, meetings with the Italian government and parliament have multiplied, mainly in order to create a fund for parity schools and to grant subsidies for families. Indeed, the confinement has hit part of the population hard, affecting the income of workers and thus the possibility of paying school fees. Discussions should continue in the coming days.

Finally, for several weeks now, Catholic schools have been reflecting on the next school year, developing strategies to ensure the safety and quality of learning (in school or online). In addition to the attention given to the technical aspects, a message of hope, unity and educational alliance for the good of the little ones has been born. In addition to the Italian Church, Pope Francis also prayed and expressed his support for teachers and students, so that the virus of indifference could be overcome and there could be a contagion of solidarity.

# ROMANIA

Together with the Holy Father, the bishops, priests and all the faithful, we pray for those who are suffering from this pandemic and for the children, young people and teachers in our schools.

FATHER ION RIBA



After initially suspending classes, the decision was taken to close public schools from 22 March. Since then, the introduction of online courses has been encouraged in order to ensure continuity of learning, in particular through the broadcasting of courses on the national television channel. The Ministry advocates adapting the volume of courses, without transmitting new learning, and suggests not using student evaluation.

On March 30, the Ministry of Education decided to maintain the national exams and proposed a series of mock subjects so that students could practice and self-evaluate themselves using the evaluation and grading grids. From 7 April, the acquisition of computers was organised and these were offered to pre-university students by the competent authorities. Subsequently, the Ministry decreed that pupils would only take the tests in subjects taught in the school before the suspension of classes.

Generally speaking, the epidemic has had an impact on national education, and consequently on Catholic education. Since classes have been suspended, teachers have maintained a link between themselves, the school, the students and their parents via the Internet or telephone. Classes are given through educational platforms and broadcast on national television for ninth and final-year students who have to prepare for national exams.

In this period, the Romanian Catholic Bishops' Conference encourages the observance of health prevention measures. The consecration of Romania to Our Lady of Fatima was a moment of spiritual gravity and intensity. Moreover, masses are celebrated and broadcast in the media or on the internet. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals can be celebrated in the presence of a maximum of 8 people, as well as communion to the sick in their homes.

This pandemic period has seen the appearance of initiatives, such as the Catholic Hour, a programme transmitted on the Facebook page of the Signis Romania Association and on the <u>website</u>. The Holy Father's prayers, homilies and catechesis offer encouragement. He invites us to pray today for the teachers who have to work hard to make their lessons online, as well as for the students who have to take their exams in an unusual way. Father lon Riba tells us: "Together with the Holy Father, the bishops, priests and all the faithful, we pray for those who are suffering from this pandemic and for the children, young people and teachers in our schools."



### **SLOVENIA**

In Slovenia, schools have been closed since 16 March. The Ministry has issued a decree to start distance learning. In the first week, about 80% of primary schools and 90% of secondary schools were able to implement this decree (to varying degrees). Initially, the possibility of rearranging the school calendar, extending the school year or introducing Saturday schooling was considered. As the situation has not improved, everyone is now learning from home.

This e-learning approach obviously presents challenges. In the Catholic schools, access to sufficient equipment for all has been ensured, either with materials already in the schools or through donations. Another challenge has been the implementation of the curriculum. At the beginning, the idea was to review prior learning, but gradually, new content was presented online to children. The acquisition of these new learnings is ensured through private lessons, prompt email responses from teachers, the use of interactive materials, etc.

The major issue at present remains evaluation. So far, no students have been graded. At the end of April, the National Institute for Education issued guidelines on this subject, favouring the use of oral examinations. Most schools will start assessing students after 1 May. The three national standardised tests for primary school (after grades 3, 6 and 9) have been cancelled. The final exams for secondary school (after 4th year) would start on 30 May. These pupils are to return to school from 11 May, following strict restrictions. In addition, it is also likely that kindergartens and primary schools (only for the first three years) will reopen to provide care for children whose parents are returning to work.

The situation in Slovenia is well under control and probably one of the best in Europe, with fewer than 100 deaths so far, and fairly strict restrictions have been put in place (restrictions on gatherings, limiting the number of people present in shops, wearing masks is compulsory). However, there is strong pressure from part of the population to ease certain restrictions.

### UNAEC

The European Union of Former Pupils of Catholic Education (UNAEC) and the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC) have collaborated in the drafting of a text proposed by Pax Christi International, together with 10 Christian inspired organisations and movements represented in the Council of Europe.

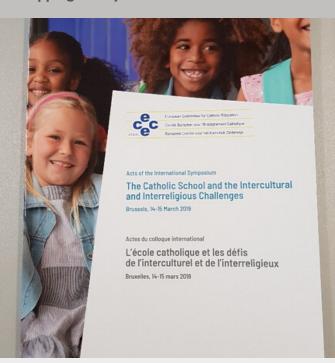
This declaration defends the respect of democratic principles and fundamental rights in times of pandemic. It also defends the role of the Council of Europe as the guardian of European values in the face of the temptation - and risks - of democratic abuses. Available here.





In March 2019, the CEEC organised a symposium in Brussels on "The Catholic School and Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges".

The proceedings are now available (English/French) as a 165-page publication. It can be ordered from the secretariat at the price of 15 euros (plus shipping costs).



The Holy Father has appointed as consultors of the Congregation for Catholic Education Dr. Sjur Bergan, head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching at the Council of Europe (Norway-France), and Professor Gerald M. Cattaro, professor and executive director of the Center for Catholic School Leadership Administration and Policy at the Fordham University of New York, United States of America. We warmly congratulate them for their appointment.

# CALLS FOR COOPERATION AND MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

TEACHER TRAINING - LJUBJANA AND SUMMER 2020

The use of new technologies in the classroom, drama as a learning tool, teaching outdoors, or learning through community work. Are you a teacher and interested in these themes? Come and discover the training courses in these fields and many others (physics, music...) by registering for the seminars organised from June 29th to July 5th by our Slovenian member association of the St Stanislav Institute. These training courses are intended for teachers who are active in an Erasmus+ project. You will find the courses and more information on the website.

### ITSLEARNING: SEARCH FOR E-REFERENTS

Familiar with the digital learning platform ItsLearning? Are you by any chance the contact person in your school? SeGEC is looking for "itslearning e-referents" to share our experiences and learn from your practices and realities. Are you ready to get in touch with other teachers and principals across Europe using the platform? Contact sonia.gilon@segec.be

### CO-CONSTRUCT THE « GLOBAL VILLAGE »

On 15 October 2020, Pope Francis invites young people and all the players in the world of Education to Rome to reflect together on a Global Educational Pact. On this occasion, the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC) suggests coconstructing a book that will bring together the contributions of the players of Catholic Education, in order to build the "global village" imagined by the Pope. This book will be entitled "The Global Educational Pact: An education of, with and for all. Towards a more fraternal, united and sustainable society". National Secretaries, Episcopal delegates and Ministers of Education, directors, presidents of parents' associations and students are invited to participate in this project. Contributions are expected by 25 May 2020. For more information, please contact pactoglobal@lasallecampus.es.



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# **CALENDAR**

SEPTEMBRE 30, 2020: The CEEC Executive Board meeting

OCTOBRE 5-9, 2020: <u>Conference</u> "Klingenthal 2020: Let's Tell Our Stories - The Positive Impact of Religion in Public Education" organised by CoGREE in Klingenthal (FR). The reflection will focus on the place of religion in our secularised society. It will be an opportunity to meet colleagues from all over Europe and to address together the challenges we face. No registration fee.

OCTOBRE 13-14, 2020 : OIEC Council Meeting (originally scheduled on May 12-13, 2020).

OCTOBRE 15, 2020: <u>Global Pact for Education</u> following the call of Pope Francis (initially scheduled for May 14, 2020)

NOVEMBRE 20-21, 2020: CEEC General Assembly meeting in Madrid. More information coming soon.

AVRIL 14-15, 2021: Conférence Conference "Committed to a Vision. The Significance of Catholic Schools for Society and Church in the light of contemporary Challenges" organised at Stephansplatz 3 in Vienna (AT) by the Interdiocesan Office for Teaching and Education in Austria. During these two days, keynote speakers will examine, on the one hand, how Catholic schools can contribute to a humanistic vision of society and, on the other hand, how the Church can benefit from and learn from the experiences of Catholic schools. The languages of the conference will be English and French (with simultaneous translation into French or English depending on the language). Registration fee: 100 euros (dinner, lunch and coffee break included). Detailed information on the programme and accommodation possibilities will be communicated at a later date.

AVRIL 16, 2021: CEEC General Assembly meeting in Vienna. This meeting will be linked to the conference on 14 and 15 April organised by our Austrian member association (see above).

More information will be communicated to you later.