

Pope Francis' address to the participants of the COMECE Congress

(Re)Thinking Europe – a Christian Contribution to the Future of the European Project

28 October 2017

Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Authorities,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join you at the conclusion of your Dialogue on the theme (Re)Thinking Europe – a Christian Contribution to the Future of the European Project, sponsored by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE). In a particular way I greet the President of the Commission, His Eminence Cardinal Reinhard Marx, and the Honourable Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament, and I thank them for their kind words. To each of you I express my deep appreciation for your active contribution to this important discussion.

In these days, your Dialogue has allowed for wide-ranging reflection on the future of Europe from a variety of viewpoints, thanks to the presence of leading figures from the ecclesial, political and academic sectors, and from civil society as a whole. The young have been able to present their expectations and hopes, and to share them with their elders, while these in turn have drawn on their own reflections and experiences. It is significant that this meeting was intended above all to be a dialogue, pursued in a spirit of openness and freedom, for the sake of mutual enrichment. It has sought to shed light on the future path of Europe, the road that all of us are called to travel in surmounting present crises and facing challenges yet to come.

To speak of a Christian contribution to the future of the continent means, before all else, to consider our task, as Christians today, in these lands which have been so richly shaped by the faith down the centuries. What is our responsibility at a time when the face of Europe is increasingly distinguished by a plurality of cultures and religions, while for many people Christianity is regarded as a thing of the past, both alien and irrelevant?

Person and community

In the twilight of the ancient world, as the glories of Rome fell into the ruins that still amaze us, and new peoples flooded across the borders of the Empire, one young man echoed anew the words of the Psalmist:

"Who is the man that longs for life and desires to see good days?"ⁱ By asking this question in the Prologue of his Rule, Saint Benedict pointed the people of his time, and ours as well, to a view of man radically different from that of classical Greco-Roman culture, and even more

from the violent outlook typical of the invading barbarians. Man is no longer simply a *civis*, a citizen endowed with privileges to be enjoyed at leisure; no longer a *miles*, a soldier serving the powers of the time; and above all, no longer a *servus*, a commodity bereft of freedom and destined solely for hard labour.

Saint Benedict was not concerned about social status, riches or power. He appealed to the nature common to every human being, who, whatever his or her condition, longs for life and desires to see good days. For Benedict, the important thing was not functions but persons. This was one of the foundational values brought by Christianity: the sense of the person created in the image of God. This principle led to the building of the monasteries, which in time would become the cradle of the human, cultural, religious and economic rebirth of the continent.

The first and perhaps the greatest contribution that Christians can make to today's Europe is to remind her that she is not a mass of statistics or institutions, but is made up of people. Sadly, we see how frequently issues get reduced to discussions about numbers. There are no citizens, only votes. There are no migrants, only quotas. There are no workers, only economic markers. There are no poor, only thresholds of poverty. The concrete reality of the human person is thus reduced to an abstract – and thus more comfortable and reassuring – principle. The reason for this is clear: people have faces; they force us to assume a responsibility that is real, personal and effective. Statistics, however useful and important, are about arguments; they are soulless. They offer an alibi for not getting involved, because they never touch us in the flesh.

To acknowledge that others are persons means to value what unites us to them. To be a person connects us with others; it makes us a community. The second contribution that Christians can make to the future of Europe, then, is to help recover the sense of belonging to a community. It is not by chance that the founders of the European project chose that very word to identify the new political subject coming into being. Community is the greatest antidote to the forms of individualism typical of our times, to that widespread tendency in the West to see oneself and one's life in isolation from others. The concept of freedom is misunderstood and seen as if it were a right to be left alone, free from all bonds. As a result, a deracinated society has grown up, lacking a sense of belonging and of its own past.

Christians recognize that their identity is primarily relational. They are joined to one another as members of one body, the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:12), and each, with his or her unique identity and gifts, freely shares in the common work of building up that body. Analogously, this relationship is also found in the areas of interpersonal relationships and civil society. By interacting with others, each one discovers his or her own qualities and defects, strengths and weaknesses. In other words, they come to know who they are, their specific identity.

The family, as the primordial community, remains the most fundamental place for this process of discovery. There, diversity is valued and at the same time brought into unity. The family is the harmonious union of the differences between man and woman, which becomes stronger and more authentic to the extent that it is fruitful, capable of opening itself to life and to others. Secular communities, likewise, are alive when they are capable of

openness, embracing the differences and gifts of each person while at the same time generating new life, development, labour, innovation and culture. Person and community are thus the foundations of the Europe that we, as Christians, want and can contribute to building. The bricks of this structure are dialogue, inclusion, solidarity, development and peace.

A place of dialogue

Today the whole of Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, from the North Pole to the Mediterranean, cannot miss the chance to be first and foremost a place of candid and constructive dialogue, in which all participants share equal dignity. We are called to build a Europe in which we can meet and engage at every level, much as in the ancient agorá, the main square of the polis. The latter was not just a marketplace but also the nerve centre of political life, where laws were passed for the common good. The presence of a temple dominating the square was a reminder that the horizontal dimension of daily life ought never to overlook the transcendent, which invites us to see beyond the ephemeral, the transitory and the provisional.

This leads us to reflect on the positive and constructive role that religion in general plays in the building up of society. I think, for example, of the contribution made by interreligious dialogue to greater mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims in Europe. Regrettably, a certain secularist prejudice, still in vogue, is incapable of seeing the positive value of religion's public and objective role in society, preferring to relegate it to the realm of the merely private and sentimental. The result is the predominance of a certain groupthink,ⁱⁱ quite apparent in international meetings, which sees the affirmation of religious identity as a threat to itself and its dominance, and ends up promoting an ersatz conflict between the right to religious freedom and other fundamental rights.

Favouring dialogue, in any form whatsoever, is a fundamental responsibility of politics. Sadly, all too often we see how politics is becoming instead a forum for clashes between opposing forces. The voice of dialogue is replaced by shouted claims and demands. One often has the feeling that the primary goal is no longer the common good, and this perception is shared by more and more citizens. Extremist and populist groups are finding fertile ground in many countries; they make protest the heart of their political message, without offering the alternative of a constructive political project. Dialogue is replaced either by a futile antagonism that can even threaten civil coexistence, or by the domination of a single political power that constrains and obstructs a true experience of democracy. In the one, bridges are burned; in the other, walls are erected.

Christians are called to promote political dialogue, especially where it is threatened and where conflict seems to prevail. Christians are called to restore dignity to politics and to view politics as a lofty service to the common good, not a platform for power. This demands a suitable formation, since politics is not the 'art of improvising'. Instead, it is a noble expression of self-sacrifice and personal dedication for the benefit of the community. To be a leader demands thoughtfulness, training and experience.

An inclusive milieu

Leaders together share responsibility for promoting a Europe that is an inclusive community, free of one fundamental misunderstanding: namely that inclusion does not mean downplaying differences. On the contrary, a community is truly inclusive when differences are valued and viewed as a shared source of enrichment. Seen in this way, migrants are more a resource than a burden. Christians are called to meditate seriously on Jesus' words: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). Especially when faced with the tragedy of displaced persons and refugees, we must not forget that we are dealing with persons, who cannot be welcomed or rejected at our own pleasure, or in accordance with political, economic or even religious ideas.

Nor is this opposed to the duty of all government authorities to address the migration issue "with the virtue proper to governance, which is prudence".ⁱⁱⁱ Authorities should keep in mind the need for an open heart, but also their ability to provide for the full integration, on the social, economic and political level, of those entering their countries. We cannot regard the phenomenon of migration as an indiscriminate and unregulated process, but neither can we erect walls of indifference and fear. For their part, migrants must not neglect their own grave responsibility to learn, respect and assimilate the culture and traditions of the nations that welcome them.

Room for solidarity

Striving for an inclusive community means making room for solidarity. To be a community in fact entails supporting one another; bearing burdens and making extraordinary sacrifices do not fall to some few, while the rest remain entrenched in defence of their privileged positions. A European Union that, in facing its crises, fails to recover a sense of being a single community that sustains and assists its members – and not just a collection of small interest groups – would miss out not only on one of the greatest challenges of its history, but also on one of the greatest opportunities for its own future.

Solidarity, which from a Christian perspective finds its *raison d'être* in the precept of love (cf. Mt 22:37-40), has to be the lifeblood of a mature community. Together with the other cardinal principle of subsidiarity, it is not limited to relations between the states and regions of Europe. To be a solidary community means to be concerned for the most vulnerable of society, the poor and those discarded by social and economic systems, beginning with the elderly and the unemployed. At the same time, solidarity calls for a recovery of cooperation and mutual support between the generations.

An unprecedented generational conflict has been taking place since the 1960's. In passing on to new generations the ideals that made Europe great, one could say, with a touch of hyperbole, that betrayal was preferred to tradition. The rejection of what had been passed down from earlier generations was followed by a period of dramatic sterility. Not only because Europe has fewer children, and all too many were denied the right to be born, but also because there has been a failure to pass on the material and cultural tools that young people need to face the future. Europe has a kind of memory deficit. To become once more

a solidary community means rediscovering the value of our own past, in order to enrich the present and to pass on a future of hope to future generations.

Instead, many young people are lost, without roots or prospects, "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4:14). At times they are even 'held captive' by possessive adults who struggle to carry out their own responsibilities. It is a grave responsibility to provide an education, not only by offering technical and scientific knowledge, but above all by working "to promote the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human".^{iv} This demands the involvement of society as a whole. Education is a shared duty that requires the active and combined participation of parents, schools and universities, religious and civil institutions. Without education, culture does not develop and the life of the community dries up.

A source of development

A Europe that rediscovers itself as a community will surely be a source of development for herself and for the whole world. Development must be understood in the terms laid down by Blessed Paul VI:

"To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man. As an eminent specialist on this question has rightly said: 'We cannot allow economics to be separated from human realities, nor development from the civilization in which it takes place. What counts for us is man – each individual man, each human group, and humanity as a whole'".^v

Work certainly contributes to human development; it is an essential factor in the dignity and growth of the person. Employment and suitable working conditions are needed. The last century provided many eloquent examples of Christian entrepreneurs who understood that the success of their ventures depended above all on the ability to provide employment opportunities and dignified working conditions. There is a need to recover the spirit of those ventures, for they are also the best antidote to the imbalances caused by a soulless globalization which, more attentive to profits than people, has created significant pockets of poverty, unemployment, exploitation and social unease.

It would also be helpful to recover a sense of the need to provide concrete opportunities for employment, especially to the young. Today, many people tend to shy away from certain jobs because they seem physically demanding and unprofitable, forgetting how indispensable they are for human development. Where would we be without the efforts of those whose work contributes daily to putting food on our tables? Where would we be without the patient and creative labour of those who produce the clothes we wear or build the houses in which we live? Many essential professions are now looked down upon. Yet they are essential both for society and, above all, for the satisfaction that they give to those who realize that they are being useful in themselves and for others, thanks to their daily work.

Governments also have the duty to create economic conditions that promote a healthy entrepreneurship and appropriate levels of employment. Politicians are especially responsible for restoring a virtuous circle that, starting from investments that favour the family and education, enable the harmonious and peaceful development of the entire civil community.

A promise of peace

Finally, the commitment of Christians in Europe must represent a promise of peace. This was the central concern that inspired the signatories of the Treaties of Rome. After two World Wars and atrocious acts of violence perpetrated by peoples against peoples, the time had come to affirm the right to peace.^{vi} Yet today we continue to see how fragile is that peace, and how particular and national agendas risk thwarting the courageous dreams of the founders of Europe.^{vii}

Being peacemakers (cf. Mt 5:9), however, does not mean simply striving to avoid internal tensions, working to end the bloodshed and conflicts throughout our world, or relieving those who suffer. To be workers for peace entails promoting a culture of peace. This requires love for the truth, without which authentic human relationships cannot exist; it also requires the pursuit of justice, without which oppression becomes the rule in any community.

Peace also requires creativity. The European Union will remain faithful to its commitment to peace only to the extent that it does not lose hope and can renew itself in order to respond to the needs and expectations of its citizens. A hundred years ago, in these very days, the battle of Caporetto was fought, one of the most dramatic of the First World War. It was the culmination of that war of attrition, which set a sinister record in reaping countless casualties for the sake of risible gains. From that event we learn that entrenchment in one's own positions only leads to failure. Now is not the time, then, to dig trenches, but instead to work courageously to realize the founding fathers' dream of a united and harmonious Europe, a community of peoples desirous of sharing a future of development and peace.

To be the soul of Europe

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,

The author of the Letter to Diognetus states that "what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world".^{viii} In our day, Christians are called to revitalize Europe and to revive its conscience, not by occupying spaces, but by generating processes^{ix} capable of awakening new energies in society. This is exactly what Saint Benedict did. It was not by chance that Paul VI proclaimed him the Patron of Europe. He was not concerned to occupy spaces in a wayward and confused world. Sustained by faith, Benedict looked ahead, and from a tiny cave in Subiaco he gave birth to an exciting and irresistible movement that changed the face of Europe. May Saint Benedict, "messenger of peace, promoter of union, master of

civilization"^x make clear to us, the Christians of our own time, how a joyful hope, flowing from faith, is able to change the world.

Thank you.

ⁱ SAINT BENEDICT, Rule, Prologue, 14; cf. Ps 34:12.

ⁱⁱ La dittatura del pensiero unico, Morning Reflection in the Domus Sanctae Marthae Chapel, 10 April 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Press Conference on the Return Flight from Colombia, 10 September 2017.

^{iv} SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration Gravissimum Educationis (28 October 1963), 3.

^v PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter Populorum Progressio (26 March 1967), 14.

^{vi} Cf. Address to Students and Academic Authorities, Bologna, 1 October 2017, 3.

^{vii} Cf. *ibid.*

^{viii} *Op. cit.*, VI.

^{ix} Cf. Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, 223.

^x PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter Pacis Nuntius, 24 October 1964.