

**Address by  
His Eminence Cardinal Pietro PAROLIN,  
Secretary of State,  
to the ComECE Plenary Assembly  
28th October 2020**

Your Eminence,  
dear brothers in the Episcopate and the Presbyterate,  
dear friends and staff-members of ComECE,

I am delighted that I can take part in your Plenary Assembly, which is taking place on the special occasion of the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Commission of the Episcopates of the European Union. I am particularly grateful to the President, His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Claude HOLLERICH, for his cordial invitation which, despite the pandemic, has at last been able to come to fruition, even if only virtually. I also greet every one of you and the Episcopates you represent, as well as the Secretary General, Father Manuel BARRIOS PRIETO, and the whole ComECE Secretariat, whom I thank for the valued work you do. I bring all of you greetings from and the blessing of the Holy Father, which he clearly expressed in the letter he wrote to me a few days ago, along with his gratitude and appreciation for your important service to the Church.

We are certainly living in uncertain and difficult times, when, as Pope Francis pointed out, a "thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities"<sup>1</sup> and, sadly, it has continued to thicken. An unexpected storm has suddenly struck us and we all find ourselves in the same boat, fragile and disoriented. Unfortunately, the situation does not seem to be improving. Many countries have been and continue to be hit hard by the pandemic and it is not yet possible to see a way out of this health-care, economic and social crisis. In this situation, the Church in Europe is called to carry out her mission more zealously, and to make her contribution by offering a message of faith, unity, solidarity and hope to this "old" continent of ours which we love so much.

As we know, the process of European unity took its first steps on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 1950, with the declaration made by Robert SCHUMAN, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, whose cause for beatification is currently going forward. SCHUMAN, in his role as French Minister for Foreign Affairs, set out an idea which was both innovative and courageous: the creation of a European coal and steel community, whose members would pool the production of these

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<sup>1</sup> Extraordinary moment of prayer and *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing presided over by Pope Francis (27 March 2020)

two highly essential commodities, in times of peace and of war, and thus reduce the possibility of a future conflict like the one that had just come to an end. This was the start of something totally new, a plan for supra-national unity, which would guarantee peace and overcome the forms of nationalism which had torn Europe apart so terribly. Right from the start, the Church welcomed this process. It is enough to recall what Pope Pius XII said on 15th June 1957, at the Congress promoted by the European Movement: "You have some idea how closely We have followed the progress of the European idea and how we have watched the concrete efforts being made to make the idea penetrate more deeply into men's minds and, under the proper circumstances, to bring about its realisation"<sup>2</sup>.

In subsequent years, the Church has continued to follow the process of European integration closely and to make her own contribution. It is enough to mention, for example, the proclamation by Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II of the Patron Saints of Europe, Saint John Paul II's visit to the European Parliament on 11th October 1988 and Pope Francis' on 25th November 2014. Something that is still clear in our memory - so much so that Pope Francis mentioned it in the letter he sent me just before our gathering was due to take place - is the speech Saint John Paul gave at Santiago de Compostela on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1982, at the tomb of the Apostle James, when he almost pleaded: "I, the Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the Universal Church, cry out with love from Santiago to you, ancient Europe: 'Rediscover yourself. Be yourself'. Rediscover your beginnings. Let your roots live again"<sup>3</sup>.

The Church's closeness to Europe has become even more intense with Pope Francis, the first non-European Pope in more than a thousand years. The Pope has addressed numerous speeches and messages to the Old Continent, including the *Urbi et Orbi* message last Easter, when he recalled that "the European Union is presently facing an epochal challenge, on which will depend not only its future but that of the whole world"<sup>4</sup>. It is also significant that his most recent Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli tutti*, begins with references to the European Union, which he describes as an example of integration, and to his own words to the European Parliament, when he mentioned "the firm conviction of the founders of the European Union, who envisioned a future based on the capacity to work together in bridging divisions and in fostering peace and fellowship between all the peoples of this continent"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Pius XII, Address to the Participants at the Congress of Europe (13 June 1957)

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, Celebration of Europe in Santiago de Compostela (9 November 1982), n. 4

<sup>4</sup> Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* message (12 April 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020, n. 10 and Francis, *Address to the European Parliament*, Strasbourg (25 November 2014)

The institution of ComECE, on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1980, was a tangible sign of the increased relevance of the European Community in the lives of the citizens of member states and of the importance the Holy See attributed to the activities it promoted, especially following the introduction of direct voting for Members of the European Parliament, which had been approved the previous year. ComECE was born exactly ten years after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the European Union, and it acknowledged the need for reciprocal openness and fraternal co-operation between the Churches of Europe, among themselves and with the European Institutions, to "promote and protect the common good, in the light of the joy of the Gospel of Christ"<sup>6</sup>.

It is clearly helpful to recall that the Holy See's approach to the European Institutions is purely diplomatic and aims to encourage the growth of bilateral relationships and dialogue on themes of common concern in the context of the international scene. The work ComECE does has a different perspective, in the context of what is foreseen in Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and aims, amongst other things, to follow the political process in the European Union in areas of interest to the Church and to communicate to the European Institutions the opinions and views of the Episcopates relating to the process of European integration<sup>7</sup>. Its work is broad in scope, complex and extremely valuable to the Church in Europe, which, in its interaction with civil authorities, faces numerous challenges, particularly in the field of legislation, with the social consequences they entail.

In this context, I feel bound to mention another important continental episcopal organism: the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe (CCEE), composed of the Presidents of all the Episcopal Conferences of Europe and represented here by its Secretary General, Father Martin Michaliček. CCEE and ComECE are called, each in its own way - the former with a more pastoral profile, the second more interested in the political and legislative processes of the EU - to work closely and in full harmony, for the good of the Church and the whole of Europe. The voice of pastors is actually needed more than ever, according to the prudent warning of Saint Gregory the Great: "The ruler should be discreet in keeping silence, profitable in speech; lest he either utter what ought to be suppressed or suppress what he ought to utter. For, as incautious speaking leads into error, so indiscreet silence leaves in error those who might have been instructed"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> ComECE Statute, Preamble (text available only in Italian)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* [Translator's note - cf. also [www.comece.eu/site/en/ourmission](http://www.comece.eu/site/en/ourmission) under "Communicate"]

<sup>8</sup> Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, Part 2, chapter 4 [PL 77, 30-31]

The Plenary Assembly is, therefore, an important way of letting the whole of Europe hear her pastors responding with care and concern to the challenges of the present time. Today in addition to their voices there is the authoritative word of the Holy Father Francis, who, as Supreme Pastor of the universal Church, offers his own positive contribution to our reflection on Europe, on her face today and tomorrow. So this is the right context to focus on what is in the letter the Holy Father sent me a few days ago, and which was published yesterday. I think the intention behind the Pope's letter is, first and foremost, to pursue a reflection on the future Europe, a continent close to his heart, "not only because of my family's origins but also because of the central role that it has had, and, I believe, must continue to have, albeit with different accents, in the history of humanity"<sup>9</sup>.

As always, Pope Francis' reflection is not an attempt - to use language dear to him - to "occupy spaces", in other words to give precise indications about steps or initiatives it would be opportune to take - this is more the task of individual Bishops and Episcopal Conferences - but rather to "open processes", to suggest an ideal trajectory and the basic elements on which to reflect for those responsible for governance to undertake the necessary actions.

As has often been pointed out, there are no abstract concepts in Pope Francis' outlook. There are always people, with their hopes, dramas, difficulties and the positive contributions they can make. In this light, it is understandable that the Pope's way of looking at things is always one which puts persons and communities at the centre of the debate on Europe. If it were to lose sight of the centrality of the person and his or her links, in other words the awareness that every human being is part of a social fabric, a community, Europe would be nothing more than a set of sterile bureaucratic processes. At this time above all, when we have all been forced to face up to a common "enemy" - COVID-19 - which we could not have imagined and which we are struggling to control because it takes no account of borders or procedures, we are called back to the urgent need to look at the person, not in abstract, simply as the subject of multiple individual rights, but in his or her real characteristics, a person made up of hopes, joys, pains and - above all - connections.

The virus forces us to rediscover that there is no such thing as a 'solitary' life. The Pope recalled this in the moving moment of prayer that took place in a deserted Piazza San Pietro: "nobody reaches salvation by himself or herself", because "we are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, as ancient navigators needed the stars"<sup>10</sup>. It is a principle dear to Pope Francis

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe* (22 October 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Extraordinary moment of prayer and *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing presided over by Pope Francis (27 March 2020)

and one he has often emphasised. Just three years ago today, at the Dialogue *(Re)Thinking Europe*, organised by ComECE in the Vatican, he said: "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"<sup>11</sup>. The pandemic invites us, therefore, to change lifestyle and to rediscover an identity on which to build, an identity which cannot but be communitarian, one which is capable of overcoming divisions and contradictions.

In this sense, neither ComECE nor CCEE is just a privileged place to live and affirm the ecclesial communion that links Bishops to each other, but a sign - we could almost say a prophetic one - of the sense of belonging to a single community which ought to be a distinctive sign of the common feeling of the peoples of Europe. Consequently, the Episcopates have an important role in ensuring that the obvious differences between our peoples, which have roots deep in the past, become not a pretext for increasing divergencies, but a way of recognising the richness of our continent, a rich variety of histories, languages and sensitivities, but united by a shared feeling and destiny. The first duty of Bishops is to bear witness to the unity that flows from faith, where differences still have a legitimate place. Even today, Christian witness is Europe's "connective tissue" and is always required to show itself - according to Paul's way of putting it in the Letter to the Ephesians - "if we live by the truth and in love" (*Ephesians* 4,15).

In his letter, Pope Francis traces some guidelines for Christian witness and commitment in Europe today, through his four 'dreams'. "I dream", he says, "of a Europe that is a friend to each and all..., that is a family and a community..., that is inclusive and generous..., marked by a healthy secularism"<sup>12</sup>.

A Europe that is a friend to each and all is first and foremost a Europe that loves the person in his truth, the whole person, and above all respects transcendent dignity. Here we need to recall some basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching, which are also at the heart of the European Project. These principles can help people interpret and evaluate proposed laws as they are being worked out, and at the same time offer valuable orientations to people with political responsibilities. One of these principles and values which is particularly important is the recognition of the sacred and inviolable dignity of

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<sup>11</sup> Francis, Audience with participants in the Dialogue *(Re)Thinking Europe: A Christian Contribution to the future of the European Project* (28 October 2017)

<sup>12</sup> Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe* (22 October 2020)

every human life, from conception until its natural end, and to this should be linked the defence and promotion of the family, the true cell of society, based on the stable union of a man and a woman.

It is actually clear that, in recent decades, there has been a constant evolution in the idea European legislators have of a person, at a continental level and in particular states. It has become more and more the bearer of individual subjective rights, which are limited exclusively by the interests of the state, most of all in questions of security, like the fight against terrorism and money-laundering. We see a particularly clear example of it in legislation on protection of personal data which, while useful, presupposes a conception of the human person as the almost absolute holder of rights understood individualistically. The prevailing concept of person here, as in other more worrying recent developments in state legislation like, for example, those linked to euthanasia or those which put marriage on the same level as other types of unions, is a solitary or monadic one<sup>13</sup>, detached from the idea of belonging to a community, composed of a plurality of subjects who do, indeed, have rights, but also duties. Pope Francis, in contrast, reminds us that "person and community are... the foundations of the Europe that we, as Christians, want and can contribute to building"<sup>14</sup>.

In the present moment in history, the Church is indeed called to repeat doctrines, but above all to make the most of the life-experiences that flow from the Gospel and show a different way of being human. The people of our time, to paraphrase Saint Paul VI, look more readily for witnesses than for teachers<sup>15</sup>. What happens, then is a love for the person, especially one living through the drama of an unwanted pregnancy, one who is sick and can no longer bear the burden of suffering, the migrant who arrives, lost, on our shores and often the victim of unscrupulous traffickers. Such love for the person necessarily becomes real in gestures of charity and solidarity and we know how Europe is bubbling over with acts done by people who really are close to people on the margins and those who are suffering.

In giving comfort, Christians cannot confine themselves to merely charitable actions. They are called to show a different understanding of man and of life: not someone left to himself or herself, but someone who is wanted, loved and aware that fatigue, pain, suffering, sickness and death are realities that have been redeemed by the Lord Jesus, not simply meaningless trials. So the witness of

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<sup>13</sup> Francis, *Address to the European Parliament*, Strasbourg (25 November 2014)

<sup>14</sup> Francis, *Audience with participants in the Dialogue (Re)Thinking Europe: A Christian Contribution to the future of the European Project* (28 October 2017)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), n. 41

charity irradiated by the Gospel is called also to be a witness of truth. Saint Paul VI himself said that "the Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life"<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, it is as well to remember that "the Church 'has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities'. She works for 'the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity'"<sup>17</sup>. For this reason, the Church, "while respecting the autonomy of political life, does not restrict her mission to the private sphere. On the contrary, 'she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines' in the building of a better world, or fail to 'reawaken the spiritual energy' that can contribute to the betterment of society"<sup>18</sup>. In this way we can understand Pope Francis' invitation to Europe to exercise a 'healthy secularism', and to be a place "where God and Caesar remain distinct but not opposed"<sup>19</sup>, where it is possible to profess one's faith publicly and make one's contribution to the good of society as a Christian.

Now I should like briefly to mention some of the current priorities concerning the European Union which, in light of the aforementioned Article 17, could be a focus for ComECE's work with the European Institutions.

A first question, one that is particular close to the Holy Father's heart, and one which Europe will have to deal with this year and in coming years, is picking up the health-care, social, economic and human consequences of the pandemic. It will be a long and difficult process, where the Church will have to be in the front line. In this context, it is worth noting the great interest there has been, even among individual European Commissars, in the Vatican COVID-19 Commission (VCC), which the Holy Father wanted, to deal with the consequences of the health-care emergency. For him, the pandemic is "a kind of watershed, forcing us to take a stand. We can either continue to pursue the path we have taken in the past decade, yielding to the temptation to autonomy and thus to ever greater misunderstanding, disagreement and conflict, or we can rediscover the *path of fraternity* that inspired and guided the founders of modern Europe, beginning precisely with Robert SCHUMAN"<sup>20</sup>.

The period we are living through is, therefore, a chance not to be missed for building a more just and inclusive Europe. First of all, as the Pope observes, it is necessary to share scientific research and investments for producing vaccines,

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 22

<sup>17</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020, n. 276

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe* (22 October 2020)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

in a way which gives priority to those who need it most<sup>21</sup>, reaching the weakest sectors of society. It is also important to make appropriate and intelligent use of the tools with which it is hoped to overcome the consequences of the pandemic. Among innovative and interesting proposals that have been made, I wish to mention the *Next Generation EU* recovery fund which, even if it is still to be sorted out in detail and in its practical implications, seems to be a move in the right direction for making solidarity between member states a reality. Such solidarity needs to touch the basic fabric of society, the family, by means of suitable support policies. It is a question of enhancing the most important resource civil society has and, above all, putting an end to the now excessively long demographic winter, which is eating away at the base of Europe's future.

The second question I should like to mention concerns a real tragedy of our time, made up of all those people who have been forced to leave their homeland to look for a better future, or to escape wars and persecutions: migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers who are knocking on Europe's doors and asking for a welcome, understanding and solidarity. Pope Francis has spoken often and with great clarity on this situation, which is of great concern to Europe and particularly the European Union, and has asked people to welcome, protect, look out for and integrate these people. Obviously, we are well aware of the problems and the distinctions that need to be made, and that sometimes the strain on the population in receiving or transit countries can be almost unbearable. In this sense, we believe the *Dublin Convention* needs to be reviewed. The new *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, presented on 23rd September last by the European Commission, is trying to point a way forward in this direction, even if it gives rise to a few doubts, concerning both its basic approach, which seems to focus on the security of borders and containment of waves of migrants rather than on making them welcome, and on particular proposals like, for example, the possibility of financing repatriation of people who are not going to be accepted or time limits on evaluation requests for asylum. Some Catholic bodies, like Caritas Europa, have already expressed their perplexity on these and other aspects of the European Commission's proposal.

A third question of particular importance is the question of climate and the environment. In his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis sought commitment from everybody in favour of our common home, inviting us to real ecological conversion. The care we are called to give as custodians of creation is closely linked to our commitment to justice and in defence of the poorest and most vulnerable peoples, as well as future generations. The *Green Deal* project, which has set a goal of making Europe the first continent with a zero climatic impact

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Francis, *General Audience* (19 August 2020)

by the year 2050, is undoubtedly an interesting and significant project, which could bring enormous benefits to Europe and the whole world.

Another priority for the current Commission, which at first sight may not seem to have any bearing on the Church, is the constantly accelerating process of digitalisation. It is a process with many positive aspects, some of which we have experienced during the months of pandemic and lockdown, but it also brings risks linked to equal and universal access to new technologies, the handling of data and privacy, the loss of employment and the use of artificial intelligence and robotisation. We need to be vigilant about the current and inevitable digital transformation, in which the European Union wants to be a leader, so that it does not happen in a way that harms respect for human dignity, but moves in the direction of greater integral development of every person and of all peoples.

An important aspect of European policies concerns its external activity and its presence in the world. One of the pillars of this activity is the promotion of human dignity and fundamental rights, solidarity, fraternity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. It is vital for the European Union to consider its relationships with neighbouring countries, both those which aspire to membership of the Union itself and those with strong geographical, historical and cultural links. In this context, partnership with Africa is of special interest and deserves particular attention from the Church. Interest in Africa should not, therefore, be limited to solving migratory waves, but could be a unique chance for Europe to contribute to a genuinely organic development of the African continent. The Church needs to pay particular attention to this, so that the word 'development' is not misunderstood in facile ways, from simply thinking that it is enough to invest money and build infrastructure, to the aim to engage in what Pope Francis calls real ideological colonisation.

I should like to make one final point. The European elections in May 2019 show new interest on the part of European citizens, proved by the high voter turnout, which was more than half those who were entitled to vote, the highest since 1994. Another positive fact was the high number of young people who voted, many of whom voted for the first time. These facts encourage hope in the future of the European Union, but they also demand commitment from elected political representatives and from the Institutions, which are called to respond to the trust citizens have placed in them.

On this point, the *Conference on the Future of Europe*, being organised by the Parliament, the Council and the Commission to "re-think the European Union" in the light of new internal and external challenges ten years after the Lisbon

Treaty came into effect, could have an important role to play. It ought to operate with the intention of listening to the voices of citizens, representatives of civil society and interested parties at all levels. It should have begun last May, but because of the pandemic it is still not clear when and how it will happen. In any case, it is a matter of a significant opportunity for rethinking Europe's identity and values, as well as drawing the European Institutions closer to citizens and making them more responsive to the Union's present needs and challenges. It is to be hoped that the Church will be involved in this conference not only as an essential part of civil society, but above all as a partner of that "open, transparent and regular dialogue with the Churches" to which Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union refers.

Your Eminence,  
Dear brothers and friends,

In coming to the end of these considerations and in order to leave space for discussion, allow me to say once again how grateful I am to each of you and, especially, to those who work in ComECE, in its various Commissions and in the Secretariat. ComECE follows a hefty body of dossiers with attention and diligence and gives indispensable help, not only to the local Churches, but also to the Apostolic Nunciature and the Holy See in a spirit of sincere collaboration, which has been growing in recent years and for which I want to express my sincere gratitude. The merits of this fruitful collaboration could be ascribed to several people. But this evening allow me to mention one person in particular: the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Alain Paul LEBEAUPIN.

In a few days, Your Excellency, you will conclude your service of the European Union, to enjoy a well-deserved rest, after many years spent in this mission and, previously, as Apostolic Nuncio in Ecuador and in Kenya. When you came here in 2012, in reality it was a matter of coming back here, since it was you who, in the 1990s, set up the current form of the Pontifical Representation. Your long diplomatic experience and your love for Europe have played a part in giving life to the Structured Dialogue between the Holy See and the European Union and in strengthening relations with the civil authorities and with ComECE. For this we are all very grateful and we wish you well for the future.

For all of us, I think the warning Pope Francis left us three years ago stands: as Christians, we are called to be "the soul of Europe". Through the intercession of the Holy Patrons of Europe, let us ask the Lord to help us really be that, in order to offer our contribution to the construction of this continent in which is found the See of Peter and which is so important for the Church and the whole world. Thank you.