

« Building a Spiritual Bridge of Unity Between Peoples »

A Statement by the Bishops of COMECE on the Enlargement of the European Union

I.

The Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) believes that enlargement is an opportunity concretely to promote and realise throughout the whole of Europe fundamental values which are also of primary importance to the Church : solidarity, mutual respect, and friendship between peoples.

This enlargement of the European Union is not just a major task for politicians and those bearing political responsibility in Europe. It is also a moral obligation for all people of good will living on this continent. So that this enlargement may be realised successfully « a spiritual bridge of unity between peoples » must be built.

In citing these words of Pope Pius XII from the dark days of 1944, as members of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, we would like to emphasise the urgency of taking citizens into account in this process of enlargement. We consider it necessary to involve them more actively in the undertaking of unifying the European continent.

II.

Ensuring internal and external peace is the prime goal of any public authority. It is also a primary concern of the European Union, itself still evolving as a public authority. The enlargement of the European Union is needed to safeguard peace in Europe. We believe that it is a dangerous illusion to think that stability and security can be maintained permanently by making western Europe a citadel over against other european countries.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe is not just a political obligation incumbent on the European Union resulting from Article O of the Treaty on European Union. It is also a moral obligation in that these countries have made it clear that they wish to adhere to the EU and they have already made immense efforts to meet the high demands set by the EU for adhesion.

We believe that the reunification of this continent, torn apart for so long by wars and ideologies, will mark an important moment for the entire human family. A reunited Europe can testify to the possibility of responding to global challenges on the basis of closer co-operation and respect for the principle of subsidiarity.

III.

Before the concrete negotiations on the enlargement of the European Union can begin in earnest, it is not only the accession candidates who will have to fulfil stringent conditions in advance ; the European Union too must prepare itself for this step. That is why the reform of the European institutions, which were initially designed for just a few Member States, is so important as an outcome of the current Intergovernmental Conference. For the same reason the governments of the Member States have to agree on a new medium-term financial framework with a credible perspective for the new acceding states.

The necessity for reform of the European Union's institutions and the need to make the necessary budgetary arrangements for enlargement are sufficiently well known. Enlargement will necessitate difficult decisions and sacrifices in times when the economic and social situation in most Member States is not very satisfactory.

Modern democracy needs the courage of politicians who dare at critical moments to make unpopular decisions in favour of the common good. In this they need the support of a real consensus on the part of the citizens themselves so that such decisions may have a lasting quality. Such political will and unstinting support on the part of European citizens is vital to a process where a fundamental reorganisation of the political architecture of Europe is at stake.

IV.

For these reasons we support the recent remarks made by Mr. Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission : « If we politicians, by virtue of our own commitment and personal involvement, succeed in starting a debate with men and women in Europe on issues and values which go beyond everyday concerns, perhaps ... we will move towards a re-enchantment of Europe, i.e. to a rediscovery of the sense, the meaning , the prospects of hope in our individual and collective life ».¹ The common search for a consensus, the successful dialogue between the people and those bearing political responsibility, are an important measure of the vitality of our democracies. Our governments can play a vital role in this respect. As Bishops and members of COMECE, and within the range of our possibilities, we will support every worthy initiative in this direction.

We cannot conceal however a certain concern and preoccupation : the enlargement of the European Union will not really succeed unless "a spiritual bridge of unity between peoples" is built. Such a bridge, sound and stable, has still to be constructed. Bridges of this kind between the people in East and West cannot be the result of official efforts. Here the governments of the Member States and the European Commission can only act indirectly. Reconciliation and understanding, friendship and appreciation of different cultural characteristics cannot be decreed from above : they must grow slowly as the result of real meetings between individuals and small communities in East and West. Promoting such reconciliation, understanding and friendship, developing mutual appreciation and respect between the peoples of eastern, central and western Europe, constitute an original contribution of the Churches to the unification of Europe.

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¹ Speech of March 1997 to the Université Catholique de Louvain. The wording of the French original is as follows. « Si nous, hommes politiques parvenons, en nous y impliquant personnellement, à ouvrir le débat avec les Européens et les Européennes, sur les valeurs qui transcendent le quotidien, peut être...alors pourrions nous acheminer vers une réenchantement de l'Europe, c'est à dire une redécouverte du sens et dans l'espérance dans nos vies individuelles et collectives. »

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