

**European Year of Cultural Heritage: an opportunity to put a spotlight on religious heritage**  
**Conference on "Promoting the Christian Heritage of Europe"**  
**Brussels, 31 January 2018**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Excellencies,

I would like to thank you, and especially Frère Olivier Poquillon, for giving me the opportunity to address this important and valuable conference.

Our societies suffer from fragmentation, and the indispensable will to live together is no longer a given, be it in our cities or within the EU. This is why our roots, our sense of belonging, our common heritage and our diversity deserve more attention and a more honest discussion.

This is what the European Year of Cultural Heritage is about. Behind beautiful facades, behind our finest museums and our most magnificent churches, there is a story that tells us who we are - if we only choose to read it. There are precious hints there about our past and our future, there are beautiful reminders of our roots - if only we choose to see them. Does "heritage" not also mean legacy in some languages? A legacy seen through a renaissance dome, a gothic arch or a baroque altar. A legacy of

countless layers of culture and traditions that make up our current identity and remind us we are one more generation in a very long series. And a legacy we must know, nurture and pass on, not merely contemplate as if we lived in a museum. Our European heritage is and deserves much more than that.

Yet all around us we see social fragmentation, ignorance, unawareness of our history and a glaring failure to use our heritage to foster integration and help us rediscover the value of our European values.

If today, for example, some of our young people are radicalised within months and turn against their own communities to commit the worst atrocities, is this not to a certain extent because we failed to promote our common values and to create a sense of belonging for them? If our integration policies do not work, is it not because we forgot to use our rich and diverse identities to bring us together? If so many citizens wonder what being European means, is it not because instead of defining explaining and it, we just took it for granted that they know?

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European Year of Cultural Heritage will only be a success if we use our cultural treasures to address these thorny questions. If we use this opportunity as an invitation to share and cherish a common past - and to build a better Europe for the future.

We should value our immaterial heritage as much as the tangible one. And within the wide array of components of our European heritage, no doubt our religious one stands out. Religious heritage represents by far the largest single category of Europe's cultural patrimony. And it is popular - Europe's two most visited sites are churches: *Notre-Dame* and *Sacré-Coeur*.

Our religious heritage reflects the deep influence religion has had in shaping our continent. Who could deny that Christianity is one of the most evident pillars of our culture, if not the most visible one? Our Christian heritage resounds in our names, in our religious holidays, in the architecture of almost every European village, in our music, in our languages. Churches define European landscapes from Finland to Andalusia and from Galway to Cracow. Our pilgrimages like the Camino de Santiago connect thousands of towns, villages and regions. And our values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty are inspired by Christian values; our political systems remind us in every European state of what shall belong to Cesar and not to God.

Allow me to share with you a personal thought. Of course every human being is free to embrace a religious belief of their choice, or none at all. This is an inalienable right. But I think we should refrain from any kind of cultural amnesia, from abusing the concept of neutrality in a way that prevents us from knowing our past, making our societies poorer and jeopardising their

cohesion. To address our most pressing challenges, a void is not the answer.

And by the same token, allow me to express my solidarity with the oldest witnesses of our cultural roots, to the guardians of our living memory: the Christians from the Middle East, who have been bluntly prosecuted for being who they are, for their faith and for their culture. Let us not forget that when a Dominican monk saved the invaluable manuscripts of a monastery in Mosul, risking his life, he preserved our heritage. Let us not forget that every time a Christian is expelled or flees those countries, a part of the world's heritage is irretrievably lost.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to sincerely thank those who keep our heritage alive through their restoration and education projects, thereby ensuring that future generations will be able to read the stories our treasures tell, and consequently, be able to write their own story. Your endeavour is all the more valuable since in times of economic crisis, few decision makers understood that what seems at first sight an investment in stones is actually an investment in communities, and that culture, beauty and legacy are key to the welfare and the cohesion of our societies.

Culture leads to education, education to equity, and equal chances in turn enable every person to be the master of their

own fate and make the most of their lives, irrespective of his or her background. In the *Quadragesimo Anno* encyclical, one of the leading texts of the Church Social Doctrine, Pope Pius the eleventh mentions this degree of comfort and culture that "*is not only no hindrance to virtue but helps it greatly*".

Your efforts, your determination are therefore crucial in keeping our societies united, especially at the local level. And thanks to your commitment, I am convinced that thousands of young people, thousands of citizens have a better understanding of where they come from and what they have in common every time they look at a stained glass window, a church aisle or an arch.

Our religious heritage is an unavoidable part that binds our societies together, that defines who we are - and helps us build our future together.

Thank you.