



PRESERVING A VALUE-BASED EUROPEAN UNION FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

Written yearly contribution of the COMECE Youth Net on values, democracy and the role of young Catholics in the European project.

Europe today finds itself in the midst of significant geopolitical tensions. The tragic war in Ukraine has brought a major violent conflict back to the European continent, undermining the efforts of several generations in building stability and lasting peace, while also posing a threat to fundamental European values and democracy. Therefore, the COMECE Youth Net appeals for a renewed commitment to the value-basis of the EU institutions and calls for a greater appreciation of the Christian roots of European integration. The yearly written contribution of the COMECE Youth Net aims to address the topic of democracy and fundamental values in the EU, from the lens of young people engaged in the Catholic Church and willing to contribute to the European project.

General overview – Historical background and current provisions of EU Treaties on democracy and values

a) Catholic thinkers on European integration

In the beginning

After the Second World War, Europe faced the question of what kind of political future it wanted to choose. Threatened by the challenges of the reconstruction of a devastated continent, divided between rival ideologies, Robert Schuman was adamant that a prosperous post-war Europe was only possible if it was '*deeply rooted in Christian basic values*'.¹ His vision was shared by his fellow Catholic colleagues, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi, who were '*filled with the desire to build the new edifice of Europe on Christian foundations*'.²

The adoption of the Maastricht Treaty made European integration less economic in nature, with a more substantial involvement of non-economic areas and actors. Finally, the 1992 initiative of Jacques Delors '*to give a Soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning*'³,

¹ Jeff Fountain, *Deeply Rooted: The Forgotten Vision of Robert Schuman* (The Schuman Centre for European Studies, 2010)

² Ibid

³ Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 'Jacques Delors, the Single Market and the Failed Attempt to Give a Soul to Europe' Research Paper No. RSCAS 2018/06. Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3157116>

articulated in a speech to the Churches and religious communities of Europe, underlined the growing interest of European institutions towards religious partners.

Legal recognition of engagement with the Church

Article 17(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU envisages *'open, transparent and regular dialogue'* with Churches and religious associations or communities (as well as with philosophical and non-confessional organisations). The European Commission has committed to dialogue with Churches and religious communities, with the likelihood that the benefits from this dialogue will be mutual, with religious communities *'becoming more assertive in influencing the agenda of European institutions'*⁴ and encouraging the European Union to become a world player, rather than to remain a regional one.⁵

The loss of Europe's Soul

Instrumentum Laboris of the 1999 Synod of Bishops stated that Europe *'appears to be lost, confused, adrift and with its hope in peril...following primarily an economic track, where the political element lies stretched across the tracks of monetary rules, and the social and cultural elements have an uncertain fate. The role of the Churches in this matter is still not clear.'*⁶

Pope St. John Paul II referred to the continent of Europe, geographically, as reaching *'from the Atlantic to the Urals'*⁷ and envisaged a spiritual rebuilding of the European continent then divided by the Iron Curtain. He believed that Europe *'could not reach the best form of society unless it renewed and protected the values which Christianity has encapsulated.'*⁸

In his speech to the European Parliament in 1998, Pope St. John Paul II again referred to the Slav peoples as *'that other 'lung' of our common European motherland,'*⁹ expressing the hope that Europe *'might one day extend to the dimensions it has been given by geography and still more by history.'*¹⁰ He believed that the fundamental unity of Europe was found in Christianity: the exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* stated that Europe *'needs a religious dimension'*¹¹, with the Church having a *'unique contribution'*¹² to help rediscover the soul of Europe.

Pope Benedict XVI saw the role Christianity as providing Europe with the spiritual unity that it needs. Recent examples show the positive contribution of the Church in contemporary society, especially in the area of peacebuilding: the powerful symbolic act of Pope Francis kissing the feet of the warring South Sudanese leaders; the Holy See mediation for the release of Cuban dissidents in Madrid, in a deal which required cooperation with the Spanish government; or the local Church's assistance to ensure free and fair elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

⁴ Lucian Leustean, 'What is the European Union? Religion between Neofunctionalism and Intergovernmentalism,' (2009)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Synod of Bishops, 'Jesus Christ, Alive in His Church, the Source of Hope for Europe,' (1999)

⁷ Michael Walsh, *The Vision of John Paul II: Assessing His Thought and Influence* Collegeville (Liturgical Press, 2008)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, 'Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*,' (2003)
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html

¹² Ibid

Pope Francis spoke of Europe as *'weary, ageing, no longer fertile and vital, that the great ideals that inspired Europe seem to have lost their appeal.'*¹³ He paints an image of Europe at a crossroad, appealing that the European project extends beyond *'material growth'*¹⁴ but also to *'be open to the transcendent dimension and the means to restore its soul which has been given to it by Christianity.'*¹⁵ Europe must be a continent that *"rediscovers itself as a community"*, where Christians *"are called to promote political dialogue, especially where it is threatened and where conflict seems to prevail"*.¹⁶

A way forward?

Scripture tells us that the Apostle Paul saw a man from the European continent in a dream calling out to him, *'Come over and help us!'* The Gospel coming to Europe changed the continent - and it can do so again. The roots of true democracy all come from Christ's teaching. Robert Schuman understood this and recognised the imperative of building political and economic structures at local, national and European level based on the democratic and Christian principle of *loving your neighbour*.

Common cement among people cannot come only through treaties signed by governments - no matter how good they are. Neither from a common currency, a common social policy or a society empty of belief. The common Christian belief was what held us together. Secular up to a point, the State can only really work if society itself has a well-rooted belief system.

In shaping the future of Europe, it is paramount that the *soul* of Europe is rediscovered. Pope St John Paul II freely admitted that multiple traditions and cultures had shaped our continent. Dutch philosopher Evert-Jan Ouweneel argued that Europe's core problems stem from the loss of roots, and that the Christian faith could prove again its vital contribution to European society through the recovery of these values. Ouweneel concludes that *'no-one wants to return to the old days of cultural Christianity in Europe but there is no reason for us to be timid about the Christian roots of Europe's most respected values'*.¹⁷

Young Catholics have the opportunity and responsibility to raise critical questions and issues of concern about the direction of the EU, while at the same time asking ourselves how we can better live out Christ's command to *love our neighbour as ourselves* within the community of European peoples.

b) The values underpinning European integration

As we strive to commit to strengthening the fundamental values of the EU, it is worthwhile to consider what those values are and how they played out in the history of European integration. It is helpful to consider the socio-political situation in Europe in the 1950s. A major reason for a commitment to cooperation among States was the premise that economic cooperation would form the basis of long-term peace in post-World War II Europe. This is reflected in the preamble to the Treaty of Paris: *'Europe can be built only through practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity, and through the establishment of common*

¹³ Apostol Martin, 'Speeches of Popes: Francis and John Paul II in the European Parliament,' (2015) <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/speeches-popes-francis-and-john-paul-ii-european-parliament/>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, Aula del Sinodo, Saturday, 28 October 2017, retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171028_conferenza-comece.html

¹⁷ n 1

*bases for economic development.*¹⁸ This emphasis on building peace through cooperation and solidarity was strengthened in the Treaty of Rome: *'Intending to confirm the solidarity which binds Europe and the overseas countries and desiring to ensure the development of their prosperity, with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.'*¹⁹

A further confirmation of the fundamental values underpinning European integration was provided by the Single European Act. Thirty years of economic cooperation in Europe resulted in an organic tightening of cooperation and extending it to other areas: *'resolved to implement this European Union on the basis, firstly, of the Communities operating in accordance with their own rules...determined to work together to promote democracy on the basis of the fundamental rights recognised in the constitutions and laws of the Member States, in the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the European Social Charter, notably freedom, equality and social justice.'*²⁰ This reflects the importance of local values often found in national constitutions. It also introduces freedom, equality and social justice and strengthens integration beyond purely economic to also political integration. Very visible is the growing concept of active citizenship emphasised by the values of democracy, rule of law and human rights.

The enhanced view of European values is reflected in the Treaty of Maastricht, establishing the creation of the European Union. The Treaty emphasises the ceasing of divisions as well as introducing new values: *'confirming their attachment to the principles of liberty, democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and of the rule of law; desiring to deepen the solidarity between their peoples while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions; resolved to continue the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.'*²¹

Here, we can find - clearly stated - the values of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as rule of law. This set remains unchanged until now. In more detail it is described and implemented by specific policies. A new concept introduced in this Treaty is the idea of **subsidiarity**, meaning that citizens have the best knowledge of their needs, which should be met as close to them as possible. Only if citizens themselves, local government or State are not able to resolve the issues, or they are ineffective in doing so, the subject should be elevated to the EU level. This idea seems to become difficult to use, as the effectiveness of local actors in tackling local challenges is becoming part of the EU competence and may not be corresponding with the best solution to the local situation.

Finally, the Treaty of Lisbon states that the EU should be: *'drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.'*²² Here, attention is paid to the sources of social values, which stem from centuries of contributions made by the many traditions of European nations.

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and actions taken

A fundamental step in the successful **promotion of common EU values** was taken with the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, solemnly proclaimed in 2000: *'Conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage, the Union is founded on the indivisible,*

¹⁸ Treaty Establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, 1951.

¹⁹ Treaty of Rome, 1957.

²⁰ Single European Act, 1986.

²¹ Treaty on European Union, Maastricht 1992

²² Treaty of Lisbon, 2009

*universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It places the individual at the heart of its activities, by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by creating an area of freedom, security and justice.*²³ In the document, all values and rights are divided in six main groups: *Dignity, Freedoms, Equality, Solidarity, Citizens' Rights and Justice*. Highlighted is also the *principle of subsidiarity* as the basis for other policies.

Firstly, **human dignity** is inviolable and as such should be protected by all means, which includes both the physical and mental integrity of persons. This chapter includes the prohibition of eugenic practices. Following this is **freedom**, which extends to the areas of liberty and security, freedom of movement, data protection, as well as freedom of thought, conscience religion and expression or association. It also covers access to education, work or conducting business. Next, the Charter considers **equality** before the law. No one shall be discriminated against for any reason and diversity in different fields shall be respected. Especially highlighted are equal pay for equal work and protection of the rights of children, elderly and persons with disabilities. **Solidarity** covers social protection of citizens, in order to provide best possible standards of living and working. It includes healthcare and environment protection. The part on **citizens' rights** describes actions required to ensure democratic expression for all citizens, i.e. being able to vote and stand as a candidate in elections. Finally, the last chapter covers **justice** and the rule of law, describing provisions such as access to fair trial, presumptions of innocence and right to defence.

Acting on the promotion of values and fundamental rights

The European Union has committed to upholding a value-based order. One of the examples is the **European Democracy Action Plan**, which aims to “promote free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom and countering disinformation”.²⁴ This action plan was publicly consulted and in general was approved by consulted organisations and by the general public. On the other hand, there are subjects that are not commonly supported. The views on some policies still differ to some extent within the member states of the EU. In areas of disagreement, which require delicate dialogue due to uncertainty in terms of widespread approval for a policy position, **broad consultation with different stakeholders as a practical means of democracy** is always highly recommended.

Overall, through the conjunction of EU primary and secondary law, as well as EU soft law instruments, the EU has generally succeeded in expressing and defining common values of the European project. Given to the width of definitions and the complex history of Europe, **different understandings of values at national level** exist. As a result, this may raise some concerns about interpretation and identification of those actors competent enough to implement value-based policies, in light of the subsidiarity principle. While observing the process of transfer of some competences to the institutions of the European Union, many European citizens appreciate the gains resulting from their country's EU membership, however they also favour the idea of having their own impact on those policies that affect them the most. With a policy-centralisation process visibly advancing, valid concerns may be raised about the **extent to which local actors can influence European decision making**. In

²³ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2012

²⁴ The European Democracy Action Plan official website, retrieved from: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

particular, issues concerning values and religious beliefs are particularly sensitive and susceptible to emotional reaction, calling for clear and open dialogue.

Young Catholics' perspectives on democracy and values Considerations and recommendations to the EU

a) Views of young Catholics on the European project

Following consultation with the youth representatives of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU Member States, feedback has been collated on the perception of EU values from the perspective of the Catholic youth. Young people were asked about their definition and characterisation of European values and their peers' perspective on democracy and possible actions to further promote fundamental values.²⁵ The following paragraphs aim to showcase the voices and perspectives of the young people who participated in the project.

How do young Catholics perceive European values?

As the youth are increasingly aware of the socio-political situation in the EU through their participation in the labour market and increased involvement in politics, it is important to provide the opinion on fundamental European values from the perspective of young Catholics. It is a widely held position amongst the participants that *Catholic values could be one of the main sources of EU values. Catholic social teaching provides the foundations for the values of human dignity, freedom and human rights.* Emphasis is especially put on **living out these values:** *the Church also fosters these values through its activities, both in local communities and at the national and international level.* The COMECE Youth Net points to the institutional role of the Church in this process through *the Holy See's position in defending democracy and people's rights, as well as educating young people in pastoral events and liturgy.*

Values perceived as fundamental by the COMECE Youth Net are ***respect for the other, mutual cooperation, solidarity and freedom.*** There are some areas in which, according to them, the Church could have been more vocal, but *the main values promoted by the Catholic Church are respect for human dignity, freedom and democracy.* *In the modern doctrine of human rights, rights have come to the fore more, while duty and respect have remained in the background.* Respondents also draw attention to the evolution of how such values are promoted: *Respect is intertwined with personal development, fulfilment of duties, orderliness and sustainability. The Church teaches to take care of oneself and their loved ones.* It was also noted that the individual has the best knowledge of their needs – i.e. *that care is the responsibility of the individual first, and only then should the State come for help.* Lastly, strongly emphasised is *the dignity of each and every person from their conception, the value of life itself and the value of marriage and family.*

²⁵ The written contribution of the COMECE Youth Net does not aim to represent the perspective of *all* young Catholics in the EU, rather takes the responses of young people in COMECE Youth Net members' networks, parishes and organisations as a starting point to address some current perceptions on values and democracy in the EU expressed by the younger generation.

What European values are visible for youth now and how are they understood?

The European values that were hailed as the founding values of European integration are not as obvious to the youth of today. This is the case for the value of **peace**. Most EU citizens have not directly experienced war and yet do not realise that peace amongst European nations was the ultimate goal of European integration. Therefore, when asking young people what European values mean for them, peace is not often referred to as a fundamental European value. In light of the war against Ukraine, the importance of highlighting the achievements of the EU in sustaining peace on the continent and its role in peacebuilding is crucial. Further, there is a growing divergence between the Eastern and Western understanding of European values. Central and Eastern European youth view the EU as the project which brought freedom and democracy to their countries after the fall of Communism. On the other hand, according to some respondents, *Western Europeans, from the founding EU Member States, seem to have lost sight of what the core values of European integration are and of the fundamental reasons to be part of the European Union.* Some also perceived that an understanding of what it means to belong to a *community of peoples* has gone lost. We can observe this amongst the youth through an extreme polarisation of Eurosceptics and federalists, with both sides having lost sight of the original idea behind European integration, attaching their own perceptions to the rationale behind the EU.

When thinking about European values, young Catholics also refer to freedom: *European values include freedom from oppressors, being able to build and improve on something that has a strong base in tradition, a strong sense of togetherness and openness to people from different cultures. As young Catholics, we see the EU as a safe base for us to start exploring the world and the universality of our faith.* Since Europe finds its historical roots in Christianity, European values draw from Christian ones and they must be translated in common actions, especially against social exclusion and discrimination, but also being attentive to preserve the uniqueness of each national culture.

What values should be promoted in the EU according to Catholic youth?

Respondents call for a greater promotion of societal values, accusing the EU of having mainly focused on the Single Market and ignoring the social reasoning that is at the root of the European Union: the **respect for human dignity**. While this expression gathers at the same time the respect for life from conception to death, it also implies the respect of the vulnerable, such as the immigrant or the homeless.

Additionally, the COMECE Youth Net feels that the principle of **subsidiarity**, which is a principle of Catholic Social Teaching and is defined in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union, is often overlooked. The EU should attach greater weight to the principle of subsidiarity and provide the space for lower levels of decision-making at a national level, as well as civil society action. In addition to this, the COMECE Youth Net believes that the EU is also threatened by divisive and selfish political agendas that make togetherness more difficult to achieve and do not allow for exchange and dialogue, painting a negative picture of European institutions.

Another major challenge is the **erosion of the family**. Respondents call for a *strengthening of the role of family in society through raising and caring for children, by improving the material well-being of families with children and the system of protection and support of children rights.* Too often, it is hard to find family-friendly environments in which young parents can raise their children and be supported in their efforts. Interfering with the respect of citizens' freedoms in this respect risks exacerbating the already existing polarisation in many European societies and

undermining the fragile political equilibrium of Member States' cooperation in the European project.

What should the Union be like in the future in terms of values?

Many young Catholics have a double perspective on democracy, as one representative to COMECE Youth Net stated, *although political participation among young people is relatively low and not all young people express high interest in politics, the fight against social exclusion and discrimination is important to them. It is the **fight against social exclusion and discrimination** that is essential as a young Catholic.* On the one hand, democracy is still cherished as a mode of governance that ensures freedom and rights. However, many respondents feel let down by the promises of democracy - *young people also tend to feel unimportant and unheard as their ideas are not often represented.* According to the experiences of many young people, democratic participation seems to be something far removed, especially regarding the political sphere of the EU.

Therefore, the members of the COMECE Youth Net call for more ambitious proposals to engage young people in the politics of the EU. New ways of **creating structural access for youth participation** should be created. Furthermore, politics should listen more to the voices and views of young people. Caring for democracy comes along with caring for the community, being aware of each other and individual needs.

Going forward, the European project should help people to **learn about their common roots**, whilst respecting the different particular cultural attitudes. A practical way to learn about the different social needs in a democratic society would be to enhance opportunities for volunteering. Despite the clear separation of religion and politics, both are still interwoven, as one representative emphasises: *A mature, healthy, vibrant, inclusive, creative democracy cannot be separated from the common human values that are nurtured, encouraged, and developed by various religions.* Consequently, fora for including different religious denominations and their representatives are vital for defining, protecting and strengthening fundamental values and to protect the public element of freedom of religion, as enshrined in the EU Charter.

In conclusion, the COMECE Youth Net calls on the EU to **promote a feeling of belonging and mutual responsibility**: *I wish young people would acquire this sense of belonging and caring for their local communities and so for the whole nation, continent, world - for the whole society, so they will be from a young age becoming good stewards of Creation. Then, it will be natural for them to participate in democracy.* This comes along with investing in good education, becoming responsible citizens, further democratising institutions, for instance by involving young people in local and European political processes, so their voice on shaping the future of the European Union can be heard.

b) Recommendations

“Democracy is the kind of societal way of life, which is not established by itself, but depends on the willingness of its supporters to learn and relearn its mechanisms.”²⁶ This chapter is based upon two core pillars. Firstly, learning about democracy and European values through fostering democratic literacy by education. Secondly, through opportunities for ‘living out’ democracy, the acquired knowledge can be appreciated, and citizens can become more aware of common European values.

²⁶ Negt, O. (2002) Arbeit und menschliche Würde, Göttingen, Steidl Verlag; p.174.

Learning about democracy and fostering democratic literacy

- **Increasing access to culture for young people**

Thanks to the European project, our continent enjoyed the longest period of peace in history. Nevertheless, remembering the past implies learning for the future - peace cannot be taken for granted, as the unjust Russian war against Ukraine illustrates. Therefore, the EU should assist people in **deepening their awareness of the rich cultural heritage** which makes up Europe. This includes reaching out to entities such as museums or cultural associations and searching for cooperation through concerts or exhibitions. Through better accessibility, young people get inspired by the experience of exploring different European cultures and histories, a process that fosters mutual respect amongst peoples.

⇒ **We recommend increasing young people's accessibility to culture at all levels, coordinating with all stakeholders to promote cultural awareness and protection and promotion of cultural heritage**

- **Making Civic Education a pillar of the European Year of Skills 2023**

From a Catholic perspective, human beings are destined for the community in which they can fulfil themselves as individual persons.²⁷ Such a perspective requires taking social responsibility for their community and environment, which includes getting involved in political and social discourse.²⁸ As a contribution to the European Year of Skills 2023, besides increasing employability of young people and ensuring their holistic development, **enhancing democratic literacy** should become a task of the European project. Civic education provides the basis to become literate and form well-rounded members of a democratic society, as well as understanding different stories that define their societies and cultures. Consequently, citizens gain the necessary skills to become responsible²⁹, contributing to the preservation of common European values and promoting the Common Good. Every Member State is encouraged to develop its own curriculum. Such endeavours shall be supported by Agencies for Civic Education, as done in the case of Germany and Austria, and recently in countries of the EU Eastern Partnership. These agencies shall provide educational material for the classroom, but also didactic material, such as simulation games. Simultaneously, through synergies and exchange of best practices, a steady improvement of high-quality education in every Member State shall be ensured. Here, religious education classes could serve as mediators to teach, learn and discuss the role of religion and values in a democratic society. The Church can contribute to such effort by encouraging dialogue surrounding common values, such as the meaning of being a Christian and a European citizen in an increasingly secular society, avoiding a uniform curriculum but rather promoting the ideas of unity in diversity.

⇒ **We encourage debate about the strengthening of civic education in national curricula of education, fostering the role of religious education and ensuring the key role of parents' rights to freedom of education in accordance with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions**

²⁷ AKSB (2010): Konvention über katholisch-sozial orientierte politische Jugend- und Erwachsenenbildung in der AKSB 1998; Am Puls der Zeit; Article 5; retrieved from: https://www.aksb.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Archiv/Dokumente_Fakt_Erklarungen/Konvention_Ergaenzung_20_09_10_AmPulsderZeit_NEU_1.pdf

²⁸ Ibid. Article 5

²⁹ Ibid Article 4

⇒ We recommend regular platforms of exchange for a common high-quality education, while respecting the unique historic, religious, and cultural tradition of each Member State

- **Ambassador Programmes at schools**

The European Union provides several opportunities for young people to discover and experience the European continent, such as Interrail, the European Solidarity Corps and the well-established Erasmus+ programme. To consolidate these initiatives, there is a need for better **interconnection between schools, non-governmental organisations, local associations and Churches**. Informational events would give students more transparency about opportunities and develop a wider appreciation of European citizenship.

⇒ We recommend expanding ambassador programmes in schools, to expand the scope of EU initiatives and involve more stakeholders in their activities

- **Erasmus for Apprentices**

Living in a foreign country, through Erasmus+, has strengthened the European identity - especially among those going on an exchange in a not-neighbouring countries with different GDP.³⁰ Participants of exchange programmes show higher cultural awareness, openness, intercultural skills, and higher self-confidence after their return.³¹ However, such programmes often focus on students. Therefore, **more opportunities for young people following other educational paths such as apprentices** should be created. Here, opportunities of programmes like the European job portal Eures, the European Solidarity Corps or the Eurodesks should be promoted more at vocational schools, as well as among enterprises where young people carry out apprenticeships. This would involve approaching firms and providing them with the tools of flexibility and financial support to set up such programs to allow them to send young people abroad as well as receiving people from abroad - all promoted in a holistic European context.

⇒ We recommend strengthening European tandem exchange programmes for apprentices

Strengthening European values and rights through opportunities for participation

- **Urban Democracy through Youth Commitment**

Many young Catholics are committed to their community via faith-based youth associations. As the 2019 European election proved, young people are eager to participate and shape the evolution of the European project. Likewise, the local dimension is essential, as the impacts of European legislation become visible in the daily life of the people. Referring to the Urban Agenda, the goal is to **share and develop knowledge of the local dimension**.³² From a youth perspective, this goal can be achieved by giving young people a voice in discussions on their future. This can happen through many initiatives: the New European Bauhaus, for instance, seeks to transform cities, bringing together science and technology, art, and culture.³³ The establishment of Youth Parliaments can also serve as important pillars to foster discussions and a particular effort should be made to **include groups** that normally are less likely to

³⁰ European Commission (2019): Erasmus+ higher education impact study; p. 103; retrieved from: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94d97f5c-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1>

³¹ *ibid.* p.113.

³² Urban Agenda for the EU; retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/info/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development/urban-agenda-eu_en

³³ European Bauhaus; retrieved from: https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/about/about-initiative_en

participate in such assemblies, such as those **from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and socio-economic background**. Here, parishes and various faith-based youth associations can provide a first contact point for peers, reaching out to young people from diverse backgrounds and fostering community-belonging.

⇒ **We recommend increasing youth participation within the Urban Agenda, in order to promote more community-based involvement of young people**

- **Equal opportunities in urban and rural areas**

Growing up in urban areas is different from growing up in rural areas, providing different opportunities for young people. Access to high-quality education and the job market depends on a refined network of mobility. In rural areas, the Church still provides a point of reference for youth associations. Building upon this, Churches and community centres are more than spiritual places: they are **places of encounter**. For instance, with migration, people from diverse cultural backgrounds can meet through common activities, **promoting cultural awareness and integration**. Furthermore, new opportunities for increasing connectivity in rural areas should be uncovered. Besides spaces for spiritual encounter, community centres could reflect concepts about establishing co-working spaces or cultural exhibition sites. Through these initiatives, assisted with European funding, the Church can play an important role in bringing people together and ensure equal opportunities in rural and urban areas.

⇒ **We recommend using regional funds to establish and expand centres of encounter**

- **Ending practices of unpaid internships**

Despite the ambitions of introducing the standard of minimum wage in every Member State,³⁴ young people often find themselves in unpaid or poorly paid internship positions. Consequently, educational opportunities can still be highly dependent on the social background of the family. Therefore, by emphasising the social dimension of the European Union, it is necessary to **end the practice of unpaid work**. Instead, with many countries facing a skill shortage, a fair remuneration by providing paid opportunities for young people to explore and experience the possibilities of the European Union is highly needed.

⇒ **We recommend fair remuneration for internships and traineeships**

- **Europe as a mutual dialogue of values and norms**

As stated in the beginning of this document, the spheres of politics and faith are interwoven. The European project does not stand as a product of history but as a steady process of change, development and evolution. The direction of this process is driven by a discussion about values and norms, searching what the European idea is and what it should become. Therefore, political representatives and institutions should strive for strengthening existing channels of communication and platforms for normative discourse. Concluding with Article 17 (3) TFEU, *'the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these Churches and organisations'*, ensuring that young people are integrated in the dialogue initiatives promoted by religious and institutional actors.

⇒ **We recommend strengthening and keeping channels of dialogue open, especially with Churches and faith-based organisations, while ensuring youth participation in dialogue projects**

³⁴ European Commission (2021): Proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages; retrieved from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/adequate-minimum-wages/>