

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

*Honourable President,
Your Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues and Friends,*

Thank you for the invitation.
It is an honour and a pleasure
to be with you for this exchange.

Today, I am speaking to you not only in my capacity as
First Vice-President of the European Parliament, responsible for the religious and non-
confessional dialogue under Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty,
but also in my responsibility as Christian, and Christian-Democrat.

First, I am strongly convinced: Religious and non-confessional dialogue is of crucial
importance for our democratic discourse. It is essential for peace, social cohesion and the
political acceptance of the necessary further integration of the EU.

Europe is much more, than an economic project.
Europe is always about the people, their dignity and the common good.

This is demonstrated by Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty, which for the first time provides a
legal basis for an open, transparent and regular dialogue between
the EU Institutions and churches, religious associations,
philosophical and non-confessional organisations.

Each and every one of you, can probably give me examples
where politicians point the finger at one religion
in order to make a “political mark”.

And each and every one of you, can certainly give me examples
where it is difficult to have this dialogue because some
see themselves as opponents.

But then, how can social cohesion in our society and how
can a democratic majority for our common values emerge?

Especially now, it is more important than ever to strengthen this dialogue.
We cannot allow it to be abused by the extremes.

Second, all of us – churches and politics – bear a common responsibility for our society and for the future of Europe.

We are sitting in one boat, and we are facing the same challenges:
The loss of trust, from our members and citizens.
The withdrawal from our communities and the political discourse.
The violation of laws and values.

Without the values of Christianity – the Christian-Jewish heritage – Europe would be standing on feet of clay.

Christianity and Europe are linked. Even now, living in great diversity, also in terms of religions. This diversity is our strength!

In fact, Europe is all of us. Europe is every single European who contributes to shape the state of Europe.

So where do we Europeans stand, where does Europe stand?

Europe is in crisis mode,
not only since the 24th of February last year, the day when Putin started a barbaric war of aggression on European soil,
and not only since the 7th of October this year, the day when the terrorist group Hamas committed the despicable attacks against Israel – the deadliest day for Jewish people since the Shoah.

For some years now, we have been experiencing more different challenges simultaneously than at any time since 1945.

What is required for a clear view on the present and future is, above all, honesty. It requires to say openly: Today's world is complex – there are no simple answers.

It is our duty as Europeans and Christians, to take over responsibility, not to ignore the complexities, but to solve them together.

Our basis for concrete answers is our community of values.

These common values are: Peace in freedom, liberal democracy, rule of law, respect for the dignity of every human being, tolerance, solidarity and subsidiarity.

These achievements, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights, protect diversity, pluralism and freedom of religion or belief and enable cooperation, social cohesion and unity.

These are not – and can never be – empty words.

Third: Unfortunately, these accomplishments have come under pressure, not only outside but also inside the European Union.

Our society is increasingly divided – by political actors and also religious leaders who put polarisation before the search for common solutions.

The war and the terror have shown, how close the connection between misconduct by politicians and misconduct by religious actors can be.

There are rulers in Europe, who abuse politics, churches and believers, for their political purposes and for destabilising society.

Look to Patriarch Kyrill, who is an instrument of Putin. The Russian Orthodox Church follows his same policy – the expansion of the region and of the Church.

Look at the Middle East: This is not just a civil war or conflict. For Islamists this is THE conflict: Jews against Muslims, Holy land, Jerusalem. It does not get clearer.

Look at the role of Social Media, which transports the conflict. It is abused by the extremes to increase the division – instead of strengthening dialogue and the respect for human dignity. And this influences the fundamental decision between democracy and autocracy.

Look to extremist politicians and their instrumentalisation of Islam, the terror attacks or the refugee crisis.

If our rules-based order does not find an answer to these challenges, only the extremists, populists and nationalists will win.

In this context, I also welcome the Synod of Bishops and its spirit of a “Church that involves everyone and is close to world’s wounds”

Of course, the first session and the report are only a beginning. The concrete recommendations to our Holy Father will follow at the second session in October next year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The upcoming European Parliament Elections, on 6th to 9th June 2024, are all about:
Liberal parliamentary democracy or national autocracies
Europe in the world or breakdown into nationalisms
Responsibility or populism
Honesty or Fake News
Future or past

In this spirit, I kindly ask for your support in mobilising the citizens, to participate at these Elections.

In the end, these elections will shape the composition of the European Parliament and the future of the EU.