



XXV ANNUAL EPP GROUP INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE
WITH CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Santiago de Compostela, 4 December 2023

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Dear friends and distinguished guests,

I am **really honoured** to be here today sharing this event with all of you. With some of you who are here, I have been engaged in personal, ecumenical, interreligious and even political dialogue for some time and I am very happy to meet you again in Santiago de Compostela, in this event organized by the EPP group in the European Parliament, that also celebrates its **70th anniversary**. I will not be what I am today if it were not for your, for the encounters we have had and the dialogue we have maintained during these years. I want to share with you in this short intervention why this event is so significant for me, why dialogue really matters for our world today and what are the obstacles and challenges we have to overcome to make it fruitful.

First of all, with this event **we celebrate 25 years of this dialogue**. I really have to congratulate the EPP group for having created the Unit for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, which might seem to some quite a peculiar thing for a political Party, taking into account that there is a clear tendency in the European institutions to marginalize or ignore the presence

and contribution of religion to our society. The creation of this Working Group for Interreligious Dialogue witnesses to the foresight and outreach of the European People's Party. With its roots in the Christian democratic tradition, this Party shows that it wants to maintain a close connection with civil society and to have a real dialogue with the different Churches, religious traditions and worldviews that are present in it. The existence of this Working Group also witnesses to the importance this political Party gives to religion for the present and future of Europe, a thing that testifies to its healthiness and closeness to reality. I have to say also, **as Secretary General of COMECE**, that the existence of this Working Group has been of paramount importance for the Catholic Church in the EU, facilitating its relations with the European Parliament and with some MEPs. **On a more personal level**, I also want to share with you that my first contact with the European institutions was through an event organized by this Working Group for Interreligious Dialogue in Strasbourg many years ago, when I was still working in the Spanish Bishops' Conference. That is why this event has a special significance for me today. Possibly, I would not be now Secretary General of COMECE if it were not for this Working Group and the kind of event we are sharing today in Santiago.

Secondly, I would like to underline the significance of celebrating this event here in **Santiago de Compostela**. This city, where tradition says lies the tomb of the apostle James, close to the "*finis terrae*", the "end of the earth" as it was known in former times, was the destination of millions of pilgrims during many centuries, who, following the different paths that crossed the whole of Europe, arrived here, contributing strongly to the cultural and spiritual unity of Europe, to its identity as we also know it today.

Saint John Paul II, in a famous speech delivered here in Santiago de Compostela, the 9th November 1982, said:

Here they gathered from France, Italy, Central Europe, the Nordic countries, the Slavic nations, Christians of all social conditions, from rulers to the humblest villagers; Christians of all spiritual levels, from saints, such as Francis of Assisi and Bridget of Sweden ... to public sinners seeking penance. The whole of Europe gathered around the "memory" of James in those same centuries in which it was building itself as a homogeneous and spiritually united continent. For this reason, Goethe himself will affirm that the conscience of Europe was born through pilgrimage.

In that same speech, Pope John Paul II uttered a strong call, asking Europe to find itself again:

[I quote]

For this reason, I, John Paul, son of the Polish nation, which has always considered itself European, due to its origins, traditions, culture and vital relationships, Slavic among the Latins and Latin among the Slavs; I, successor of Peter in the See of Rome, the See that Christ wanted to place in Europe and that Europe loves for his effort in spreading Christianity throughout the world; I, Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the universal Church, from Santiago, cry out with love to you, ancient Europe: "Find yourself again. Be yourself". Rediscover your origins. Revive your roots. Come back to live the authentic values that have made your history glorious and your presence on other continents beneficial. Rebuild your spiritual unity, in a climate of full respect towards other religions and genuine freedoms.

[end of quote]

Today the "**Way of St. James**" still attracts many people from all parts of Europe and the world, that come to Santiago, some looking for a spiritual and Christian renewal of their lives, others looking for something that might bring light and healing to their torn existences. The way of St. James has become today like the **courtyard of the Gentiles**, that was in the Temple of Jerusalem, where people of different origins gathered searching for transcendence and meaning for their lives. This has to be also a reminder for the European Union

that its unity has to be more than an economic or political unity. The spiritual and religious dimensions are part of the identity of Europe and it will never be united neglecting them.

Dear friends and distinguished guests, we live in very **challenging moments**. The **war** in our continent and the war in the Holy land affect all of us deeply and in many ways. These wars are not far from us; they touch our daily lives, our beliefs, our emotions, our hopes for humankind and the world. These two wars have also a religious dimension: the one in Ukraine is a war in which Christians fight each other; the war in the Holy Land is a war that involves Muslims and Jews. Though we can discuss the way religion is a factor in these and other wars, it is obvious that ecumenical and interreligious dialogue can help both to understand these conflicts and to find a way out of them.

Another important challenge we face today is **multiculturalism**. Today in our cities and in our countries people of different Churches, religious traditions and worldviews live together. This living together and sharing the common public space is not easy and we have to give it form together. A clear example of how this is difficult is the **Judgement of the Court of Justice of the European Union** that was made public last week– the 28th November- on the wearing of religious symbols in the workplace. The Judgement establishes that a public administration may decide to prohibit **all of its employees** from wearing such signs. The Judgement tries to avoid discrimination but ¿is it fair with the right to religious freedom? Obviously, interreligious and intercultural dialogue can help very much to understand each other and share our common spaces in an enriching and respectful way for all.

In the European Union we are also approaching **new elections** for the European Parliament and in the actual context of what some call “polycrisis”,

of fear and uncertainty, of distrust in institutions, of perceived growing migration, certain **populist** ideas and simplistic solutions tend to flourish. Interreligious dialogue can vaccinate us against populist tendencies.

But **why can interreligious help** in our context today? **Why is it so important for us to engage in interreligious dialogue**, personally but also as a political Party? My answer is that interreligious dialogue changes the ones the engage in it. It is not only an activity or an isolated event, it becomes a way of relating to others, a way of being-in-relation- A person or institution that engages in interreligious dialogue does not think and act according to labels, etiquette or stereotypes. It or he/she is used to encounter the person behind the ideas or the religious tradition to which the person belongs. Interreligious dialogue makes us discover the common humanity we share and our common human fraternity, it makes us aware that we are all brothers and sisters. In this I think that the Jewish philosopher **Martin Buber** can help us. His distinction between two basic kinds of relation, the **I-it**, which is the relation we have with objects, and the **I-thou**, that is the relation we should have with persons. The problem we frequently have in our world marked by the technocratic paradigm is that we live our relations with persons, according to the I-it scheme, treating the others as objects, using them, manipulating them, etc. Authentic dialogue instead is characterised by immediacy, mutuality, sincerity, equality and spiritual closeness of souls. It takes place in the context of the relation of two persons that acknowledge each other as such. This is also the case for true interreligious dialogue. To make this kind of dialogue possible we have to overcome self-centredness, prejudices, and the concern for our image. True human and interreligious dialogue can cure us of many of the diseases that are present and spreading in our modern world and vaccinate us against them.

Thank you very much!