



## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPEECH  
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### EPP GROUP ACCADEMY BREAKFAST: EUROPE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD. CHALLENGES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

*How important is interreligious and intercultural dialogue to bridge  
the two sides of the Mediterranean?*

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- 1. Global importance of the Mediterranean region on many levels and for many reasons**

It is a Sea that unites 3 continents: Europe, Africa, Asia. Possibly we may need a broader perspective that just think of the relations between the EU and the MENA region; see the mediterranean region in a more unified way.

22 countries have coastlines in the Mediterranean: Spain, France, Monaco, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco; Malta and Cyprus. In addition, there are the two overseas territories of the United Kingdom, Gibraltar and Akrotiri and Dhekelia.

The Mediterranean region is the cradle of the main monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic faith, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with all their interior diversifications and branches, and also of Western civilization.

## **2. The Catholic Church and the Mediterranean**

The **Church is aware of the importance of this region for the whole world** and is committed to contribute to a better future for it. It considers the Mediterranean region in an analogous way to the Amazon: The Mediterranean is not only important for itself, but for the whole world; similarly to the **Amazon biome**, which is so important for the world's sustainability. The Mediterranean has an enormous cultural, political and religious influence on the rest of the world, as we can sadly see in these days with what is happening in the Middle East.

The Church has celebrated in the last years **3 encounters of the Mediterranean** gathering bishops of the different countries touched by this sea: in Bari in 2020, in Florence in 2022 and in Marseilles in 2023, and is thinking of the possibility of organising a big Conference of the Mediterranean. A short enumeration of some ideas that have come out of these encounters might be useful: the Mediterranean as **Sea of Hope**, as **Mirror of the World**,

as **Workshop of Peace**, with a **Global vocation to fraternity**. **Giorgio La Pira** compared the Mediterranean to the **Sea of Galilee**, which in the times of Jesus was a multicultural space, the **Galilee of the Nations**, it was called, in which Jesus exercised his ministry and announced the Good News to the poor. In the First Mediterranean Colloquium that La Pira organised in **Florence in 1958** he talked of the Mediterranean as the “the beginning and foundation of peace among all the nations of the world”, and said: “The answer... is possible if we consider the common and, so to speak, permanent vocation that Providence assigned in the past, assigns in the present and, in a certain sense, will assign in the future to the peoples and nations who live on the shores of this mysterious enlarged Lake of Tiberias that is the Mediterranean” .

In these encounters of the Mediterranean organised by the Church many issues were discussed, like migration, the situation of women, sustainability, presence of religions in the region, Eastern and Western Christianity, etc,. On migration Pope Francis said in Marseilles: “**The *mare nostrum***, from the cradle of civilization is turning into the ***mare mortuum***, the graveyard of dignity”. Another thing he also said in the encounter in Marseilles was: “For this is the vocation of the Mediterranean, to be a place where different countries and realities can encounter each other on the basis of the humanity we all share, and not on the basis of contrasting ideologies”.

### **3. Importance of interreligious dialogue in relation to the Mediterranean**

In the Mission Letter to the Commissioner designate for the Mediterranean we find the proposal of a **New Pact for the Mediterranean** based on **comprehensive partnerships** focused on different areas (investment, economic stability, jobs, energy, transport, security, migration, etc.) that

follow an **integrated approach** which includes the humanitarian, development and peace dimensions.

In this I think that also the **religious dimension has to be taken into account and used in a positive way**, as the presence of religions in this region and their influence in the lives of many people is undeniable, and sometimes causes conflicts and tensions. **Interreligious dialogue is possibly the best way** of doing this; of acknowledging the importance of the religious element and of trying to use it to enhance understanding, tolerance and peace and avoid it being instrumentalised for political purposes.

We speak of **four different kinds of interreligious dialogue**: the **dialogue of life**, that takes place spontaneously in ordinary life through the encounters we have in multicultural spaces; the **dialogue of beliefs** in which we discuss formally about the main tenets of our faiths to get to know each other better and enrich ourselves; the **dialogue of religious experience** in which we share moments of spirituality together; and the **dialogue of action** in which we engage together in initiatives for the good of humanity. Interreligious dialogue respects the differences between us and does not attempt to cancel them in a secularistic or relativistic perspective or to show the superiority of one belief over the others. **It is a means** of understanding our own beliefs and those of the other better, enriching ourselves in this process, and working together for a better world, avoiding the misuse of religion.

Interreligious dialogue can be **organised in different ways**, for example by meetings of religious leaders to discuss an issue or celebrate together, or encounters of people on a more grassroot level, or taking action together on some common concern or solidarity project, etc.

For us, the theological and philosophical basis of interreligious dialogue is **the common humanity we share, our human fraternity**, that we are all brothers

and sisters as Pope Francis says in the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*. This Encyclical letter is based on the parable, the narrative, if you prefer, of the **Good Samaritan**, that has so much to teach us even today.

#### **4. Two concrete proposals for the EPP group in the EU Parliament**

a) *Enhancing interreligious dialogue through the Working Group for Intercultural and Interreligious dialogue that the EPP Group already has.*

The EPP Group is the only group in the EU Parliament to have a **permanent structure for interreligious dialogue** since many years. It was chaired in the last mandate by MEP Jan Olbrycht and Giorgi Holveny. I think this working group should be strengthened in the present context, also enlarging its activities to take more into account the Mediterranean region as a whole and possibly involving more **young people** in its meetings. A thing we have to have clear, though, is that interreligious dialogue should be distinguished clearly **from article 17 TFEU dialogue** which is not a dialogue between religions, but a dialogue between Churches and religious communities on the one side, and European institutions on the other. Though they are connected, they should be kept separate as they have a different finality and setting. The EPP Group, in this sense, hosts, promotes, accompanies, is enriched, by organising and participating in interreligious dialogue, but this is not in itself a formal implementation of article 17 dialogue, though these kinds of activities are supported by it. This Working Group for Interreligious dialogue is also an important **channel of outreach** for the EPP Party to maintain contacts with religious leaders of the region.

b) *A New Intergroup for a new architecture of peace for Europe and the world.*

- Another proposal I want to make and which I have also mentioned to some of you here and is connected also to interreligious dialogue, is the **creation of a new intergroup to discuss about peace**, about a new architecture of peace for Europe and the world. I fully agree with what was said here yesterday that to have peace we have to be prepared for war and show clearly that we are prepared. In the present geopolitical context, with actors such as Russia and China, but maybe also United States in another way, we cannot be naïve if we want to protect our way of life and our values. Also, our position with respect to the war in Ukraine is clear. But I think **as Christians and as human beings, our aspirations cannot be limited to this**, to a peace that is fruit of deterrence. We have to think in broader terms of peace as *shalom*, as fullness of human life, as establishing those conditions in which we can live dignified, peaceful, rich lives that make justice to our humanity and aspirations. We have to be brave as the **Founding Fathers of Europe** were at their very challenging times: they didn't limit themselves to rearming their nations, but looked for long term solutions to guarantee peace, stability, prosperity, rule of law, etc.

Thank you very much!