



**To Cardinal
ANGELO MARIA BAGNASCO
President of the Council of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe**

At the beginning of the annual Plenary Assembly of the Council of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe, I wish to convey my warmest greetings to you, Your Eminence, to His Excellency Msgr. Julián Barrio Barrio, Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela, and to all the participants. This year's theme, "*Europe, time for awakening? The Signs of Hope*" is an important provocation to reflect on the possible paths to restore hope to Europe.

Significantly, your gathering is held near the tomb of the Apostle James, that since time immemorial has been the destination of many pilgrims from all over Europe who place their afflictions, supplications, and hopes in the hands of the Apostle. In Santiago, a city in the far West of Europe, the whole Continent converges. In Santiago, the centre and the periphery meet. It is therefore a highly symbolic place to rediscover the great richness of Europe, united in its religious and cultural tradition, yet so marked by the many peculiarities that make up its richness. "The whole of Europe - Saint John Paul II recalled - found itself around the 'memory' of St. James in those same centuries in which it built itself as a homogeneous and spiritually united continent. For this, Goethe said that the conscience of Europe was born by making pilgrimages"¹.

Dear Brothers Bishops, I invite you to live these days as a journey, aimed at identifying the signs of hope that you find in Europe today. There are many of them, sometimes hidden, even though we often tend not to recognize them. We see them in the concern of so many of our brothers for those in suffering and in need, especially the sick, the prisoners, the poor, the migrants and refugees, as well as in the commitment in the cultural field, especially in the education of the youngest who are the future of Europe. Faith in the Risen Lord has made Christians fearless in love, and this is the greatest antidote to the tendencies of our time, full of lacerations and contrasts.

May yours therefore be a commitment to love. This is the main road of the life of Christians, as the Lord Jesus teaches us. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (*Mt 25:35-36*). Every time we do even one of these things to a brother or sister, we have done it to the Lord Jesus! This gratuitousness is a tangible sign of hope, since it leads us to look at our brother or sister as a person. The forms of populism

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *European Act at Santiago de Compostela* (9 November 1982): AAS 75 (1983), 329.

that are spreading these days are nourished by the constant search for contrasts. They do not open the heart, but rather imprison it within walls of suffocating resentment. Instead, love opens and makes you breathe. It does not set people against each other, but sees the needs of each of us reflected in the "need of the least", because we are all a bit destitute, all a bit fragile, all in need of care.

Love towards our neighbour spurs us to recognize ourselves as children of one Father, who created us and loves us. Therefore, our commitment to giving witness of faith to our time – that is often lost - should not diminish, knowing that we hand down our faith not through proselytism but through attraction, that is, through witness. There is no point in re-presenting patterns from the past. We should let ourselves be guided by the Spirit of the Lord in proposing the joy that flows from the Gospel to the men and women whom we come across in our daily ministry.

It could be helpful, in this regard, to rediscover three great holy women who Saint John Paul II proclaimed co-patrons of Europe on 1 October 1999: Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena, and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein). Together, they show us love lived in the family as the foundation of every human society, and as service to our neighbours in truth and sacrifice. Their simple gestures are full of hope, since they are filled with that love which "moves the sun and the other stars"² and makes us fully human.

In embarking on this journey of closeness to our neighbours, in bending over the wounds of those who are lost, defenceless, and marginalized, the Church will renew her commitment to the building of Europe, a responsibility which has never ceased, even among many difficulties, ever since Paul, Silas, and Timothy landed on the coasts of Europe (cf. *Acts* 16:9). In fidelity to its Lord and to its own roots, we encourage the People of God to work for a new European humanism, capable of dialogue, integration, and generation³. At the same time, we encourage everyone to value what is dearest to the Continent's tradition: the defence of human life and dignity, the promotion of the family and the respect for the fundamental rights of the person. Through this commitment, Europe will be able to grow as a family of peoples, a land of peace and hope.

With these wishes, I urge you to continue your pastoral commitment and, assuring that I will remember you in my prayer, I willingly send you my Apostolic Blessing.

Francis

Rome, 23 September 2019

² DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Paradise*, XXXIII, 145.

³ Cf. Speech for the awarding of the Charlemagne Prize (6 May 2016): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6-7 May 2016, 4-5.