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**CCEE Plenary Assembly – Opening speech**  
**Thursday, 3 October 2019, Santiago de Compostela**  
**"Europe, time for awakening? The signs of hope"**

***H. Em. Card. Angelo Bagnasco***  
***Metropolitan Archbishop of Genoa***  
***President of the Council of European Catholic Bishops' Conferences (CCEE)***

**Greetings**

H.Em. Card. Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops  
H.Em. Card. Ricardo Blázquez Pérez, President of the Spanish Bishops' Conference  
H.E. Mgr Júlían Barrio Barrio, Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela  
Mgr Michael F. Crotty, Chargé d'affaires, Apostolic Nunciature to Spain  
Mr. Román Rodríguez González, Councilor for Culture and Tourism of the Xunta of Galicia;  
Mr Xosé Antonio Sánchez Bugallo, Mayor of Santiago de Compostela

Dear Confreres in the Episcopate, distinguished Authorities, dearest Friends, this Plenary Assembly of the Council of European Catholic Bishops' Conferences is celebrated between two events of the Catholic Church: last year's Youth Synod and the imminent Amazon Synod which will begin next Sunday.

In our hearts, these moments pulsate like vibrant waves: we continue to accompany them with the most intense prayer, first of all for our Holy Father Francis, visible principle and foundation of the Church. We also pray for the Synod Fathers and for those who will participate in various capacities in the Synodal Assembly.

Our gratitude full of esteem and affection also goes to His Eminence Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, who always follows and accompanies our work in a fraternal and authoritative way.

We are happy and honored for the elevation to the Cardinalate of His Eminence Hollerich, Archbishop of Luxembourg, President of COMECE, and member of our Council. We are grateful to the Pope who - also in this way - expresses attention and support to the European Union and to the entire continent.

## 1. A symbol

I would like to start with an event that left astonished not only France and Europe, but the entire world: the fire in the Cathedral Church of Paris. Signs are part of our humanity, but sometimes we look at them with indifference, perhaps even annoyance. When they suddenly fail, though, our conscience is shaken, it feels like something deep has been hurt, that a nerve has been uncovered, because the religious symbols - although often disregarded - are there to remind us who we are and where we are going. In front of the burning cathedral, the world stopped incredulous. The Middle Ages had thought of it - Notre-Dame - in all its bold beauty, rooted in the earth and soaring towards the sky, a testimony and reminder of the truth of the spirit, a synthesis of Europe which, now burned by flames, is actually poor of the fire of the Gospel.

In front of the Cathedral, perhaps many have wondered: can Christianity, which has conceived so much beauty, be man's enemy? Could it not have the man at heart, not be a leaven of civilization, dignity, and peace? In the darkness and amid the smoke, we saw the silhouetted cross come through the flames intact: how not to be overwhelmed by such symbolic power? Almost a message for the world! We don't want to be visionaries, but how can we escape the suggestion of images and events? They are more eloquent than words! To those who asked, "What else burned in the fire in addition to the cathedral?" I had this spontaneous answer, "Perhaps a bit of indifference was burned." The indifference towards what we are, to what Europe has been since its origins. You can find the truest meaning of what happened in the many people who knelt before the fire to pray and sing the *Regina Coeli*. Words that have crossed history as a distillation of faith, elicitation of a more humble and fraternal life together, more realistic and cohesive. Chesterton's witty words come to mind: "Christianity has been declared dead countless times. But in the end it has always risen, because it is founded on faith in a God who knows the way to get out of the grave"!

On that night, a perception that was previously languid became more vivid: the awareness that we are European, and what had happened concerned everyone, beyond misunderstandings and contrasts, beyond partisan interests and suspicions, and beyond certain arrogances and heavy bureaucracies.

The European continent - from the Atlantic to the Urals - has the credentials to constitute itself as a manifold and united subject, strong and respectful of the different peoples, convinced that differences are at the foundation of any union. The sense of belonging to one's own land, the fact of having a peculiar history, often conflicting with neighboring countries, not necessarily obscures the awareness of having common roots. Different spiritual, religious, and cultural trends have found synthesis in the great river-bed of the Gospel. This national and continental awareness is still struggling to consolidate and expand, but it is the necessary way.

## 2. Watchman, what is left of the night? (*Is 21:11*)

The best ally of the Gospel is not our organizations, resources, or programs, but man himself: man at every age, in any situation, civilization, and culture. Today's culture does not like to listen to ideas other than those it professes, as it is convinced that civilization has to be completely rethought, and the most elementary truths - such as life and death, love and freedom, solidarity and law - are to be rewritten. However, men have

a secret desire. They hope to meet someone who helps their conscience awaken. To reawaken the decisive questions of existence, of destiny, of the future beyond death, of the evil that hurts the human dimension, and of the evils that violate life and the cosmos. "In the face of death, the enigma of the human condition becomes supreme (...) The seed of eternity that brings man to himself, irreducible as it is to matter alone, arises against death" (*Second Vatican Council, GS 18*).

In the most beautiful things in life, in the happiest experiences and the most cherished affections, man feels that two things escape him: "everything" and "forever". He would like to experience a full joy that would never end. This is why he feels he is a marvelous but unfinished symphony, a creature on the border between time and the eternal, marked by a subtle nostalgia of "something more", which he sees as not being in his hands. A nostalgia that is not condemnation, but grace!

We can say that Western man is confused, but in his confusion, there is an opportunity for a reawakening, often slow and uncertain, but sometimes as sudden as a flash. It is the awakening of the soul! This process has now begun and no one will be able to stop it, because man cannot live without truth and in radical solitude. Isn't this the *kairòs* of the present hour? We do not want to miss such a turning point, we must be like morning watchmen, alert and ready to announce the new day.

There is another sign that can be read as a "sign of the times": people, especially the youngest ones, begin to wonder about phenomena that are so new that they raise questions on their spiritual, ethical, cultural, and social nature. And on the future of humanity. This is also a clue and an appeal for us Pastors.

In conclusion, it is all about reawakening the questions that doze at the bottom of our souls: they can be anesthetized, but they cannot die, because the Creator has engraved them in our conscience as a beneficial torment, so that man cannot be satisfied with anything that is less than God. It is therefore a task of evangelization to reawaken the decisive questions and to proclaim the Lord of life and hope.

### **3. *What is mankind that you are mindful of them? (PS 8)***

The attention and care of the Church towards Europe finds inspiration in the words of the Lord who sends his disciples to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Gospel of grace. We know that the "good news" is not an idea or an ethical code, but the very person of Jesus. When the anthropology that is revealed in the crucified and glorious Christ is obscured, then even society, sooner or later, becomes distorted and eventually inhuman.

Initially - when one moves away from God - it may seem that everything proceeds equally well (interpersonal relationships, social structures, politics, economy, social status, culture, and education), but the truth is that we live on our background, we continue to think in the "brightness" of the Gospel, in its "echo". We continue to walk in a Christian way out of inertia, always less aware of it. This state of affairs, though, does not last forever: sooner or later the initial drive is exhausted. The face of man, his dignity, becomes blurred. The immediate interest prevails, the poor get stuck while the others go forward. Even the home of creation is robbed in the logic of domination, thus increasing poverty and planetary imbalances.

In this same perspective, the Holy Father Francis has summoned the Pan-amazonic Synod.

We want to reiterate that Christianity is not a "civic religion" and the altar is not at the service of any throne. In Christ all that is human enters a new dimension of truth, elevation, and fullness. Social coexistence is marked by the light of openness and solidarity.

#### **4. Against all hope (*Rom 4:18*)**

The question that inhabits our hearts as Pastors who preside over the Bishops' Conferences of their respective countries is, what can we do? What does the Spirit say to the Churches? How do we contribute to the European journey? In the last Plenary in Poznan, in the dialogue of the groups and in the plenary, a desire seemed to emerge. To learn more about our stories, about the different cultural areas, not out of intellectual curiosity but to grow in the understanding and acceptance of love. Love for God and for our peoples, love for the one Church that reflects the multiform light of Christ (cf. *LG1*), and love for the world. We believe that the true response of the Church to the Continent is Jesus Christ, the face of the Father and the salvation of man. Furthermore, we are convinced that, in the face of a social and cultural context marked by confrontations, suspicions, individualisms, and disappointments, our duty is to climb on the roofs and proclaim the lights that are there: lights of the Light that is Christ the Lord.

We know that, within the different historical paths and traditions, in the midst of old and new challenges, there are elements of hope: among these, the Saints of our countries are like torches that encourage the present and announce the future. They are outposts of the world that is coming, which is already among us, even though at times its mystery puts our faith and perseverance to the test.

From this shrine - rich in centuries and faith - we would like to send a message of hope to a troubled Europe; we would like to mention here that to deny the origins is a premise of personal and social bewilderment. Last year, we remembered in Poland the testimony of solidarity inspired by the Gospel. To the 100 million Catholic volunteers operating on the Continent we renew our gratitude and we encourage them to continue for the good of all. This year, from Spain, we want to announce another fruit of the Gospel: the good that is spread with the imagination of love, the high values of man and the Christian faithful. The sanctity of the saints and martyrs who - like golden threads - yesterday and today, weave together the popular plot, the truest and most profound soul of our lands. From the tomb of the Apostle James, we would also like to make a warm and insistent appeal so that, with all the Brothers of the different Christian denominations, we can together be the leaven of Europe. We are interested in everything that concerns man! His life, his family, justice and peace, the poor and migrants, the environment and creation, fair and sustainable development, the good of the soul, the right to remain in one's own country or to leave ... eternal life! Everything belongs to faith! On these challenges, Christians have much to witness and say together. In this regard, I would like to inform you about the meeting of the Eastern Catholic Bishops of Europe that was held in Rome (12-14 September 2019) with an encouraging audience with the Holy Father. Our intense dialogue and reflection focused on Ecumenism in our respective Countries.

Dear Brothers, let me give you a brief personal testimony: I greeted the Christians of Syria and I bring you their greetings. In fact, I had the grace of visiting them a few days ago. In the midst of devastating and widespread rubble, in the lack of everything, in the uncertainty of the future, I met Christians full of courage and hope. Their strength does not come from their resources that are non-existent - it is necessary that our Churches continue to help them - nor from internal organizations. Their strength is spiritual, it comes from the invisible world of God that becomes visible in them. We are indebted to them for hope, which does not die in the face of any destruction or distress. Together with the prayer of our Churches, we will try to ensure every possible aid.

Dear Confreres, will that world of justice and peace ever arise, human and livable for all? Together with all people of good will, the Lord's disciples know they are invested in this mission as humble and generous workers. May the Apostle James help us to think about the lights that are in our peoples. We too see darkness, but precisely because we see it, we want to indicate the lights, knowing that evil can never win over good.