



CCEE PLENARY ASSEMBLY

Rome, 23-26 September 2021



Rome 24.9.2021
Plenary Assembly
of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences
on the 50th anniversary of its establishment

Prolusion

Card. Angelo Bagnasco
President of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences

Dear confrères

I am very sorry I am unable to be with you to celebrate the Plenary Assembly of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. The 50th anniversary of its establishment gives reason for special joy and gratitude to the Pontiffs, to those who have preceded us in this service. My unexpected absence has been caused by Covid 19, a mild case thanks to the double vaccination cycle I completed last May. In spite of this, I felt I should be present at least with a few words that, as usual, introduce our proceedings.

The CCEE's anniversary has brought us to Rome where the Apostles Peter and Paul announced the Gospel and gave their life for the Lord Jesus and where, therefore, the Successor of the Prince of the Apostolic College, currently the Holy Father Francis, has his seat. For this reason the world considers Rome the centre of Catholic Christianity.

We hold in our heart – I too from afar – yesterday's Eucharistic Celebration presided over by the Supreme Pontiff and we are deeply grateful to him for his affectionate attention, his prayers and the gift of his words that encourage us and our Confrères in our responsibilities as Ministers. Just as they encourage our Council to be salt and yeast and the entire continent to recover its Christian roots and renew the consciousness of its mission.

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the Secretary of State, His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, for honouring us with his words and offering us the fundamental address for this historic anniversary: half a century of life, passion and respectful service. Thank you Eminence for your generous willingness. We also wish to express our affectionate gratitude to His Eminence Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for the Bishops, our institutional point of reference; he follows us with his participation in all our Assemblies, introduces us and stimulates us with his brotherly words.

My warmest thanks go also to the President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, His Eminence Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, for his welcome to Italy and the valuable cooperation provided by the CEI bodies and, above all, its Secretary H.E. Msgr. Stefano Russo.

A warm welcome to the Presidents or Delegates of the equivalent Bodies of the other continents: we are honoured by their presence here in an exchange of gifts that enriches the Universal Church.

We greet the Speakers and, guests grateful for the attention and time they are giving us in the framework of this special assembly. I wish to address especially Mr Antonio Taiani, Italian MP and former President of the European Parliament. And we are also honoured to welcome Professor Isabel Capelo Gil, Rector of the Catholic University of Portugal, who will be offering us her qualified contribution.

Our Organisation was born from the heart of Saint Pope Paul VI who, spurred by the Vatican Council II, wished to establish a specific, qualified and unitary body that could represent the Catholic Church's evangelising passion for listening, inspiring and accompanying the journey of Peoples who – with their different history, language and traditions – share a common origin, Jesus's Gospel. Like the bed of a great river it has welcomed all contributions and laid the ground for understanding between the different peoples of the continent. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, Benedictine monasticism had created the cultural and social humus that provided an example and a stimulus for the establishment of different religious and human communities.

It has been a high vision of life, the world and history, which has reached in its anthropological concept the highest and fullest peak ever recorded in mankind, as opposed to visions that might appear humanist but have resulted in forms of self-violation and negation of human life. "Trans humanism", which is now discussed and written about, is not an abstract category that is the object of dissertations, but rather an ongoing phenomenon: man wishes to overreach himself, detaching himself from any physical and spiritual constraint, and in the name of absolute freedom is going as far as denying himself confirming the words of the last Council: "without the Creator, the creature would disappear" (Vatican Council II, GS 36).

As Ministers, we consider Europe with affection and trepidation, and would like to see it move forward becoming more and more united from the Atlantic to the Urals. The Continent is a single body, it was born as one and has continued – thanks first and foremost to the Christian presence – to breathe in the original nourishment that is the Gospel in the fruitful meeting of faith and reason: without this virtuous relationship everything becomes complex, and sincere dialogue too comes to lack its required instruments. If it is necessary for us to raise our eyes and look further in order to see more clearly what is nearby, i.e. the single steps in the journey, then let us look confidently to the Europe of the founding Fathers, a Europe of peoples, Home of Nations, and hope – together with the Holy Father Francis – for a renewed vision, a Europe of the Spirit.

Today we too renew our commitment to evangelisation out of love for both Christ and the human beings who live on this wonderful Continent. In spite of the many problems modern man is faced with, he carries within his heart the most disquieting problem that he often seeks to suppress, the question: what is to be of me, of my life? It is the quest for eternity. To announce Jesus is the truest and most urgent answer to the many existing challenges, and the best way of serving Europe and the world. Amongst the serious problems that trouble our countries and our times, I would also like to highlight that of human freedom. I believe the increasingly apparent risk is that of a manipulation of human beings, for the purpose of transforming them into consumer subjects and objects of power. The malady of isolation is spreading and does not generate communities of life and destiny, but agglomerations of withdrawn and confused individuals. Manipulation benefits "power" that is political as well as economic and financial,

does not wish to be judged by anyone and creates increasingly small powerful élites that think and direct others.

In this perspective, - together with people with upright feelings – the Church announces the person of Christ, the way, truth and life, knowing that truth generates freedom. At the same time, we are aware that – as always in Christian history - caring for intelligence is also a condition for faith. Indeed, in connection with weak thinking we will not find strong faith but faith that is also weak. For this reason too, the corruption of intelligence should be of concern to us more than moral corruption: the latter concerns human weakness, the former concerns the truth at the root of ethics. Devaluing values, indeed, opens the door not just to frailty but also to arbitrary thinking. It appears necessary to revive – along with the announcement of the Lord Jesus – a cultural commitment for dialogue with the world to be possible and fruitful, using – as Habermas stated – not only the language of faith but also the language of reason, knowing how to explain values in a way that will be accessible to all. It is not enough to say that this is difficult and possibly pointless, Minister look at difficulties through Jesus's eyes more than in consideration of the likelihood of success. This commitment requires an additional effort to be made by European Christianity in terms of awareness, testimony of life and preparation in the appropriate places.

Dear Confrères and friends, the time had come for me to say goodbye as President of this Council. You placed unexpected trust in me at the 2016 Assembly as the successor of Cardinal Peter Erdö who has given us a gift of his presence and his words. How could one forget our closest collaborators who formed the General Secretariat? The priests and the lay people? They are the people who bear the day's burden and the heat as the Gospel says: I offer them my affectionate gratitude and that of us all. As one does within the family, the final goodbye and attention is reserved to those who have worked for these past five years most closely and with the greatest responsibilities in the Presidency: His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols and His Excellency Msgr. Stanisław Gądecki. The 2016 assembly chose us with a wide-ranging scope and brought us together with trust: with our eyes set on Christ and our shared love for the Holy Church and at the service of European humanity, we have walked together with esteem, in loyalty gradually built up and growing affection. We became travelling companions and – as Emmaus's disciples – we met the Master who encouraged us and guided us to the table of trust and giving. Thank you dear Confrères Vice Presidents for your benevolence and patience: thank you for your friendship over these years that I am certain will not be lost.

Five years ago I accepted your choice in the belief that Providence inspired you: God will take stock, as to myself, of the knowledge that I sought to do my best, in spite of my limitations, hoping to do my best with God's help. This has been a great experience for me both because I have seen once again that the Lord helps those who are small, and because I felt your sympathy and closeness. With our legitimate differences, we have walked together to serve – as Ministers – the Master, his Church and Europe. I feel certain that the bonds of respect and fraternity will not fail and that our mutual prayers will be the golden thread that will keep us united wherever the Lord takes us. Thank you!