



CCEE PLENARY ASSEMBLY

Rome, 23-26 September 2021



CCEE, 50 years of service to Europe, memories and prospects within the context of “Fratelli tutti”

(September 23^d - 25th 2021)

Greetings

by

His Eminence Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti

My dearest Brothers and Sisters,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this plenary session of ours that will address such an important subject: Europe, the role of “service” played by the Episcopal Conferences and the new prospects created by the Encyclical Letter entitled *Fratelli tutti*.

In recent decades there have been many debates about Europe, its cultural roots and the people who inhabit this continent. I believe that when we address the issue of Europe we refer to two aspects of great importance that are strongly linked to each other. I am first of all referring to Europe’s ***symbolic-religious*** dimension, hence its thousand-year-old *history*, the centrality of Christianity in this history and its immense and articulated wealth of *material and intellectual* production that, in the course of centuries, has contributed to create and outline a European identity. Secondly, I am then referring to Europe’s ***political-cultural*** dimension, which, instead, brings us to the difficult issues of current times, to the new problems to be addressed, such as that of the continent’s political unity, which in a sense obliges us to rethink Europe and its future projections. It is, however, a future that cannot exist without its past, without the ***historical experiences*** of millions of men and women who through their lives have contributed to the development, planning and building of this continent.

This makes me think, for example, of people such as St. Augustine and all those great personalities who evangelised the continent and were later acknowledged by the various local communities as *Patron Saints*, *defensores patriae* and models to be imitated. It also makes me think of the more famous events concerning St. Francis of Assisi and Saint Catherine of Siena, Patron Saints of Italy and Europe, who thanks to their preaching and their example were absolute leading players in public life and untiring creators of peace not only within the Church, but also in European political communities that were often in opposition. And then of course also St. Benedict from Norcia, the Saints Cyril and Methodius, St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein).

There is absolutely no doubt that *Christianity* understood both from a theological-religious and political-cultural perspective, has always played a decisive role in defining the identity of this continent. On the other hand, it was precisely a Pope, Nicholas V, who brought back the word *Europe*, once no longer used, retrieving it from classic antiquity and reintroducing it into educated language. And later on, in 1453, the year of the fall of Constantinople, the great humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, wrote a book with a surprisingly modern title that still now sounds powerfully evocative, the *De Europa*.

In this book about acculturation and evangelisation, a role of extraordinary importance was played by *monasticism*, which, placing *people and human dignity* in a central position through contemplation (*ora*) and social commitment (*labora*), contributed as many acknowledge to the writing of “Europe’s great ideal code”. This was an extremely well-known concept and acknowledged over time by a very large number of intellectuals, such as for example Wolfgang Goethe who wrote that “The mother tongue of Europe is Christianity”; or Emmanuel Kant who did not hesitate to acknowledge that the Gospel is the source that gave birth to our civilisation.

Of course there are obvious differences between the Europe of ancient populations resulting in a cultural declination, and modern ones, also created as a supra-state political entity. However, the symbolic-cultural bond of this thousand-year-old history is still extremely obvious. And it is also a bond that was very clear to many of *Modern Europe’s Founding Fathers*, such as Alcide De Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer and Robert Schuman, and is one that cannot be forgotten today.

From a magisterial perspective, however, the contribution provided by *Paul VI* was decisive when during his papacy he launched a message that echoes a strong commitment to a united Europe and lasting peace among between all the people of the Old Continent. On October 25th, 1964, in fact,

a year after the publication of John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope Montini travelled to the abbey of Montecassino to proclaim Saint Benedict the patron saint of all of Europe. This was a choice made precisely to prevent the danger of fratricide wars on the Old Continent, because, as Paul VI wrote, Saint Benedict had been an exemplary model of "pacis nuntius" that in order to unite Europe has equipped itself with three great means of evangelisation: *the Crucifix, the Book and the plough*.

Pope Montini's teachings about Europe are very extensive as are those of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. Albeit with different sensitivities due to different historical periods, they all referred to a past and an extremely profound historical past representing Europe's Christian roots. During his papacy, when speaking of Europe, Paul VI in particular did not refer so much to a European identity but more to Europe's *soul* and the need to persevere it in the creation of this meeting area. An area that in his intentions was to be a place of peace and solidarity.

Unfortunately, however, it was precisely during the years of Montini's papacy that Europe started to reject itself. And it did so by more or less unconsciously embracing *atheist humanism* as previously written by Father De Lubac, which appeared to dramatically be a perfect fit for the new ways of modernity. It was a modernity that appeared to be self-confident, devoid of any transcendent tension and in march towards a future filled with ever increasing scientific and social victories.

Ever since the days of Paul VI, we have seen very many ideas and exhortations from pontifical teachings concerning Europe that are still to a certain extent unexplored and that should be meditated with great attention. In my opinion, all these documents lead in a single direction: *Europe as a family of families, as a place of solidarity and charity, as a community of populations living in peace* that overcome all forms of selfishness and national grudges. All this, however, on condition that everything Pope Francis said addressing the European Parliament when awarded the 2016 Charlemagne Prize is implemented: "I encourage you to work to make Europe rediscover the best of itself.!" These are simple but fundamental words.

I believe, in fact, that Europe is above all a *place of the soul* with a profound, ancient and complex history and above all having an immensely wealthy legacy for each of us. Personally I dream of a new *supportive Europe* capable of really being a shared home – and not just an ensemble of organisations – and that it be founded on a *new European humanism* based on the centrality of *human beings* – whose dignity is always inalienable – and on a new *culture of "social dialogue and friendship"* as Francis wrote in his *Fratelli tutti*. This Encyclical, in fact, in addition to ecumenical dialogue

refers to the great issue of migratory flows. This is an extremely delicate subject and there is the need for coordinated action at an international level so as to manage a phenomenon that is both complex and dramatic. The role played by Europe is fundamental as far as this issue is concerned.

Furthermore, as the Pope says, this culture of dialogue can be created also by “religions” if they place themselves “at the service of fraternity in our world.” This is one of the future’s great challenges, “building together” a world of “peace” that is capable not only of rediscovering “the taste of recognising others” starting with the “last”, but also “recovering kindness”, “forgiveness” and “remembrance” of those who “have endured much unjust and cruel suffering” such as for example in the Shoah and in Hiroshima. This still applies today. How many men, women and children are obliged to abandon their own countries to try and find refuge elsewhere. How can one forget the image of that Afghan mother entrusting her child to the arms of American soldiers returning home, in the hope of giving it a future. And yet, even when faced with such merciless scenes we often see painful indifference. We cannot think of others as enemies, as people we should fear. No, we Christians are the first who have to duty to have hearts open to welcoming people. The starting point, warns the Pope, “must be God’s way of seeing things” because “God does not see with his eyes, God sees with his heart.” And then “Sincere and humble worship of God” that leads to the rejection of discrimination and all forms of “violence”.

The reference to violence is obviously an extremely delicate point but one of the greatest importance because it irremediably leads back to religious extremism and terrorism. In the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, the condemnation made in Abu Dhabi of “terrorism in all its forms and manifestations” is rightly quoted and above all at the end of the Encyclical there is a lengthy quote from the 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity* which is a sort of “appeal” made to the whole world. It is an *appeal* that – after stating that “religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes” and after acknowledging that “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity” – ends by stating the choice to “declare the adoption of a **culture of dialogue** as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”

On this subject I still remember the words spoken by Pope Francis to the members of the CCEE in a message sent to the 2019 Plenary Assembly held in Santiago de Compostela: “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 Generation. 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.” In this sense, as Churches we participate in and are supportive of this difficult period that so many citizens are experiencing since the appearance of the pandemic. Work and health are two decisive challenges now and for the future. Bearing witness to faith and charity must continue to drive our Churches while we place our trust in the European Union’s decision to proclaim 2022 the European Year of the Young.

It is the young who represent the continent’s spring season. It is our task to accompany them and support them, persuaded that with no spring there will be no progress. The future must be created together with hope. There is a need for the young to play a leading role with their smiles, their affectionate gestures, and their friendships, starting with the more elderly, those who live in despondency especially in these times. So it is important to communicate to them the joy of the Gospel, the desire for friendship with Jesus. This must be done above all to help them understand that the problems and suffering of our brothers are calling us, that it is Christ who makes the difference and that life is not the same with Him or without Him. It is really important to have the young generations grow up in the light of the redeeming Word.

“God is the giver of youth and he is at work in the life of each young person. Youth is a blessed time for the young and a grace for the Church and for the world. It is joy, a song of hope and a blessing. Making the most of our youthful years entails seeing this season of life as worthwhile in itself, and not simply as a brief prelude to adulthood.” (Christus Vivit, 135).

I am certain that I am expressing a shared idea in saying that our Churches look to the future and rely on the young and the reserves of great hope each of them represents in dreams of peace, justice, solidarity and goodness

My dear Brothers,

Before taking my leave allow me to express heartfelt thanks to Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco who has led the CCEE since 2016, and also turn a thought to Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini who was its president between 1986 and 1993. Thanks to their commitment the Church that is in Italy has been able to provide an effective contribution to reflections on Europe.

I hope we will be able to continue to experience our belonging to the Council of European Bishops Conferences during the coming years with this “spirit of service” as stated in our Charter (see Art. 1). In this way we will be able to create a new culture of dialogue and social fraternity in Europe. In

the name of God, of the Gospel, of peace and of the inalienable dignity of all human beings.

*CEE, 50 anni a servizio dell'Europa, memoria e prospettive nell'orizzonte di
Fratelli tutti*

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