



**CCEE PLENARY ASSEMBLY**  
Rome, 23-26 September 2021



---

Isabel Capeloa Gil

## **What Europe Expects from the Church: Cultural Analysis or On Imperfection**

Your Eminences, your Excellencies

Members of the Presidency of the CCEE, (Cardinal Nichols, Archbishop Gadecki,  
Presidents and Members of the European Bishops' Conferences,  
Distinguished guests

I am humbled to have been invited to speak before the Jubilee Assembly of the Council of European Bishops. I come before you as a Catholic woman, wife, mother, professional, academic, wearing many hats of an imperfect existence, to address the current concerns of the laity before a changing Europe. I am deeply thankful to the Council for this opportunity, which I believe is a sign, and for listening to reflections that are certainly torn with imperfection, intended simply as a contribution to a wide ranging and open dialogue between the laity and Church authorities. To discuss what Europe expects from the Church, it is perhaps relevant to reflect on what the former means under current conditions.

Let me start by singling out two different strategies that are often present when discussing Europe and what it stands for. The first one champions a sense of irretrievable loss. It pivots around the idea of Europe as a political and spiritual unity, a community of believers that gave vent to distinct modes of political organization. One may borrow the words of the German poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, Novalis, when he wrote in the 1799 fragment *Christenheit oder Europa*, (Christianity or Europe), "Those were beautiful, magnificent times when Europe was a Christian land," and he goes on to lament " when one common

interest joined the most distant provinces of this vast spiritual empire.” Novalis lamented the intestine process and the religious wars that led to the divisions of Christianity, while stressing the attachment to a past that could be retrieved and mourning the loss of a sense of ‘common interest’, that was both political – secured by the sovereign/emperor – and spiritual. Novalis’ Europe is a homogeneous community of believers, that is also a unified ethnic, cultural and ideally political entity, disseminated from a core and led astray by dissent and revolution. In the time when centers cannot hold, this idea of Europe is in some sense permanently lost and it is probably unwise to hang on to a Romantic construct as a guiding narrative for the present.

The second strategy looks for articulation without disavowing confrontation. The imagination of Europe has also been historically built around the construction of borders. Geographically this strategy stresses work across the limits and not the dissemination from a center. A geography of limits, in fact, articulated the imperial discourse of Rome from myth to politics. Rome’s founding myth, the story of Romulus and Remus, enunciates the violence that both structures and protects a demarcation practice. The process of culture, then, begins with the setting of boundaries and it is precisely at the border, the savage and unhomely space of the *limes*, that culture is ultimately affirmed. Arguably, the border produces the empire. In his reflection on the philosophical idea of Europe (*Europe and Empire*), Massimo Cacciari argues that identity is ingeniously produced at the limits. Becoming occurs *in limine*. Consequently, the space that substantiates and co-produces the idea of Europe only becomes what it purports to be at the edge, when the limits are reached. One might say that Europe becomes Europe in Lampedusa and Callais.<sup>1</sup> More precisely when the values, the sense of

---

<sup>1</sup> [...] one recognizes the place only when the threshold, the limit, is reached, that is, there where place turns into its own border (*cum finis*), near, close, contiguous to the other from itself – where it reveals something ‘in common’ (*cum-munus*) with the other. Europe is there where it ‘touches’ the extraneous, the stranger. Europe does ‘know itself’ only there, where it encounters, in every sense, the wonderful and frightening face of the stranger. [...] Until it reaches its ‘extreme’ (*stremo*), which can change over time, Europe is not. (Cacciari, 2016: 57-58)

identity of a European communion of sentiment are questioned, the mode of response and engagement, with dialogue and respect for human dignity, define and reaffirm the deep sense of the Christian becoming of Europe.

Today, more than ever, the idea of Europe is informed by the boundary, and it is immersed in its vernacular hybridity and untidiness. And maybe, precisely because it grew out of this liminal dialogue, Europe is not, if not in the face of its contestation. The limits that produce its identity are precisely the porous opening convoking at the same time dissolution and reaffirmation. Europe is thus revealed to be a tensional figure, that retrieves its rhetorical strength from the ever present perspective of demise.

We live at a time when a global pandemic is slowly becoming endemic, Europeans are daily confronted with poignant social crises – ranging from unemployment to migration - ; with environmental hazards ravaging the livelihood of populations, with political and cultural crises reflecting the rise of dissent, prompted on the one hand by populist discourse and on the other by the global call for social justice. Under current conditions, then, what it means to be a European, what it means to be a European Catholic is under duress. And yet, I believe that the moment can be grasped as an opportunity to reaffirm the lessons of the Gospel, and should not be wasted with despondent nostalgia, hanging on to a past that never truly was as idyllic as some are led to believe. To understand Europe's becoming *in limine*, it is relevant to address the real experiences of those who live in the continent, their disgruntled lives perhaps and the force of our values. It is in the liminal dialogue with these dissenting lives, that Christianity and Europe should be reaffirmed. It is here in the space of the liminal that we believers (and non-believers) seek the guidance and the mercy of the Church. It is here, in the work with human fragility that She is daily reaffirmed.

The liminal is by definition the space of contact. And contact, or as Pope Francis puts it, the culture of encounter is the true cultural position. When two different cultures come together suspicion, violence and antagonism are much easier than dialogue. But culture as a wide system is inextricably linked with other

cultural systems, so to speak of Europe from a cultural position is to discuss a very clear politics of articulation. I would even be more radical and say that Catholicity – understood as a mode of universal dialogue – informs every possibility of cultural analysis.

But it takes courage to address that which is alien, unlike, to engage with those who deny one's existence. That is in fact the difficulty of the cultural encounter, and of Christianity, as such. But if we are to honor the Christian values we go by, there is no other choice. Christianity demands that we take that step, calling for a willingness to listen to the Other, in the name and the spirit of our common humanity. Because the world does not stop at the nation's borders. In our global world, responsible leadership comes with an ability to listen. The Gospel takes its strength from addressing the reality of human imperfection (figures like the tax collector, the stranger, the Samaritan, the adulteress, the leper, the non-believers in general) and showing a way of salvation for all. More than laws, we need concrete and viable solutions that address the murky entanglements of the limits without shying away from the common purpose of recognition and salvation.

The French psychoanalyst Catherine Malabou describes our time as a time of wounds and wounded identities. These wounds run deep, they cut across political borders, remnants of past conflicts, they foster anxiety before the changing social landscape and the arrival of new entrants, that in turn seem to justify the waning of social rights. They articulate a crisis of values and identities, they anticipate a fear before a future defined by technology where human beings are obsolete, they connote a sense of despair before the ravages of climate change and the toll of natural disasters triggered by human behavior. And in these times of wounds, we observe a clash over the precedence of fragility. Who has suffered the most? Who is to blame? Who may claim the status of victim and who are the perpetrators? The widening of the wound threatens all sorts of institutional authority, the State, education, the economy, the Church. It threatens societal cohesion and instills a demand for retribution.

Europe is at a crossroads, but I argue that this is not a moment to lament, but precisely an occasion to rekindle the spirit that comes forward exactly when the idea of Europe is placed under duress. Just as the personalist values of integrity, justice, solidarity, care, but also the right to a dignified living are part and parcel of the European project and originate in the lessons of the Gospel, so too is the self-reflexive critique that informs discernment. Faith does not preclude reasoned choice, obedience does not disqualify discernment. The critique of Europe must therefore be an occasion to strengthen our choice for a project serving the common good.

In order to unpack the challenge of my topic for this address, I have chosen four themes that speak to some of the current trials for Europe and for the Church and allow me to address some of the expectations that derive therefrom.

## **1 – The world is not Europe.**

Up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the global order was very much shaped by Europe and its (stronger) political allies, like the United States. For over two decades, this is no longer the case. Europe has waned in political importance vis-à-vis the rise of global authoritarian players such as China and the make up of new alliances, as we've all observed this past week (AUSUK). The self-determination of nations colonized by European powers over the past century, but also a cultural and economical dislocation of the decision centers to Asia and other areas of the globe has brought the European master narrative to wither, politically and economically at least. But also, I would argue, culturally.

The process of European expansion from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards was celebrated as 'bringing new worlds to the world.' That Europe was conceivably 'the' world in this equation and that the 'new' worlds were positioned on a lesser level of the enlightened progress of history was self explanatory. The nature of the contact though was both framed by light and darkness, by the immense widening of knowledge and dialogue, but also by conflict and violence. Today, Europe is no longer 'the' world and it has a hard time conceiving of a less central position, and

yet, the world is coming in droves to our doorstep. This incoming Other world is widely diverse. It is both the world of the **diaspora of hope**, of the cosmopolitan elites, and the world of the **diaspora of despair**, the world of the global disenfranchised, forced to leave their nations in search of a chance of survival, fleeing famine, conflict and war. For the diaspora of despair, Europe's world is appealing not for its hard power, but for its values. It is the space of sanctuary and hospitality, of care and recognition, shaped at its core by the Christian values of respect for human dignity, a Europe where every life matters and where all have the right to have rights. What the migrants and refugees seek is a leadership of values and access to the basic tenets that make life livable: the right to work, to health, education and participation.

Nonetheless, we are sadly, and perhaps increasingly, faced with a congregation of European nations that more often than not is not able to hone these values. Instead of hospitality and care, they bring indifference and populism. The liminal moment when Europe is challenged, is precisely the occasion for its reawakening, and for this we expect the leadership of our shepherds. We need the voice of the Church, as our Pontiff has repeatedly done, in denouncing abuse and inspiring a welcoming strategy; we invite the Bishops' Conferences to be attuned with a social agenda that is a values agenda, we require the institutions of the Church, charities, schools, universities to act in support of this endeavor. The force of our example, with concrete and real actions – such as the Pope Francis Fund for Migrants and Refugees at UCP - may be the last chance for the Europe of values.

## **2 – Social Justice and *woke* culture**

Over the past years, and more recently with the impulse of retribution movements such as Black Lives Matter, the global call for social justice - which is effectively at the heart of Christian social thought – has gained renewed prominence. In fact, if the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the century of history and the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the century of the people - was the century of economics and sociology as French theorist Alain Touraine suggested, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is organized around

a new paradigm, that of culture and the demand of cultural rights. While a first element of this cultural inquiry is hermeneutical, set on understanding how cultural artifacts, practices and beliefs produce social, political, spiritual and aesthetical value, addressing the complex ways in which societies communicate, represent themselves and others and how changing social conditions structure the production of discourse; a second is clearly programmatic, including in the set of questions that concern the study of culture a fundamental commitment to an extended narration, that is, to the right of all constituencies to have a voice and tell their story.

This vernacular right to narration, to tell one's story and to memory, underlies Hannah Arendt's fundamental claim for 'the right to have rights'. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) she writes that "The right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself," adding, "It is by no means certain whether this is possible." In the wake of the terrible events of the WW II, Arendt was skeptical of humanity's possibility of doing otherwise. If we are to honor a common interest for each other, or as Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti*, to honor a common debt (FT, 35) that rests in the recognition of the face of the other, the study of culture too is bound by a commitment to contribute to a more equitable society, at least to mobilize against demeaning, degrading and unjust social combinations that persist in limiting the rights of some groups to access the rights of others.

However, as demands for equitable representation grow, reacting to the contradictions in our global development model, the threats to fundamental rights and the failed liberal promise of equal opportunity, another concurrent strategy is doing precisely the opposite, limiting narration, erasing history, and limiting the voices in the public space. This activist move that has been defined as *woke*, referring to the act of awakening the underrepresented voices, is torn with inconsistency and contradiction, because its focus is not 'awakening' but rather silencing what is perceived by aggrieved groups as instruments of the dominant cultures they aim to abate. *Cancel culture*, the popular form of the activist *woke*, acts to erase words, rewrite books of Western tradition, requests 'trigger warnings'



for the classics lest they wound the afflicted fragile souls of the youth – Greek tragedy is a particular target of these groups – and demand the silencing of academics, the canceling of whole disciplines. Let us retreat with disgust before examples such as that of a scholar of Classics at Princeton, who became recently famous for demanding to rescue Greek and Roman classics from whiteness. He thinks classicists should knock ancient Greece and Rome off their pedestal, even if that means destroying their discipline (NYT, Feb 2, 2021).

In these actions, we see a clear and present danger for freedom of speech, for an integral and open model of education that does not erase but rather includes and contextualizes. It all seeps down to an understanding of identity that has changed quickly. In fact, over the 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and the study of culture have moved from an understanding of identity as something personal and utterly particular, to a sense of identity as a marker of collective belonging. The notion of ‘situated identities’, that one’s identity is marked by sex, race, class, religion, and that those situated forms of belonging determine how one feels, reasons and behaves provides for the activist splintering that sustains a disruptive agenda. The personal then becomes a social affair. A woman shares the fight for empowerment with other women against the male dominance of the public sphere, but a black male is felt to be placed on a lower level of power than a white woman, while a black woman falls lower than the preceding two. If one adds class and education, age and religion, to the equation, the possibilities of these activist shared identities multiply *ad infinitum*.

The movement though is spreading, rapidly, into our countries, our sentiment of feeling, our universities, which as institutions where a free reasoned discussion has structured the model of European development over a thousand years, are particularly under threat by the moralistic waves of *wokeness*. The force that binds this culture is resentment, that great accelerator of strife and mayhem, considered by historian Marc Ferro one of the greatest drivers of historical development. And there is no end to the compensation requested by the resentful culture. Like a revolution that engulfs and destroys its children, *wokeness* is already canceling the cancellers.



As a Rector of a Catholic University, I see the waves moving in our direction, it is a movement felt by Catholic universities across the continent, challenging yet again and from within the very idea of the Catholic university, for some a contradiction in terms. We've been there before and I do not see this as a real and present danger, I do however perceive a challenge in the appropriation of the social justice agenda by radical identity politics.

The Church has been at the forefront of the global call for reform and social justice. To speak only of recent events shaping life in Europe, during the sovereign debt crisis, when unemployment skyrocketed, Church charities and institutions were at times the only back up support for families before ailing government welfare services. The Church has supported the hospitality agenda, the laity has been at the forefront of the implementation of an agenda for the ethics of care – that is now clearly placed as one of the European Commission's key social policies - we have worked to support intergenerational justice, to defend democracy and the rule of law.

The move towards the practical eradication of situations of social injustice rather than an abstract plea for absolute justice, as Amartya Sen suggests, culminates in political and juridical change but it is preceded or goes hand in hand with social and cultural awareness and this I am afraid is where our work has not been enough. In the media savvy world, what is not represented, does not exist. Part of the effort of finding viable solutions to combat injustice is linked to communicating this effort, of penetrating the circuits of representation, adapting the language in order to put the message clearly across. And also of finding new actors to connect with the wide world of believers and non-believers. We cannot keep addressing our concerns in close-circuit. Of Catholics, by Catholics, for Catholics, in a gated community with low impact. Training leaders, engaging a coalition of the willing that may support the cause, is of the essence. But also recognizing the power of our imperfection and shortcomings as testaments to a fragility that binds and is not resentful.

### **3 – Social rights, digital transition and the dignity of work**

One of the most crucial social and cultural challenges facing Europe today is the impact of the transformation of work and work relations on individuals. Digital transition and A.I. announce a new era where robotization threatens reproductive labor and A.I. will affect complex functions.

The idea of work has suffered a reinvention over the years. First there is the wider question of what counts as an occupation. The second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> witnessed a remarkable dematerialization of the notion of work. The disjuncture of the worker from the production process had already been diagnosed by Marxism, but the novelty was indeed a conceptual dematerialization that was to grow with the virtualization of labor. Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* speaks about conceptual break up of the idea of work. Indeed by separating the biological drive of labor – epitomized in the *animal laborans* – from the transitive act of work and the reasoned appraisal of action, Arendt's theory dematerializes the affectivity of the worker's body from the product and conceives of industrial, mechanical work as distinct from the reasoned reflexivity of action. This separation connotes, in fact, the emergence of an idea of work as a sacrifice and a liability not a source of joy and fulfillment (Massey, 2013). More deeply, labor and work are stricken from the economy of meaning. But the fact, that work matters and means is seen in the anguish before a loss job and the despondency of unemployment. Obviously, it is through work that people express their desires and capabilities. It is through work that the community is created and the social is organized. But work is not a task separated from the life of the spirit.

Certainly the Church has been consistently present to denounce workforce exploitation, but what I am referring to now is different. The impact is less social than anthropological. The pace and scope of digitalization and roboticization is and will affect the very definition of humanity. It is crucial to reflect on transformations to the livelihood of individuals that this change may bring, to support strategies of reskilling and upskilling, to be close by, there on the cusp of these developments where these transformations in science are being prepared, in the corporations where they are being tested, to work with governments, but also how this reshapes humanity. We all probably recall the scene in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, when

Charlot's body movements become one with the machine and how his body out of order then worked to subvert the rhythm, hence the line of production and ultimately the system. The question we are faced today is with the disappearance of the worker's body altogether from the stream of production.

It is crucial for the Church to place this issue at the heart of Her societal concerns and support the People of God at this moment of change.

#### **4 -Women, the family and service to the Church**

Allow me to end with a final plea to this honorable assembly of ecclesiastical thought leaders, spoken from the heart and from the mind. It has been compellingly argued that the family is the node of society, the warranty of the values that have shaped Europe, the keeper of Christian values and the core from where individual resilience, empathy and respect for others emanates, shaping the collaborative effort that renders each one of us a keeper of our brothers and sisters. Women's role in the family as caretakers is a model for a renewal of the European social model based on the reconfiguration of the ethics of care. At the heart of the European question is precisely the thinning of the social fabric, of human relations. A self-centered and barren reasoning obscures the deeply entangled condition of humanity. From this mode of reasoning economic crises arise – prompted by management decisions that are blind to the real lives of those outside 'the room where it happens' (musical *Hamilton*) – political strife and self-centred populist discourse emanate; human made natural disasters explode– e.g. the terrible floods on the island of Madeira caused by decades of building across creeks, brooks and other waterbeds – and also a push for a programmatic reversal of the integrity of the person with the widespreading approval of euthanasia laws across the continent. To rebuild Europe from the standpoint of an ethics of care is of the essence and the hub from where it grows is the family.

I speak for a collective ethics of care and at the same time utter a plea for a recognition of the role of women in society and in the Church. Women are

superlative caretakers, and multitaskers. However, their role cannot be subsumed to what many have already named the 'trap of care'. This is basically a display of fairness and good sense. Women are great change makers and in these interesting times there is an unquestionable need for humane, competent and caring leaders. Characteristically, the country that led the humanitarian effort during the 2015 crisis was led by a woman, Chancellor Angela Merkel. Women take care but they are also ready to take charge and be endowed with the duties and the responsibilities that are now entrusted to the other 50% of the world population. Women are brave, and selfless, like Sister Maura Lynch, a doctor and a member of the Medical Missionaries of Mary with an extraordinary life dedicated to women's health in Angola and Nigeria. Women are thought leaders, innovators, extraordinary trailblazers and superlative professionals in business, academia, politics. They are also essential to move the work of the Church forward and they need to be trusted and recognized.

On this issue, the Church needs to go an extra mile. To recognize the tremendous work of consecrated religious women in the service of the Church and widen their education, their ability to lead in pastoral work. It is true, steps have been taken. There are examples like Gabriella Gambino and Linda Ghisoni, the Sub-Secretaries of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, or my own as President of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, but it is more important to be the second woman in office than the first. More than playing with words, women act. In the Gospel, the women that follow Jesus, never doubt His word. They express themselves through gestures, such as the woman that wet Jesus' feet with her tears and wept them with her hair. They act with the strength of their conviction and display an incredible ability to serve. Women are daring, they are resilient, they are champions of the underdog like Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, aka. Mother Theresa. This is not a call for plain equality, across all functions and services. Abstract equality is an empty signifier. The key question is recognition, not as second or third best, but as different partners in the service of the Lord. I plead with you, do not let the will, the talent and the service of women go to waste. Time is not on your side.

## Coda

Like the disciples in the stormy sea of Galilee, the faithful look to the Church in search of gestures of reassurance, gestures of care, that may allow for the weathering of the storm. As I've tried to suggest in these minutes, the nature of the crisis runs deep, it is not one sided and therefore requires a coalition, where the laity have a strategic role to play. True, our tensional times suggest that the past contributions of the Church for the construction of the very idea of Europe is under duress. Arguably, this past, for the current generation, is truly a foreign country. As we speak, the diversity of the continent is enhanced or enriched with newcomers that bring different faiths and sentiments. This is not a threat, but a challenge that provides an opportunity for the reaffirmation of the core values of Catholicity, discernment, dialogue, respect. New social identities disrupt discursive practices, challenge our ways of making sense of the world.

In addition, the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have shown that humanity is living on the 'dangerous edge of things' (Graham Greene), wavering between the immense capability of science and technology to improve the condition of mankind and the widening of income inequality, the degradation of the planet, the flaring of ethnic and religious conflict. The habitus of the European citizen and his/her recognition before others and the State rested on the ownership of an occupation. The nature of work is changing and with it the self-awareness of the *animal laborans*. On top of it all, the People of God are not perfect creatures. The Church too has recognized its imperfections and wounds. We cannot aspire to the morality of angels. Accepting our fragilities and embracing the truth of our imperfections, we can still and always remain faithful to the one program we have to follow, the embodied example of the Gospel, and its one law: to love one another. A synodal conscience would be of the essence. To deepen collaboration with the Church in mending the grave wounds of our times, the women and men of the People of God expect fraternal recognition, and look forward to having a voice and being listened

to. This is surely what Europe expects from the Church: a synodal conscience and fraternal engagement, binding all together, *fratelli e sorelli tutti*, through mutual recognition, and working for the common good.

Thank you for your kind attention.