



POPE FRANCIS

Address to European Parliament

25 NOVEMBER 2014

Mr President and Vice Presidents,
Members of the European Parliament,
All associated with the work of this Institution,
Dear Friends,

I thank you for inviting me to address this institution which is fundamental to the life of the European Union, and for giving me this opportunity to speak, through you, to the more than five-hundred million citizens whom you represent in the twenty-eight Member States. I am especially grateful to you, Mr President, for your warm words of welcome in the name of the entire assembly.

My visit comes more than a quarter of a century after that of Pope John Paul II. Since then, much has changed throughout Europe and the world as a whole. The opposing blocs which then divided the continent in two no longer exist, and gradually the hope is being realized that “Europe, endowed with sovereign and free institutions, will one day reach the full dimensions that geography, and even more, history have given it”.[1]

As the European Union has expanded, the world itself has become more complex and ever changing; increasingly interconnected and global, it has, as a consequence, become less and less “Eurocentric”. Despite a larger and stronger Union, Europe seems to give the impression of being somewhat elderly and haggard, feeling less and less a protagonist in a world which frequently regards it with aloofness, mistrust and even, at times, suspicion.

In addressing you today, I would like, as a pastor, to offer a message of hope and encouragement to all the citizens of Europe.

It is a message of hope, based on the confidence that our problems can become powerful forces for unity in working to overcome all those fears which Europe – together with the entire world – is presently experiencing. It is a message of hope in the Lord, who turns evil into good and death into life.

It is a message of encouragement to return to the firm conviction of the founders of the European Union, who envisioned a future based on the capacity to work together in bridging

divisions and in fostering peace and fellowship between all the peoples of this continent. At the heart of this ambitious political project was confidence in man, not so much as a citizen or an economic agent, but in man, in men and women as persons endowed with transcendent dignity.

I feel bound to stress the close bond between these two words: “dignity” and “transcendent”.

“Dignity” was the pivotal concept in the process of rebuilding which followed the Second World War. Our recent past has been marked by the concern to protect human dignity, in contrast to the manifold instances of violence and discrimination which, even in Europe, took place in the course of the centuries. Recognition of the importance of human rights came about as the result of a lengthy process, entailing much suffering and sacrifice, which helped shape an awareness of the unique worth of each individual human person. This awareness was grounded not only in historical events, but above all in European thought, characterized as it is by an enriching encounter whose “distant springs are many, coming from Greece and Rome, from Celtic, Germanic and Slavic sources, and from Christianity which profoundly shaped them”, [2] thus forging the very concept of the “person”.

Today, the promotion of human rights is central to the commitment of the European Union to advance the dignity of the person, both within the Union and in its relations with other countries. This is an important and praiseworthy commitment, since there are still too many situations in which human beings are treated as objects whose conception, configuration and utility can be programmed, and who can then be discarded when no longer useful, due to weakness, illness or old age.

In the end, what kind of dignity is there without the possibility of freely expressing one’s thought or professing one’s religious faith? What dignity can there be without a clear juridical framework which limits the rule of force and enables the rule of law to prevail over the power of tyranny? What dignity can men and women ever enjoy if they are subjected to all types of discrimination? What dignity can a person ever hope to find when he or she lacks food and the bare essentials for survival and, worse yet, when they lack the work which confers dignity?

Promoting the dignity of the person means recognizing that he or she possesses inalienable rights which no one may take away arbitrarily, much less for the sake of economic interests.

At the same time, however, care must be taken not to fall into certain errors which can arise from a misunderstanding of the concept of human rights and from its misuse. Today there is a tendency to claim ever broader individual rights; underlying this is a conception of the human person as detached from all social and anthropological contexts, as if the person were a “monad” (μονάς), increasingly unconcerned with other surrounding “monads”. The equally essential and complementary concept of duty no longer seems to be linked to such a concept of rights. As a result, the rights of the individual are upheld, without regard for the fact that each human being is part of a social context wherein his or her rights and duties are bound up with those of others and with the common good of society itself.

I believe, therefore, that it is vital to develop a culture of human rights which wisely links the individual, or better, the personal aspect, to that of the common good, of the “all of us” made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. [3] In fact, unless the rights of each individual are harmoniously ordered to the greater good, those rights

will end up being considered limitless and consequently will become a source of conflicts and violence.

To speak of transcendent human dignity thus means appealing to human nature, to our innate capacity to distinguish good from evil, to that “compass” deep within our hearts, which God has impressed upon all creation.[4] Above all, it means regarding human beings not as absolutes, but as beings in relation. In my view, one of the most common diseases in Europe today is the loneliness typical of those who have no connection with others. This is especially true of the elderly, who are often abandoned to their fate, and also in the young who lack clear points of reference and opportunities for the future. It is also seen in the many poor who dwell in our cities and in the disorientation of immigrants who came here seeking a better future.

This loneliness has become more acute as a result of the economic crisis, whose effects continue to have tragic consequences for the life of society. In recent years, as the European Union has expanded, there has been growing mistrust on the part of citizens towards institutions considered to be aloof, engaged in laying down rules perceived as insensitive to individual peoples, if not downright harmful. In many quarters we encounter a general impression of weariness and aging, of a Europe which is now a “grandmother”, no longer fertile and vibrant. As a result, the great ideas which once inspired Europe seem to have lost their attraction, only to be replaced by the bureaucratic technicalities of its institutions.

Together with this, we encounter certain rather selfish lifestyles, marked by an opulence which is no longer sustainable and frequently indifferent to the world around us, and especially to the poorest of the poor. To our dismay we see technical and economic questions dominating political debate, to the detriment of genuine concern for human beings. [5] Men and women risk being reduced to mere cogs in a machine that treats them as items of consumption to be exploited, with the result that – as is so tragically apparent – whenever a human life no longer proves useful for that machine, it is discarded with few qualms, as in the case of the terminally ill, the elderly who are abandoned and uncared for, and children who are killed in the womb.

This is the great mistake made “when technology is allowed to take over”:[6] the result is a confusion between ends and means”. [7] It is the inevitable consequence of a “throwaway culture” and an uncontrolled consumerism. Upholding the dignity of the person means instead acknowledging the value of human life, which is freely given us and hence cannot be an object of trade or commerce. As members of this Parliament, you are called to a great mission which may at times seem an impossible one: to tend to the needs of individuals and peoples. To tend to those in need takes strength and tenderness, effort and generosity in the midst of a functionalistic and privatized mindset which inexorably leads to a “throwaway culture”. To care for individuals and peoples in need means protecting memory and hope; it means taking responsibility for the present with its situations of utter marginalization and anguish, and being capable of bestowing dignity upon it.[8]

How, then, can hope in the future be restored, so that, beginning with the younger generation, there can be a rediscovery of that confidence needed to pursue the great ideal of a united and peaceful Europe, a Europe which is creative and resourceful, respectful of rights and conscious of its duties?

To answer this question, allow me to use an image. One of the most celebrated frescoes of Raphael is found in the Vatican and depicts the so-called “School of Athens”. Plato and Aristotle are in the centre. Plato’s finger is pointed upward, to the world of ideas, to the sky, to heaven as we might say. Aristotle holds his hand out before him, towards the viewer, towards the world, concrete reality. This strikes me as a very apt image of Europe and her history, made up of the constant interplay between heaven and earth, where the sky suggests that openness to the transcendent – to God – which has always distinguished the peoples of Europe, while the earth represents Europe’s practical and concrete ability to confront situations and problems.

The future of Europe depends on the recovery of the vital connection between these two elements. A Europe which is no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life is a Europe which risks slowly losing its own soul and that “humanistic spirit” which it still loves and defends.

Taking as a starting point this opening to the transcendent, I would like to reaffirm the centrality of the human person, which otherwise is at the mercy of the whims and the powers of the moment. I consider to be fundamental not only the legacy that Christianity has offered in the past to the social and cultural formation of the continent, but above all the contribution which it desires to offer today, and in the future, to Europe’s growth. This contribution does not represent a threat to the secularity of states or to the independence of the institutions of the European Union, but rather an enrichment. This is clear from the ideals which shaped Europe from the beginning, such as peace, subsidiarity and reciprocal solidarity, and a humanism centred on respect for the dignity of the human person.

I wish, then, to reiterate the readiness of the Holy See and the Catholic Church, through the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of Europe (COMECE), to engage in meaningful, open and transparent dialogue with the institutions of the European Union. I am likewise convinced that a Europe which is capable of appreciating its religious roots and of grasping their fruitfulness and potential, will be all the more immune to the many forms of extremism spreading in the world today, not least as a result of the great vacuum of ideals which we are currently witnessing in the West, since “it is precisely man’s forgetfulness of God, and his failure to give him glory, which gives rise to violence”.^[9]

Here I cannot fail to recall the many instances of injustice and persecution which daily afflict religious minorities, and Christians in particular, in various parts of our world. Communities and individuals today find themselves subjected to barbaric acts of violence: they are evicted from their homes and native lands, sold as slaves, killed, beheaded, crucified or burned alive, under the shameful and complicit silence of so many.

The motto of the European Union is United in Diversity. Unity, however, does not mean uniformity of political, economic and cultural life, or ways of thinking. Indeed, all authentic unity draws from the rich diversities which make it up: in this sense it is like a family, which is all the more united when each of its members is free to be fully himself or herself. I consider Europe as a family of peoples who will sense the closeness of the institutions of the Union when these latter are able wisely to combine the desired ideal of unity with the diversity proper to each people, cherishing particular traditions, acknowledging its past history and

its roots, liberated from so many manipulations and phobias. Affirming the centrality of the human person means, above all, allowing all to express freely their individuality and their creativity, both as individuals and as peoples.

At the same time, the specific features of each one represent an authentic richness to the degree that they are placed at the service of all. The proper configuration of the European Union must always be respected, based as it is on the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, so that mutual assistance can prevail and progress can be made on the basis of mutual trust.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the European Parliament, within this dynamic of unity and particularity, yours is the responsibility of keeping democracy alive for the peoples of Europe. It is no secret that a conception of unity seen as uniformity strikes at the vitality of the democratic system, weakening the rich, fruitful and constructive interplay of organizations and political parties. This leads to the risk of living in a world of ideas, of mere words, of images, of sophistry... and to end up confusing the reality of democracy with a new political nominalism. Keeping democracy alive in Europe requires avoiding the many globalizing tendencies to dilute reality: namely, angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems lacking kindness, and intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom[10].

Keeping democracies alive is a challenge in the present historic moment. The true strength of our democracies – understood as expressions of the political will of the people – must not be allowed to collapse under the pressure of multinational interests which are not universal, which weaken them and turn them into uniform systems of economic power at the service of unseen empires. This is one of the challenges which history sets before you today.

To give Europe hope means more than simply acknowledging the centrality of the human person; it also implies nurturing the gifts of each man and woman. It means investing in individuals and in those settings in which their talents are shaped and flourish. The first area surely is that of education, beginning with the family, the fundamental cell and most precious element of any society. The family, united, fruitful and indissoluble, possesses the elements fundamental for fostering hope in the future. Without this solid basis, the future ends up being built on sand, with dire social consequences. Then too, stressing the importance of the family not only helps to give direction and hope to new generations, but also to many of our elderly, who are often forced to live alone and are effectively abandoned because there is no longer the warmth of a family hearth able to accompany and support them.

Alongside the family, there are the various educational institutes: schools and universities. Education cannot be limited to providing technical expertise alone. Rather, it should encourage the more complex process of assisting the human person to grow in his or her totality. Young people today are asking for a suitable and complete education which can enable them to look to the future with hope instead of disenchantment. There is so much creative potential in Europe in the various fields of scientific research, some of which have yet to be fully explored. We need only think, for example, of alternative sources of energy, the development of which will assist in the protection of the environment.

Europe has always been in the vanguard of efforts to promote ecology. Our earth needs constant concern and attention. Each of us has a personal responsibility to care for creation,

this precious gift which God has entrusted to us. This means, on the one hand, that nature is at our disposal, to enjoy and use properly. Yet it also means that we are not its masters. Stewards, but not masters. We need to love and respect nature, but “instead we are often guided by the pride of dominating, possessing, manipulating, exploiting; we do not ‘preserve’ the earth, we do not respect it, we do not consider it as a freely-given gift to look after”.[11] Respect for the environment, however, means more than not destroying it; it also means using it for good purposes. I am thinking above all of the agricultural sector, which provides sustenance and nourishment to our human family. It is intolerable that millions of people around the world are dying of hunger while tons of food are discarded each day from our tables. Respect for nature also calls for recognizing that man himself is a fundamental part of it. Along with an environmental ecology, there is also need of that human ecology which consists in respect for the person, which I have wanted to emphasize in addressing you today.

The second area in which people’s talents flourish is labour. The time has come to promote policies which create employment, but above all there is a need to restore dignity to labour by ensuring proper working conditions. This implies, on the one hand, finding new ways of joining market flexibility with the need for stability and security on the part of workers; these are indispensable for their human development. It also implies favouring a suitable social context geared not to the exploitation of persons, but to ensuring, precisely through labour, their ability to create a family and educate their children.

Likewise, there needs to be a united response to the question of migration. We cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a vast cemetery! The boats landing daily on the shores of Europe are filled with men and women who need acceptance and assistance. The absence of mutual support within the European Union runs the risk of encouraging particularistic solutions to the problem, solutions which fail to take into account the human dignity of immigrants, and thus contribute to slave labour and continuing social tensions. Europe will be able to confront the problems associated with immigration only if it is capable of clearly asserting its own cultural identity and enacting adequate legislation to protect the rights of European citizens and to ensure the acceptance of immigrants. Only if it is capable of adopting fair, courageous and realistic policies which can assist the countries of origin in their own social and political development and in their efforts to resolve internal conflicts – the principal cause of this phenomenon – rather than adopting policies motivated by self-interest, which increase and feed such conflicts. We need to take action against the causes and not only the effects.

Mr President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Awareness of one’s own identity is also necessary for entering into a positive dialogue with the States which have asked to become part of the Union in the future. I am thinking especially of those in the Balkans, for which membership in the European Union could be a response to the desire for peace in a region which has suffered greatly from past conflicts. Awareness of one’s own identity is also indispensable for relations with other neighbouring countries, particularly with those bordering the Mediterranean, many of which suffer from internal conflicts, the pressure of religious fundamentalism and the reality of global terrorism.

Upon you, as legislators, it is incumbent to protect and nurture Europe's identity, so that its citizens can experience renewed confidence in the institutions of the Union and in its underlying project of peace and friendship. Knowing that "the more the power of men and women increases, the greater is individual and collective responsibility",^[12] I encourage you to work to make Europe rediscover the best of itself.

An anonymous second-century author wrote that "Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body".^[13] The function of the soul is to support the body, to be its conscience and its historical memory. A two-thousand-year-old history links Europe and Christianity. It is a history not free of conflicts and errors, but one constantly driven by the desire to work for the good of all. We see this in the beauty of our cities, and even more in the beauty of the many works of charity and constructive cooperation throughout this continent. This history, in large part, must still be written. It is our present and our future. It is our identity. Europe urgently needs to recover its true features in order to grow, as its founders intended, in peace and harmony, since it is not yet free of conflicts.

Dear Members of the European Parliament, the time has come to work together in building a Europe which revolves not around the economy, but around the sacredness of the human person, around inalienable values. In building a Europe which courageously embraces its past and confidently looks to its future in order fully to experience the hope of its present. The time has come for us to abandon the idea of a Europe which is fearful and self-absorbed, in order to revive and encourage a Europe of leadership, a repository of science, art, music, human values and faith as well. A Europe which contemplates the heavens and pursues lofty ideals. A Europe which cares for, defends and protects man, every man and woman. A Europe which bestrides the earth surely and securely, a precious point of reference for all humanity!

Thank you!