

Europe: beyond the crisis, hope

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Together for Europe

Dear friends, we cannot conceal the European crisis from ourselves. It is rooted in other crises, like the economic crisis gripping many countries. How can it be overcome? It is not the time to talk of recipes. Even though the message often conveyed today is: you can overcome the crisis by yourself, by focusing on yourself. There is a human root to the crisis, perhaps the mother of the crises, and it is the loneliness of many Europeans. It is the condition of a number of people: many nets of togetherness have faded away: political parties, associations, families. Today Europeans are more lonely in their lives and think of themselves as alone.

Besides, we are confronted with a culture marked by individualism, which affects our personal lives, jobs, and far beyond. The crisis of the idea of a common European destiny is part of a broader picture of crisis of communities of life and destiny. This reflects in the single countries. One of its facets – not the least important – is the lack of visions for the future. There is an incredible need of visions, because visions are icons of hope that need to be contemplated in order not to fall into pessimism.

Indeed, if a completely individualistic concept of life can offer moments of exhilaration and satisfaction, the lack of a sense of community generates an atmosphere of pessimism. So we Europeans, clouded over, run the risk of giving up making history: “to go down in history, no longer making history” Jurgen Habermas wrote, or “taking leave of history” said Benedict XVI. For fear of a world too big and too complex. It seems we need to defend ourselves from history and from the world. This was the attitude after 11th September 2001, the day of the terrible attacks against the United

States. We need to defend ourselves from the excessive aggressiveness of an enemy or from history.

A French philosopher, Alexandre Lacroix, asked himself: “Are we like the Romans of the late empire, at the last chapter of our glorious (and violent) history? Hedonistic and cynical, heedless of laws and of God, incapable of taking anything seriously except ourselves, not able to project ourselves in the future, grown lazy in comfort, shallow and spoilt, do we deserve to be overcome by other peoples, younger, more ambitious and stronger than we are?”. Is Europe a declining continent? No longer the centre of the world in a world without a centre?

There is a yearning to cut ourselves down to size, to find reassurances, recover our borders. It is an illusion. Alone, most European countries will be unable to deal with the global challenges, the economic crisis, the confrontation with the Asian giants. Do not deceive yourselves. If we are not together, individual European countries will be *quantité négligeable*. And our values will be diluted in the currents of globalization: it would be a loss for the planet in terms of freedom and humanity.

We cannot be resigned to this decline. The appointment of Christians in Brussels is a powerful signal: “Together for Europe”. Fifty years have passed since Vatican II. We do not remember it as nostalgic old men. The Council remains a nourishment for visions of the future. On 11th October 1962, upon opening the Second Vatican Council, an eighty-year-old John XXIII said words of hope:

“Often we are told of voices that ... are incapable of seeing other than ruin and trouble. Voices saying that our times, if compared to the past, are worse. We feel we need to disagree with these prophets of misfortune. In the current state of human events, whereby humanity seems about to enter a new order...”.

We too, fifty years later, disagree with the prophets of misfortune: concerning the decline of Europe and the fact that the individualistic culture must inevitably prevail. The Council and the European Union are closely linked. The Council was, after 1945, the first pan-European event, gathering together bishops from both sides, in spite of the cold war. Furthermore, it projected – well before anyone mentioned globalization – European Christians into the world, inaugurating ecumenism.

The Council is a memory of hope. Hope does not negotiate with pessimism. We cannot join the “save yourself” spirit of decline. Believers are called to “lay hold of the hope set before us [...] as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” writes the Letter to the Hebrews. Christians are the people of unity and hope.

Unity. I think of our stories. Every movement is a dream of universality and unity. Movements are different, not as a pretext for division, but to unite. Chiara Lubich, an elderly woman who never gave up hope, said: in unity, whether it is religious or not, there is still our soul. In unity there is a Christian and profoundly human soul. Will we be the soulless ones who give in to the fraying of communities at all levels?

The answer is to serve a dream of unity, by living and communicating hope. The greatest misery of Europe is lack of hope. History calls us to live in complex and difficult times. Not terrible times, nor desperate times. We can still act, we can still change. If there are serious reasons for concern, even for the sufferance of many European countries in the economic crisis, it is necessary to generate an atmosphere of friendliness and solidarity: a sense of common destiny needs to rise again, social networks need to be reborn.

Paul wrote to the Romans: “Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts...”. Notwithstanding difficulties, ours can be the time for hope, capable of letting the best rise to the surface: “If we are united, we will have a future, we will do good to the world and to ourselves”. But who are we? Each of us is little in front of life’s questions. Hillel, a Jewish teacher in Jesus’ times, once said: “If there are no men, you strive to be a man!”. If there are no men and women of unity, let us strive to be so with hope. Then the culture of unity, lived, envisaged, and communicated, will regenerate a soul for this Europe of ours.

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