



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONVENTION
ORGANIZED BY THE COMMISSION OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCES
OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (COMECE)***

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 24 March 2007*

*Members of the College of Cardinals,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Honourable Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen!*

I am happy to receive such a large number of persons at this particular audience taking place on the eve of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, signed on 25 March 1957. This was an important step for Europe, exhausted by the Second World War and eager to build a future of peace and greater economic and social well-being without suppressing or denying its various national identities. I welcome the Most Reverend Adrianus Herman van Luyn, Bishop of Rotterdam, President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, and I express to him my gratitude for his kind words. I also offer greetings to the other prelates, to the distinguished authorities and to all those taking part in this Convention organised by the COMECE as an invitation to reflect on Europe.

Since March 1957, this Continent has travelled a long road, which has led to the reconciliation of its two "lungs" - the East and the West - linked by a common history, but arbitrarily separated by a curtain of injustice. Economic integration has stimulated political unification and encouraged the continuing and strenuous search for an institutional structure adequate for a European Union that already numbers 27 nations and aspires to become a global actor on the world scene.

During these years there has emerged an increasing awareness of the need to establish a healthy

balance between the economic and social dimensions, through policies capable of producing wealth and increasing competitiveness, while not neglecting the legitimate expectations of the poor and the marginalized. Unfortunately, from a demographic point of view, one must note that Europe seems to be following a path that could lead to its departure from history. This not only places economic growth at risk; it could also create enormous difficulties for social cohesion and, above all, favour a dangerous form of individualism inattentive to future consequences. One could almost think that the European continent is in fact losing faith in its own future. As regards, for example, respect for the environment or the structured access to energy resources and investments, incentives for solidarity are slow in coming, not only in the international sphere but also in the national one. The process of European unification itself is evidently not shared by all, due to the prevailing impression that various "chapters" in the European project have been "written" without taking into account the aspirations of its citizens.

From all this it clearly emerges that an authentic European "common home" cannot be built without considering the identity of the people of this Continent of ours. It is a question of a historical, cultural, and moral identity before being a geographic, economic, or political one; an identity comprised of a set of universal values that Christianity helped forge, thus giving Christianity not only a historical but a foundational role vis-à-vis Europe. These values, which make up the soul of the Continent, must remain in the Europe of the third millennium as a "ferment" of civilization. If these values were to disappear, how could the "old" Continent continue to function as a "leaven" for the entire world? If, for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the Governments of the Union wish to "get nearer" to their citizens, how can they exclude an element essential to European identity such as Christianity, with which a vast majority of citizens continue to identify? Is it not surprising that today's Europe, while aspiring to be regarded as a community of values, seems ever more often to deny the very existence of universal and absolute values? Does not this unique form of "apostasy" from itself, even more than its apostasy from God, lead Europe to doubt its own identity? And so the opinion prevails that an "evaluation of the benefits" is the only way to moral discernment and that the common good is synonymous with compromise. In reality, if compromise can constitute a legitimate balance between different particular interests, it becomes a common evil whenever it involves agreements that dishonour human nature.

A community built without respect for the true dignity of the human being, disregarding the fact that every person is created in the image of God ends up doing no good to anyone. For this reason it seems ever more important that Europe be on guard against the pragmatic attitude, widespread today, which systematically justifies compromise on essential human values, as if it were the inevitable acceptance of a lesser evil. This kind of pragmatism, even when presented as balanced and realistic, is in reality neither, since it denies the dimension of values and ideals inherent in human nature. When non-religious and relativistic tendencies are woven into this pragmatism, Christians as such are eventually denied the very right to enter into the public discussion, or their contribution is discredited as an attempt to preserve unjustified privileges. In this historical hour

and faced with the many challenges that confront it, the European Union, in order to be a valid guarantor of the rule of law and an efficient promoter of universal values, cannot but recognize clearly the certain existence of a stable and permanent human nature, source of common rights for all individuals, including those who deny them. In this context, the right to conscientious objection should be protected, every time fundamental human rights are violated.

Dear friends, I know how difficult it is for Christians to defend this truth of the human person. Nevertheless do not give in to fatigue or discouragement! You know that it is your duty, with God's help, to contribute to the consolidation of a new Europe which will be realistic but not cynical, rich in ideals and free from naïve illusions, inspired by the perennial and life-giving truth of the Gospel. Therefore, be actively present in the public debate on a European level, knowing that this discussion is now an integral part of the national debate. And to this commitment add effective cultural action. Do not bend to the logic of power as an end in itself! May Christ's admonition be a constant stimulus and support for you: "If the salt loses its flavour it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." (cf. *Mt.* 5:13). May the Lord make all your efforts fruitful and help you to recognize and use properly what is positive in today's civilization, while denouncing with courage all that is contrary to human dignity.

I am certain that God will bless the generous efforts of all who, in a spirit of service, work to build a common European home where every cultural, social and political contribution is directed towards the common good. To you, already involved in different ways in this important human and evangelical undertaking, I express my support and my most fervent encouragement. Above all, I assure you of a place in my prayers. Invoking upon you the maternal protection of Mary, Mother of the Word made Flesh, I cordially bless you and your families and communities.

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