

Rediscovering the European Common Good

By CEC President Rev. Christian Krieger

1. Introduction

Good evening

First of all, I would like to thank the *Jesuit European Social Center (JESC)* and the *Chapel for Europe* for the kind invitation addressed to me to join this panel and in a broader way for your commitment to the European project. I would also like to express my gratitude for your excellent paper entitled “Rediscovering the European common good.”

The future of Europe requires attention, passion, and hopefully that various groups are taking hold of it. I willingly share the intent, statement and broad directions of this paper, which can be related to CEC’s 2016 open letter *What Future for Europe?* This text served as a basis for a broad and intensive consultation of our Member Churches in Europe in preparation for the General Assembly held a few months ago in Novi Sad. Four regional church meetings and several national meetings on this paper showed that the churches are deeply concerned about the critical times the European project is nowadays facing.

2. What future for Europe

Let me briefly present CEC’s paper, in order to highlight the convergences with the statement “Rediscovering the European Common Good.”

CEC’s paper largely gives space for an analysis of the situation and the challenges the European Union is facing. Starting with a reference of the context of globalization, which more and more needs global and international approaches to be effective, our paper admitted that people disagree more and more with the view that global issues can best be addressed through global approaches.

CEC’s paper then continues with a brief summary of the European project’s history. Being aware that “The European project, in its various

manifestations, stands as an example of what can be done through reconciliation, stability and prosperity” the authors take the opportunity to enumerate some of its great achievements: a time of peace on a continent that had devastating experiences with nationalism and fascist ideologies, the promotion of democracy, the promotion of solidarity between rich and poor regions through cohesion policy (e.g., European Social Fund, Common Agricultural Policy), the promotion of encounters (e.g., twinning of towns and villages, student exchange programmes), and the management of the world’s largest budget allocated to emergency humanitarian aid.

Nevertheless, the European project stands at a crossroad in its history. For a long time, the EU was seen as a part of the solution. By reading texts written before the 2005, the European project appears often as a self-evident argument, which suffers no discussion neither contestation. Now the EU is seen by many as being part of the problem. Multiple and interacting crises are challenging the common project in raising many fears and worries. Among them: violent conflicts and terrorist attacks, the number of migrants, the deficit of economic development and a lasting Euro crisis since 2008, a loss of trust in Brussels institutions and more generally in established politicians, a democratic deficit causing a decrease in participation, climate change . . .

From the above observations and the fact that the initial narrative is no longer operational, CEC calls for the European project to be redefined around the core values that shaped the heart and soul of Europe: peace, solidarity, equality, unity in diversity, democracy, justice, the rule of law, human rights, freedom and ecological sustainability—all could be seen as parts of a European soul.

In these evocations, one can consider how close both statements are; except that the CEC paper has fewer quotations from the Pope! To conclude, CEC’s paper calls the churches, in being mindful of the ambiguous role religion has played in Europe during the past centuries, to consider “The intrinsic value of each individual human being as fundamentally importance for them” and to act faithfully for *diakonia* and *koinonia* for service among the poor and fellowship among the people.

What did we learn through this consultation?

- Diversity in multicultural societies should not be underestimated. Europe is in many aspects a diverse continent: religious, ethnic, cultural. There is an extraordinary density of diversity on European soil. The unity of the continent is by no means 'uniformity'. Unity in

Europe means carefully and patiently listening to the diversity of accents associated with the theme of Europe.

- For churches, a common Europe means much more than a common market and a common economy. Talking about common values can sometimes seem too sweeping and superficial. Nevertheless, it is up to churches to face this task. This consultation is published under the title ***Beyond Prosperity*** (which also contains another paper linked to our subject *Seeking justice and prosperity for our common future* edited by CEC).

3. The churches' responsibility

In my view, the three first points of attention for a new perspective for EU raised in the statement *Rediscovering the European Common Good* don't require much by further comments:

- To deem human being as core consideration, “the foundation and the end of the political community” is an undeniable theological topic.
- To consider human beings, not only as individuals, but also as social entities, not detached from their relationships and society, belongs deeply to the biblical anthropology, especially that of the Old Testament.
- The need of a culture of exchange, encounter and dialogue is a core topic for a pluralistic society.

I will now pay attention to the “view of the common good that requires social and societal responsibility,” and raise three points of specific responsibility for Christians and the Churches, because I have both in mind.

European narrative

In about fifteen years, the European project has gone from being obvious to everyone to being a problem. For a long time, it was considered as an absolute and indisputable argument, now it is seen as the very heart of the problem. The European narrative no longer works as it used to.

These days we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War. The American political scientist and historian Georgers F. Kennan describes this war as a great disaster (*Urkatastrophe*)¹ that shaped

¹ « La Première Guerre mondiale fut la grande catastrophe qui a modelé la civilisation européenne de ce siècle, non seulement en appauvrissant dramatiquement les sociétés des principaux pays belligérants, mais aussi en devenant la principale origine des deux grands mouvements totalitaristes de la moitié du XX^e siècle, le communisme soviétique et le nazisme. Mais au-delà, ce type de nationalisme, ajouté

European civilisation in the 20th century, causing a descent into hell for European peoples that reached its summit with the Shoah. The narrative of this disaster has pushed the European project forward. But today, living in peace has become a normality. Fearing the consequences of nationalism is no longer a motivating factor for unity.

On the other hand, the overall lack of trust in Brussels institutions, and more generally in established politicians, leads many people to seek their interests, not in the common good, but in the defence of particular interests. While the European project was based on a conviction that the common interest was also going to be the interest of everyone, the good of everyone. Our moment in history seems to forget that some values can only be common. As Albert Camus wrote in his book *The Plague* published in 1947 “[They (people) thought they were free, and no one will ever be free as long as there are plagues.” Therefore, I want to focus our attention on Paul Ricoeur's idea of narrative identity. To him, this narrative identity does not only refer to a narrative of origins, which we often try to manifest during commemorations, but also to the identity we write on a daily basis through our choices and actions. What identity is written by Europe through its dealing with the Aquarius, with the management of Greek debt and social crisis, with Brexit negotiations, and so on?

I do not believe that in the 21st century, political Europe and the politics of the Member States of the EU, are writing the story of an identity in sync with that of the founders. The Member States of the EU, as revealed especially in migration issues, writes more the story of a lack solidarity than of a project drawn by a common vision. That is why, as Christians, as Churches, we must continually question the narrative written by current politicians. This is crucial to the very sustainability of the European project.

Pastoral care of fears and work on dissatisfaction

Another source of the current crisis is the interaction between the fears and concerns of many European citizens and a political culture haunted by elections, which therefore favours the short term. Moreover, the feeling of dissatisfaction of many citizens, not necessarily linked to a real existential difficulty, is increasingly becoming a key factor in the rise of the populist and Eurosceptic vote. Moreover, the discourse of politicians, which is in my opinion irresponsible, does not shy away from exploiting these feelings of fear for their own political ends. Although often irrational, these fears and

au militarisme qu'il encourage, s'est profondément enraciné dans l'esprit et dans la conscience de millions de personnes, déformant leur perception de la réalité extérieure et leur image d'eux-mêmes, répandant une violence destructrice, irraisonnée et suicidaire parmi les peuples – des peuples qui vont à présent devoir mobiliser leurs ressources et leurs forces, même sans sacrifice militaire, pour pouvoir affronter les dangers sociaux et environnementaux qui assaillent aujourd'hui leur civilisation ». [\[6\]\[6\] Kennan, Around the Cragged Hill, p. 80.](#)

feelings of dissatisfaction represent a real risk for our democracy and for the European project. The election of the French president, an almost unknown political figure in the beginning of 2016, who overthrew the political establishment 12 months later, was largely due to this feeling of dissatisfaction and lack of trust in traditional parties.

As Christians and as churches, we must face these fears and feelings of dissatisfaction, listen to them, seek to understand them . . . and make people aware of their limitations. What a complicated exercise to welcome the inadmissible! Behind the call formulated in *Rediscovering the European Common Good*, to multiply the places of exchange, I identify this issue in particular.

A question of trust

In my view, actually, fears and the rise of Euroscepticism is the reflection of a lack of trust. Certainly a lack of trust in politicians and political bodies, particularly in European ones, but also a lack of trust in human beings, in our ability to build on a larger scale just societies that respect every human being. And finally these fears and the rise of Euroscepticism also reflect a lack of trust in God, in God's work among humans, among us, in us, in us and by us. As Bishop Nick Baines used to say, *Christians are not driven by fear; they are drawn by faith and by hope because of the Resurrection.*² This echoes also with the conclusion of the statement "Rediscovering the European common good" when it quotes the words of Pope Francis calling on Christians and churches to communicate hope and trust in our time. So, let us pray and act so that trust may dwell in hearts and that the work of peace and reconciliation, also among European countries and peoples, may continue.

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude by quoting the *Charta Oecumenica*, which is, in a way, for Catholics and CEC Member Churches, our common good:

"On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail."

Rev. Christian Krieger
CEC President
6 November 2018
Chapel for Europe, Brussels

² "*Christians are not driven by fear; they are drawn by hope because of the Resurrection*" (Nick Baines)