

Catholics, the Roman Catholic Church and the European Union

Speech by Mgr Jean Kockerols, Vice-President of COMECE

Reflecting on a Vision of Europe - Contribution of the Christian Churches

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Let me just share with you three questions, trying also to give some answers.

(1) Why is it rather natural for Christians (and for the Church) to support the European project and to be involved?

At least for these four reasons:

1. Christian faith, embodied in the faith of Israel, gives great importance to history and memorial. To understand its own identity and mission, the Church needs to remember its origins, its source. Europe can only be considered as a Union if Europeans know where they are coming from and the reasons why nations were gathering 60 years ago. I do regret that in many countries, and also in the local Churches, we lack this sense of history and memorial.
2. Christian faith introduces a religion of peace and reconciliation. For that reason, Churches can only encourage what was started just after the Second World War. In any case, nowadays peace remains a mission and a task for all of us.
3. Much more broadly, listening to each other, respecting the other in his or her differences, and trying to build unity, or better receiving our unity through the Holy Spirit, is also the core message of Christian life. This reflects the catholicity of the Church – one of its foundations; otherwise it would not be faithful to the Gospel. Christians know very well that “to be united in diversity” is a huge challenge. They can also give a taste of what it means to transcend some borders. Building bridges, not walls.
4. Eventually, Christians are nourished in their daily life not only by their faith, but also by their hope. Our continent so often lacks this dimension. Sometimes we might say that Europeans are suffering from *acedia*. Rethinking Europe today requires a lot of hope, courage and confidence, which can be brought by Christians. Indeed, Christians have to share this gift of the Holy Spirit.

(2) How can we understand, in a certain way, the crisis the EU is facing?

In one of his speeches, Pope Francis has talked about Europe as being a “grandmother”: old, tired, her ambitions left behind, out of breath. This comparison is interesting, but in my opinion it is not sufficient. In a certain way, even after 60 years, the EU is like a teenager. Each one of us was once a teenager and had to sustain such a crisis in his or her life. A crisis, understood as a positive step to maturity. In which way can this be considered for the EU? Let me emphasize three points:

1. A teenager is discovering *liberty*; what it actually means to be free. But he has to learn what this freedom involves, through experiences of success and of failures. He has to find out the way to live with all this, for himself and for others. Clearly, this needs a sense of *responsibility*. Towards himself and towards others. In most of the countries of the EU, the citizens have been liberated and still have a very high level of freedom. But the Church has to help them to understand the *responsibility* towards the whole world which this includes.
2. A teenager has a lot of fears. He is often anxious and hesitant. Just as almost all Europeans are now. Afraid, or at least anxious. They share a lot of apprehensions, on the political, economic or ecological level. Most of them consider “Brussels” as being so far from the citizens. But the Church has to help them to be confident and not to use their fears as an easy justification, lacking any ambition. Pope Francis is calling us to look further than our first impressions and not to be afraid.
3. A teenager is searching for his own identity and which communities he wants to belong to. Just as a lot of inhabitants of this continent are now. Are we Catalans? Or Spanish? Or Europeans? We all have multiple identities. The consequences of this can be understood in very different ways. The Church has to help us to discover this as a chance. European citizenship is not a detail for our future. It helps us to welcome a common destiny, without ignoring our other identities.

(3) Where is the main responsibility of the Church today?
I just want to give you a few suggestions.

1. Going back to the fundamentals: we must never forget that the EU is not first of all a huge structure of institutions, but was intended as a community.¹ A community of nations, of course, but mainly of human beings, who are working for the common good. The Church has to *inform* its members, so that they can be aware of all this.
2. When it is needed, people need to hear the prophetic voice of the Church. Not only according to Article 17 of the TFEU. This requires better structures, even in the Church and with the other Christian denominations. For example, the links between COMECE and CCEE and with KEK must be improved.
3. The Church has to be exemplary, by promoting the integration of those who are arriving here. Welcoming the foreigner is a core business of a loving Church.

One of the main skills of the Church is its ability to symbolize. And symbols actually work. They are effective. As Pope Francis invites us to strengthen our capacity to dialogue, we have to encourage much more *dialogue* between our different dioceses. First of all having the opportunity to *meet* each other.² Could it be possible to organize fraternizations, for example, between three dioceses: one of the West, one of the East and one of the South of Europe? If Pope Francis is talking about Europe as a *family of peoples*, it is the responsibility of all of us to develop this “spirit of family”, here and now.

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¹ Pope Francis reminded us last week that the first name for the EU was “European Community”. This designation, which includes an ambitious project, is stronger than the word “Union”.

² *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 239.