

## **Speech by Vice President of the European Parliament, Mairead McGuinness**

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

**Chapel for Europe, Brussels**

**Tuesday 7 November at 19.00**

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Good evening

I am delighted to speak for the first time at the Chapel for Europe, right in the heart of the “European Quarter”. It seems to me that this chapel was built at an equal distance from the Parliament, the Council and the Commission - a delicate institutional balance!

These days, I am engaging with faith leaders in dialogue on the *Future of Europe* on a regular basis. This dialogue is something that I am officially charged with on behalf of the European Parliament; but it is also something in which I strongly believe because it is absolutely necessary.

I spent all of this morning and early afternoon at the European Commission headquarters where, together with Commission First Vice President Frans Timmermans, we listened to such contributions from the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches, as well as Muslim, Jewish and Mormon voices.

As a directly-elected Member of the European Parliament, I have always engaged with faith communities on the local level. These are frequently the people at the front line in providing education, health and social services. They do it out of their religious convictions, out of their belief in human dignity, out of love for their fellow men and women.

Meeting the full range of human needs for what Pope Francis has called “*Integral Human Development*” can only be achieved by a close partnership between public authorities and civil society, including religious communities. In our contemporary setting, both political institutions and churches are autonomous in their own fields. But, as each of them is concerned with how to live in the world and make it better for all, it is imperative that they work together.

My involvement with religious dialogue on a national and European level began in earnest at the start of this year when I was appointed Vice President of the European Parliament responsible for conducting Parliament’s dialogue with religions. Since then, I have met religious leaders of different faiths from across the EU, and further afield.

The Lisbon Treaty legally obliges the EU institutions to engage in regular structured dialogue with faith groups on EU policies and legislation. The Treaty (Article 17, TFEU) states clearly that people of faith and belief can make a distinct contribution to the European project, linked to their worldview and the moral and ethical framework this implies.

In some way, this is an implicit recognition of the universal values that need to underpin any political structure if it is to have legitimacy. When the first US President George Washington left office he said in his Farewell Address: *"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."*

I frequently say that even without any legal obligation, the EU would be obliged to engage in this dialogue on the basis of good governance. It is not possible to shape good public policies, which impact on the everyday lives of citizens, without engaging with those citizens on issues that matter to them. The reality is that even in the highly-secularised societies of some European countries, religion remains an important factor in the lives of millions of Europeans.

A week ago, along with Bishop Kockerols here - and of course Fr Krystian and Fr Martin too - I was in the Vatican to take part in a major conference organised by COMECE and the Holy See on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome entitled "Re-thinking Europe". Representatives from other Christian denominations also participated in the deliberations - a nice ecumenical gesture in this year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Churches are known for bringing people together to *pray*; so it is nice to show the world that they also gather people to *think*! Certainly, we all need prayers when faced with crises and difficulties; but throughout history the Church has brought together the very best minds to put their talents at the service of the common good. Faith and Reason need to work hand-in-hand, in the same way as the religious and secular authorities need to.

The Vatican conference brought together church leaders, politicians and civil society for two days of reflection and discussion on the contribution of the Catholic Church to the European project, ensuring that we build together a Europe that serves all its people; so, similar to our topic for this evening.

We looked at questions such as:

- "How to build bridges inside and between Member States"
- "What kind of economy for Europe in a changing world?" *and*
- "The state of democracy in Europe."

We were honoured by the presence of Pope Francis who in his intervention spoke clearly about the role of Christians in reminding Europe that *"she is not a mass of statistics or institutions, but is made up of people."*

The Pope was critical of an approach to public policy which forgets that people should always be at the heart of policy, stating: *"There are no citizens, only votes. There are no migrants, only quotas. There are no workers, only economic markers. There are no poor, only thresholds of poverty. The concrete reality of the human person is thus reduced to an abstract principle."*

Christian churches, through work with the poor, the homeless, the hungry and migrants, seek to go beyond merely technocratic approaches to tackling social problems. They see the human faces, smile on them, and seek to bring a smile to them, amidst their suffering.

As the previous Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his book about Europe: *"Politics is not only a place of seeking technical solutions, because the purpose of every State, and thus the*

*ultimate end of all politics, is moral in its nature; in other words the establishment of peace and justice."*

In his closing speech to the "Re-thinking Europe" conference, Pope Francis structured his ideas under the following headings:

- Person and Community
- A place of Dialogue
- An inclusive milieu
- Room for solidarity
- A source of development
- A promise of peace, *and finally*
- To be the Soul of Europe

Perhaps we can learn from this human approach to looking at Europe that reflects the thinking of successive Popes, and which indeed is reflective of the general Christian vision of Europe. If the churches have always supported the European project, it is because they believe it can improve people's lives.

Pope Francis underlined that *"Person and community are thus the foundations of the Europe that we, as Christians want and can contribute to building. The bricks of this structure are dialogue, inclusion, solidarity, development and peace."*

I fully endorse that sentiment and am convinced that, just as Christians in the persons of the *Founding Fathers* played a key role in the creation of the European project over 60 years ago, the engagement of Christians with the project is still required today. Christians are a People of Hope. The European Union has faced multiple crises and its citizens need to be able to look with such hope to the future.

The late Pope John XXIII when he was opening the Second Vatican Council disagreed with what he termed the *"prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster."* He said that Christians must *"ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the apostolate."*

Thank you for your attention, and I am looking forward a constructive discussion on the concrete contribution of the Christian churches to shaping the European policies that directly impact on us all and building the Europe of future generations.

**ENDS**