



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE COUNCIL OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF EUROPE

Tuesday, 19 December 1978

Dear Brothers,

I am very happy to receive you, for I attach great importance to these plenary meetings of your Council, in which Bishops delegated by each of the Episcopal Conferences of the whole of the European continent take part.

1. This collaboration is carried out in conformity with the statutes which were canonically approved by the Holy See, on 10 January 1977. It consists in exchanging regularly information, experiences and points of view on the main pastoral problems raised in your countries. It also leads you to undertake together duties which assume a European dimension.

It is one of the ways of incarnating collegiality, in the framework of which the teaching of the Second Vatican Council can yield all its fruit. Collegiality means the mutual opening and brotherly cooperation of Bishops in the service of evangelization, of the mission of the Church. An opening and cooperation of this kind are necessary, not only at the level of the local Churches and the universal Church, but also at the level of continents, as is testified by the vitality of other regional organisms—even if the statutes are a little different—such as the Latin American Episcopal Council (C.E.L.A.M.), the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (S.E.C.A.M.) or the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conference (F.A.B.C.), to mention only these great Assemblies. The Pope and the Holy See make a point of promoting these organisms, at the various levels of collegial cooperation, it being understood that regional or continental bodies do not replace the authority of each Bishop or of each of the Episcopal conferences as regards decisions, and that their research is set in the framework of the more general orientations of the Holy See, in close liaison with Peter's Successor. And in the present case, the European dimension seems to the Pope very important and even necessary.

2. The Council of European Episcopal Conferences (C.E.E.C.), among its numerous exchanges

and activities, has taken an important initiative: it organizes a symposium of European Bishops every three years. The symposium scheduled to take place this year was not held owing to the death of my two predecessors and the conclaves that followed. The preparation is continuing on the subject: youth and faith. It is a very important subject: it must be approached with great objectivity and with the hope of the apostles who know that Christ's message can and must touch the young of every generation.

I had the good fortune to take part in the 1975 Symposium and to give a conference to it. I wish to recall at least some of the thoughts that Paul VI had expressed then on receiving us. They were thoughts concerning Europe, its Christian heritage and its Christian future. He called on us to "awaken the Christian soul of Europe in which its unity is rooted"; to purify and bring back to their source the evangelical values still present but, as it were, disarticulated, geared to purely earthly aims; to awaken and strengthen consciences in the light of the faith preached in season and out of season; to cause their flame to converge above all barriers ... (cf. A.A.S., 67, 1975, p. 588-589).

In line with these thoughts, Paul VI established St Benedict as the patron saint of Europe, and now the fifteenth centenary of the birth of this great saint is approaching.

3. Europe is not the first cradle of Christianity. Even Rome received the Gospel, thanks to the ministry of the Apostles Peter and Paul, who came here from the country of Jesus Christ. But, in any case, it is true that Europe became, for two millennia, the bed, as it were, of a great river in which Christianity spread, making fertile the land of the spiritual life of the peoples and nations of this continent. And under this impetus, Europe became a mission centre, the influence of which spread to the other continents.

The Council of European Episcopal Conferences constitutes a special representation of the Catholic Episcopates of Europe. We must hope that all Episcopates are fully represented in this organization, with the possibility of taking a real part in it. It is only under these conditions that the analysis of the essential problems of the Church and of Christianity can be complete. It is a question of the problems of the Church and of Christianity, approached also in an ecumenical perspective. For if it is true that the whole of Europe is not Catholic, it is nearly all Christian. Your Council must become a kind of breeding-ground in which there is expressed, developed and matured not only awareness of what Christianity was yesterday, but responsibility for what it must be tomorrow.

It is with these sentiments that I present to you my best wishes for Christmas and the New Year, for the intention of each of you, your Council, all the Episcopates that you represent and all the nations of this continent, with which Providence has linked the history of Christianity so eloquently.

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