



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO COMMEMORATE THE 50th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE***

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As the peoples of Europe began to rebuild their lives after the Second World War, that great conflict which ravaged the entire continent for six years, the desire to create a new European order found its first political and collegial expression in the establishment of the Council of Europe, the Charter of which was signed in London on 5 May 1949. The Council is thus the oldest among European institutions and was the first to be devoted to forging a new unity among the peoples of the continent, based on the spiritual and moral values which are the common heritage of the European peoples. The founding fathers of the Council of Europe affirmed that these values are "the true source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law" (Preamble to the Statute of the Council of Europe, 1949), thus establishing the foundation for a new European political project.

This noble vision was further strengthened and given concrete form in the drafting of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the safeguarding and implementation of which was entrusted to an independent European Court of Human Rights, the pan-European jurisdiction of which still remains an unprecedented principle, affirming that - in those cases envisaged by the Convention - respect for human rights transcends national sovereignty and cannot be subordinated to sociopolitical aims or compromised by national interests. The Court has demonstrated that the Convention remains an effective instrument in protecting the rights of the individual against the improper use of power by the State.

The spirit of European democracy was further enhanced by the establishment of the first Consultative Parliamentary Assembly in 1949, unique at that time, which brought together the elected representatives of the Parliaments of the Member States of the Council of Europe. I recall with special joy my visit to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in 1988. In the address which I

gave there I paid tribute to the perceptive vision of the founding fathers of the European movement, who succeeded in surpassing national borders, old rivalries and historical animosities in order to launch a new political project where the nations of Europe would reach out and build a "common home", cemented by the indispensable values of forgiveness, peace, justice, cooperation, hope and brotherhood. How fitting it is for me to repeat now what I said on that occasion: Europe needs to rediscover and become conscious of the common values which shaped its identity and which form part of its historic memory. The focal point of our common European heritage - religious, juridical and cultural - is the singular and inalienable dignity of the human person. The Council of Europe, interpreting this rich historical heritage, has made the proclamation and the protection of human rights the basis of its political initiatives. In the Budapest Declaration, you commit yourselves to building this Greater Europe without borders by affirming "the primacy of the human person in the elaboration of [your] policies" (n. 3).

The Council of Europe has opened its doors to receive the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. From an assembly of 21 States when last I directly addressed the members of the Council of Europe, your numbers have grown and today there are 41 Member States.

The 50th anniversary of the founding of the Council of Europe coincides with the 10th anniversary of the dramatic events of 1989 which opened the way to the reunification of this continent on the basis of the ideals and principles which are the common heritage of the States belonging to the European family. It was the "weapons of truth and justice" (Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus* [1991], n. 23) - the truth about man and the justice to which all people aspire - promoted by peaceful protest, which brought about the downfall of the political systems which, built on an alien ideology, divided the peoples of Europe. The fundamental error of totalitarianism was anthropological in nature (cf. *ibid.*, n. 13). The good of the individual was subordinated to the sociopolitical order, with the consequence that the human person as a moral subject vanished. From this mistaken concept of the person there arose a profound distortion of the purpose and function of law, which became an instrument of oppression rather than service. Through well-prepared programmes of assistance aimed at promoting the development and consolidation of democratic stability in the newly independent States over the last 10 years, the Council of Europe has helped to remedy this distortion and create the foundations for genuine democracy. Given the limitations of current models of society in bringing about political freedom, social equality and solidarity, it is my fervent hope that the Council of Europe will be able to help its member nations and the whole continent to meet creatively the new challenges facing them.

Just as I value the efforts made to remove the causes of political division, so I trust that you will appreciate my fervent desire and constant hope that the religious divisions in the European family might also be overcome, especially at a time when the Church is engaged in fruitful dialogue with other religious communities which have also made their contribution to the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of Europe.

I am fully aware of and share deeply in the anxiety of the Council of Europe before the tragic and violent events which have engulfed the Balkans, and Kosovo in particular. I urge you not to lose hope but to continue your praiseworthy efforts to help to bring an end to the violation of fundamental human rights and to the trampling of human dignity. It is necessary to find means respectful of law and history which will satisfy the conditions for building a positive future for the nations involved in the present conflict. I encourage you to persevere in your noble vocation of seeking to bring about a new European order based on the priority of human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law. Once the ravages of war have ceased, the European institution most eminently equipped to create a new political culture in South-East Europe and to be a focus of reconciliation between peoples whose physical, moral and spiritual energies have been dissipated by violence and destruction is the Council of Europe.

To the President of the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, to the Foreign Ministers and Representatives of the Member States and Candidate States of the Council of Europe gathered in Budapest, as also to the Representatives of the Observer States and senior officials of the Council of Europe, I send my cordial greetings and pray that God may abundantly bless and reward your endeavours to strengthen and enhance the unity of the peoples of Europe.

From the Vatican, 5 May 1999.

JOHN PAUL II

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