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Letter of the Holy Father to the Secretary of State on the 40th anniversary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the European Union, and the 50th anniversary of the presence of the Holy See as Permanent Observer at the Council of Europe

The following is the letter addressed by the Holy Father to His Eminence the Secretary of State on the 40th anniversary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the European Union, and the 50th anniversary of the presence of the Holy See as Permanent Observer at the Council of Europe.

To coincide with these anniversaries, a visit by Cardinal Parolin to Brussels was planned for the days 28 to 30 October, but has been cancelled due to the worsening of the health emergency. It is expected that the meetings with the authorities of the European Union and the members of COMECE can be held by video connection.

Letter of the Holy Father

To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin,

This year the Holy See and the Church in Europe celebrate several significant anniversaries. Fifty years ago, cooperation between the Holy See and the European institutions that arose in the period following the Second World War took concrete form by the establishment of diplomatic relations between the then European Community and by the Holy See's presence as an Observer at the Council of Europe. In 1980, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Communities (COMECE) was founded, composed of delegates from the Bishops' Conferences of all the member states of the European Union, for the sake of promoting "closer cooperation between those episcopates with regard to pastoral questions related to the development of the areas of competence and activities of the Union". This year also marked the seventieth anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, an event of capital importance that inspired the gradual process of the continent's integration, making it possible to overcome the animosity resulting from the two world wars.

In the light of these events, you are planning in the near future to make significant visits to the authorities of the European Union, the Plenary Assembly of COMECE and the authorities of the Council of Europe. In this regard, I consider it important to share with you some reflections on the future of this continent so dear to me, not only because of my family's origins but also because of the central role that it has had, and, I believe, must continue to have, albeit with different accents, in the history of humanity.

That role is all the more pertinent in the context of the pandemic we are now experiencing. The European project arose from a determination to end past divisions. It was born of the realisation that unity and cooperation make for strength, that "unity is greater than conflict" and that solidarity can be "a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity". In our own days, which "show signs of a certain regression", a growing tendency for all to go their own separate ways, the pandemic has emerged as a kind of a watershed, forcing us to take a stand. We can either continue to pursue the path we have taken in the past decade, yielding to the temptation to autonomy and thus to ever greater misunderstanding, disagreement and conflict, or we can rediscover the *path of fraternity* that inspired and guided the founders of modern Europe, beginning precisely with Robert Schuman.

As the experience of Europe in recent months has shown, the pandemic has made this increasingly evident. On the one hand, we have witnessed the temptation to go it alone, seeking unilateral solutions to a problem that transcends state borders. Yet thanks to the great spirit of mediation that distinguishes the European institutions, we have also seen a determination to set out on the path of fraternity, which is also *the path of solidarity*, unleashing creativity and new initiatives.

The steps taken thus far need, however, to be consolidated, lest centrifugal forces regain their strength. Today, the words of Saint John Paul II in the European Act of Santiago de Compostela remain as timely as ever: Europe, "find yourself, be yourself". An age of rapid change can bring with it a loss of identity, especially when there is a lack of shared values on which to base society.

To Europe, then, I would like to say: you, who for centuries have been a seedbed of high ideals and now seem to be losing your élan, do not be content to regard your past as an album of memories. In time, even the most beautiful memories fade and are gradually forgotten. Sooner or later, we realise that we ourselves have changed; we find ourselves weary and listless in the present and possessed of little hope as we look to the future. Without ideals, we find ourselves weak and divided, more prone to complain and to be attracted by those who make complaint and division a style of personal, social and political life.

Europe, find yourself! Rediscover your most deeply-rooted ideals. Be yourself! Do not be afraid of your millenary history, which is a window open to the future more than the past. Do not be afraid of that thirst of yours for truth, which, from the days of ancient Greece, has spread throughout the world and brought to light the deepest questions of every human being. Do not be afraid of the thirst for justice that developed from Roman law and in time became respect for all human beings and their rights. Do not be afraid of your thirst for eternity, enriched by the encounter with the Judeo-Christian tradition reflected in your patrimony of faith, art and culture.

Today, as many in Europe look to its future with uncertainty, others look to Europe with hope, convinced that it still has something to offer to the world and to humanity. The same conviction inspired Robert Schuman, who realized that "the contribution which an organized and living Europe can bring to civilization is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations". It is a conviction that we ourselves can share, setting out from shared values and rooted in the history and culture of this land.

What kind of Europe do we envision for the future? What is to be its distinctive contribution? In today's world, it is not about recovering political hegemony or geographical centrality, or about developing innovative solutions to economic and social problems. The uniqueness of Europe rests above all on its conception of the human being and of reality, on its capacity for initiative and on its spirit of practical solidarity.

I dream, then, of a Europe that is a friend to each and all. A land respectful of everyone's dignity, in which each person is appreciated for his or her intrinsic worth and not viewed purely from an economic standpoint or as a

mere consumer. A land that protects life at every stage, from the time it arises unseen in the womb until its natural end, since no human being is the master of life, either his or her own life or the lives of others. A land that promotes work as a privileged means of personal growth and the pursuit of the common good, creating employment opportunities particularly for the young. Being a friend to others entails providing for their education and cultural development. It entails protecting the weakest and most vulnerable, especially the elderly, the sick in need of costly care, and those with disabilities. Being a friend to others entails defending their rights, but also reminding them of their duties. It means acknowledging that everyone is called to offer his or her own contribution to society, for none of us is a world apart, and we cannot demand respect for ourselves without showing respect for others. We cannot receive unless we are also willing to give.

I dream of a Europe that is a family and a community. A place respectful of the distinctiveness of each individual and every people, ever mindful that they are bound together by shared responsibilities. Being a family entails living in unity, treasuring differences, beginning with the fundamental difference between man and woman. In this sense, Europe is a genuine family of peoples, all different yet linked by a common history and destiny. The experience of recent years and that of the pandemic in particular have shown that no one is completely self-sufficient, and that a certain individualistic understanding of life and society leads only to discouragement and isolation. Every man and woman aspires to be part of a community, that is, of a greater reality that transcends and gives meaning to his or her individuality. A divided Europe, made up of insular and independent realities, will soon prove incapable of facing the challenges of the future. On the other hand, a Europe that is a united and fraternal *community* will be able to value diversity and acknowledge the part that each has to play in confronting the problems that lie ahead, beginning with the pandemic and including the ecological challenge of preserving our natural resources and the quality of the environment in which we live. We are faced with the choice between a model of life that discards people and things, and an inclusive model that values creation and creatures.

I dream of a Europe that is inclusive and generous. A welcoming and hospitable place in which charity, the highest Christian virtue, overcomes every form of indifference and selfishness. Solidarity, as an essential element of every authentic community, demands that we care for one another. To be sure, we are speaking of an “intelligent solidarity” that does more than merely attend to basic needs as they emerge.

Solidarity entails guiding those most vulnerable towards personal and social growth, enabling them one day to help others in turn. Like any good physician, who not only administers medication, but also accompanies the patient to complete recovery.

Solidarity involves being a neighbour to others. In the case of Europe, this means becoming especially ready and willing, through international cooperation, to offer generous assistance to other continents. I think particularly of Africa, where there is a need to resolve ongoing conflicts and to pursue a sustainable human development.

Solidarity is also nurtured by generosity and gives rise to gratitude, which leads us to regard others with love. When we forget to be thankful for the benefits we have received, we tend increasingly to close in upon ourselves and to live in fear of everything around us and different from us.

We can see this in the many fears felt in our contemporary societies, among which I would mention uneasiness and concern about migrants. Only a Europe that is a *supportive community* can meet the present challenge in a productive way, since piecemeal solutions have proved to be inadequate. It is clear that a proper acceptance of migrants must not only assist those newly arrived, who are often fleeing conflict, hunger or natural disasters, but must also work for their integration, enabling them “to learn, respect and assimilate the culture and traditions of the nations that welcome them”.

I dream of a Europe marked by a healthy secularism, where God and Caesar remain distinct but not opposed. A land open to transcendence, where believers are free to profess their faith in public and to put forward their own point of view in society. The era of confessional conflicts is over, but so too – let us hope – is the age of a certain laicism closed to others and especially to God, for it is evident that a culture or political system that lacks openness to transcendence proves insufficiently respectful of the human person.

Christians today have a great responsibility: they are called to serve as a leaven in reviving Europe's conscience and help to generate processes capable of awakening new energies in society. I urge them, therefore, to contribute with commitment, courage and determination to every sector in which they live and work.

Your Eminence,

These few words arise from my pastoral concern and my certainty that Europe still has much to offer to the world. My words are meant solely to be a personal contribution to the growing call for reflection on the continent's future. I would be grateful if you could share these thoughts in the conversations you are to hold in coming days with the European authorities and with the members of COMECE, whom I ask to cooperate in a spirit of fraternal communion with all the Bishops of the continent gathered in the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE). I ask you to bring my personal greeting and a sign of my closeness to each of them and to the peoples they represent. Your meetings will certainly be a fitting occasion for consolidating relations between the Holy See and the European Union and the Council of Europe, and to confirm the Church in her evangelizing mission and her service to the common good.

May our beloved Europe continue to enjoy the protection of her holy patrons: Saint Benedict, Saints Cyril and Methodius, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), men and women who for love of the Lord tirelessly served the poor and worked for the human, social and cultural development of all the peoples of the continent.

I commend myself to your prayers and to the prayers of those whom you will encounter in the course of your travels. To all of them I ask you to bring my Blessing.

From the Vatican, 22 October 2020, Memorial of Saint John Paul II
