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230323a Audience with Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), taking place in Rome from 22 to 24 March.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I thank the new President and wish him all the best in his service. I express my heartfelt gratitude to Cardinal Hollerich. He never stops, he never stops! And I greet you all and I thank you for your work, demanding and also exciting, if you do not get mired in bureaucracy and keep your eyes on the horizon, on the inspiring values of the Europe project. That is why I would like to dwell briefly with you today on two focal points, which correspond to the two great "dreams" of Europe's founding fathers: the dream of unity and the dream of peace.

Unity. On this first point, it is crucial to make it clear that European unity cannot be a uniform, homogenising unity, but on the contrary, it must be a unity that respects and values the singularities, the particularities of the peoples and cultures that comprise it. Think of the founding fathers. They belonged to different countries and different cultures: De Gasperi and Spinelli, Italian; Monnet and Schuman, French; Adenauer, German; Spaak, Belgian; Beck, Luxembourg, to name the main ones. The wealth of Europe resides in the convergence of various sources of thought and historical experience. Like a river, it lives from its tributaries. If the tributaries are weakened and blocked, the entire river suffers and its strength diminishes. The originality of the tributaries. This must be respected: the originality of each country.

This is the first idea to which I draw your attention: Europe has a future if it is truly a union and not a reduction of the countries with their respective characteristics. The challenge is precisely this: unity in diversity. And it is

possible if there is strong inspiration: otherwise, apparatus prevails, the technocratic paradigm prevails, but it is not fruitful because it does not enthuse people, it does not attract the new generations, it does not involve the living forces of society in the construction of a common project.

We wonder: what is the role of Christian inspiration in this challenge? There is no doubt that in the original phase it played a fundamental part, because it was in the hearts and minds of the men and women who initiated the undertaking. Today a lot has changed, certainly, but it is still true that it is the men and women who make the difference. Therefore, the first task of the Church in this field is that of forming people who read the signs of the times, who know how to interpret the project of Europe in today's history.

And here we come to the second focal point: *peace*. History today needs men and women inspired by the dream of a Europe united in the service of peace. After the second world war, Europe experienced the longest period of peace in its history. In the world, however, there was a succession of wars. In recent decades, some wars have dragged on for years, up to today, so that by now one can speak of a third world war. so much so that one can now speak of a third world war. The war in Ukraine is close by, and has shaken the European peace. The neighbouring nations have done their utmost to welcome the refugees; all European peoples are participating in the solidarity effort with the Ukrainian people. This choral response on the level of charity should be matched - but it is clear that this is neither easy nor obvious - by a cohesive commitment to peace.

This challenge is very complex, because the countries of the European Union are involved in multiple alliances, interests, strategies, a series of forces that it is difficult to make converge in a single project. However, one principle should be shared by all, clearly and with determination: war cannot and must not be considered as a solution to conflicts (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 258). If the countries of Europe today do not share this ethical-political principle, then it means they have drifted away from the original dream. If instead they share it, they must commit themselves to implementing it, with all the effort and complexity that the historical situation requires. Because "war is a failure of politics and humanity" (*ibid.*, 261). Politicians must respect this.

COMECE can and must also make its contribution in terms of values and professionalism to this challenge of peace. You are by nature a "bridge" between the Churches in Europe and the institutions of the Union. You are by mission builders of relations, of encounter, of dialogue. And this is already working for peace. But it is not enough. It also takes prophecy, it takes foresight, it takes creativity to advance the cause of peace. Both architects and craftsmen are needed in this building site; but I would say that the true builder of peace must be both architect and craftsman: the true builder of peace is thus. I also wish this for each of you, well aware that each one of you has his or her own personal charisms that contribute with those of the others to the common task.

Dear friends, I express my gratitude once again, and I assure you that I pray for you and I pray for your service. Today I have dwelt on these two focal points, which are particularly urgent, but I encourage you also to carry out, as always, your work on ecclesial front. May Our Lady keep you and sustain you. I bless you all from my heart, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
