

Chairman's Opening Address to the 1990 Ampleforth Conference

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This Conference is being held at a time of considerable uncertainty but yet of great hope and anticipation for the future of Europe. In recent weeks the Gulf crisis, of course, has rightly monopolised world attention for it poses a threat to global peace and the world economy. Inevitably it affects our continent seriously. When the original planning for this meeting began some two years ago, not one of us could have predicted the changing context, the end of the Cold War and the peaceful revolution that has transformed the political, religious and social landscape of our continent. One thing has remained intact throughout all the upheavals in Europe. It is important, I believe, to recall that this Conference is possible because it is built on relationships and a dialogue that continued, sometimes precariously, amid all the hostilities and divisions of the Cold War.

Catholic bishops from East and West have met without major interruptions in the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. They have devoted much time and energy to clarifying how the whole continent is to be evangelised. Catholic laity have their Forum which meets to discuss matters of common interest. At the same time the Churches of Europe (CEC) have developed their own structures bringing together East and West, and have worked alongside the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), particularly in a number of European Ecumenical Encounters. Now that the political map is being redrawn, the patient and sometimes frustrating work of the past decades seems entirely justified. Certainly among Catholics structures of dialogue and cooperation already exist under the auspices of CCEE, which will be able to give practical effect to the guidelines yet to be agreed at next year's Synod of European Bishops.

It is to that past I wish to turn now for inspiration and for a vision of what can be our future. Ten years ago the Council of European Bishops' Conferences went on pilgrimage with Pope John Paul II to Subiaco. We wanted to honour St Benedict, who at that time was the sole patron saint of Europe and who had been born 1500 years before.

Despite decades of political divisions, over 200 bishops from East and West came that day to the cradle of western monasticism. While generally wanting to draw fresh strength from the witness and intercession of St Benedict, we specifically intended to pray for all those churches then deprived of their liberty and cut off from their sister churches in the free world. No one who took part in that pilgrimage will ever forget its symbolism and the promise it held out for the future of our continent. We gathered first at the cave where Benedict lived as a hermit, fleeing from the corruption of a decaying civilisation. He sought the desert and found solitude and shelter in the bare hills. A cave can recall the tomb where the past is laid to rest but also the womb out of which the future is born. The Pope spoke to us that day of his vision of a Europe that needs to rediscover its spiritual and cultural roots and to blossom once again into new life and unity. It was a prophetic moment.

When we emerged from the cave we walked in silent procession with the Holy Father down the steep hill to the church of St Scholastica. The hermit-life of St Benedict in his hillside cave was to prove a magnet for others in search of God, and he developed the community life so characteristic of subsequent Benedictine foundations. Our silent prayer during that procession was for all Christians in Central and Eastern Europe, so long deprived of their liberty and their voice. At the church of St Scholastica we sang the praises of God at solemn vespers presided over by the Pope. Throughout the Christian centuries, religious communities have offered uninterrupted prayer on behalf of all humanity. It was entirely fitting that our pilgrimage ended in such a way, since the divine office expresses three great truths which have, I am convinced, shaped Christian life over the centuries and will continue to have great importance in the rebuilding of European unity and civilisation.

The first truth is that of creation. All that exists reveals, albeit in a limited and contingent way, something unique about the truth, beauty and goodness of God. There is, in creation, an inner unity and coherence; all created things are interdependent; all are good. When we sing the praises of God, we acknowledge Him as Creator and give thanks for the marvels He has wrought.

Such a view of reality inevitably determines our attitude as believers to the environment, to the finite resources of our home planet and to our responsibility as humans for the careful stewardship of God's gifts. The Christian vision of creation, with its emphasis on unity and the free love of the Creator, is best expressed in the *Canticle of Creatures*, that hymn of praise and love in which St Francis of Assisi saw all things as kith and kin in God's family.

Alien to that vision is the callous exploitation of natural resources characteristic of materialistic philosophies of life. Capitalism has been guilty of its own crimes against creation but communism too has left Central and Eastern Europe with a grim legacy of pollution and environmental neglect. Both are economic, political and social systems that have failed signally to befriend humanity and to reverence and respect individual dignity. At the same time, and consistently, they have adopted similar attitudes towards nature and the environment. They have been aggressive, insensitive and short-sighted.

Belatedly, in the West, enlightened self-interest is causing governments and industry to rethink attitudes about established practices. Care for the environment has become a matter of global concern. As believers we should be in the forefront of this new thinking. We have a distinctive contribution to make here to the policies of the new Europe.

The second truth celebrated in our public praise of God is that of incarnation. We sang vespers together at Subiaco, we worship together because we are one body, one spirit in Christ. In and through the Eucharist, by our fellowship, our shared life and love, we witness to the revealed truth that God became man and dwelt among us. It is a truth central to our Christian faith. It has profound consequences not only for our personal lives but for society, and the way we structure it and make it work.

From the beginning, humanity has reflected in a unique way the very likeness of God. That, in itself, means that we must give unconditional respect to each individual. He or she, by sharing our common humanity, has certain inalienable rights and may never be treated as a means to any end, however noble. Christian civilisation has over the centuries come to define and defend these rights. They are under constant threat. They must be vigilantly defended.

But that is not all. God took to Himself our human nature. By His so doing, human dignity and rights assumed an altogether deeper and richer significance. All that is human is now caught up into the mystery which is God. No political and social system in history has ever yet done justice to this Christian vision of human dignity. But we have a goal at which to aim.

East and West have in their different ways inflicted grievous wounds on humanity. This century has seen cruelty and death on a scale hitherto unimaginable. The horrors of the Hitler regime were matched by the crimes of the Stalinist era. Less dramatically there have been in the West the depersonalising effects of the Industrial Revolution, the multiple deprivation inflicted on the poor in the slums and inner city areas; there have been bad housing and inhuman

working conditions; unemployment has left millions devalued and unwanted. In Central and Eastern Europe, political ideology has systematically subordinated individuals to the power and dictates of the state. Rigorous repression of religious freedom, the corruption associated with dictatorships have left behind them whole populations in many respects demoralised and without established values. There is a real danger of the disintegration which often occurs when authoritarian regimes are toppled. And yet the models of Western European democracies are not panaceas. The value of truth, the need for integrity and openness in public authorities, the importance of genuine participation and accountability in social, economic and political life — these are all hard to sustain, and require as a bedrock a shared moral awareness and commitment in society at large.

In some respects I believe this awareness has worn thinner in Western Europe with the development of an individual ideology which places too little emphasis on community and tends to deny or obscure the true interdependence of people. Believers must cooperate to bring to bear on society and the structures of a united Europe their vision of human dignity, freedom and rights. That would represent for Europe a source of hope and renewal. In this context I can do no better than quote Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini speaking last year to the Symposium of European Bishops:

. . . the heart of the Gospel message consists in introducing human beings into the mystery of life itself, given to us by the God of creation and of the covenant. Every human life is, in fact, the story of God's investment of trust in man (Deut. 3:26). One of the greatest services which the church of Europe can render to our contemporaries is to help them understand this mystery, or better still, to help them to 'inhabit' it. It is in the light of the mystery of God, who creates and offers an eternal covenant, that modern people can understand their true dignity and the meaning of their lives.

The third truth which is expressed when we turn to God in public prayer is belief in redemption. Mankind's chronic abuse of freedom, the persistent presence of sin in human lives have plunged the world into darkness and death. We could never have rescued ourselves. We needed to be redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ and to be reborn with him in resurrection to new life. The saving love and obedience of Christ have transformed the possibilities of human life and made a sharing in divine life our ultimate destiny. The church is the sacrament of that redemption. As a reconciled people she is both sign and source of reconciliation between God and man and between nations and peoples.

It is not then in keeping with this fundamental nature of the church to bless the banners of warring and aggressive states in a divided, violent world. Instead she should be a force for peace and dialogue, a bridge-builder between those at variance with each other, an antidote to the poison of hatred. Nor should she be a protector of privilege, a defender of the rich against the poor.

In the new Europe, the church must not be part of the problem but an essential element in the solution. Christian unity will be an important contribution to peace and cooperation between divided communities and states. In the past, and up to the present day, there has been discord, misunderstanding and rivalry between Christian churches: Orthodox and Catholic, Catholic and Reformed. The churches cannot call on others to lay aside differences and work for a better world if we are unwilling to do so ourselves.

Christian unity will be a gift from God when it is achieved, and in that connection the most powerful weapon is clearly prayer. Nonetheless little progress will be made without a re-examination and assessment of the historical situations that gave rise to the divisions in the first place. Furthermore, it will be necessary to engage in a rigorous study of ecclesiology and to face up to its consequences.

Many European countries now have their own Muslim communities, and increasingly it will become necessary for the Christian churches to enter into serious dialogue with them. One of the particular problems faced by some of these Islamic communities is that their loyalty and national allegiance is sometimes questioned. It is perhaps important to recognise that this is not a new problem, at least in this country. The loyalty of the Catholic community was, after all, under suspicion in the 16th and 17th centuries, as was that of Irish Catholics in the last century. There is, then, a dialogue to be held with the Islamic communities in which, without minimising the substantial differences which exist, and without being sidetracked by strident voices, a genuine relationship can be forged. Whilst always serving the truth, such contact is essential in pluralist societies if tolerance, liberty and respect for human values are to be maintained.

Believers must demonstrate to society that former models of class warfare and of armed hostility have no part in tomorrow's world that we are called to build. We are now citizens of one world, children of the same God, destined for one end. It is for us to help fashion structures and habits of co-responsibility and dialogue in society and industry. We should renounce violence as a solution to disputes, without prejudice, of course, to the moral obligation which governments have to defend their citizens against unjust aggressors. We should be working towards universal acceptance of the rule of international law and towards a world community of nations for

which the European Community may provide a working model.

In all this the church claims no privileged place in society and is in no position to impose solutions. She must humbly and in a spirit of service offer practical collaboration and a wealth of experience. Her role is to witness to truth, to be light in darkness, to be a sign of contradiction to the pretensions and follies of power.

When the Subiaco pilgrimage came to an end, the bishops of Europe returned home to their dioceses throughout Europe. They were soon plunged back into the routine of local pastoral care. That is the way believers and the churches make their best contribution in the building up of local communities. There is a moment of vision on Tabor, then back into the reality of daily life and struggle. If many of us seem to be, and are, helpless and without political power, we can be channels of God's power and instruments of His will.

Within the last decade and since our pilgrimage to Subiaco, the Catholic Church has chosen Saints Cyril and Methodius as joint patrons of Europe with St Benedict. This is an inspired choice. They were missionaries and had a special genius for adaptation and inculturation. They did not challenge the cultures they set out to evangelise. They refused to destroy them. Instead they sought to transform them with the leaven of the Gospel.

This brings me to my final point. The three patron saints of Europe represent the undivided church of the first centuries. They came from different cultures, East and West. They bring to the whole continent rich traditions and complementary gifts. That provides us with a valuable lesson. I am convinced it would be a distortion to imagine that the rebuilding of Europe and its evangelisation is a task that the West should be undertaking on behalf of the East. Neither has a monopoly of charisma, courage or wisdom. This enterprise demands equal sacrifice and the commitment of both East and West. It will be a hazardous, complex and exhausting work. It will draw on all our spiritual energies. It is, however, a task that we cannot refuse to undertake.

It is my prayer that this Conference will make its own important contribution to that task. I wish you well in your labours and I look forward confidently to their successful outcome.