



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL MĪLOSLAV VLK,
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL
OF EUROPEAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES**

To Cardinal Miloslav Vlk

Archbishop of Prague

President of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences

1. The plenary assembly of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences, which is being held in Brussels from 19 to 23 October 2000, has particular importance in this year of the Great Jubilee, when the whole Church is celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of the Saviour's birth. Such a gathering is a renewed manifestation of the bonds of communion which join you to the Successor of Peter and a particularly significant expression of collegiality among the continent's Bishops for proclaiming together the name of Jesus Christ with boldness and fidelity.

Throughout its history, Europe has received the treasure of the Christian faith, basing its social life on principles taken from the Gospel. Thus Christianity is constantly encountered in the arts, in literature, in the thought and culture of European nations. This heritage does not belong merely to the past. It is important to transmit it to future generations, because it is the matrix of life for the individuals and peoples who together have forged the European continent.

2. Your meeting is an opportunity to increase the exchange of gifts between the local Churches, to share the pastoral experiences of Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern Europe, to enrich and enlighten each other and to strengthen the various local communities. It will also allow you to experience ecclesial communion, always a gift of God but also a task to be fulfilled. In order for the Catholic Churches in Europe to carry out their mission, which is always the same and always new because "the Church ... exists in order to evangelize" (Paul VI, *Evangeliū nuntiandi*, n. 14), it is important that their members be open to the call of the Spirit, to work intensely for the sake of the new evangelization.

In this perspective, I encourage you to give ever greater attention to educating young people and adults in the faith. The experience of the catecheses during the two most recent gatherings of *World Youth Day*, during which young people showed a deep desire to know Christ and to live by his Word, reminds us of the urgency of giving the faithful a solid Christian moral, spiritual and human formation. As the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council stressed, one of the principal tasks of the Bishop is the duty to teach and lead the Christian people to perfection (cf. *Christus Dominus*, nn. 12, 15). In all your Churches a vast field of doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral formation has opened to help the lay faithful to carry out

their baptismal mission in the Church, in communion with their Pastors, and to proclaim without confusion the salvation Christ has brought. In a world marked by scientific and technological development, a true understanding of the faith will give Christians the means "to account for the hope that is in them" (cf. 1 Pt 3: 15) and to offer the Gospel to their contemporaries as a way of life and as a basis for personal and collective moral action.

I also wish to stress the crucial importance of the formation of priests and deacons, called to be ministers of Jesus Christ and your co-workers. In this way they will form "a precious spiritual crown" around you (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 1, 13). By their words and actions they will be witnesses to the Lord, the Bridegroom and Head of the Church, which is his Body. How could they signify this gift of Christ, who offered his life for the Church (cf. *Eph* 5: 25), without giving themselves totally to their mission and to walking the way of holiness?

3. Throughout the continent, one notices disparities regarding priestly vocations. While some countries are experiencing a disturbing lack of seminarians and young priests, others, especially in the East, are seeing more and more young people take the path of the priesthood or consecrated life. We must pray without ceasing and ask "the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (*Mt* 9: 37). It is advisable, at the same time, to develop in every Diocese, and jointly, a vigorous pastoral care of vocations that offers young people a faith journey, spiritual life and ecclesial experience, as well as quality philosophical and theological instruction. I know that some countries and regions have organized a system of sharing for better clergy distribution. I gladly invite you to continue to focus on this.

4. Europe is being built as a "union". The Church has a specific contribution to make; not only can Christians join all persons of good will in the realization of this great project, but they are also invited to be in some way its soul by showing the true meaning of the organization of the earthly city. Europe, then, cannot be considered merely an economic market or an area for the free circulation of ideas. It is also and above all an authentic community of nations that wish to join their destinies, in order to live as brothers and sisters, with respect for cultures and spiritual paths, which cannot however remain outside the common project or in opposition to it. At the same time, the strengthening of the continent's union reminds the Church and the Ecclesial Communities that they too must take further steps towards unity.

5. The civil authorities should ensure that European structures and institutions always remain at the service of man, who can never be regarded as an object to be bought or sold, exploited or manipulated. He is a person, created in the image of God, who reflects the benevolent love of the Creator and Father of all. Every man and woman, whoever they may be, whatever their origin or condition of life, deserves absolute respect. The Church does not cease to recall these basic principles of social life. Today, in view of the prospects opened by science, particularly genetics and biology, in view of the phenomenal development of the means of communication and exchange at a global level, Europe can and must work to defend everywhere the dignity of man, from the moment of conception, to improve his living conditions by working for a just distribution of wealth, and by giving an education to all people, which will help them to become active in social life, and employment, which will allow them to live and provide for the needs of their loved ones. In this regard, it is also important to recall, in season and out of season, the place and inestimable value of the marital bond and the family, which cannot be put on an equal footing with other kinds of relationships without the risk of damaging the social fabric and making children and young people ever more fragile.

6. On this path of service to humanity, all Europeans must work untiringly for the cause of peace. In the century now

ending, the Old Continent twice led the whole world into the tragedy and grief of war. Today it is beginning to learn the need for reconciliation and understanding among peoples.

The new bridges built between European nations are still unstable and insecure. The Balkan conflict reminded all European countries of the fragility of peace and the need to work to strengthen it daily. It revealed the danger of exaggerated nationalism and the need to open new horizons of acceptance and exchange, but also of reconciliation, between individuals and European nations.

7. For centuries the history of the European continent has been mingled with the history of evangelization. Europe is really not a closed or isolated territory; it has been built by expanding overseas to meet other peoples, other cultures, other civilizations. This history indicates a requirement: Europe cannot close in on itself. It cannot and must not lose interest in the rest of the world. On the contrary, it must remain fully aware of the fact that other countries, other continents, await its bold initiatives, in order to offer to poorer peoples the means for their growth and social organization, and to build a more just and fraternal world.

8. At the beginning of my Pontificate, I wrote that "man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil" (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 14). May your reflection and the work of your assembly contribute to moulding the people of Europe! Asking the Blessed Virgin Mary to accompany you with her maternal protection, I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to all the members of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences and to their staffs.

From the Vatican, 16 October 2000.

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