

Europe Day - 9 May 2021

“From an integral ecology onto an economy of solidarity”

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Thank you for this invitation which I accepted with great joy. I was lucky to have participated at the meetings of *Together for Europe* from its outset, 20 years ago, with Chiara Lubich, Andrea Riccardi and all the other founders of this fabulous network of Movements, which is still going strong. I felt enriched after every meeting. The projects which I carried out in my life were greatly inspired by *Together for Europe*; these include my work regarding the *prophetic economy* and the *economy of Francesco*.

I have always considered the idea that the Charisms and the Churches *together* may bring about something new and prophetic for Europe and the world as one of the most important and prophetic inspirations of the new millennium.

One of the ‘7 Yeses’ proclaimed in Stuttgart was ‘Yes to a just economy’.

I will now try to say something about this, that is, what we mean today by a ‘just economy’, ‘an economy of solidarity’, starting from an integral ecology, which we are all seeking to bring about.

First of all: I wish you all a happy feast. As we know, so that Europe can be built and safeguarded it needs to celebrate feasts. The reason why, presently, there is not enough European spirit in all the European Nations is perhaps the lack of feasts or that people are rather indifferent to them. All nations have created their shared identity through the celebration of feasts: popular, religious and civil feasts are all occasions that nurture a sense of belonging, a shared feeling and a common destiny. From the Bible we know that feasts started in the desert, and were rediscovered and re-started during the years in exile, when they could not be celebrated. Today, as we pass through a grave shared trial for humanity, we experience a new exile, and therefore, this is the right time to hold feasts, shared feasts that nurture a sense of belonging and hope for the future.

Europe has developed a capitalism that is different from that of other Continents, and this was due to the great influence that Christianity exercised from the beginning of Europe, following Paul's dream in which the Macedonian told him to go toward the West. For us that dream was providential: the Christianity of the very first generation came to Europe, thus transforming and developing it with its vitality. Therefore, the economy that was born in Europe is imbued with a lot of Gospel, of Christianity and of Bible. This, indeed, brought about the greatest Welfare of the world. As we all know, Europe is the Continent with the highest budget for health, social welfare and education, and this reflects the underlying Christian spirit.

Monasticism has been for more than a millennium – and still is – a showcase of democracy, culture and the arts, as well as economy: the monks invented new ways to produce wine and cheese; they also invented the division of labour. We wouldn't have a European economy without the contribution of monasticism. This spirit was nurtured by the European Charisms: the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Mendicant Orders and the many charitable Congregations that came about in the last centuries.

The pilgrims provided the spirit and the merchants, using their intelligence, hands and feet, made it possible for the market economy to spread throughout Europe. Europe was built by the monks together with the merchants: it was built by the spirit of haberdashery and the spirit of the Bible, prayer. '*Ora et labora*' was not exclusively Benedictine: it is the motto of Europe, which, from its outset, was built by work and prayer. Therefore, the European economy is also one based on the spirit. The expression 'spirit of capitalism', which became famous through Max Weber, is very profound; that is, the European economy was born from a spirit and, if it does not rediscover that spirit, it will lose its identity.

In the 20th century, the immense sufferings of two great fratricide wars generated something new in the economy. We must not forget that in 1951, the year following the event we are celebrating today, we saw the setting up of the European Community of Carbon and Steel. What a wonderful prophecy: carbon and steel, the natural resources for which the war was fought, were now being put in common!

This was the prophetic utopia of the Father Founders of Europe, that is, the declaration: "no more war, never again", by putting in communion the resources of war. In other words, let's pool together what has divided us. Therefore the birth of the European community is deeply linked to an economy of communion

and the sharing of resources and talents, and the pulling down of barriers. Every time that Europe falls short on these achievements, it becomes less European and more fragile.

Thus we got the welfare state, in which our health care, freedom and education are guaranteed; indeed, what we now call Welfare is the fruit of the great sufferings of the wars, of Nazism and Fascism, which was transformed in a blessing. An enormous suffering was transformed into an enormous blessing for all.

A united Europe was the brainchild of several great prophets, whose Christian exemplarity has been recently recognized. It was also yearned for by the Nations. What can we expect as a result of this new world crisis caused by the pandemic? What will come out of the present enormous sufferings? We don't know. For something positive to eventually come out of it, it will surely depend upon the ones that count. In these days important things are being said regarding the vaccines. Nevertheless, it will also depend upon the Nations. The declarations of the great Nations are not enough to change the economy; indeed, the people's contribution is also necessary because the economy is part of our daily life, as we do our shopping, use our current accounts and make economic and productive choices. Therefore, if, as Nations, we are capable of considering this crisis as a blessing (as Jacob's great struggle with the angel in Genesis), then the present great suffering could paradoxically benefit all, even the economy. In this context, the Charisms and the Communities ought to ask for the impossible, because the Charisms and the Churches are prophecy, and prophecy is always daring, asking impossible things so that what is possible is indeed better. If the Charisms cease to ask for the impossible, then what is possible is never good enough; it ends up being too little human to be good. Therefore, if in the present phase of novelty we do not ask for too much, we are not asking enough: following the Gospel logic, if we do not give away the tunic, we don't even give away the mantle. Therefore, if today we say: "No, we can't afford to be daring, we cannot ask too much regarding the vaccines...", we are not asking enough, and thus we are not following the Gospel logic.

Third point. This crisis brought about stronger politics. In the last years politics was ill-treated and ridiculed: we saw a rise in populism and parasites. Many seemed to enjoy badmouthing and cursing politics, which, nevertheless, became more appealing and was indeed strengthened. Today we are convinced that without a certain politics we would not have made it. Indeed, this kind of politics has shown the importance of people seeking the common good and promoting

it: this is the essence of 'Politics'. Therefore, we can say that politics is rising again from the ashes and is being seen as important: we have admired our local, national and European politicians.

Europe is coming out of this crisis in a positive way by putting once again its resources together and it wanted to dedicate to the younger generations its operation of solidarity: 'Next generation UE'. Therefore, in a pandemic that took away hundreds of thousands of old people, Europe became aware that it needs to take care of the younger generations. This is something extremely interesting: during such carnage of old persons Europe speaks to us about the younger generations. These are prophetic things that are really wonderful; perhaps many do not consider them to be prophetic, but that is exactly what they are.

In the fourth point I will deal with three challenges. Which, according to my point of view, are the important challenges that we are facing in order to have an economy with enhanced solidarity after the pandemic? First of all it is *inequality*. This is a hot topic because we all know that not enough is being done: the world is becoming poorer and inequality is on the rise. When inequality reaches a certain critical threshold, democracy, and not only the economy, is at risk, because there would be no point for people to stay together. If the enrichment of the richest does not improve the lot of the poor, the latter will dissociate themselves from the former. This is, after all, what history teaches us. When in a Nation, as is happening today in some parts of the world, inequality reached a certain level, life in common goes in crisis. Therefore, we must fight inequality with all our means, especially by recognizing the rights of persons, for example by making the vaccine available to all. This is a particular way of fighting inequality in our days. We know that in the world there are billions of persons who are not being offered the possibility of vaccination. While we, in Europe, are worried because few have so far been vaccinated, there are entire Countries where no one has been vaccinated yet. This is intolerable from a Christian and a human point of view because this means increasing inequality even in a matter of life and death.

The second challenge: today the young people are protagonists. Suffice to mention Greta (*Fridays for future*) and the thousands of young people shouting "Shame on you for what you've done!" Whenever it's a young person who is reproaching an adult, then things must be quite serious. When we are reproached by someone our age, we take little notice. However, when the rebuke comes from a young person we ought to listen carefully. In a nutshell they have told us: "How dare you treat our Planet in this manner? How dare

you?” All this is telling us that a new movement, a new 1968, has been set in motion.

This time, however, the enemies are not the Churches. The leaders of this movement of young people aligned themselves with the Churches; suffice to mention the *‘Economy of Francesco’* and other initiatives. A new relationship has been established between young people and adults. This reminds me of the wonderful expression of the Prophet Joel: “The young ones will prophesize, while the old ones will dream”.

Sometimes I like to rephrase this expression as: “The young ones will prophesize *IF* the old ones will dream”. That is, if today we adults are still capable of dreaming, avoiding becoming cynics (as is often the case with old age); if we are still capable of imaging a better future, of dreaming a different Europe, then the young people will be capable of prophesizing. However, if we become cynics and pessimists we would be handing down to the young people the worst legacy possible: in the present time of great sufferings, they do not merit an adult generation that has lost the capacity to dream.

Lastly, the integral ecology: this is fundamental; it’s a sign of the times, a *kairos*. Today it’s not possible to have an economy that is not already ecological. As an economist, I don’t like the idea of annexing the ecology ministry to the economy one, as is the case in Italy. It is the economy ministry that ought to be ecological, because if the economy is not immediately ecological, it will never become so.

We still have the logic of the subsequent phases, which has destroyed our planet: the economy causes damages, then someone is called to repair them. No! Today’s economy ought to become intrinsically ecological. Nevertheless, an ecological economy, a Green economy, a circular economy is not enough, because at the same time we ought to listen to the poor. If, for argument’s sake, today we dedicate an enormous attention to the Planet because it’s burning (and we must necessarily do so), but while doing so we forget the poor, we haven’t done enough. It is not sufficient that an economy is Green to be Christian; it must also pay attention to inequality, to the poor and the marginalized. It’s absurd to look after the Mediterranean Sea – its fishes and algae – and then allow African migrants to drown in it. In this case, that Sea is ‘unhealthy’, even if we take care of the fishes. What is the degree of fraternity of Francis of Assisi? He used to call ‘Brother’ the sun and ‘Sister’ the moon; he preached to the fishes and the birds; but he also kissed the leper. Both dimensions are to be taken into consideration.

And this is fundamental. Regarding the problem of inequality, we need to know that today we are finding it hard to fight inequality because the word 'meritocracy' has been manipulated. Meritocracy in itself is something good. However, if talent becomes merit (and not a gift), meritocracy would become the ethical justification of inequality against which we fought in the 20th century.

In contemporary civil and economic contexts, richness is once again deemed a blessing and poverty a curse. The culture of meritocracy leads us to consider the rich as deserving and the poor as somewhat guilty. In this way the Book of Job is contradicted because it does not consider the poor as guilty, but simply unfortunate. We ought to conclude that if one is poor (and perhaps this is so because he or she has no talents or favourable conditions), he or she has no fault, and therefore we can, or rather we must take care of that person, and we do so not out of altruism but as a matter of justice. The European model of economy of solidarity will cease to exist once the business culture convinces us that only those who merit are to be helped and have rights. Instead, we must go back to the radical ways of Jesus in the Gospel and affirm: the paralytic and the blind persons are not guilty of anything; they aren't sinners: they are simply poor persons that need our help and love.

I conclude with an expression of Alistair MacIntyre, one of the greatest living philosophers. In a book he wrote some 40 years ago he stated: "If the European ethical tradition was able to survive the horrors of the latest dark period, then we can still have hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not beyond the frontiers; we have been governed by them for quite some time. And it is our unconsciousness of this fact that has contributed to our difficulties. We don't need a Godot but for another Benedict" (A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 313).

(Transcription of the audio file)