

Culture of encounter and the dialogue between Eastern and Western Europe

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1. PREMISE

1.1 A framework of reference

In my speech, I would like to draw up a framework for a dialogue between Eastern and Western Europe, and indicate some elements to consider. I will discuss the critical issues that should be considered before discussing the challenges we face together. It is to be aware of certain differences that deeply affect our reasoning and are often the cause of misunderstanding.

My statements are indicative in that they do not intend to offer an in-depth analysis of reality, but they are meant to focus on certain crucial points. I will not even be able to offer an overarching outlook, which would rather be the result of a joint effort that will start, hopefully, with this conference.

I'm Hungarian, born and raised in Hungary. I'm Roman Catholic, of Hungarian mother tongue, but my maternal grandparents were German, and my paternal ones were Slovene. I lived in Italy for over ten years, and I have spent various amounts of time in Germany and other Western European countries. I worked with international organizations, and I participated in various dialogue initiatives at the academic level and also in the sphere of civic participation.

So I will speak as a Hungarian, from an Eastern perspective, but with so many other realities in my heart, having being involved in so many lively relationships with other Eastern and Western brothers and sisters.

1.2 Europe's diversified composition

To frame the European situation well, it is useful to bear in mind its geopolitical and cultural reality.

Western Europe is mainly a *socio-political concept* and it specifically identifies the European countries of the “first world”, the result of a multi-century political, economic, and cultural path, different from the Eastern European one. Today, the term Western Europe is also commonly associated with *liberal democracy*, *capitalism*, and even with the European Union, despite the latter's inclusion of Eastern European countries. Most of the countries in the Eastern regions share the very Western culture that seems to be undergoing a crisis today. And there are differences and tensions within the West as well, for example between the North and the South. Or, let us think of the Church of England, which after Brexit will surely not want to leave Europe but intensify its relations with it.

Eastern Europe is rather a *geographical concept*, an area articulated by different traditions and problems within its borders. Culturally, it can be largely distinguished between *Central Europe*, the *Balkans*, and the *former Soviet Union countries*, and religiously speaking,

between the *Catholic-Protestant* and *Orthodox* spheres, with consequences on thoughts and actions of its peoples. The common denominator are the post-communist conditions characterized by the social and political troubles of a difficult path to democratization. With the extension of the EU to some Eastern countries, new member States are rapidly adapting to the Western economic and legal system, while cultural approaches are much slower.

1.3 Building a culture of encounter before anything else

To achieve a fruitful dialogue between East and West, it is necessary to *proceed in degrees* and not face problems head-on. According to the Together for Europe journey, condensed in 18 years of experience, and densely expressed in the great event in Munich in 2016, it is necessary to shy away from an attitude of criticism and defense, and promote a culture of encounter, *mutual acquaintance*, and *reconciliation*.

Over the last few centuries, the East has looked at the West as a cultural and political model and has developed an understanding of what happens in Western countries, while Eastern Europeans often are painfully faced with the Westerners' lack of knowledge, and the subsequent misunderstandings. Without Westerners *acknowledging the values of the East*, there can be no equality or reciprocity. So, we need humility, trust, knowledge, and mutual acceptance.

Consequently, I think that, as a first step, we should promote a culture of encounter, *create a platform*, a "home" *where dialogue is possible*. At this stage we could also reflect on our cultural traditions and different reasonings, to prepare for constructive dialogue.

2. SOME DIFFERENCES AND CRITICALITIES

2.1 West: multireligious and multicultural society – East: reinforcement of national identities

The West lives in a *multi-religious and multicultural society* due to immigration, and it has developed, at least in terms of beliefs, a culture of *recognition of diversity* and a practice of dialogue to manage diversity. The East has not yet passed the phase of ethnic tensions and the process of establishment of the nation has not yet come to an end. It focuses on *strengthening national identities* as homogeneous entities with the negation of any kind of distinctiveness. The West discusses the necessity of overcoming the idea of the nation, the East wants to strengthen it. As a result, in the East the dialogue aimed at understanding and collaboration is not yet a vital necessity. At the metaphysical level, the West perceives the need for unity in multiplicity, the East tends toward a homogenous conception of society.

2.2 East: rebuilding a Christian society

In addition to the affirmation of their own national identity, some Eastern nations want to reaffirm *Christian values*, restore *Christian society*, and re-establish Europe on its Christian roots. The State should be the guarantor and promoter of this process, and Churches and States should set up a new alliance in this perspective.

2.3 Church-State relationship

Therefore, the Church-State relationship also deserves attention. We are facing different models.

In the West there is a clear *division* between Church and State - in some countries, such as France, “secularism” takes on the weight of a quasi-religion.

In the East, during communism, Churches lost their financial independence, and still today they are mostly funded by the State. Mutual collaboration models are based on the acknowledgement of the public service supplied by the Church. However, this dependence of the Churches by the State makes it sometimes difficult for ecclesiastical authorities to express an independent moral voice.

However, in the East, in general, there is a *doctrinal and moral vision* of a Church that seeks to affirm herself in society, while in the West she seems to have a *pastoral and social approach*, considering the Church as a service to the people.

2.4 West: critical thought – East: defensive position

The West's attitude towards the East is mostly characterized by a *criticism of the lack of democratic culture* and a paternalism that wants to accelerate from outside, and sometimes from above, the process of democratization. In the East, education is lacking in critical thinking and tends to confine itself within ideological positions.

2.5 West: human rights – East: ethical reasoning

The West reasons, even at the popular level, in categories of *human rights*, while the East has a *moral mental form*. In the West, education in schools has been providing adequate training for decades, and this is still missing in Eastern countries. It seems, however, that the East has maintained a sound moral reasoning and has managed to stay in Aristotle's “middle ground” regarding, for example, the excesses of application of the principle of equality with regard to certain behaviors which are traditionally considered transgressions of the moral norm.

3. WHAT THE EAST CAN OFFER

Facing the critical issues resulting from communism, the question arises: Can something good come from the East? But the question could also be turned around: What are the sore points of the West? Where are the signs of the crisis? Could the East suggest some type of remedy? How to address secularization, church emptying, vocational decline, ideological fragmentation, freedom as a right to transgression, and the ban on speaking about God in the public sphere?

3.1 The Church of the people and popular piety

In Poland, Romania, and Russia, to name just three countries, there are manifestations of the *Church of the people* and *popular piety*, which in this form can no longer be found in the West, in an increasingly secular - and secularized - society. They seem to be overcome phenomena in the face of a Christianity made of individual and conscious choices. In many places in the East, however, there is still the awareness of *being a people of God*, not as an expression of a mass, but rather as a manifestation of a *popular mysticism*. This popular

devotion could be considered as an effective resource for the European rebirth – provided that it is continually renewed through the practice of the Gospel.

3.2 Strength of the small communities

During communism, Eastern Churches developed *the culture of small communities*, groups of young people and families, with a life based on the Gospel: mutual support on a material and spiritual level, shared and lived values, that “go against the current.” I think this is a treasure of the Eastern Churches, which hard to find in the West. It could be a gift from the East to the West.

3.3 Need for unity and truth

The East carries within it all the negative *consequences of a false, forced, and overwhelming unity*, and it *desires a true unity* in freedom and brotherhood. It has in its bones humiliations, occupations, and secular exploits, and as a result, reactions of self-defense and self-closure. A story sealed by the blood of many Eastern Christian martyrs gave witness to their loyalty to Jesus Christ and his Church.

This *cry* is addressed, both consciously and non-consciously, in an expressed or silent way, toward the West, which proclaimed as the main objective of its social and political action to make unity in diversity. The West, looking at the social, political, and religious events of the East, could find this voice of suffering as a huge human resource. Eastern Europe could be discovered in its vocation of *showing the world true unity*, a unity founded in God.

The East also expresses another strong need, that of the *truth*. A guardian of secular Christian wisdom, the East perceives in the currents of Western thought a *doctrinal confusion* and it is concerned for its relativism and fragmentation, for the “liquidity” of the Western condition. If we talk about “vocations” or “missions”, the West, heir to great philosophical traditions, could be vanguard in developing *new propositions of thought*, to give to the East as a gift, and in collaboration with the East.

4. COMMON CHALLENGES AND GOALS

We have highlighted some differences and criticalities that could hinder an understanding between East and West. We cannot spare a common reflection on this so to not get stuck in carrying out a common mission: *re-evangelizing Europe*. Despite the differences, we have *cross-cutting issues* in Europe such as ecological urgency, the peace process, the challenges of migration, poverty, and social justice, as well as civil participation.

And we, members of the Movements, Communities, and Associations, are implanted together to discover *new ways of Christian presence in society*, to be salt and yeast, and to overcome ways of thinking and acting that still divide the East and the West in Europe. Let me quote Pope Francis: “Neither the liberal individualist vision of the world, in which everything (or almost) is exchange, nor the State-centric vision of society, in which everything (or almost) is submissiveness, are safe guides to overcome that inequality and exclusion in which our societies are now overwhelmed. (...) This is a search for a way out of the suffocating alternative between the neoliberal thesis and that centralist thesis” to promote integral human development. To be Christians today means to courageously propose *new models of politics, economics, and media* to initiate processes of civil participation.

In this way, as we have already pointed out, *Together for Europe* could increasingly become a permanent platform and a school for intra-European dialogue, including this aspect among its objectives and implementing it along with several concrete projects with the goal of outlining a *shared vision* and consequent *common actions*, thus forming a growing network of Christian citizens committed to a Christian rebirth in Europe.

In these workshops on *equality and mutual recognition*, starting from that portion of truth that both parties keep in their respective traditions, one could develop a new kind of *wisdom speech*, which goes beyond mere criticism and deals with criticalities from a perspective of growth, and looks at miseries and shortcomings in a perspective of redemption and resurrection. The new generations, which have not experienced communism first-hand, are no longer influenced by the mental categories of oppression, they are more open, and they are a promise of a *rapid acceleration of mutual understanding processes* between the East and the West, in the aim of identifying agreements on possible future scenarios.

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