

EUROPE 2014

IS A NEW BEGINNING POSSIBLE?

The contribution of an experience

As the May 25th European elections approach, public opinion seems divided between those who press to leave the European Union and those who deem voting useless because it will change nothing. While supporters of the EU are not lacking, there is a prevalent sense of frustration: Europe no longer seems a center, but instead a great periphery of the globalized world. But, **drawing upon Pope Francis's words, isn't it possible that being or feeling "on the periphery,"** if we consider it in depth, can **afford the opportunity to recover a positive attitude** and give ourselves the chance for change?

What are the factors of this new opportunity?

Europe was born and grew around a few great things that marked the history of the world and that document the importance of the Christian faith for the life of women and men. Fr. Giussani reminded us of this in 1986:

- “the value of the *person*, absolutely inconceivable in all the literature of the world;
- the value of *work*, which all of world culture, ancient culture but also Engels and Marx, conceives as enslavement, while Christ calls work the activity of the Father, of God;
- the value of *matter*, that is to say, the abolition of the duality between a noble and an ignoble aspect of the life of nature;
- the value of *progress*, of time as charged with meaning, because the concept of history requires the idea of an intelligent plan;
- *freedom*. Man cannot conceive of himself as free in an absolute sense: since before he was not and now he is, he depends. Perforce. The alternative is very simple: either he depends on What makes reality, i.e., on God, or he depends on the chance movements of reality, i.e., on those in power.”

1. The value of United Europe

In the furrow of these few great things that historically founded Europe, there also the project of a United Europe arose, as Fr. Julián Carrón underlines: “What enabled the fathers of Europe to find the willingness to speak to each other, to build something together, even after the Second World War? The awareness of the impossibility of eliminating the adversary made them less presumptuous, less impermeable to dialogue, aware of their own need; they began to give space to

the possibility that **the others, in their diversity, could be perceived as a resource, a good**” (*la Repubblica*, April 10, 2013). **In the period following the Second World War, the leaders of countries that up until then had been fighting each other** (De Gasperi, Schuman, and Adenaur) decided to set aside feelings of revenge or domination and **laid the foundations for a long-term peace** putting together their respective economic interests.

To understand the exceptionality of what happened in Europe at that critical juncture, just think what happened after the World War I, after the Napoleonic wars, or the wars of religion: there was never true peace, but a continual tension that prepared for the following wars. United Europe was born upon a very precise and concrete point: the 1951 agreement about management of coal and steel (the treaty constituting the European Coal and Steel Community), recognized by all as the example of a new way of dealing with each other. In the birth of the first European project, the force of ideals was a decisive factor, capable of changing the course of events. In contrast to what happens today, the goal was not limited to the economy. In fact, that economic agreement was the first step toward a much greater goal: peace (partners who cooperate and do business with each other tend not to go to war against each other) and, together with peace, reciprocal help so that each could seek its own and the common good.

The pursuit of this very goal was renewed in the second historical passage of contemporary Europe, which happened with the fall of the Berlin Wall and was also determined by the power of an ideal. Few in the East or the West would have wagered on the possibility of a peaceful resolution to Europe’s division into two blocks, which so dramatically marked the vicissitudes of the Old Continent. Václav Havel, who would become the first President of post-Communist Czechoslovakia, in his 1979 book, *The Power of the Powerless*, had asserted that the problem of social and political life was the dominion of the lie of ideology and that the true answer to the situation was not a violent revolution, nor a simple political reform or the mere overturn of totalitarianism in favour of a parliamentary democracy, but **a life, personal and social, engaged in the pursuit of truth**. In the testimony of Havel it appeared evident that **the factors that change history are the same ones that change the heart of the human person**.

2. The crisis

The current crisis of the “European consciousness,” together with the economic crisis, shows that what gave life to United Europe is no longer an evident fact, a premise acknowledged by all as the condition for facing the challenges that reality sets before us. As happened in the past, so too we Europeans in 2014 **must recapture the reasons for a unity that is not at all taken for granted and from which we can always regress**. In fact, as Benedict XVI affirmed, “incremental progress

is possible only in the material sphere. Yet in the field of ethical awareness and moral decision-making, there is no similar possibility of accumulation for the simple reason that man's freedom is always new and he must always make his decisions anew. **Freedom presupposes that in fundamental decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning.**" The difficulties of the present make us aware that "Even the best structures function only when the community is animated by convictions capable of motivating people to assent freely to the social order." (*Spe salvi*, 24).

This, then, is the great opportunity that the crisis offers us Europeans: to recapture the reasons for our "existing as a community." This challenge is imperative, and Benedict XVI reminds us of the reason: "Since man always remains free and since his freedom is always fragile, **the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world.** Anyone who promises the better world that is guaranteed to last for ever is making a false promise; he is overlooking human freedom." In other words, "**good structures help, but of themselves they are not enough. Man can never be redeemed simply from outside**" (*Spe Salvi* 24b, 25).

One element today makes the road even harder: we no longer have the same awareness of the depth of our human need that the founding fathers had; the drive provided by an ideal has petered out, to be replaced by a logic of pure self-interest.

Going to the root of the crisis, trying to understand all the factors in play is the only road for finding the new awareness Europe needs today. Precisely for us Europeans, it has become vital to promote a real debate on the present and future of the Old Continent, evaluating whether the attempts made so far have been appropriate to the nature of the crisis. This concerns just as much the economy as it does anthropological challenges. Expecting to resolve the grave anthropological issues we are facing with mere juridical instruments is as ineffective as it is illusory. As becomes evident **before the most radical problems of human existence, the solution "does not come directly facing the problems, but exploring more deeply the nature of the subject who faces them"** (Fr. Giussani, 1976).

Forgetfulness of this level lies at the origin of the crisis of the human that has weakened awareness of our goals. So, over time, the means (the economy, profits, and finance) have become the end and the European economic union has changed into a mere compromise between inevitably conflicting interests. The Europe of nations re-emerges, no longer warring with cannons, but with the weapons of the economy and finance, divided over many crucial questions: the relationship with Mediterranean countries, illegal immigration, sovereign debts, peacekeeping operations, and solidarity with partners in difficulty.

The disappearance of an ideal-based drive and of awareness of the ends has also produced consequences in Europe's functioning as an institution: the European organisms have become ingrown, often bloating beyond measure and generating a sort of technocratic monster that seems to have decided to bend reality to its own needs. Thus there is an increasingly widespread perception of the inefficacy of European structures. Until 2008, when the financial crisis exploded, the judgment on the trustworthiness of European institutions was very positive, much more positive than the one for individual nations. Today, instead, polls indicate that 70% of European citizens consider the European structures (the Commission, the Council, the Parliament) inadequate to meet the needs of people and social life.

According to Joseph Weiler, one of the most authoritative judges of European dynamics, Europe suffers from a political deficit: an authentic European political life is missing because the dimension of ideals is lacking. Having wagered everything on the economy, which has not taken off at all, people wonder, "What Europe is here to do?".

At the same time, there is a growing idea of Europe as a relativistic cultural and political space, whose structures seek to legitimize and even deem a source of rights every individual aspiration, unmoored from the problem of what the human person is.

So then, are the Euroskeptics right in wanting to abandon the European Union, deeming it defeated and the dreams of the founding fathers passé?

3. The person as the condition for Europe

Is there a way out? Yes: starting again from the position that generated Europe and the European Union. Economic interests alone are not enough for starting anew. We need to rediscover that "the other is a good and not an obstacle to the fullness of our 'I', in politics as well as in human and social relations" (Fr. Carrón). The only thing that builds is "love for the reverberation of truth found in everyone. This is a factor of peace, construction of a human dwelling place, of a home, that can be a refuge from extreme desperation" (Fr. Giussani, 1995).

The recovery of an adequate consciousness of the human, of what is essential to the realization of individuals and of peoples, can happen in places that reawaken the "I" of each person, educate it to an adequate relationship with reality (whatever it may be), help it existentially perceive the centrality, uniqueness, and sanctity of each person: here, the two thousand year experience of the Christian community and all the social realities inspired by lay and religious ideals are called into play. Only a conception of the human being as an irreducible reality, "relationship with the infinite" (Fr. Giussani), can put together people who differ in ethnicity, social

background, culture, religion and political ideology, in sight of a true integration that eliminates all ghettos and becomes bearer of development.

Beginning with these concerns, a broad dialogue must be opened about how the EU should evolve in the coming years, involving all citizens, above all the future generations, thousands of whom are already leaving their countries of origin and feel at home wherever they go to study or work.

This has an important impact on the institutional level, as well. In the speech he was to give at Rome's Sapienza University in 2008, Benedict XVI said he shared the judgment of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, “when he says that the legitimacy of a constitutional charter, as a basis for what is legal, derives from two sources: from the equal participation of all citizens in the political process and from the reasonable manner in which political disputes are resolved. With regard to this ‘reasonable manner,’ he notes that it cannot simply be a fight for arithmetical majorities, but must have the character of a **‘process of argumentation sensitive to the truth,’**” that is, **in the continual striving to discover every spark of truth kindled in the encounter with the other**. In fact, the truth is never one person's possession, to brandish like a cudgel against others, but emerges in the dynamic of the human encounter: **“Truth is a relationship!** As such each one of us receives the truth and expresses it from within, that is to say, according to one's own circumstances, culture and situation in life, etc. This does not mean that truth is variable and subjective, quite the contrary. But it does signify that it comes to us always and only as a way and a life.” (Pope Francis, Letter to Eugenio Scalfari, *la Repubblica*, September 11, 2013). This routes relativism, saving precisely what relativism seeks to valorise: diversity, otherness.

In the measure in which there is an appeal to an experience of the human person that is not reduced, European politics can be founded no longer on the clash of opposing interests and on a relativism that results in nihilism, the indifference of everyone to everything, but on a **use of reason that is “sensitive to the truth”** and on a **realism that recognizes the other as a good for oneself and not as a threat**. As Pope Francis writes, “Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance... but above all an *attentiveness* which considers the other ‘in a certain sense as one with ourselves’. This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 199).

In this sense, the European organizations must be the first to **structure themselves in the direction of true subsidiarity**. This would promote the responsibility of all (people, social groups, nations), **avoiding the illusion that the answers always and in every case come from above**.

A Europe that understood this would not tend to close itself against immigration, would not practice austerity alone, but also solidarity in economics, would not withdraw into unrealistic and anti-historic nationalisms, would not push for legislation that breaks all bonds, cultivating the obsession for new rights of individuals, would not endorse hostility to faiths, in particular the Christian faith, betraying precisely what built and gave greatness in the history of Europe.

“Sometimes I wonder if there are people in today’s world who are really concerned about **generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains**, but do not enhance human fullness. History will perhaps judge the latter with the criterion set forth by Romano Guardini: ‘The only measure for properly evaluating an age is to ask to what extent it fosters the development and attainment of a *full and authentically meaningful human existence*, in accordance with the peculiar character and the *capacities* of that age’. [...] As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 224.257).

Here we see the fundamental contribution that faith can give to public life, “broadening reason,” as Benedict XVI reminded us. **Christianity’s foremost contribution is in educating people to look at reality in all its factors** and thus to recover the original ideal-based drive that has dimmed over time. This is the true emergency of our times.

If Europe is not deaf to this call, it will be able to be born again and thus to hope to return to being the “new world,” an example and model for all. The contribution that a reborn European culture can offer the whole world is to **put back in the center the question about what enables a human being to be and feel such**.

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