

Herman Van Rompuy, President Emeritus of the European Council
Keynote speech at the conference “The Role of Christians in Today`s Europe”
20/01/2016 - Chapel for Europe, Brussels

The Role of the Christians in Europe

The European Union was created as value-based. It was not in the first place an economic project. It was our answer to the cruelty and barbarism of World War II and all the preceding wars. The Union was based on reconciliation between nations and thus, on the restoration of human dignity, and the irreplaceable value of each human person. We renounced revenge. By dehumanizing others inexorably we are dehumanizing ourselves in a never-ending spiral of violence and hate. The EU stopped this fatal evolution.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was also value-based. It was a victory over deceit, over dictatorship, over ignoring the uniqueness of every human being. A person was only one million divided by one million. A person was only part of the main. Joining the Union meant joining those values, which we often call European values.

The role of the Christians in the creation of the Union was crucial. Let us not forget that the two ideologies which were responsible for most atrocities in the previous century had nothing to do with religion and Christianity.

Christians should remain the strongest defenders of the European idea.

In today`s world we are confronted with new major challenges, with strong ethical implications.

The massive influx of war refugees provoke two kind of reactions, also among Christians:

- The strengthening of the Muslim communities in Europe is a threat to the very character of our societies, to our values, to social cohesion. It is a further step in the Islamization of Europe.
- War refugees need our compassion as human beings, as victims of terrorism and barbarism; they need our generosity and hospitality. We can work together on their integration in a multi-cultural society. We stand firm on our public values. Solidarity also is part of them.

The first group considers the second as naïve. The second group describes the first one as egoistic, driven by fear instead of hope.

A wise view is to work on a balance between humanism and realism. It is faster said than done!

Allow me to comment on those two approaches:

- We shouldn't fall into the trap of generalizing. Putting all people in the same basket and reintroducing the notion of 'collective' guilt. This would be a dangerous path. It is the basis of nationalism and racism.

A repetition of the assaults in Cologne or new terrorist attacks would feed this feeling of 'clash of civilizations'.

Therefore, it is crucial that the voices of moderation, of lucidity, of dialogue, of firmness are heard more often—on the Muslim side as well as on the side of organized Christianity. If not, things can derail.

My slogan is 'One civilization, many cultures'.

Our Western civilization is built on democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, not discrimination, the separation between Church and State, the social market economy. Within this framework there should be room for many beliefs and cultures. We need both legs. Once one accepts this model the number of Muslims or other believers is less important. The general feeling is that we are not there yet.

- My second comment is that behind the so-called defense of our 'values', we notice a dislike of others, a refusal of solidarity, the selfish side of our inward looking societies, the fear of an isolated individual. The defense of values can be a pretext/an alibi for a non-admitted egoism. This too is a dangerous evolution.

In any case, Christians should remain personalists. Humans have an inherent dignity that can never be relativized or diminished, of which our fellow humans and society have no right to suppress or violate. Humans are relational and humans are beings that engage i.e. beings that freely take responsibility for our own lives, but also for our fellow humans and for the community as a whole.

Christians should never forget that their fellow man are concrete persons, especially those in need. We become really engaged, morally engaged persons confronted with people crossing the Mediterranean in winter time, children perishing in the cold or living in tents in Calais. The sight of the faces of people may change our opinion and our behavior.

Unlike many other ideologies, personalism does not claim to have an answer ready at hand to all the challenges and problems that we, as societies and individuals, face. There is no answer book, but rather a collection of principles and guidelines that we may follow when attempting to say how we should treat one another and which role the state and other institutions should play in our societies.

We have to be aware that we are at crossroads and that much is at stake.

Christians can have different views on economic policy; on the need of austerity or structural reforms; on the irregularities in our societies; on how to tackle climate change. Christians can give a different content to values as responsibility and solidarity.

Those differences are more outspoken in the US than in Europe. But here too, ethnical minima should be respected. We cannot go ahead with endless accumulation of public and private debt or with further deterioration of our environment and a depletion of raw materials and non-renewable energy sources. This would be generational egoism. We shouldn't love only our own children but all children. Loving thy neighbor is not enough. All human beings, present and future, are our neighbors. It is as simple as that. We shouldn't take any risks. Failing on the future of the human race is the biggest failure one can imagine.

The European Union took the lead in the COP-21 in Paris on climate change. We 'sinned' in the past – since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution – but we changed our policies. It shouldn't be 'too little too late'.

The crisis in the euro area was a challenge to those key values of responsibility and solidarity. Some countries had built up debts in an irresponsible way in the past and had to correct. Other countries had and have means to show more solidarity but were reluctant and sometimes waited too long. But in both

cases responsibility and solidarity were the product of necessity rather than a positive choice. The moral value is rather small! I'm not naïve and the results count, but one can not ignore the moral deficit.

The Union is not Europe; neither in budgetary terms or as far as society is concerned. Christians are engaged in our Member States, whose developments are to a large extent independent from those in the EU as our EU. What about our social capital, loneliness, unhappiness, our family capital, the distribution of income, development aid, the role of education, the balance between work and personal life, between productivity and the quality of life? In all those domains we need a humane dimension even in a global, highly competitive economy. There are no clear-cut answers but the approach is important. Personalism is the only way to look at things.

We live in secular societies. It is not a threat for Christians. On the contrary, it is a real opportunity. We have to make our own choices, to convince others. Even to lead by example. Since the arrival of Islam in Western Europe old rivalries between Christians and non-believers are not too prominent any more. The landscape is more diverse. On the one hand, religion in general is blamed for the crimes of extremists. 'Religion means war'. On the other hand, religion is again a factor in our societies. Dialogue is needed more than ever, not only in looking for common values but also being aware of the differences as far as the embodiment of values are concerned. Therefore the dialogue has to be genuine. In interpersonal relations the 'other' is different from who I am. We live with and love people who are never like us. Differences are a part of life. But living together means to look for common ground, where we can live in harmony. Dialogue leads to convergence. Dialogue is a part of the culture. Integration is not assimilation but the paradigm of 'one civilization, many cultures' is still valid.

Our societies are changing dramatically due to technology, biotechnology, prosperity, medical progress, globalization, immigration etc. The worst behavior is folding on oneself and being dominated by fear. This is the source of conflict and violence. Our approach has to remain hopeful ("Wir schaffen das", "yes, we can"), being on the side of Eros and not of Thanatos. Christians have to contribute to this societal change, even in a position of 'the rest of Israël'.