



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRESIDENTS OF THE PARLIAMENTS
OF THE EUROPEAN UNION***

Saturday 23 September 2000

*Madam President of the European Parliament,
Distinguished Presidents of the Parliaments of the European Union,*

1. I am happy to welcome you to the Vatican and to greet you in this place which from the first has been associated with the great epochs of European history. I respectfully greet Senator Nicola Mancino, President of the Italian Senate, who has spoken on your behalf and I thank him for his kind words.

Your Conference is a highly significant sign of the process of European unification which, in recent years, has gone forward still further. Through the century just past, my predecessors and I have lent our support to the great project of rapprochement and cooperation between the States and peoples of Europe.

2. Presiding over the legislatures which represent your people, you are witnesses of the convergence between the interests of your respective countries and the interests of the larger unity of Europe. I am pleased to note that the Union wants to welcome new member States and that it is showing itself open and flexible as it looks to the future. The European Union has retained its creativity, and that is the best guarantee that it will succeed in securing the greatest good of its citizens. It is pledged to maintain their cultural diversity and to safeguard the values and principles of its founders, which constitute the common heritage of all of Europe's citizens.

True to its distinctive character, the European Union has already developed shared institutions, with a system of checks and balances of power, which safeguard democracy. The time seems ripe to synthesize these achievements in an arrangement which is both less complex and more

effective. The European Union will certainly be able to find the right formula both to satisfy the aspirations of its peoples and to ensure that the common good is served.

3. In the Church's social teaching, which draws upon biblical revelation and natural law, the notion of the common good applies at every level of organization in human society. There is a national common good, which State institutions are meant to serve. And at a time when economies and trade of every kind in Europe and throughout the world are more and more interdependent, who could deny that there is also a continental and even global common good? Europe is becoming increasingly aware of its common good as a continent, that is, of the range of initiatives and values which European nations must together pursue and defend if they wish to respond appropriately to the needs of their citizens.

If the European Union were to move to the point of adopting a formal constitution, it would have to choose the kind of system which it finds more suitable. Among the various systems, different arrangements are possible. In the Church's view, systems of government stem from the genius of peoples, from their history and from their goals for the future. The Church stresses, however, that all systems must have as their objective the service of the common good. Moreover, every system must resist the temptation to remain selfishly closed within itself and must be open to other States of the continent wishing to cooperate with the European Union, so that the Union may be as broad as possible.

It is a source of deep satisfaction for me to see that the fruitful principle of subsidiarity is increasingly invoked. Put forward by my predecessor Pope Pius XI in his celebrated Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, this principle is one of the pillars of the Church's social teaching. It is an invitation to distribute responsibility at the various levels of political organization of a given community – for example, regional, national, European – so that only those responsibilities which the lower levels are unable to exercise for the sake of the common good are transferred to the higher levels.

4. The protection of human rights is one of the imperative requirements of the common good. The European Union is engaged in the difficult task of composing a "Charter of Fundamental Rights", in a spirit of openness and attention to the suggestions of various groups and individuals. In 1950, the founding nations of the Council of Europe adopted the *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties*, followed in 1961 by the *European Social Charter*. Declarations of rights in some way mark out the inviolable area which society regards as not being subject to interference from the play of human power. Further still, it is recognized that power exists in order to protect this area, the focus of which is the human person. Thus, society acknowledges that it is at the service of its members and their natural aspiration to find fulfilment as individuals and as social beings. This aspiration, part of the nature of the person, corresponds to inherent rights of the person, such as the right to life, to physical and mental integrity, to freedom of conscience, thought and religion.

In adopting a new Charter – whatever shape it may take in the future – the Union must not forget that Europe is the cradle of the notions of the person and of freedom, and that these notions emerged because the seed of Christianity was planted deep in Europe's soil. In the Church's thinking, the person is inseparable from the human society in which he or she develops. In creating man, God set him within an order of relations which enables him to become what he is intended to be. We call this the natural order, and it is the task of reason to explore it ever more fully. Human rights cannot become pretensions against human nature itself. They can only flow from it.

5. May the European Union witness another step forward on the path of human development! May it succeed in forging the consensus necessary to set among its highest ideals the protection of life, respect for one another, mutual help and a fraternity which excludes no one. Whenever Europe draws from its Christian roots the great principles of its vision of the world, it knows that it can look serenely to the future.

Upon you, your families and the peoples and nations which you represent I gladly invoke the blessings of Almighty God.

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