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The future of Europe – Reflections for the EU by 2025

Paper presented at the dialogue seminar with religious communities

Under the patronage of the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani

At the Invitation of Mrs. Mairead McGuinness

First Vice-President of the European Parliament

Responsible for the Parliament's implementation of Article 17 TFEU

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Before starting my presentation, I would like to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to the First Vice-President of the European Parliament, and Responsible for the Parliament's implementation of Article 17 of the TFEU, Mrs. Mairead McGuinness, for inviting me to this exceptional meeting, and to Rev. Heikki Huttunen, General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), for entrusting me to speak on behalf of CEC in this highly important dialogue.

I am neither a EU expert nor a specialist of the EU treaties, and the consequent political, social, financial or legal policies. I am an Orthodox Christian theologian strongly committed to the European project, coming from a country of the European South, i.e., Greece, a country which is used now to be at the top of the negative publicity, due to the terrible economic and financial crisis it experiences for the last seven years. I would then approach the crucial issue under discussion from a theological perspective, rather than from a technocratic or managerial one. End of the day, I think this is what you expect from me: what a member of a religious community, the Christian Orthodox in my case, has to say about the future of Europe from his own perspective.

If the European project has to regain its strength and attractiveness, and its capacity to bring together people from a variety of horizons and backgrounds, then it has to overcome the now dominant idea of a union defined mainly by financial rules or austerity measures. As stated in

CEC document entitled *Beyond Prosperity*, “decades ago, the European Union started out as a visionary project of peace and reconciliation” (p. 63), while “since its initiation, the primary driving force for building up the EU has been the achievement of goals that reach beyond economic cooperation” (p. 47). This strong statement does echo Jesus’ saying “one does not live by bread alone” (Mt 4:4; cf. Lk 4:4), but also reminds us the 2001 historic “Charta Oecumenica” declaration, issued at the end of European Christian Churches meeting, according to which “without common values, unity cannot endure” (cf. CEC, *Beyond Prosperity*, p. 11). This brings us to the crucial question of common values, and to the vision of EU founding fathers or distinguished leaders such as the Former President of European Commission Jacques Delors, when saying that “we will not succeed with Europe solely on the basis of legal expertise or economic ability. If we do not succeed in giving Europe a soul..., then we failed” (cf. CEC, *Beyond Prosperity*, p. 32).

I strongly believe that the current crisis Europe is facing, a crisis which also defamed the European project, and made it less attractive, if not undesirable, for people both outside and inside EU, has much to do with the deficit of the soul of Europe, as it has also to do with the lack of hope and vision. And when the soul of Europe, and the hope for a better future have gone, in other words when the core European values such as freedom, solidarity, justice, overcoming of poverty and exclusion, are not taken into account, then the prosperity of the figures and the statistics comes to replace the real well-being of European societies to the point to believe that the crisis is now gone, and that “the economy is now back on a growth path and unemployment rates are falling in all Member States,” as the Reflection Paper of European Commission on the “Social Dimension of Europe” seems to claim (p. 9), while the same Reflection Paper does give 23% of unemployed people for Spain and Greece, and around 40% (in fact more than 50%) for the unemployed youth in Spain, Italy, and Greece (p. 9).

But anyone who will visit Athens or the other major Greek cities, will personally witness the humanitarian catastrophe my country is now experiencing for the last seven years, and will realize the gap between the prosperity of the statistics and the real well-being of European societies. Also, anyone who is sensitive to the messages sent by people in Italy, Spain or even in France, and the growth of the influence of right and left populist parties in that countries, he/she cannot but start wondering regarding the eclipse of core European values. As rightly underlined (in a different context) at the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008 by the

message of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches: “The gap between rich and poor is growing dramatically due to the financial crisis, usually the result of manic profiteering by economic factors and corrupt financial activity, which, by lacking an anthropological dimension and sensitivity, does not ultimately serve the real needs of mankind. A viable economy is that which combines efficacy with justice and social solidarity.”

In other words, there can be no plan about the Future of Europe without raising the discussion on common European values. The same applies to any attempt to elaborate measures in order to overcome the current crisis: We should first understand the in-depth reasons of the crisis, before deciding the appropriate treatment. Allow me here to remind you that besides the many financial reasons often highlighted by the experts on this matter, we should also discuss and reflect on the moral issues related to the debt policies, directly linked to the economic and financial crisis, and connected with the impoverishment of large segments of the population in the countries of southern Europe, the sharp increase of inequalities, the weakening of social coherence, and the abandonment of the welfare state; otherwise said, all the aforementioned phenomena are nothing more than a “growing political and economic egoism,” to recall the bold statement of the Protestant Church in Luxemburg.

I am neither an economist nor an expert in financial matters, and if I intervene in this discussion, I do this only in my capacity as a Christian intellectual and a European citizen. This last quality, however, gives me the right to evoke the current crisis which still persists in many countries in Europe. It seems to me, therefore, that it is urgent to question the prevailing financial policies in today Europe, policies that not only contribute in their way to the marginalization of large segments of the population, but also lead to a new divide in Europe, a divide between North and South replacing the old divide between Western and Eastern Europe.

Coming from a country of the South of Europe, which at the same time shares in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, I can witness on the negative importance of such divides towards European integration and a successful completion of the European project. Orthodox Christians in Europe often feel marginalized because of their religious belonging, and affected by the old confessional confrontation between Western and Eastern Christianity. The same applies for the countries of the South (mainly Greece and Italy, and to a lesser degree Spain)

which last years experienced more and more the lack of European solidarity and the absence of respect for European rules as regards the crucial issue of refugee crisis. Last but not least, both the South and the North, the East and the West of Europe, as well as individuals and communities are called to overcome the temptation of nationalism in its multifaced aspects (ethnic, racial, economic, cultural), which is now threatening not only the unity and the future of Europe, but even the very existence of European Union. As we were prophetically reminded by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew during his visit to the European Parliament “there must be a more profound understanding of the absolute interdependence—not merely of states and political and economic actors—but the interdependence of every single human person with every other single human person.”

As a theologian I could easily appeal to many biblical stories or narratives, both from the Old and the New Testament or from the Patristic tradition, regarding the Jubilee year, debt release, the critique of social injustice and inequalities, exploitation of the poor and the weak, and more. However, I do not want to give the impression with my argument that biblical stories or patristic texts offer a model that is ready to be applied in society and in the field of the secular state policy. I am not naive enough to believe that for instance a sacred parable, text or story about debt and its surrender could alone solve such a complex contemporary problem. Being fully aware of the secular and pluralistic character of the modern state, its animosity to any kind of tutelage exercised over it by any religious or ecclesiastical authority, I have no illusions about the post-Christian reality of today’s Europe. As for secularization, I see in it not only dangers, but also creative challenges to be met. As an adherent of the eschatological character of the Church, and of its distance with regard to any worldly power or institution, I strongly support the idea that we can not make biblical texts or the commandments of the Sermon on the Mountain the principles that should govern a State, since this would recall theocracy, and even religious totalitarianism.

However, I think that as a Christian I could appeal to the biblical value of solidarity, which means in our case the transcendence of the collective and national self in favor of a broader and more universal formation like Europe. Few years ago, in 2013, the great German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his lecture at the Catholic University of Leuven entitled “Democracy, Solidarity and the European Crisis,” called for solidarity as a political project to get out of the crisis which destroys Europe, while criticizing his own country for his stance on the European debt crisis.

The discussion on solidarity brings also to the fore two other theological terms, “Diaconia” (service to the community, and to every other fellow human being), and “Koinonia” (communion). Genuine “koinonia”/communion, which in Orthodox Christian tradition is linked to Trinitarian theology, to the equal-in-honor life and interpenetration of the divine persons in mutual love, a life of communion and sharing, implies the respect of “otherness,” as well as “diaconia”/service. But as maintained in the CEC document entitled “Beyond Prosperity” (pp. 35-36), “an important function of diaconia is working both with, and on behalf of those whom it seeks to serve. This role encompasses identifying and challenging injustices at every level—locally, nationally and internationally. It means addressing the huge disparities of income and wealth which mark the globalized economy. But it also means advocating the cause of those who are excluded because of race, gender, faith, ability or age.”

I take, and some more of my fellow Orthodox colleagues of the new generation also do Europe as a “koinonia,” as a communion, and as a unity in diversity, which needs our service and sharing, our labor and untiring efforts, but also the spirit of tolerance and the acceptance of otherness, in order for it to be fulfilled. If we want to be honest, we have to accept and recognize that this was not always the case with us. The unprecedented economic and financial crisis we experienced these last years may perhaps give the peoples of Southern Europe the opportunity to repent and work on our spiritual, moral, and political maturation. At the same time it should challenge the policies followed by European leaders in order to measure the tragic and disastrous effects on human beings, on social cohesion, and on the very future of Europe itself caused by the neo-liberal indoctrinated financial policies.

As it is mentioned in the “White Paper on the Future of Europe,” “every voice should be heard” (p. 26). I do hope that the voice I dared to raise, and my critical, and self-critical remarks contributed for all of us to understand how important it is to preserve the integrity of our European edifice, how vital it is for Europe itself to remain for all of us Western, Eastern or South Europeans, our common home and our destiny to share!