

EUROPE ALIVE! EUROPA VIVA! VIVA L'EUROPA!**That they may all be one...****The experience of unity** - *A deep experience of spiritual renewal for pastors to bless Europe***The treasure hidden in the field***“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Cor 4:7 NIV)*

The theme of this pastoral conference is “*Europe Alive!*”. Which could also be interpreted as: “Let Europe come alive!”, which is the version I prefer, the one nearest to my way of thinking. This is my hope and my longing! For I believe that this world still stands in need of the treasure hidden in the spiritual and moral roots of Europe. Nevertheless, I must confess that in the face of that phrase I realise ever more clearly what a distance there is between desire and reality and that I am overwhelmed by the suffering and pain found throughout Europe, the crisis that has been “exhausting” her for many years now. This is a financial and economic crisis, but still more, at root, a spiritual and moral crisis. I am reminded of that fine book by my old friend Michael Harper, *Il sole sta tramontando in Occidente*, which several decades ago already sensed and anticipated the crisis of the churches and of Christianity in Europe. One thing is certain, that – as someone has written – “Christianity is disappearing from Europe”. And it is migrating more and more permanently to the “South” of the world. Our morals, our way of life, our language... “our value system”, have seriously damaged the bridges connecting us to our Christian roots. The biblical model of family is at the centre of an unprecedented historical crisis. The European Union itself lacks a shared historical, cultural and spiritual vision and seems to be encouraging more and more the tendency to free itself of its “Christian heritage”. Furthermore, since its refusal to recognise its “Christian roots”, most of its decisions and the rules promulgated indicate a growing departure from a Christian ethos. This is a fact! For social and cultural reasons, Christianity is more and more pushed to the margins and to the *edge* of the “system”.

Christians with life in them

The “Christians with life in them”, as Cardinal Martini called them a few years ago, those who ultimately function as a real “force for change”, are fewer and fewer in Europe. At the time, in the 1990s, they were estimated to be no more than 5-8% in Italy. The *pastoral* (or more accurately, *political*) and *cultural* attempts by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, respectively, to overcome the crisis starting from Europe, do not appear to have had any substantial success. And Pope Francis, “the Pope from the ends of the earth”, or at any rate from outside Europe, confirms the shift in the church’s – and not merely the Catholic Church’s – centre of gravity from Europe to the southern hemisphere. By now we are all challenged (which is a good thing!) to look at the “centre” from the “edges” of the world, and to turn our hearts and our “evangelical” attention once more to the edge, to all the edges. Europe is running away from its roots, it no longer recognises its roots. Europe is running away from its civilisation, attracted by a “new civilisation” to which it bows down, even within the churches. The values and the principal “idols” inspiring it are increasingly science, technology and – the greatest of all! – economics! My Lady Economics! Man himself is more and more driven to the edges. The

Enlightenment, though undoubtedly bringing with it many benefits, opened a breach in the church's defences. And now, Christianity is fighting an enemy who has broken in and is currently eating it away from within as well as from without: secularisation. Or, to use the biblical term, "worldliness". This enemy is excluding Christianity from the public sphere and, slowly but surely, is robbing "Christians" of the inward and personal dimension of the Gospel, leaving them at most with ritual and the "sacred" dimension. All the rest is more and more "contaminated", more and more "worldly".

How can Europe be revived? – From where will my help come?

So then: How can Europe be revived? How can the church be revived? How can the course of this continent's history be changed? Though disoriented, and like pilgrims of *this time* and *this generation*, let us lift up our eyes to the "heights" before us and ask ourselves, like the Psalmist: *"I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from?"* And, like the Psalmist, let us confess that *"My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth... He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber... The Lord will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life."*¹ Our help comes from the Lord! The enemy will not prevail! The Lord is the answer. *Here and now, the Lord will come for us too! The Lord will answer!* Beginning from His presence *in* our life; continuing with Him *in* our relationships. The Lord's answer is the Christian and the church, the individual and the fellowship! True, the evangelical presence is not great in our continent. The number of any sort of Christians, "Christians with life in them", certainly make them a minority. But in the history of the world and of the church, it has always been the minorities that have changed the course of events, right from the days of the "Way".² And this principle is true for the future of Christianity too. The early church was not strong in numbers; it was strong in consecration and because of its unity. And this makes me think: this applies to modern Europe, for this Europe of ours, too! This is the only possible starting point: our personal relationship with God, and the restoration of our unity.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field..." (Mt 13:44)

The story of Eisik

I would like to tell you an old Jewish story. I read it long ago, I believe in an interesting book by Martin Buber. It is the story of Rabbi Eisik, son of Rabbi Yekel of Krakow. One night Rabbi Eisik, in a dream, was told to go and look for treasure under the bridge leading to the Royal Palace in Prague. The same dream was repeated insistently for three nights, each time with the specific instruction to go and look under the bridge leading to the Royal Palace in Prague. Rabbi Eisik decided to believe in this dream, and set off to walk from Krakow to Prague. Reaching the bridge leading to Prague's royal palace, he wandered about there for several days, looking for the place where the treasure might be hidden. But the bridge was guarded by soldiers and he was afraid to draw near. Finally the captain of the guard, having noticed him prowling around there for days, stopped him and asked, "What are you are looking for?" And so he recounted his dream to the captain. At this, the captain burst out laughing and said to

¹ Ps 121:1-7

² "However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14)

him, “So you still believe in dreams? How can anyone believe in dreams? Ah! If dreams told the truth, I should believe in the dream that I keep having night after night, telling me to go to Krakow to the house of a certain Jew, Eisik son of Yekel, and look for buried treasure underneath the stove in his house! Are you joking?” And, laughing, he turned away and went back to his job. Rabbi Eisik said goodbye to him and left to walk home from Prague to Krakow. On his arrival, however, out of sheer curiosity he decided to have a look anyway under the stove in his own house. On digging under the stove, to his amazement he found buried right there the treasure he had gone looking for so far away, under the bridge in Prague. With the money from the sale of the treasure, he built the synagogue in Krakow, later known as the “School of Reb Eisik, son of Reb Yekel”.

Where treasure is to be found

The moral is that there is a treasure which exists nowhere else in the world. There is just one place where you can find it... The place where this treasure is to be found is *where we are*, in the people amongst whom we live, the town where we live, the world in which we live. This world, our world, needs us in order to grow up towards its perfection, towards its “fullness”. We only need to let God into our world and it will all happen. And then, as it is written: *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field...”* (Mt 13:44). God wants to come and live in our world, in the world which belongs to Him, and is only waiting for us to make room for him, to welcome him. As it is written: *“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*³ Two separate worlds whose desire is to become one.



The two worlds are in reality one and the same. God wants to enter into the world, which is His (*“he came to that which was his own”*). And this is what he does in the Incarnation! He decided to do it with and through man! 1. He began with Jesus (Christmas); 2. He continued with man (Pentecost). And he will continue to do it with man! We believe that God’s grace consists precisely in this giving himself to man, in this desire of his to live within man. God wants to come into His own world, but he wants to do it through man! This is the mystery of our existence, man’s chance to become more than man! *Where* is it, then, that God chooses to dwell in the world? The lesson that we can draw from this word is that God comes to live right where we are. That is, if only we let him come in! He doesn’t ask to come into a perfect life, no. On the contrary! He asks to come into our imperfect lives. He comes into Matthew’s

³ Jn 1:9-12.

house.⁴ He comes into Zacchaeus's house.⁵ He asks to come into Levi's life.⁶ He knocks at the adulterous woman's heart.⁷ We are called to let him in right there where we live, where we are, where we actually are. So do we need to be perfect, then? No, we don't need to be perfect. God asks to come into imperfect lives. Right there where we are, where we actually are. To enrol in certain police or army units, it is necessary to be, at least physically, perfect. To be indwelt by God, no! The only thing needed is GOD's desire for it! "To all who did receive him... he gave the right to become children of God",⁸ and "If anyone loves me... we will come to him and make our home with him".⁹ We have prepared a dwelling place for God in our hearts. We are called to prepare Him a dwelling place in our world! We are called to prepare Him a dwelling place in our Europe!

The places where God wants to live

There are basically two places where God wants to live: the individual and the fellowship. This is because he is a Person and he is a Fellowship! He wants to live in man, in every man. He wants to live in the fellowship, in every fellowship. He wants an intimate, personal relationship with man. He wants an intimate, personal relationship with the fellowship, with every fellowship, with every expression of his Body, *with His fellowship*. This is the reason for worshipping together, for relations within the fellowship, that have to do with love and unity, God with man, each person with himself, each person with his brothers. These are the "places" in our lives where he wants to live. And we cannot heal them, "restore" or "fill" them, if we do not start from an initial and "fundamental" personal experience of a deep inner reconciliation with him. Only God can reveal himself as Love and bring us into an experience of the acceptance and the free pardon which Christ has won for us on the cross. Our hearts, made vulnerable and teachable by the wound of his grace, offers itself broken and imperfect to his love. We hand ourselves over to him with our weaknesses and our impotence. He comes to live *in* us. He comes to live *among* us.

The experience of reconciliation

Together with (and in the act of) this "experience" of reconciliation, He deposits in us "the message of reconciliation".¹⁰ Indeed, he deposits himself in us as *the Word of reconciliation*. This word, the relationship with this Word, will heal us and qualify us to become ministers and servants of reconciliation. And this with the same dynamic used by God towards us "when we were still dead in trespasses and sins".¹¹ It consists basically in three steps, three attitudes: 1. The one who takes the initiative of reconciliation (the Father's passion); 2. The one who pays the price of reconciliation (the choice of the cross); 3. The one

⁴ "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" (Mt 9:9-13)

⁵ Lc 19:1-10

⁶ Lc 5:27-32

⁷ Jn 8:3-11

⁸ Jn 1:12

⁹ Jn 14:23

¹⁰ "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2Cor 5:19)

¹¹ "And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1 NKJV)

who seeks, pursues, courts, envelops and persuades the one who is far off (the desire of the Holy Spirit). And He comes to live within us. God's treasure in our hearts! To inhabit us, and from within! To experience us from within! To love us from within! To console and heal us from within! To help us, teach us and guide us from within!

His glory

This Presence is the presence of Love: “*God’s love* has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”¹² This Presence is *the Grace* that now makes possible for us what the Law was powerless to do. This Presence is *Fellowship* with “the river of love” that brings us into relationship with the inner movement of divine love flowing between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This Presence is God’s own nature, of which we have become participants,¹³ by means of his “glory”: the glory which is the only thing that can enable us to become “one *as we are one*” – “so that they may be brought to complete unity”. The “glory” we need so urgently in order to “enter” into that unity which from all eternity is the fundamental nature of God, God’s purpose for all eternity. What is this “glory”? It is important to understand this, because it is *God’s secret* for unity among disciples! The Scripture declares: “*I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one* – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”¹⁴ “Christ’s glory” is “the mindset of Christ Jesus” mentioned in Philippians chapter 2. It is the mindset of *His love* which feeds on *mercy* (“mercy triumphs over judgement”¹⁵); His mercy which is fed by his deepest attitude of *humility*. This is His nature! And, at the bottom of his nature, the quality of his “glory”! Yes, because, as has been observed: “If the Incarnation is an act of humility, it is so because God is the essence of humility. *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*”, Jesus declares (Jn 14:9). So when I see him humbly washing men’s feet, I ‘see’, if He is telling the truth, God Himself as eternally, mysteriously Servant with humility *in the ultimate depths of His glory*. The self-humbling of Christ is not a totally isolated epiphany of glory. *It makes evident in time that humility is at the heart of glory...* God is an unlimited power of self-withdrawal, of hiddenness.”¹⁶ This treasure is within us, because the Person of Christ is within us; the Spirit of Christ is within us. We can draw on this treasure for our life of relationship with God, for our life of relationship with ourselves and with our brothers and sisters, to drink at the river of His humility and to build His unity.

The secret of unity

And it is here that this apostolic fellowship (AFI) could give a helping hand. One possible goal of AFI could be to promote this convergence, to promote a spirituality of reconciliation and develop this awareness; to be a pole of attraction, an area where many true Christians can come together, starting with the pastors. And in the meanwhile to create a “*koinonia of pastors*”, a co-ordinating body of father-ministries, “*a koinonia of apostles*”, as ministers of unity. The objective would be to “heal” the substance of the church; to be “leaven” in the history of Europe; to influence the “destiny” of our human race. Our trust is in the God of hope: *in us and among us*. If we can manage to make room for Him, the night will be followed by a new dawn. And soon it will be broad daylight! “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life... He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”¹⁷

¹² Rm 5:5

¹³ “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature” (2Pt 1:3-4)

¹⁴ Jn 17:22-23

¹⁵ Jas 2:13

¹⁶ François Varillon, *L’umiltà di Dio* (Eng. *The Humility and Suffering of God*), pp. 55 – 56.

¹⁷ Rev 22:17-21