

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Developing a culture of cooperation in Europe: the role of the Churches

3rd European Ecumenical Assembly

Sibiu, 6 September 2007

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

I am truly happy and honoured to take part in this third Ecumenical Assembly. I congratulate organizers to the inspirational selection of meeting place. Firstly, Sibiu (Hermannstadt) is very suitable place for this meeting: city of culture, city of cultures. Majority and minorities live here not only in tolerance but also in acceptance! It is more. It is like a difference between *let to live* and *help to live*. Mosaic of Sibiu reminds a bigger one of Europe. *United in diversity* is the best narrative for Europe in XXI Century. It was a long and demanding process to get to this description of acceptance, tolerance and reconciliation through history of divisions and conflicts.

Secondly, we are all now gathered in the large tent. I think it is a great symbol of our temporary stay not only here, but also on the Earth. We all are like pilgrims moving through our lives. But here and now we can make a difference, we can form a community of people and bring more hope to the world we live in. It makes sense to be here together!

I would like to go back to the first Ecumenical Assembly in Basel. It was 1989, Annus Mirabilis, where Europe retrieved its freedom and re-launched its road to unity altogether. Then Graz came in 1997 and now the Assembly and the

process are further to the East, in Romania. A providential coincidence, in my opinion, as the historical events since 1989 created a new framework for the development of the European integration: Europe could be a real community built upon shared values, upon freedom and democracy. This is true also from a political and religious point of view. Christianity cannot be disconnected from European history; it forms a substantial part of our cultural heritage and identity. Eurobarometer on social values published in 2005 reported that 52% of Europeans believe in God. Additional 27% relate their beliefs to a spiritual force. Christianity, which became major religion of Europeans in history, is together with other religious and humanist traditions also today a source of many values which Europeans embrace as theirs.

I believe that Christians – individually and collectively - have also a very important role to play for the future of Europe: to foster citizenship, enhance democracy, develop responsibility for the preservation of the mankind, the nature and the heritage, protect the dignity of the human person, spread peace and the reconciliation of peoples and cultures—including the dialogue with the other large monotheistic religions.

We should never lose sight of these ultimate goals, because they give a sense of direction to our action, which is necessarily constrained by the pressing issues of the day.

We should learn from the history, which is so strong teacher. 50 years ago in Rome *via* signature of the Treaties process towards European unity in freedom was launched. At the same time the Soviets launched the first Sputnik in attempt to dominate in space, as well as on the Earth. Soviets were building “unity” without freedom. Such vision and process is inhumane, and therefore unsustainable. Unity needs spiritual, value base.

History also tells us that peace, freedom, democracy, shared Europe are not granted. We have them as a result of generational painful and tragic lessons, of nation's sacrifices and endeavours.

One of the issues your assembly puts on the table is what exactly the European project is supposed to achieve. Past experience would suggest a superficial answer: the integration of economic and political systems into the world's largest internal market.

But our united Europe is much more than an internal market and a new form of association between sovereign countries—unique in its geopolitical implications.

Integration does not mean absorption or assimilation of newcomers or smaller countries by the older and stronger community. Integration means participation on the base of respect, equality, common principles and agreed rules. Since the beginning, building a united Europe has always been about integrating different ways of life, value systems, habits, and traditions. Looking back at our half century together, the Union has constantly extended its policy areas from its original agenda focussed on tangible domains (coal, steel, agriculture, internal market, single currency).

Today, the most promising areas of development are intangible and cultural in character: education, intercultural dialogue and developing a true sense of European citizenship.

We have attempted to seize the opportunities presented by this historic shift with the proposal—approved last May by the Commission—for a European agenda for culture in a globalising world. The document states explicitly that culture is central to the European project and is a vital part of our vision for the future.

Our proposals articulate for the first time a comprehensive strategy for culture in the EU and address the many ways in which culture can support and enrich the

European project. We believe that cultural policies across the EU should be structured around three main goals:

- promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue;
- promoting culture as a catalyst for creativity and growth; and
- a stronger role for culture in the Union's international relations.

Another important aspect should be added to these broad objectives: all the citizens of Europe and of the world should have access to expressions that originate from their own cultures.

All world communities—no matter how tiny and peripheral in the global context—should find the right conditions to preserve, develop and disseminate their own heritage. I do not see this as a political goal—I see this as a basic human entitlement. Promotion and protection of cultural diversity in relation to all, especially the most vulnerable, the least developed countries is a case for universal solidarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Why this shift from tangible to intangible policy areas in the European debate, and why now?

Part of the explanation is the strategy adopted by the Barroso Commission since the beginning of its term of office. Towards the end of 2004 a critical momentum was reached around the notion that European integration needed a new intellectual climate. Many have seen unprecedentedly wide EU enlargement as a problem. But from historical and overall perspective it was important part of solution of European weaknesses. It was about reunification of the divided continent and about europeisation of the Union. Today's EU is more complete. 23 official languages and 3 alphabets is not the EU problem, but cultural richness and characteristic.

But even before 2004, many voices had already extended a genuine European dimension to other domains—and your Charta Oecumenica of 2001 is a very good example of what I mean.

After 50 years, we are beginning to see that our historic endeavour would be incomplete if it did not include the traditions, values, convictions and aspirations of our peoples. At the beginning of his Memoirs Jean monnet writes: “*Nous ne coalissons pas des etats, nous unissons des hommes*”. Citizen-friendly Union or Europe of people represents a space where people may feel “like at home”. It is about community of people, and therefore it is much more demanding than to build alliance of states.

And this means, above all, getting to know each other better and building a firmer ground for intercultural dialogue—both within our borders and with our partners around the world.

These are the objectives of another major action of the EU: the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, planned for 2008. I launched the idea of the European Year as soon as I was appointed Commissioner for education and culture and—thanks to the support of the other European institutions—the initiative is now ready to start.

Over the past few years, Europe has seen major changes resulting from successive enlargements of the Union, greater mobility within its borders and increased exchanges with the rest of the world, growing immigration to Europe.

This has resulted in more frequent and more significant interactions between the different cultures, languages, ethnic groups and religions on the continent and elsewhere. We need to step up from multicultural comments and laments into more active approach based on dialogue of cultures. Dialogue is not sign of weakness, but a sign of maturity. In dialogue 1 + 1 can bring more than 2 through understanding, added value, synergy. *Via* culture of dialogue we can

pave the way towards a culture of cooperation. I see cooperation as a mature fruit of culture of dialogue.

It is clear that dialogue between cultures and religions has become essential to forge closer links both among Europeans and with peoples beyond our borders. I would like to add here that as Christians represent the largest religion in Europe, we should be an example and feel the responsibility of deepening as much as possible our internal dialogue and the dialogue with the other religions.

Churches and religions have a large role to play in Europe. Let's not forget that according to Declaration No. 11 to the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, "the EU respects and does not prejudice the legal status churches and religious communities enjoy in the Member States". The Constitutional Treaty confirmed this in its Art. 52 para. 3, which reads "Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations". This text has been maintained in the Reform Treaty Draft.

This is not new for European policymaking. The EU has always been committed to creating a culture of dialogue, tolerance and co-operation. In particular, since the 1980s, successive Presidents of the European Commission have maintained a dialogue on European integration between churches and communities of conviction.

This is a two-way dialogue; on the one hand, it intends to disseminate the significance of European integration among religious communities; on the other, it allows EU institutions to refine their social and political views using the insights of religious communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We live in a diverse and pluralistic society. Our united Europe is founded on the utmost respect of this pluralism, which applies to views in the political and social areas as well as in the religious domain. Traditionally, the action of the EU as an institution presupposes a degree of separation between public authorities and religious organisations.

This is a useful and sound principle, because the separation protects individuals and communities against undue interference from governments and other public authorities and allows them to follow and practice their beliefs as they see fit.

At the same time, keeping church and state in their respective domains also guarantees our democracies against undue interference from religious leaders.

However, it would be a mistake to turn this legal principle into a policy that ignores religious beliefs altogether and excludes the contribution of people of faith to the public debate and to the service of common good.

It would be a mistake in point of principle and it would be unrealistic in practical terms, because it is impossible to force people to drop their moral and religious views at the door if they want to enter the public arena.

On the contrary, I believe that moral and ethical principles would help us a great deal in our fight for peace, justice and equality. In the Central Europe we remember how important this was for the Polish movement *Solidarność*, for the *Velvet revolution* in Czechoslovakia, for all the freedom fighters.

Besides, the language of exclusion is always inappropriate when we talk about religions. I am convinced that the vast majority of our fellow Europeans do not experience religion in their hearts in terms of exclusion, division and confrontation.

The keyword of any culture of co-operation must be inclusion not exclusion, and it should embrace all the aspects of our complex identities, including our faith and beliefs.

In fact, as I have already said, the EU recognises the important role religious communities play in our societies. Many religious organisations are active in the social and cultural areas and are a positive force for the affirmation of progressive civic and moral values in our societies.

They are active at grassroots level and are often behind creative European projects supported by community programmes in the fields of education, youth or citizenship. We need dialogue and co-operation of churches and religious communities on challenges of migration and demography, development assistance, fight against poverty, security, environment etc..

There is one final reason why it would be a mistake to turn the legal principle of the separation between church and state into a policy of exclusion, and it is probably the most important one. Public authorities should not leave the space for religion in the public arena empty because social and political debates—like nature—abhor a vacuum.

The space would not remain empty for long and it would probably be filled by others with more restricted and possibly sectarian views of the relation between church and state Or growth of nihilism or ethical relativism. The Central-Eastern European countries have experienced a lot of this during decades of communism.

Democracy needs ethical values as the backbone. Otherwise it leads to totality of the majority. These are some of the reasons why I feel that it is our duty as political leaders to foster a constructive and open dialogue that recognises the proper role of communities of faith and conviction in European affairs. Respectful Europe – it is a community of communities.

I would be very happy if the European Year 2008 of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, but not only 2008—among other things—allowed both secular and religious people to understand what they have in common and where their differences lie.

Communities of faith and conviction should seek to create a consensus around their proposals using universal arguments, not arguments that are regarded as valid only within their communities. And this includes reaching out towards other communities of faith—inter-religious dialogue proper—and towards the secular and non-believers as well, which is perhaps the crucial point of the exercise.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to close with a look at the past. Fifty years ago, our founding fathers dreamed of a united Europe as a means to eradicate the tragedy of war from our continent. Their political vision was guided by a moral imperative; their religious and humanistic background was the driving force for what was to become the European Union.

It is very important to keep and illuminate the memories of people and of the society, and thus to form their awareness and conscience. Future of Europe depends on our awareness of belonging together and on the consciousness of our shared responsibility. Cultural diversity is not a European problem; on the contrary, it represents its richness and uniqueness. In cultural diversity Europe is seen as a superpower. According the Czech writer Milan Kundera “*Europe is a maximum of diversity in a minimum of space.*” Regrettably, Europe also went through tragic periods of liquidation of "the others" on the basis of race, class or religion. What creates the human link among us today and in the future is not a place on the map or trade, but is the respect for the common values we share, human dignity to begin with. Instead of clash of civilizations we need to struggle for more civilization. Because if there is a dividing line across the mankind, then it leads between fanaticism (political, ethnic, religious) on one side and the respect for life and humanity on the other. We like to quote the founding fathers of Europe: Adenauer, Schuman, De Gasperi and many others. Why do we still

remember and honour their names? Because their vision, their work and their determination are still an inspiration for us.

Today's political, intellectual and religious leaders should follow their example. They can still teach us that leadership is not about chasing the latest opinion polls, is not about political or confessional egoism, but about fatherly responsibility. Leadership is about working for the common good; it is about seeking imaginative and bold solutions to the problems at hand; it is about serving present as well as future generations.

Robert Schuman and Jacques Delors called for a soul to Europe. They believed Europe needs not to stay only as an economic or technical community. It needs to gain historical awareness and a sense of common destiny. Late pope John Paul II. supported integration process as a faster way to reach a common good and spoke about Europe breathing with the two lungs. As I said at the beginning, this new century and millenium Europe's best narrative is *united in diversity*.

Who could be more credible witnesses of unity than those who claim the same roots, the same destiny, the same God, the same belief? Who can speak better about brotherhood than the children of the same Father? Strength of Christians in history was actually never in their numbers but in their inspiration (faith) and commitment (credibility).

Europe should be a synonymum of openness combining open mind and open heart. The former is about rational approach, competence and competitiveness. The latter about empathy, sympathy and solidarity to others.

Whatever our calling, we need to draw in openness on our intelligence, wisdom and imagination. We need to build on our cultural, religious and humanistic inheritance. We need to work together, to promote a culture of dialogue and co-operation of for a Europe of humanity, solidarity, and hope.

Thank you.