

JOHN PAUL II

TOWARDS THE NEW EVANGELIZATION OF EUROPE*

Christianity in Europe goes back to the time of the Apostles. According to The Acts of the Apostles, the proclamation of the Gospel crossed the border between Asia and Europe, above all, through the work of Saint Paul. Subsequently, the Apostle Peter left Jerusalem and passed through Antioch on his way to Rome, where Paul too later arrived as a prisoner. From that time Rome became the See of the Apostles, and from here the great evangelization began to spread throughout Europe. In a sense that evangelization can be called "the first", and it lasted almost to the end of the fourteenth century. The last to be baptized, together with its king, was Lithuania.

In the context of the phenomena just described, there remains *the permanent presence of Christianity in Europe*, more or less deeply rooted in individuals, environments and societies. In effect, Christianity possesses a definite "right to citizenship" in European history. Through its presence since ancient times it has contributed to the very formation of the culture and consciousness of the various nations. However, immanentistic and secularizing trends in the areas of thought and action are not just a later intrusion. They developed under the impulse of a cultural evolution that was *the expression of a civilization* in which the advances of science and technology gave man an ever increasing *sense of domination*, and, indirectly, of *independence* in relation to the One who is the Beginning and the End of all that exists.

How far this sense of independence stems from a real "reduction" of the processes of knowing and willing, and how far it gives rise to *man's present-*

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day subjection to immanentism (in relation to the world), are separate questions. What is clear is that in the great successes obtained in the realm of the visible world, in the overall sum of conquests of science and technology, man has found an apparently satisfying “alibi”. He is content with what he can get from the world during his existence on earth. He thinks that the world serves him, without in turn making him dependent on it. This is enough for him. It is as if he were to forget his own mortal nature and his need for transcendence. He does not feel the desire to be open to the Kingdom which “is not of this world” (cf. Jn 18 : 36). He also seems not to experience the truth of the words: “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (II Cor 3 : 17).

The tragic series of events that have followed one after another during this century, particularly since the outbreak of the World War II, have contributed perhaps in some measure to opening the human heart to the freedom which comes from the Spirit, that freedom by which Christ has set us free (cf. Gal 5 : 1).

Within the nations which at Yalta had been consigned to the superpower of the east as “allies”, but in effect as “satellites”, a *resistance* had already begun to awaken in the previous decades. Later, and more recently, it showed itself more decisively, first in Poland and then also in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. These nations, deeply rooted in the traditions of Europe, began in an increasingly consistent and effective way to make claims against the totalitarian system of the State. This action was based on the inviolability of the *rights of man*. Among these rights a central place belonged to the *right of freedom of conscience and of religion*.

The year 1989 concluded with a series of changes in the countries of the so-called Communist bloc. The Marxist parties lost their absolute power. Free elections in these societies are confirming the widespread disapproval of the forms of political, economic and social life which had been imposed by them. All of this is happening *by way of a peaceful revolution* – a road initiated by “Solidarność” in Poland in 1980 – without the spilling of blood, with one exception: the case of Romania. The process of democratization is in all the countries of that area, except – at least so far – in Albania.

One consequence of these changes is that rights are being restored to the Community of believers, namely the Church, of which she had been systematically deprived under Marxist totalitarianism. The degree of that deprivation varied from country to country. *What was common in them all was the point of departure*: religion as a factor of alienation, had to disappear to make way man’s liberation. It can be said that the experience of the period which has just ended has demonstrated the exact opposite: *religion and the Church have shown themselves to be among the most effective means to liberate man from a system of total subjugation*.

In the light of these events, Christians on their part must carefully reflect and ask themselves *if and to what degree* the extinguishing of the Church’s

rights was somehow related to *an inadequate evangelization*. It may be asked whether there was not something lacking, for example, in catechesis, either on the part of those who imparted it or on the part of those who received it.

Likewise, the children of the Church must reflect on *the integrity of their Christian profession*, that is, on their effective witness, in public life also, to all the demands of a coherent commitment to their faith. It is important in fact that in the nations which have returned to freedom the altogether legitimate affirmation of civil and patriotic concerns should not be detached from the strengthening, on the personal and community levels, of the values of Christian faith and morals.

The basic criterion which should direct this reflection and inspire suitable responses should be that of *fidelity to man* in the inalienable dignity that comes to him from being *created* and *re-created* in the image and likeness of God. I say this, because if man is to be adequately understood in his historical reality, he must be considered jointly *in the order of creation and in that of redemption*. In this way his dignity appears in all its richness, a richness to be unfolded both in his *dominion over created things*, exercised according to the Creator's intentions, and in *mutual communion* between individuals and peoples in the name not only of a shared humanity but also, and above all, of a shared vocation to build in Christ the one great family of the children of God.

In conclusion, we return to the two questions posed at the beginning. These are questions which involve us, gathered here as Bishops and Pastors of the Church on the European continent.

The first refers to the past, in a special way to the last fifty years, and *what typical gifts do the Churches* of the west, centre and east of Europe *bring to each other* in this moment in which the state of our continent is undergoing notable transformations? What is the meaning of past experiences for particular Churches and for the universal Church? What is that meaning from the point of view of ecumenism and perhaps also of dialogue with other religions, as well as with the world that is foreign to religion?

The second question projects us into the future: *how should we develop* this reciprocal gift *from the point of view of the Church's mission* in Europe and in the world? That is, from the point of view of continuing service to the Kingdom of God by means of a new evangelization which, while it advances the particular Churches with their legitimate traditions, strengthens their bond with the See of Peter, which "presides over the universal communion of charity, protects legitimate differences and at the same time sees that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute towards it" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13).

It is a question of discerning what *the Spirit of Christ* is saying to all of us by means of past experiences and, at the same time, of understanding *what path he is opening up before us for the future*.

For almost two thousand years Christianity has been a part of the history of the continent of Europe. Now that we are approaching the beginning of the

Third Millennium after Christ and especially now that the life of the Nations of Europe is beginning to assume a new form, our presence cannot be lacking.

“Watch and pray...” (Mt 26 : 41). We must stand close together and be united in prayer to obtain an inner and at the same time community sensitivity to the word that the Holy Spirit is addressing to the Churches.

We must “watch and pray,” invoking the intercession of the Patron Saints of Europe, Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, and of all the men and women Saints of the continent; “watch and pray” under the special protection of the Holy Mother of God, towards whom the Christian peoples of Europe have always fostered a deep devotion, as testified by innumerable Shrines dedicated to her; “watch and pray” in order to grasp and follow what the Spirit says to the Churches and so be able to lead all those whom the Lord has entrusted to us to the joy of that “inheritance among the saints” of which the Spirit is the “guarantee” (cf. Eph 1 : 18, 14).