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Europe of the Regions: Building Europe from the bottom up

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

31st Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples

Rimini, 27 August 2010

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking Professor Emilia Guarnieri for her invitation to take part in this 31st 'Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples' in Rimini.

And I also want to thank my friend Mario Mauro who did not rest for such a long time to bring me one day to Rimini. I must say, just by looking at this impressive number of people coming here together, I feel deeply honoured and emotionally touched.

It is a particular pleasure for me to attend the Rimini meeting because this important and ever more forceful initiative is led by you, by civil society, by hundreds and thousands of volunteers who have made Rimini what it is today – the world's biggest summer festival of encounters. I strongly welcome your fantastic efforts. With your commitment, your initiatives and energy you represent an important development of our democracies where civil society movements are becoming a cultural and social force of ever greater significance in Europe today. I'd like to return to this point later.

Matters of critical importance for Europe and for the world are being discussed here, with contributions by international speakers on the most diverse of topics. In this warm, festive and artistic atmosphere, people of different cultures and faiths are brought together to learn from each other.

What is particularly remarkable is the huge number of young people who make a point of meeting up in Rimini. This is a very encouraging sign of their moral seriousness and willingness to engage. Society as a whole can only benefit from this enthusiasm.

The theme chosen this year - 'That nature which pushes us to desire great things is the heart' – reminds me of the creation of our common Europe. Its founding fathers, great men like Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Alcide de Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer who, after the Second World War, ignored the rational response of distrust and suspicion of 'the other', and instead listened to their hearts.

And in their hearts they realised that the cycle of hatred and violence had to be broken. What they desired wasn't just a 'great thing', it was an astonishing and audacious thing - unique in world history.

The ever closer union they launched between the peoples of Europe, has demonstrated for over half a century that war is not programmed into humanity's genetic code. Peace and co-operation is possible, even among historic enemies.

And increasingly, closer links are now emerging not only between Europeans, but also between us and the peoples of other regions of the world. There is great interest out there in our pioneering system of supranational cooperation, based on shared values and objectives. There is great hope that it can serve as an example for peace and regional integration in other parts of the world.

The peace that we won through the process of European integration is much more than just peaceful coexistence. It is built on the rule of law and the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, freedom and democracy. Without ignoring its weaknesses, Europe today is enjoying the fairest political, economic and social order it has ever known.

War in our European Union really has become not just unthinkable, but materially impossible – just what the founding fathers hoped for with all their hearts. And what they were striving for to build something infinite.

For many young Europeans here today, who were born into peaceful democracies, this is taken for granted. Living in peace, democracy and freedom is part of the natural order of things. As much as travelling across borders, studying abroad, or making friends over the internet – it is a part of your culture and your everyday life.

But it wasn't always like this.

Only until a few years ago Europeans still had to fight for freedom and democracy - in Greece, Portugal and Spain in the seventies, and in Central and Eastern Europe in the late eighties and early nineties. And even war was possible on the other side of the Adriatic Sea, in former Yugoslavia, only a few kilometres away from Rimini, just fifteen years ago.

Thus we Europeans fought for change, and we brought it about.

But precisely because the battle for peace, freedom and democracy is never won forever, we need Europe, we need the European Union. Peace between the peoples of Europe has been and will always remain the principal foundation of the common European project.

Having said this, Europe today is facing new and different challenges. Europe is facing a crisis which is not just an economic or a financial crisis. It is also a crisis of values. Emerging from this crisis requires us to put human dignity at the heart of our endeavours. The lesson to be learnt is that neither the market nor the state alone can provide the answers to today's challenges. At least as much as we need them we also need all forces of society to respond to people's needs.

The economic and financial crisis – the worst in 80 years – has rocked Europe and the whole world. It has destroyed millions of jobs and has put millions of people at the risk of poverty and social exclusion. The gravity of this crisis

Thus our first and most pressing concern today is to overcome this crisis. And for this Europeans have to act together, and even more than in the past. The crisis has demonstrated how interdependent Europe's economies are. It shows how a crisis in one Member State can affect us all, not only in the euro area but in the entire EU and in global markets.

The crisis is a last wake-up call to us Europeans. A truly united European Union is needed to emerge from this crisis stronger than before. , is underlines the need for action in all 27 Member States and the European institutions. But it also shows that action to promote growth and innovation will not, by itself, be enough. First, confidence must be restored.

Translating this into the economic and financial field, the European Union had to do three things: stabilise, consolidate, stimulate.

First we stabilised the euro area. The European Union and its member states were offering solidarity in exchange for a radical change of course towards responsibility and sustainability. In other words consolidation and structural reform.

There can be no sustainable growth without first getting public finances in order as soon as possible. The age of fantasy economics is over. We simply cannot keep spending money we haven't got, and expect our young people to pay the bill later.

So we set about getting the basics of the European economy right for sustainable and inclusive growth. This means establishing sound public finances; building trustworthy financial markets; and investing in areas of future growth.

Europe has adopted a comprehensive set of actions to do just that, including ex-ante budgetary surveillance and a robust sanctions regime with better early warning.

We are also seeing measures to reinforce European economic governance and restore trust and confidence in the financial markets.

We continue to set out a full programme of legislative work - from supervisory reform to the new hedge fund and private equity directive, from the bank resolution funds to stricter regulation of credit rating agencies.

And because the crisis is global in nature, our consolidation efforts must be too.

It is not enough for Europe alone to ensure fiscal stability in a growth-friendly way and open, well-regulated financial markets; all other major economies must play their part, too. This is the only way we can return the global marketplace to the path of strong, sustainable and balanced growth.

That is the clear message I took with me to the G20 Summit in Toronto earlier this summer. And I am happy to say I found a receptive audience, keen to follow the European Union's lead and join us in this commitment.

Some say that all this fiscal consolidation will damage growth. But there is no contradiction between greater discipline and growth, as long as we combine the action I have just outlined with structural reforms.

Real growth will come from addressing the roots of a lack of competitiveness. Real growth will come from targeting public spending, in a sound budgetary framework, on those areas that are strategic for future growth. Real growth will come from making better use of our internal market, as set out by former Commissioner Mario Monti in the report I asked him to draft on ways to complete and consolidate the single market.

This is the stimulation that follows stabilisation and consolidation, and the time to start is now.

The road map for achieving this is our Europe 2020 strategy. This is the EU's growth strategy for the future; a programme to guide our economy towards new sources of sustainable growth and social cohesion, in order to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth –and high quality jobs for our young people.

This strategy will only succeed with the active participation of all sectors and actors concerned. Social partners, civil society and local and regional authorities all have an important role to play.

This idea of a partnership for progress first appeared in my political guidelines for the new Commission, which I presented to the European Parliament. It was an important principle for me even before European leaders asked me to serve a second term as President of the European Commission.

Economic and social change can only succeed when everyone takes ownership of the reform effort. And Europe's regions are at the forefront of these efforts, whether fighting climate change, creating green and sustainable jobs, investing in new technologies, or managing and using structural funds in imaginative and effective ways.

A good illustration of the important role regions can play in building a better Europe for future generations is the Covenant of Mayors.

Rimini is just one of 1,800 towns and cities that have signed up to this Covenant. In doing so, they have committed themselves to go beyond the objectives of the EU's energy policy in terms of reducing CO2 emissions.

As a result, local governments have become leading actors in implementing sustainable energy policies. Through the combined efforts of the Covenant of Mayors signatories, an estimated 132 million tonnes of CO2 emissions can be saved every year.

That's the equivalent of 78 million fewer cars on Europe's roads, or the total annual emissions of 22 coal-fired power plants!

And the contribution of Europe's regions and cities doesn't end with the fight against climate change. They have just as important a role to play in realising our targets for jobs, investment, research, education and social inclusion.

I would very much like to see local and regional authorities extend innovative partnerships like the Covenant of Mayors to other policy areas. This would help Europe to translate its ambitions into reality, while taking account of the immense diversity our continent enjoys, and the differing situations on the ground.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This, for me, is subsidiarity in action. And while many today assume that 'subsidiarity' is just another piece of euro jargon, it has in fact been a key feature of Catholic social teaching for more than 100 years.

When reflecting on what subsidiarity means in practice, it is worth returning to the source. The Church defines it as a community of a higher order helping, not hindering, a community of a lower order. In this way people, and organisations closest to people, can properly contribute to the common good.

"This is the realm of civil society", the Church's Compendium of Social Doctrine states, which brings me neatly back to my opening comments about the welcome rise of civil society in Europe today.

Europe - that magnificent construction that has secured peace, prosperity and stability for generations of Europeans - is not just 'Brussels'. Europe is London. Europe is Lisbon. Europe is Warsaw, Helsinki and, yes, Rimini as well.

Europe is not, and cannot be, an imposition from the top down. It must be built and strengthened from the bottom up, by our regions, by our cities, by each one of you.

So let me end this speech by encouraging all of you to seize the opportunities provided by previous generations and make your own contribution to Europe.

Let your experience here in Rimini inspire you to build strong communities and strong regions.

Then, and only then, can we say with confidence that we are building a strong Europe as well. An open Europe, a prosperous Europe, a Europe of opportunity for all.

Thank you.