

Third Sunday after Easter

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Since the end of the Second World War, we have heard a lot of talk about the construction of Europe as if it were something new. The purpose may be good – to obtain peace, economic prosperity, and a share of scientific knowledge, cultural values and so forth. And seen from many points of view, this new Europe seems to be good and soon achieved. But despite the greatness of the endeavor, a great lacuna in the thinking of those who strive after a new Europe threatens to render all their efforts ineffective, even harmful. One man sees this clearly, a man whose voice rises often, urging politicians to consider this great lacuna. It is the Pope's voice reminding us of the necessity to build a Christian city, because, as the Psalmist says, *Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it.*

In November 14 2002, the Pope went to Palazzo Montecitorio, the Italian Parliament and spoke in the presence of the President of the Italian Republic, the ministers of the Government, together with the Deputies and Senators. About Europe, John Paul II said this:

There is a need to guard against a vision of the Continent which would only take into account its economic and political aspects, or which would uncritically yield to lifestyles inspired by a consumerism indifferent to spiritual values. If lasting stability is to be given to the new unity of Europe, there must be a commitment to ensuring that it is supported on those ethical foundations which were once its basis, while at the same time making room for the richness and diversity of the cultures and traditions which characterize individual nations. In this noble Assembly I would like to renew the appeal which in recent years I have made to the various peoples of the Continent: "Europe, at the beginning of the new millennium, open once again your doors to Christ!"

Quoting from his encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, the Pope also warned the Italian politicians of the *"risk of an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism, which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life, and on a deeper level make the acknowledgement of truth impossible."*

What is true for Europe is also true for the United States of America, and during this time of elections we would do well to keep this in mind. Unlike the United States, however, Europe used to be a Catholic Continent. Today's politicians and statesmen want to build Europe, but Europe had already been built. The Pope referred to this fact when he stated, *It is my hope that, thanks also to Italy's support, the new foundations of the European "common house" will not lack the "cement" of that extraordinary religious, cultural and civil patrimony which has given Europe its greatness down the centuries.*

Europe had already been built and had a name: Christendom! To be sure, this society was not perfect. After all, Christendom is not the Church, but a fruit of the Church, a kind of godsend. Even in the best political system, men are still men. Christendom knew its greatness and glory, and also its troubles and divisions. At least these last didn't come from a flaw in the founding principles of Christendom, but rather from the malice of men. There were internecine struggles in the Middle Ages caused by political rivalries, unbridled passions of ambition, and the inordinate desire for power. But never was there a war of ideology, not until the rise of the Protestant Reform and, above all, the unleashing of the French Revolution. The history of the two last centuries is filled with ideological wars and conflicts: religious wars, Napoleonic wars, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Franco-Prussian war, the Russian and Spanish Revolutions, the two World Wars. While we tend to think only of the ideologies of communism and fascism, all of these conflicts can ultimately be traced to the theological and philosophical ideologies of the Protestant Reform and the French Revolution, the erroneous principles of which continue to this day to foster disunity in Old Europe.

Today, Christendom no longer exists, nor are the builders of the new Europe attempting to restore it. What they envision is a Europe without God, except perhaps for the God of Muslims! Anyway, the Church continues to exist today, and will exist until the end of time, according to the word of Our Lord. Unlike the Church, no nation, no political system enjoys the divine assurance that it will last until the end of time.

Knowing all of this, what should be our attitude in the world? St. Peter reminds us: We should regard ourselves as “strangers and pilgrims.” Our homeland is not here, because our kingdom – Christ’s kingdom – is not of this world. Nevertheless, Christ Our Lord was not the enemy of Caesar, nor are we called to do away with earthly kingdoms. As He Himself said: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which belong to Caesar, and unto God the things which belong to God.*

Along these lines, Saint Peter gives us in today’s epistle a kind of moral code for living in civil society: *Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. . . . Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.* These instructions of Saint Peter echo the words of the Lords: *seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his justice; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

What was at the origin of Old Europe? What was its worldview? Unlike the Roman Empire, which failed, it was not merely political, economic, or cultural. The worldview of Old Europe was first and foremost spiritual in character. Built on the Catholic faith, it acknowledged that that we are indeed just “strangers and pilgrims.” And who built Old Europe? Why, strangers and pilgrims! That is, monks and missionaries and, yes, pilgrims too. Monasteries were centers of knowledge, sources of scientific progress and economic prosperity for the inhabitants of the area. Missionaries brought the light of Christ to pagan Europe, and pilgrims brought their knowledge and culture from one part of Europe to another, as well as received the knowledge and culture of those places that they passed through and visited. But above all, the very act of making pilgrimages reminded both pilgrim and spectator alike of the spiritual worldview upon which Christendom had been built. Rome, Mont Saint Michel, Vezelay, Le Puy, Subiaco, Monte Cassino, Santiago de Compostelle, and Cluny, to name but a few of the countless places that remain prestigious even today, likewise radiated this spiritual worldview. Monks and pilgrims were all seeking the “things that are above”; they were pursuing God. In doing so, they became builders of a truly great civilization. In my country, we used to say that France, the kingdom of Mary, was covered with a white coat of cathedrals and monasteries.

In the prologue to the Gospel of St. John, we read that the *light shines in darkness*. In Christendom, the light of Christ had succeeded the barbarity of Roman society, and mitigated the chaos that followed in the wake of the dissolution of Roman civilization. We also read in St. John’s Gospel that *the darkness didn’t comprehend the light*. Today, the darkness, embraced by millions, does seem to reign over the world. With Christendom all but a memory, our situation has begun to resemble the Christian-persecuting Roman Empire at its worst. But even if today’s Caesars persecute us, we must not think of ourselves as the enemies of Caesar. By doing our duties for God, for the Church, for our countries, we bring Christ, *light of the world*, into the world. By bearing in mind that we are strangers and pilgrims on earth, we can give the world a beautiful testimony of God’s love. This is often difficult, just as a pilgrimage is often difficult, requiring perseverance, patience, and tenacity. Imagine, for example, traveling with those who still go to Santiago of Compostelle from far away – often you want to quit, return home and enjoy the amenities and conveniences of life. But then, you remember that you walk for God, for the Church, for yourself, for your friends, for your country, for sinners. And so you continue on joyfully. People can see you on the road. They are surprised. Sometimes they congratulate you, they encourage you, they give you water, food, anything. Sometimes they say you are crazy to make a pilgrimage. Sometimes they insult you. But you continue, praying for all. And finally, when you arrive, a great sense of satisfaction fills your soul, a wonderful joy that makes you forget all of your troubles. This is a pilgrimage, this is Christian life.

As a good pilgrim, let us not forget to walk with and for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Our Lord. When she accompanies us on the road of life, we can be sure that we are on the right road, that by her intercession we shall be fortified. For all those who place themselves under her mantle shall be protected and shall receive her sweet help and consolation. May Our Lady of Christendom, patron of our traditional pilgrimage of Chartres, take us and lead us toward our Home, where we shall see the eternal light of God for ever! Amen!