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A. EXE TO

President of the European Commission

The future of the Union of 25

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Semaines Sociales de France

Lille, 23 September 2004

President Camdessus,

Ladies and gentlemen,

My warm thanks to Michel Camdessus for inviting me to open this year's Semaines Sociales de France.

It was an honour to receive your invitation and it is a pleasure to be here. This event in Lille is special for two reasons.

First, because this year is the centenary of the founding of the Semaines Sociales.

Second, because this is the first time that representatives of all 25 countries that now make up the Union have attended.

On 1 May last year the European Union became an economic, political and cultural entity of 453 million people.

Like every great turning-point in history, this enlargement has generated its share of misgivings and fears. Such reactions are understandable because the challenge is daunting, both economically and culturally.

Much needs to be done to protect and foster the new Member States' national and local identities within the Union.

This is a matter of foremost importance because our rich diversity is a great asset and we must turn it to account.

But there is one certainty that can dispel any doubts. The accession of the countries of central and southern Europe is a unique chance history has laid in our laps.

A united Europe -- stretching from Tallinn to Lisbon, from Dublin to Valletta -- is our shared destiny.

Our well-being, our influence in the world and our capacity to maintain and foster our values we owe largely to the European Union.

In other words, only the Union can ensure Europe remains in control of its destiny in a globalised world.

Our social values and development model are among the foremost values the Union is duty-bound to defend. But before everything else comes peace.

The history of European integration may be short but it has taken giant strides since 1950. And you cannot look to the future of our united Europe unless you start by looking at where we came from.

The basic principle, the spark that set the process of integration in motion was the conquest of peace. And we should never forget that.

For over half a century, the countries that threw themselves behind our project have enjoyed a long period of peace and concord.

Today a conflict within our Union is unthinkable. And by force of example we are helping to bring peace to the rest of the continent, to neighbouring regions and the world beyond.

That was part of our original aim. After all, Robert Schuman's famous speech on 9 May 1950 started with the words "World peace".

54 years on, I can only echo his words: Europe's aim is world peace.

Today we must defend this founding principle of ours from threats from all sides. Once again Europe must defend peace with "creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it".

The "creative efforts" Schuman speaks of, this great virtue of politics, can be seen in the weapons that Europe's founding fathers took up to defeat war.

They had tragic, personal experience of the limits of the old system of international relations. A system based on the use of military force, trade protectionism and the politics of Europe's chancelleries.

So they took the opposite approach and merged their markets in coal and steel, the raw materials for waging war at the time.

Today we must show the same ingenuity, wisdom and creativity.

The world has changed enormously since then. Today the raw materials of war and armed conflict are different, and so too are the basic motives that drive individuals and whole peoples to the path of violence.

That is why we have taken other measures to carry through the policy of enlargement.

The first is to complete the process of enlargement for the other candidate countries.

The second is our offer of membership to all the Balkan countries.

This will come about gradually with each country advancing at its own pace.

Croatia has already started along the road, Macedonia is just behind and the other countries will follow as they reform their economic and political structures.

This objective is the only stable, lasting solution. It is the only prospect of hope for all these countries.

Once again Europe has a chance to turn the page on a painful chapter of our past and open a new era of friendship and peace.

The policy of enlargement is drawing to a close, at least for the time being.

But Europe's task of building peace goes on. We have offered a share in the Union's future to all our neighbours -- from Russia to Morocco and the countries of the southern Caucasus. Everything but the institutions -- which means very close economic and political integration.

This Europe of pluralism and respect for diversity and minorities is offering to share its soft security and its values with the ring of friendly countries around it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The original aim of the Semaines Sociales was to spread the Church's social thought and apply it to the issues and problems of the time.

It is interesting to note that your organisation was established just a few years after the publication of Rerum Novarum, the papal encyclical that denounced the inhuman life of workers in the late 19th century.

I am glad to see that a hundred years later you have put Europe and the role it can play in the world of globalisation squarely at the centre of the debate on Christians' social commitment.

Among the topics up for discussion I would like to highlight sustainable development, poverty and opening Europe up to the world.

Europe's recent past shows that the best strategy for tackling these three major issues involves solidarity, cooperation and the search for political solutions to conflicts.

Throughout the world, the European Union must do its bit to ensure that every human being and every people can enjoy certain basic rights -- the right to food, to housing, to health and security.

But above all we must put all our strength and our traditions behind ensuring that people throughout the world have dignity and hope.

That is why we have put forward far-reaching, new proposals in recent years to open up our markets to the poorest countries and step up assistance to the developing world. In this area we are the major donors, even though we still need to do much more.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Europe today the chance is there to give fresh impetus to our traditional social model and adapt it to the challenges of our time.

As we unify the continent we can set our sights very high.

We can create a fairer and more inclusive society.

We can set narrow interests aside when laying new foundations for our economy.

We can open up to the world through international solidarity and the integration of our immigrants.

That is how we can defeat those who play on people's fears with the politics of scare-mongering and rejectionism. Such groups and their backward-looking views are the true threat to our deepest values.

Europeans have learned to live together in their diversity, curious of each other and keen to discover each others' cultures. The benefits of tolerance and openness enrich all of us in the Union.

I do not believe in a clash of civilisations. Rather, I believe in confronting fairly and squarely those who use it for their own political ends.

We must oppose such closed and selfish attitudes. Our strengths are the force of solidarity, our belief in dialogue and the power of intellect.

Besides those who preach rejection of what is new and different, there are those who whip up fears that globalisation can endanger our productive fabric.

In particular some see the major emerging countries, such as China and India, as directly responsible for low growth and unemployment.

And they always prescribe the same medicine -- raising new protectionist barriers, influencing the decisions of economic operators by fiscal means and supporting European production with public money.

Analyses and solutions of this sort can easily have an impact on public opinion because they are facile and promise immediate results. But such solutions -- like the lies they are -- don't go very far and will end up doing the economy a lot of harm.

Such analyses are beguiling for another reason too. Blaming an external, easily identifiable enemy absolves our entrepreneurs and politicians from responsibility.

That way they can keep on proposing the same old medicine without having to show any creativity or courage. But it is our clear duty to look for new solutions to win the battle on the world market.

We mustn't fool ourselves into thinking we can stop globalisation. This historical process must be tackled boldly and managed.

Let me give you just three examples.

As I said before, we must manage major migratory flows intelligently and far-sightedly.

Immigrants are much more than a social drama of epic proportions, they are vital to our economy. It is thanks to them that we will manage to cope with the problems of an ageing population.

But this calls not only for a policy of integration and support for them and their families but also for a policy of close cooperation with their countries of origin.

Here too our neighbourhood policy offers practical ways of putting a human face on immigration policy.

A proactive, multi-pronged approach that puts the accent in particular on religious and cultural aspects is vital to understanding what a multi-ethnic Europe will look like.

Given the characteristics of such immigration flows and the continuing differences in the way integration is perceived, the American model cannot suffice as a reference.

Let's stop pretending that Europe doesn't need immigrants now and in the future. Or that we don't need a new immigration policy.

The second example concerns our social policies. We need to manage and reform them so we can leave our children social-welfare systems the whole world envies.

The welfare state needs to adapt to population trends too. In addition to the social pact that binds people together today, we mustn't forget the pact between generations and the responsibility we all have towards our children.

We must reform our social-security, public-health and pension arrangements and make them sustainable. We must strengthen these instruments, because otherwise we will be in no position to give any meaning to our most fundamental values.

We Europeans are convinced deep down that it is only fair for the community to look after the weakest and the least fortunate -- the ill of health, the elderly, those who fall on hard times economically.

The best way to explain what it means to be European is to refer to such broad social solidarity. We must do what is needed to preserve the welfare state for the future, giving it high priority but also, I repeat, making sure it is sustainable.

The third example concerns the economy. We must manage our economic system and move decisively towards the knowledge economy and society. Today this is the only way to cope with international competition.

As you know, four years ago EU leaders approved an ambitious plan of reforms known as the Lisbon Strategy. But since then progress has been disappointing.

In a globalised world, only significant advances in scientific research and innovation can allow Europe to preserve a fair, caring social policy in the future too.

But this is not possible if economic and research policies are kept separate in watertight compartments in our Member States.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In all these cases -- as in many others -- there is a common denominator. The challenges of the future can only be met successfully if we tackle them together. No individual European country, whatever its size, can hope to make it on its own.

After five years leading the Commission, five years of events and achievements that have changed the face of Europe, I can say frankly that I am convinced the Union of 25 will find fresh unity and determination.

But it calls for courage and a feeling for the future. Because otherwise we are doomed to defeat in the present too.

Thank you.