

Mr. Van Rompuy Speech at the Rediscovering European Common Good Event

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An event organised by the Chapel for Europe, the Jesuit European Social Centre (JESC) and the Passion for Europe Group



I will speak about the ethical dimension of politics during my time in office. I will deal with three cases of applied ethics.

In a second part I will reflect on current trends in our European societies regarding values. These trends had an impact on the three 'ethical' decisions.

1. During my time in office as President of the European Council, the EU had to face an existential crisis, with serious ethical implications.

The banking crisis was at the root of the Great Recession and of the eurozone crisis. The banking crisis itself was imported from the US. It is very well known that the weakening of supervision in the US in the years ahead gave space to irresponsible behaviour, close to wild capitalism.

European banks (though not all) also had unsustainable profit (ROI) targets which had pushed them towards major risk taking. Supervision in the EU was national, but the banks were international. It was related to

sovereignty whilst insufficient surveillance was an ideological option in the US.

The combination of recklessness and a weak State created the crisis. It was ironic that the banks, in which the public had huge confidence, were saved by politicians, who were not trusted at all by large parts of the population. The crisis became a crisis of trust, a moral crisis. Trust is already scarce in modern societies. The financial crisis enhanced the credibility gap.

Governments acted swiftly during the banking crisis, but the eurozone crisis lasted almost three years. Mistrust had time to settle in people's hearts and minds. They felt insufficiently protected. Protection is a key mission for public authorities. Less protection means more anxiety, the worst of all counsellors. Trust goes away on horseback and returns by foot. It enhances cynicism, too, within our societies about the political and financial world. It is a fertile terrain for populists. This mentality doesn't disappear when the economy recovers.

The fight to overcome the eurozone crisis was tough in the creditor and debtor countries. In the former, many asked why they should help those who hadn't been cautious enough during the good years. In the latter countries, many suffered from austerity measures which were

imposed upon them by ‘Brussels’ and by the ‘Germans’.

Finally, solidarity with countries under ‘programme’ was nevertheless shown as well because the implosion of the euro was in nobody’s interest. It had little to do with virtue but with necessity. In the end, debtor countries took up the responsibility to put their economic and fiscal houses in order – but from necessity. It was not a free choice. The moral content in both cases was rather meagre.

I add here two remarks on austerity. Adjustment is unavoidable after ‘malgoverno’. The question is how to distribute the burden. It is possible to do this in a fair manner, but this implies that non-standard measures have to be taken. My second comment is that austerity could have been softened in countries under programme if the creditor countries had been ready to lend more. But for them, there were limits to solidarity.

In the debtor countries, the problem of ‘democratic deficit’ was posed. The most obvious case in Greece, after the Greeks voted in 2015 for a new coalition and after they rejected new austerity measures in a referendum. The Greek people saw the confrontation between their national democracy and the 18 other national democracies which had a different opinion. Italy is facing the same political reality these days. Once you are in monetary union or in the European Union, a Member State has to comply with collectively taken democratic decisions.

There is no ‘democratic deficit’ in that sense. Nationals in general are not sufficiently aware of this new reality.

Abandoning sovereignty over the currency is a major step with far reaching implications, also for national democracies.



2. Our growth model was and is a new source of debate all over Europe.

We created the welfare state in different forms in each of our Member States. In Belgium, social expenditures constitute today 25 % of GDP, or more than half of total public spending. We have to adapt our systems to slower growth and to the ageing of our population; the system shouldn’t impede any more the creation of jobs. The welfare state is inspired by the value of social justice.

After this social correction, we have to correct our economic models ecologically. We are doing so. Since 1990, GDP has grown by 53% and GHG emissions have decreased by 23%. It is a collective effort, but with strong European impetus, and even with legal obligations. We are even more ambitious for 2030 (-40%) and 2050 (-95%). Sustainable development is a form of solidarity with the generations to come. At the same time, it is inevitable for reasons of f.i. public health and mobility. As always, this entails a mix of ideals and interests.

The third correction is fairness beyond social security. Growth in the Anglo-Saxon world is very unevenly distributed, with wages having been stagnant for decades.

The tradition in the Rhineland countries is different although wages as a share of national income have also decreased, be it at a slower pace. Inequalities are growing in countries with high unemployment and in countries with very flexible labour markets.

Low interest rates are fuelling share prices and provoking differences in wealth. International tax fraud and evasion are tackled now at the European and OECD level much more efficiently than in the past. Scandals have provoked further action. Politicians often take action under pressure. A lot has still to be done against tax competition and tax havens. Inequalities played a role in the American presidential elections and in the Brexit referendum. The success of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders is a clear indication of this shift in public opinion.

Our growth model has changed dramatically in the course of the last several decades. Wrongly, this is often presented as if we still live in a purely capitalist system. Public authorities play an ever-growing role. The main problem is that companies are working internationally, while the countervailing powers are still too national.

The EU is an exception, but it is not competent in many domains. The financial crisis showed this imbalance.

Global governance is needed. It is and will not be assumed by a unique body but by several multilateral organisations, such as the IMF, WTO, UNFCCC, G20 and others.

These organisations sometimes function under the rule of unanimity, which hampers quick and efficient decisions.

3. I wasn't really confronted with the migration and refugee issues during my time in office (until end 2014). This is an ethical challenge of the first degree.

The only two problems in my tenure were the resettlement of asylum-seekers blocked on the island of Malta and the rescue operation of the Italian navy in the Mediterranean. In both cases, there was no readiness by Member States to help these two countries.

This lack of solidarity was noticed later on in the refugee crisis of 2015-2016. The Italians slowed down their humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum in the fall of 2014 and were only helped by the EU after the tragedy in April 2015 of 900 people who died at sea when a refugee boat capsized. Again, a crisis was needed before the EU came into action.

The unexpected massive influx of more than one million refugees coming from Syria and neighbouring war zones was greeted first with generosity by many in several countries. Refugees were allowed to travel to Germany, but when it became clear that millions were waiting to flee to Europe, this generosity turned into fear. Walls were built, and finally the inflow was stopped by an agreement with Turkey. This accord still holds. Refugees blocked mainly in Greece were the 'collateral' victims. I'm convinced that more refugees would have threatened the political and societal stability of Germany and of the EU as a whole. It was a difficult choice, especially for the German Chancellor, who showed great moral leadership in September-October 2015. It was a dilemma. As you know, a dilemma is a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between alternatives, especially ones that are equally undesirable. Often one loses

on both fronts. The hardliners consider that you have been too complacent, while for the others you have ultimately given in to those hardliners.

These challenges are even more difficult to tackle because they are directly related to human beings. In the eurozone crisis, the link to the people was more indirect. All in all, public opinion on the whole became more anxious, more focused on identity and security.

Compassion faded away. The terrorist attacks in many Western European countries hardened the mood in our societies. The rhetoric used by political leaders enhanced polarisation and even hate. The words of leaders are often as important as their deeds. The most striking example was the name President Trump gave to illegal migrants: animals. On other issues, public opinion and the media urged the authorities to take action against injustice; but when identity is under threat, the survival principle has the upper-hand. Identity is about 'to be or not to be', or it is presented as such. A majority of the people tend to forget other social and economic issues.

The recent crisis, the multiple crises, was also a moral crisis. A balance had to be found between 'ethical idealism and political realism', between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, between politics as the art of the possible and politics as the art of the necessary. We were far away from a business-like management of public affairs. Leaders have to take these decisions in a democratic environment and in a society with volatile and asymmetric moral standards. Keeping often in mind ethical minima and lesser evils.

I referred to public opinion on several occasions. What is happening in our societies? The Europe of Schuman is very different from the Europe of today.



Can we still speak about one, unifying European culture?

Christianity played a crucial role in the construction of a common European culture, but religion was also very divisive. We had cruel religious wars among Christians. The Enlightenment values of the individual and the pre-eminence of reason turned rapidly after the French Revolution (1789) into the bloody Napoleonic wars. Democracy is another common value but it is only hundred years old for men and only seventy for women.

A culture, an identity is composed of many layers, which are often intertwined.

When we enumerate in the Union our common values as we did in our latest EU-Treaty we are actually referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the United Nations. In the drafting Jacques Maritain played a key role.

Europe is rediscovering these days its specific contribution to humanity via a negative argument. Europeans pretend to have a set of public values and institutions different from those of migrants with an Islamic background.

The rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, gender equality, pluralistic political democracy, non discrimination, separation of religious institutions and the state, fundamental freedoms as the freedom of religion and of speech: all this forms the backbone of our civilisation and binds us. A nation is also a union of values. Around those public values other cultures, religions and convictions can circle provided that they respect the core of our civilisation. It's a way of creating unity in diversity. There is no social cohesion possible without this double track. Integration in our society proceeds according this scheme. Otherwise you don't have a society but a permanent clash of civilisations.

Different societies can live peacefully alongside and with each other but inside every society one needs a common base. Harmony is the result of this consensus on basic values. It is a long but necessary process. We are not there yet. But our unique civilisation needs a permanent feed back by interpersonal values. No society can survive without respect for every human person and love. Public values are not lasting without private values.

Absolute unity in a society shouldn't be an objective. It necessitates force or violence. We are different and we want to express it. A plural society around common values and institutions is more lasting than an artificial unity.

The time is over that Europe tries to impose its 'civilisation' on other nations, outside its borders. It is the idea of a superior civilisation. Even inside Europe some countries proclaimed in the past that their race was superior. But 'Make Europe great again' wouldn't be a popular slogan in Europe today. Humanity and

Europe paid a high price for this perverse idea. Reconversion and repentance started on the graves of tens of millions of innocent deaths. The Union was built on this tragic failure. In times of rising nationalism we have to recall this hard lesson of history. It can always repeat itself although never in the same way.

One cannot compare the EU of the last decades and of today with the powers of before. A shift in the balance of power at global level took place after 1945. Also a dramatic shift in the idea of what Europe should be in terms of values. The two elements are needed to understand this turn around. Instead of a colonial and imperial power the EU is now the biggest donor of development and humanitarian aid. Instead of being a military super power Europe is today even too much a soft power. The EU as such has no army.

A society is composed of human beings. Often there is a difference between on the one hand the official proclamation of values and behaviours and daily life on the other hand. In today's world, in Asia as well as in Europe, one cannot deny the rise of individualism and materialism. The consumption society is a reality. Money matters. Enjoying is a frequently used verb. This mentality can turn longstanding values upside down such as, solidarity, sense of the common good, long term thinking, social and family capital etc. The source of this growing individualism is the market economy with its competition model and to some extent the size of the modern State with the decrease of individual responsibility it entails. According to Robert Putnam television destroyed associative life because people stayed at home to watch television. The introduction of smart phones and tablets has amplified this movement. Everyone

can make a choice what and when to see and to listen to, without any interference of others. This can also be disruptive for a society. Linkages are of the essence to create, to structure and to stabilise a community. A fragmented club is not a club. Distrust, volatility and discontent are the products. I think we have to face it and to look for ways to reconnect people. Togetherness restores values and vice versa. Togetherness is another word for love. The community is more than the sum of the individuals. The common good is more than the fulfilment of everyone's desires. Society is different from community. The root of harmony is the respect for every person, incl. compassion for the weakest. Without respect you cannot expect people to be interested in the common good, in the common good life for all.

This is less naïve than some are thinking. After all, I believe that history is not condemned to make the same mistakes. Progress was possible the last decades in many respects. Less wars and less poverty. But we need also humane progress. The big challenge is to keep the acquit and to reinvigorate our societies in order to avoid fragmentation, isolation and polarisation. Only strong communities can work for the good. Conversation is key. It leads to moderation. The latter brings respect for each human being. Fanaticism forgets that we are brothers and sisters. The extremists don't see in every individual a person, but a 'part of the main', even a possible enemy. Terrorism and extremism is not the monopoly of jihadism. Don't forget the 3000 people killed in Northern Ireland by terrorists from home.

I add a few words on the global and European common good. The founding fathers of the United Nations had personalism in mind. The UN is not a form of world government. It is an intergovernmental body that tries to set up cooperation in a variety of domains and to avoid the worst. It depends on the good will of the nations and more in particular of the most important among them. If such a common endeavour for the common good, transcending national interests isn't present, the UN is powerless. It is the second time in human history that such an institution was created. In any case, the UN contributes to world stability via dialogue. The only alternative for dialogue is war, the opposite of every human value and the worst enemy of mankind.

Bridging differences on a global scale implies more than bringing the West and the East closer together. But it would be a major step. People-to-people contacts are the royal way to better understanding, especially among youngsters. The human face is the strongest enabler of respect and love. We learned that from E. Lévinas. Culture is manmade. Cultures change when people meet. This dialogue is crucial. But, as I said, we have to work against common threats to our societies such as rising nationalism and individualism. An exclusive focus on material goods prevents people to establish stronger links among each other.

More than ever Christian personalism and humanism matter. Embodied by persons with authenticity and credibility. We need both. We really need those people.