
Pope Francis 10-year anniversary. "Europe, find new hope": the pontiff's appeal to the Old Continent

Pope Francis' references, speeches, and appeals to Europe (generically) or the European Union (more specifically) abound. During his ten years of Papacy, Pope Bergoglio, the South American pontiff with strong Italian -and thus European- roots, has referred to the roots of the integration process, to the "founding fathers," to the two major cornerstones of the European Community: peace and democracy, on multiple occasions. In his view, Europe - built on the combined legacy of Greek thought, the contribution of Christianity, and the subsequent contributions from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment - is harbinger of a "global vocation." From Francis's multipolar perspective, the "Old Continent" is indeed a cultural crossroads, characterized by a plural and multi-religious society, governed by democratic political systems that in time created welfare and protection of human rights (thereby outlawing the death penalty at its core), while developing economic and social systems that ensure adequate living standards for the majority of the population. Hunger and pandemics -except for Covid- have been uprooted throughout the EU countries; war and strife did not cross the EU borders (albeit fought near its territory several times – notably in the Balkans and now in Ukraine). If anything, Europe is affected by other "illnesses", such as denatality and ageing population; a marked, unbridled secularization process; the tendency to uphold individual rights that in some cases undermine the "right to life" (abortion, euthanasia). In this context, the impression is that the Church in Europe is somewhat strained, and Christian witness (comprising several Christian denominations) risks being overshadowed, becoming withdrawn, rather than devoting increased missionary zeal to this "sowing season." Bergoglio's speeches expressly dedicated to Europe (in terms of its human and physical geography or, for that matter, understood as a political integration process via the EU) most notably include the address to the Heads of State and Government of European Union on March 24, 2017, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome that established the European Economic Community. After dwelling on the historical role played by the "founding fathers" and on the legacy they delivered to posterity, the Pope recalled that the present time is marked by a multiplicity of "crises": economic, of the family and of established social models, of institutions, "of migrants." "So many crises that engender fear and profound confusion in our contemporaries, who look for a new way of envisioning the future." For the Pope, however, this is "a time of challenge and opportunity," to find and rebuild "new hope" - the cornerstone for our future. In this respect, Bergoglio reminded political leaders that "Europe finds new hope when man is the centre and the heart of her institutions," it finds hope "in solidarity, that is also the most effective antidote to modern populisms." "Europe finds new hope - the Pope declared - when she refuses to close herself off in false forms of security"; "she finds new hope when she invests in development and peace." In essence, for Pope Francis, "Europe finds new hope when she is open to the future. When she opens herself to young people, offering them serious prospects for education and real possibilities for entering the work force. When she invests in the family, which is the first and fundamental cell of society. When she respects the consciences and the ideals of her citizens. When she makes it possible to have children without the fear of being unable to support them. When she defends life in all its sacredness." Without detracting from the other continents and populations across the globe, Bergoglio thus calls on Europe (and thus European citizens) to continue playing the central role it was historically entrusted as a global player, with a consistent, generous and honest contribution across its borders for the purpose of peace-building, development and human advancement.