



## **Europe, show your self-confidence!**

### **A Commentary by the German bishops on Europe's self-perception in a changing world**

#### **1. The Church's responsibility for Europe and the common home**

“Europe is worth it” was the title of a basic document by the German bishops from 2021<sup>1</sup>. But what is Europe? What is its self-perception, and what is Europe worth to the world? European integration has engendered hopes of peace and freedom. Europe's role and strength continue to the present day to rely on cooperation between the nations of Europe. Europe's pilgrims' routes illustrate the degree to which Christianity still continues to identify and unite Europe. The cross as a familiar symbol on churches, and the contribution that monasteries and universities have made to culture, education and science, reveal an intellectual tradition which has developed in the course of the centuries. Europe's values reflect the Bible's message of solidarity and brotherly love. For many of the founding fathers and mothers, the Christian faith and its socioethical principles were a motivation laying the spiritual foundation of Europe, along with the Enlightenment.

The Catholic Church supported and guided European integration from the outset as a project for peace. When the EU was founded, economic cooperation became a value-based political union. Pope Francis gave expression to his dream of Europe when making his address on the conferral of the 2016 Charlemagne Prize, and called for “updating the idea of Europe” via the capacity to integrate, the capacity for dialogue and the capacity to generate<sup>2</sup>. This implies a generative role, given that Europe has the principle of human dignity at its heart, and bears responsibility for the entire world as a “common home”, as Pope Francis put it in his encyclical *Laudato si'*. The Church therefore in turn bears responsibility for Europe. She cannot and must not be silent when the project that is European integration is in jeopardy.

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<sup>1</sup> Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): [Europe is worth it. Stimuli from the Episcopal Working Group on Europe](#). The German bishops – Commission for Society and Social Affairs No. 52 (Bonn 2021).

<sup>2</sup> “[...] take up with determination the challenge of “updating” the idea of Europe. A Europe capable of giving birth to a new humanism based on three capacities: the capacity to integrate, the capacity for dialogue and the capacity to generate”; Pope Francis, address on the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize (6 May 2016).

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## **2. What we see: A world in disarray**

A new geopolitical era is dawning in the world. The conditions which allowed the EU and the Council of Europe to grow over decades have undergone profound change at short notice. The united Europe is needed, particularly because the international balance of power is shifting, leading to a new “world dis-order”. Respect for and adherence to international law are noticeably fading away. But where laws are no longer binding, violence becomes an option, and protection of the weak becomes fragile. Reliable rules with multilateral coordination are then replaced by the right of the stronger. The division of tasks had appeared unambiguous for quite some time. Firstly, the EU as an area of integration based on economics and law – together with the Council of Europe as a promoter of democracy and human rights –, and secondly NATO as a guarantor of security, with primary leadership provided by the USA – and both taken together and combined together as the “West”.

The US' Security Strategy of November 2025 and the January 2026 National Defense Strategy shattered this alliance, and made the Transatlantic partnership more fragile. Europe must increase the contribution it makes to its own security more rapidly and more forcibly. Moreover, populist, anti-democratic forces are pouring their scorn on democratic and multilateral institutions in an increasingly blatant fashion. The EU's usefulness as a supranational community is being more and more frequently denied. Increasing numbers of international players regard it not (or no longer) as a partner, but as a strategic rival, and are concentrating on cooperation with individual European countries.

Pressure from Russia and China is growing. Russia is counting on military force, and systematically eroding European stability. It is testing the resistance that is put up by democratic systems and solidarity among partners. China combines technological and economic power with geopolitical influence, whilst Europe continues to have a role to play in the conflicts that have flared the world over, especially the war in Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East. The impact of these conflicts, most recently after the closure of the Strait of Hormus, however reveals the difficult economic and security situation in which Europe finds itself as almost never before. All this makes Europe dependent in ways that limit the action that it can take. Europe is at risk of being backed into a corner in its defence of peace, freedom and human dignity. There is an urgent need for it to readjust its role and play a more active part in setting its values compass, both towards itself and the world.

The promises of European integration are also losing their persuasiveness in the EU. Many people are uncertain, are seeing their societies become polarised, and feeling pressure to transform. This promotes a feeling that democratic politics are too slow or aloof. This impression is deliberately enhanced by authoritarian, anti-liberal players both outside and inside the EU who employ populist interpretations in order to kindle doubts as to liberal parliamentary democracy and the achievements of European integration.

All this shows that united Europe is at risk. This is why Europe must update, politically and institutionally, the order which it helped to form after the Cold War, and emphasise the attractiveness of its model. There is a need for joint advocacy for a united Europe – as a visible, renewed acknowledgement: for peace, cooperation, the power of the rule of law and the equal dignity of all people.

### **3. What identifies Europe: unity and values**

The EU constitutes cooperation between nations in a manner that is unique anywhere in the world, in combination with a supranational level of nationhood. European integration was however never a linear path to a pre-defined destination. It is the outcome of an ongoing struggle over the appropriate political order of Europe – between federal approaches and intergovernmental cooperation. It engendered a structure for peace in Europe which lasted for more than 80 years which at the same time is a project for peace and democracy. This connection makes it clear that peace is not merely the absence of war. True peace requires justice. Even though countries have a legitimate right of self-defence, justice can only be achieved in peace. A united Europe requires the nations of Europe to work together peacefully, and to defend the equal dignity of each individual person. The self-perception of Europe takes on concrete form, especially in an EU which is structured along the lines of the subsidiarity principle, acting in a spirit of solidarity.

The EU recognises the diversity of its Member States in line with its motto “United in diversity”. It can however be said for everyone that conflicts between nations and individuals are to be resolved according to the standard of the law applying equally to all. Whether they are the State or individuals, the stronger are still subject to the rule of law. The integration of Europe is conditional on trust in the peace- and democracy-securing function of the law, protecting minorities and exercising a binding effect at all political levels. But the EU is more! It is a community of values committing itself to the shared values and principles set out in Art. 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. The EU and the Council of Europe therefore maintain a strategic partnership on this joint foundation.

Examining these values and their origin reveals the constructive contribution that Christianity has made to Europe: Talk of the “*Christian West*”, which is becoming more common today and is meant in an exclusivist sense, falls short of the mark in theological and historical terms. The Christian faith is universal in terms of its self-perception, and is not bound by any specific cultural or political order. Christianity has exerted a formative influence on today’s Europe without defining it exclusively. An idea of Europe as a religiously- or culturally-homogeneous “One Europe” therefore ignores both the many dimensions of European history, as well as the Christian understanding of freedom, dignity and responsibility. To the Roman legal tradition and the Greek tradition of democracy, Christianity has in fact added an understanding of the dignity and fundamental equality of all people. Without these, the rule of law and democracy

would not have developed in Europe in their present form, enabling each person to assume their individual freedom in responsibility. An image that is frequently conjured up places Europe on three historic hills, namely *Athens*, where the idea of democracy originated, then *Rome*, standing for the law as an organising power, as well as *Jerusalem*, which introduced the concept of the inalienable dignity of each individual with the Jewish-Christian faith.

In accordance with the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU also needs to be guided by its fundamental values in terms of its external relations. This places it at the side of those who take international law seriously as forming the foundation of the international order, in a spirit of solidarity, and who align their (foreign) policy actions accordingly, as reliable partners. The EU and its Member States hence lobby for multilateral solutions in the face of global challenges such as sustainable development and rules-based peaceful conflict resolution. This connection with values is maintained today under strained conditions, but it is part of the essence of the EU. Europe as a project of peace, freedom and democracy is unthinkable without these values.

#### **4. What Europe needs: hope and self-confidence**

The world is in turmoil; the existing global order is threatened with radical change. The world therefore needs the community of values embodied by Europe. Europe needs the courage to put forward its values with self-confidence. In this situation, Pope Leo XIV reminds us of peace, and appeals for a Christian commitment in society. According to the Pope, the European institutions need “people who know how to live a healthy secularism” by affirming the value of religion while preserving the distinction from the political sphere<sup>3</sup>. Christianity can and must therefore make a positive, value-based contribution to democracy and European integration. This contribution is founded in the News of the Gospel, in which true peace is at the same time a gift of God and a mandate to all people. This also entails defending democracy and the law, not as a mere addition to value-led policy, but as its core: Where international law is placed into perspective, and the right of the strongest sets the tone, human dignity also risks becoming negotiable. This would lead to Europe losing its moral and political profile.

The European nations can only master this task together, by means of a courageous concentration within Europe, decisively asserting themselves through cohesion. This includes the unshakeable desire to work together in a spirit of fairness and solidarity in subsidiarity-based structures and joint institutions, as well as an unambiguous acknowledgement of the foundation of European ideals – of human dignity, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and multilateralism. Europe needs a security and defence concept enabling it to defend itself in the medium term, and to play its role in NATO in a plausible fashion. In its external relations, the time has definitely come for Europe to act as a motor for multilateral solutions, from climate policy, through commercial policy, to security policy. Europe's capacities must be combined

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Leo XIV, Address to members of the Working Group on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue (29 September 2025).

in order to remain able to act in terms of technology and economic aspects, without renouncing the goal of social justice. Above all, though, Europe needs a narrative of hope! Hope provides the motivation to advance, and to take up the initiative once more, with courage for integration, willingness to enter into a dialogue, and creative strength.

We affirm that this is Europe's watershed moment. In the new geopolitical era, and in a world in disarray, considerable importance attaches to a self-confident Europe as a guardian of peace, as well as an area of respect and defence of human dignity and human rights. Europe can be proud of this, and it needs to be filled with life and meaning for the present and transformed into hope for the future.