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## **Msgr. Crociata: "European Union, more decisive steps forward are needed"**

The centrality of the European peoples in the integration process, the role of the institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels, relevant issues such as the ongoing conflicts and the search for peace, and migratory phenomena, as well as the upcoming elections for the renewal of the European Assembly. These were some of the topics discussed during the meeting held in the Vatican on Friday 26th January between Pope Francis and Msgr **Mariano Crociata**, Bishop of Latina-Terracina-Sezze-Priverno and President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (Comece). We put a few questions to Msgr Crociata.

**An audience with the Pope is always a beautiful experience, which allows for a discussion that is certainly rich in insights. What was the "climate" of the meeting with Francis?**

The atmosphere of the meeting was very serene and attentive. Pope Francis, as always, was sensitive and at times thoughtful about the path of the European Union, especially at this stage. He always starts from the original intention of the Union, found in the great personalities who launched it immediately after the tragedy of the Second World War.

**What European themes did you focus on?**

The Pope has the freedom of Europe at heart, which he sees first and foremost as a breathing space for peoples who must be able to express themselves, their culture and their values, in a constructive and creative relationship with other peoples who are bound through their respective countries by specific commitments in the European Union. An important role in the growth of the Union can undoubtedly be played by enlargement to include the countries waiting to join.

The more the European Union takes on the dimensions of the whole of Europe, the more the possibility of wars on our continent diminishes

and the momentum towards ever greater unity and a solid balance between the institutions of the Union and the citizenship of the peoples is strengthened.

**Were comments made regarding conflicts and the urgent need for peace? Or on migration and the reception of refugees in Europe?**

Concern about the ongoing wars is constant, as we can see from the timeliness and frequency of the Pope's interventions. Migration is a thorn that causes much pain. It is incomprehensible that a Europe that is more and more plunged into a demographic winter does not even see the necessity of a contribution such as that of immigrants for its survival, although it would certainly not be enough. The measures adopted, such as the recent Pact on Migration and Asylum, reflect the desire of all the Member States to find a common line, but also the tendency to shift the burden and consequences of migratory flows to others, and to put security and the defence of borders above the duty of welcome and solidarity. We need to move towards a vision that organises migratory flows and integration processes in the various countries, proportionately and according to their capacities.

**In June, Europeans will vote for the new European Parliament. Did the Pope mention this in your conversation?**

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These European elections are, as always and more than ever, a critical juncture; the possibility that the political orientations of the electorate will result in a majority capable of seriously considering the future of the European Union will be put to the test; but the question of how many people will actually exercise their right to vote is also looming.

A widespread awareness of participation must be revived.

Unfortunately, there is an image, and often a reality, of a European Union centre which ignores the sensitivities, expectations, needs and problems of the peoples it is supposed to be the expression and guide, at least in matters within the Community's competence, and sometimes beyond. This breeds intolerance, rejection and, consequently, anti-Europeanism and disaffection.

### **What other themes emerged during the meeting with Pope Bergoglio?**

An issue that emerged during the audience with the Holy Father, and which is of great importance for the work of Comece, is the institutional dialogue of the Church with the European institutions, which is supported by an article in the Treaties of the Union. This dialogue is sometimes fruitful, sometimes it is in danger of becoming a formality. It is important that it be strengthened with the new Parliament and Commission that will emerge from the June elections.

### **Ten years ago, in November 2014, the Pope visited Strasbourg to give an address to the European Parliament and another to the Council of Europe. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then... In your opinion, what progress has been made in European integration? What, if any, are the delays or setbacks?**

The European Union's integration process has grown over the decades. One cannot speak of steps backwards, rather of slowing down or even stopping at certain points. There is a need for more decisive steps forward in certain areas, which could mean a strengthening of Europe's role in the global landscape.

Unfortunately, the European Union appears weak in the geopolitical context, although it has taken clear and consistent positions, for example in the case of the war in Ukraine and in the fight against climate change.

It should grow in the same direction. But this would require overcoming partisan selfishness, not to be confused with the legitimate freedom and cultural identity and values of each people. The crux of the matter is how to reconcile the desire for unity that emanates from the European institutions with the objective need for integration and growth of the Union, on the one hand, and the sharing and conscious participation of European citizens, on the other. The risk of division is great. That is why we all need a sense of values and spirituality, a soul, as Jacques Delors used to say.

### **His message to the young people who for the first time will be eligible to vote for the European Parliament?**

This time too, Pope Francis is showing a special concern for young people and for their capacity for change and renewal. The youngest must be told that Europe is their tomorrow, that they are called to build right now, for their present to anticipate the best of what they want for themselves and for everyone in the future. Voting is the first decisive step in the right direction.

Gianni Borsa