

Dear Colleges and Friends,

The world has entered one of the darkest moments of human existence; it is not the dreaded nuclear war, but a “war” of an insidious virus that enters our bodies to destroy us, threatening the peoples of nations and continents. I hope that you and all your families are fine and not affected by the virus.

After China, it is now our dear Europe under enemy fire. Italy is the country of the European Union that was most seriously hit first and still struggles by all its “National health system” and involving the efforts of many volunteers and the entire population.

I have to say, with bitterness, that, as was the case with the epochal phenomenon of migration, this time too Italy did not receive the European solidarity - the fundamental principle of solidarity - enshrined in the EU treaties. It was left alone, and the most concrete and timely help came from China.

Setting aside the EU and MSs Institutions, it was also very sad to see national and international media painting Italy as a plague-stricken country guilty of originating and spreading the virus epidemic beyond its borders.

You all know the European spirit that has always animated my thinking and my actions, and my aversion to policies that exalt national value as opposed to the spirit of European unity, but I cannot avoid expressing my disappointment with the lack of European sensitivity towards Italy, which was the first in Europe to be plunged in a dramatic way into the tragedy of the coronavirus.

I do so also to invite to a reflection that not only concerns one EU country, in this case my own country, but the entire political-institutional system of the European project.

The message of the President of the European Commission addressed in Italian to all Italians a couple of days ago and the decision of the Commission to allow flexibility to meet the economic needs caused by the pandemic, were certainly very much appreciated, even though it has come late.

However, we cannot hide the fact that Brussels took action after the virus began to infect in a particular worrying way the traditionally strongest EU Member States. This is a sad, disappointing and not at all encouraging fact for the future of the Union. It is hard to believe it was pure coincidence. Or do we need to believe that we have sleeping representatives in Brussels?

When we think of the European institutions, we should all be convinced that there are people at leading positions who are very well prepared and unbiased with regard to the countries that make up the Union and who, when they speak out, know that they have a great responsibility towards the genuine interest of all the EU Member States.

We know, for example, the importance of the European Central Bank for the economy, especially in times of crisis of various kinds. And if it is so, what can we say about the unfortunate statement of two days ago by the President of the ECB on the spread that in a few minutes caused billions in debt in countries already at the bottom because of the virus pandemic? How sad!

A few days ago the virus began to gallop throughout the European Union, which is causing a very great concern. This situation would require strong solidarity and European coordination between the various Member States and the EU. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few isolated cases, each country has thought, thinks and acts for itself.

Still, according to art. 168 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* on matters of health protection the European Union “shall in particular encourage cooperation between the Member States to improve the complementarity of their health services in cross-border areas”.

And even stronger needed and needs to be the action of the EU according art. 222 of the same Treaty, according to which with reference to the “Solidarity clause”, “The European Council shall regularly assess the threats facing the Union in order to enable the Union and its Member States to take effective action”.

There is undoubtedly an institutional limit set out in art. 5 of the Treaty on European Union, according to which “the Union shall act only within the limits of the competences conferred upon it by the

Member States in the Treaties." It is therefore up to the Member States to decide what the Union must and can do. There are also principles and values laid down in the Treaty that allow - and would require - united action in the face of tragedies such as the one we are experiencing now.

All this means that in the case of coronavirus the EU had, has and will have the institutional power to act, to act much more. Just one thing is needed: willpower!

Unfortunately, it is sad to realize that, in facing major challenges, unity and solidarity within the European Union has become a mostly hazy concept, used in political Sunday's rhetoric and instead of joining forces in the common interest, each country goes its own way, weighing only on itself. This has been happening, unfortunately, for many years, ever since the oil crisis of the early 1970s.

It would be logical to hope that the process of European integration and the growing challenges we have faced would have taught us that only with unity can we think of a better future in the interest of all of us.

Many ideals that had inspired the courageous and far-sighted founding fathers have been trampled on, or to be more mild, just forgotten.

Dear Colleges and Friends,

Maybe you might be surprised by this outburst of mine, but I felt the need to do it because my strong belief in the European unity that has driven my way of thinking and acting for more than 50 years, since I was a young student.

This tragic pandemic has already claimed too many victims in Europe as well. Every day there are "war bulletins" announcing the number of new deaths.

What is certain is that after we get out of this tragedy the world won't be like before.

The European Union will certainly not be the same as before. We will have a significantly weakened Union, because of the mistakes and feckless idleness both at the European institutions' levels and on the side of its Member States.

We will have a European Union that has offered new arguments to nationalists and populists to blame it. We will have a further loss of citizens' confidence in the already low degree of trust for this European union.

It will be also more difficult for us to champion the EU in its present state with its Member states, and the colleagues who are already professionals in attacking the European Union, will be even more aggressive: we have put oxygen of their blaming fire.

However, we must continue to strongly support the ideal of European unity. We must certainly denounce what we believe to be wrong and not give discounts to those who only use the European institutions for partisan interests.

Personally, I am optimistic by nature and even failures in the European project will not discourage me from supporting it as a principle, as an ideal and as the only way forward for the future of the European peoples and for ensuring peace and stability worldwide.

We must do whatever we can to support the most important and fascinating democratic and peaceful Project in uniting peoples ever seen in the history of humanity.

At our next international congress in Timisoara we will have to ask ourselves thoroughly what we can and must do as an association and individually. We already have a program outline but the current situation suggests that we should keep the development of events under scrutiny and act accordingly. We will keep you timely informed.

I would like to thank all those colleagues who, knowing the serious virus situation in Italy, have contacted me. For the time being I'm fine, and my family too.

In implementing the strict Government's regulations, which have put the entire country under dramatic total lockdown, I'm "segregated" in my mountain house. I can only go out to buy food and, if needed, to go to the pharmacy or in cases of serious need. Before going out I must sign a self-certification indicating, under my responsibility, the reason and time of leaving home and the place where I have to go.

If the police finds that the self-certification is not justified, we face criminal consequences, which are even more severe for people being in quarantine.

In my small region we have also many people infected, some of them in my valley, and up to now seven have died. As you might know from your media the most tragic situation is in the region of Lombardy (especially Milan and Bergamo), where there are churches with coffins laying outside in a row waiting for a funeral service.

Let's hope that we will be ASAP successful to come out from this very dark tunnel, with the help of science, and, for believers, with God's help, and with wise political decisions.

Ciao to all of you.

Paolo Magagnotti  
*EJ President*