

## Speech Prof. Herman Van Rompuy

on the occasion of receiving the Comenius Prize at the Comenius Commemoration Day, April 2, 2016 Naarden, The Netherlands.

The European idea has been a utopia for centuries, a dream that would probably never be a reality, however strong desired. Comenius belonged to those dreamers. Three hundred years later a European Community has been realized with participation of all major countries which for centuries had been in conflict and warred. The great values of peace, freedom, tolerance, equal opportunities and others became the basis for living together. Those three hundred years were however filled with violence. It would even exceed the cruelty of the thirty years war in which 80 pct of the Czech population were killed, succumbed to epidemics or fled. It reminds us of Syria today. Comenius himself became a refugee who found a haven in the Netherlands, the homeland of tolerance. He didn't feel a migrant but a refugee. The utopia of Europe should in his eyes be based on values. The ambition today is still to be a "Union of values".

Compared to the barbarism of the 17th century and the insanity of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that dream is realized. One must therefore always know from which, one comes to an understanding of where we are today. It also helps to see things in perspective and in proportion, which is often missing today.

The time of Comenius was marked by religious wars within the Christian world. That time is long since over. Today these tensions are found especially within Islam. But let us never forget from where we come from in our history. War, however, has many different causes. Just after the French revolution Napoleon wanted to impose the noble values of the Enlightenment on the whole of Europe, with violence and war. Just after that, nationalism and ideology were then the basic of war and mass killings. It is often said that "history repeats itself". That's not necessarily correct, and if so, it may not be repeated in the same manner.

We must, therefore, interpret the signs of the time in a good way in order not to encounter any unpleasant surprises.

Peace remains the highest good, with war being the greatest evil. War wipes away all human dignity.

Peace is the work of many factors. In the first place of institutions. A series of treaties, forms of governance and rules must protect us against ourselves. Comenius also drafted schedules for this. But it is even better when the mutual dependence is organized so that a country can not wage war alone or by that it will impoverish itself. If armies be adjoined in an alliance no one will be militarily independent. If the mutual trade and investment flows are so intertwined between countries no one can leave even that common market under the penalty of great loss. The EU is such a related and connectively organized interdependence. NATO is another. In both cases there is shared sovereignty. In the today's global economy a "stand alone" is a hurried and incomprehensible position. The world of yesterday will happily never return.

For Comenius man was much more than an individual, a "stand alone". He stressed the being whilst in the "world with others". Later existentialism will develop this as a philosophy.

"No man is an island,  
Entire or itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main",

the contemporary of Comenius, John Donne, sang in 1624.

But institutions must be supported by the will to work together. Quid leges sine moribus? A democracy needs the faith of people who think that this is the best form of Government to get people to development, to ensure the dignity of each person and to edit the prosperity. Democracy requires trust. Unfortunately, often distrust is the predominant feeling. If everyone distrusts everyone else institutions are undermined. There is, at national and extending, at European level, a growing distrust.

How to counter that?

In Europe we need to develop a double awareness. We have developed a space in which we can freely travel, work, do business, study and communicate. Who really wants to go back to the world of hundreds of border offices between Netherlands and Belgium? That space makes us free.

But Europe must also be a place, a home, in which people are protected against unemployment, financial speculation, irresponsible immigration, international tax fraud, social dumping and terrorism. National and European authorities should create opportunities but also protect. That is a natural function. It should be worked on this. The EU does more than usually supposed in any of these domains but not enough and with insufficient visible results.

But confidence is two way traffic. People need to develop positive values with each other so they don't fade too quickly into distrust.

Education should develop mutual empathy, solidarity, attention to the weak, goodness and justice. All that makes us "more human". That's the basis of a more harmonious world.

And then I think of the educator and lecturer in education Comenius. The negative energy that is spent in jealousy, greed, aggressiveness and hate. Aggressiveness makes people suspicious and just plain unhappy. Contentment does not come from negative feelings. There is a deficit of contentment in our societies. The prosperity grew in the last decades steadily and powerfully, but the feeling of happiness remained constant. That increasing gap is explained by the large dissatisfaction in people as they compare themselves to others.

There is always someone richer, more beautiful and more successful. It can be a factor of progress, but it can also lead to much unease in our living together and in our civilization. Education to values is an antidote for that sense of unease.

Peace is also the work of justice. Also here we have made enormous progress compared to the time of Comenius and even with the pre-war years. The countries with a Rhineland model such as Netherlands and my own country excel here. In the recent years disparities are growing in a large number of countries, not only in countries with large economic problems but also in those with apparently low unemployment. Shrinking of the Middle Class groups in the USA plays a big role in the current election campaigns and explains the increasing polarization. But it is also with us that the danger sneaks within. A large concentration of wealth splits the society. Peace and satisfaction require justice. There is no exact value indicator available, but it should not be that the problem is recognised only as the tensions grow too high.

It is not known where the equilibrium point is. One will see it when it is exceeded.

Large disparities also lead to large migration.

War refugees, such as Comenius, are another problem. But if the demographic explosion in our neighbouring African continent is incompatible with economic progress for many, the urge for migration is created. Africa can have four billion inhabitants at the end of this century, compared with one billion today. Europe must not be occupied only with

themselves. Whom only looks at himself will lose themselves. One country alone cannot burden that task. Who dramatically saves on development cooperation must not be surprised later when some developments spiral out of control. It's as simple as that. We decreased the aid to the camps with Syrian refugees, and according to many it was the threat of food shortage that caused the the beginning of the exodus.

Peace will bring a fight against climate change. Also here is a danger of uncontrolled migrations. Therefore it was important that the EU had a key role at the climate conference in Paris in December last year. Also here we must widen our horizons. The EU can be a global player if they cultivate harmony.

If not it becomes irrelevant and the irrelevant and will damage its own interests.

Peace is also a matter of tolerance. Our past was no example of that. Comenius was forced to roam around. Today it is the turn to Islam to choose more the way to moderation, dialogue and to give up the monopoly on the truth. No one can claim that for themselves. Each conviction must be open, prone to corrections and additions. An open society has become our model after all the misery of our history. Our new European model can be summarized as: one civilization and multiple cultures. Our civilization is built on universal values if the political democracy, a constitutional state, social market economy, equality between people, the non-discrimination, the separation of religion and State, the human rights and fundamental freedom. That is the basis of our life together. Around it there may be more cultures, multiple religions and beliefs that can bloom around those central civilization values. One civilization and multiple cultures is the pedestal of the European model.

In particular, we have to continue the work on the solidarity within our societies.

Everyone agrees that there is more social and family capital needed. People need to see and meet each other more, work together, live together, not only digital and virtual but also directly, physically. The human face makes people look different to each other. Detachment makes enmities more possible. When people meet each other not directly easier caricatures about the Muslims, the Flemings, the Walloons etc. may arise. Enmities can lead to violence and possibly to war. We must therefore strengthen our societies internally. We live too much next to each other. Strangers can become enemies sometimes.

The humanist was far ahead of its time. Much is realized ever since. But nothing is permanent. The history knows no achievements. We should never forget that.