A caring society is the blueprint for ensuring our Union emerges from the current crisis stronger, more united and with greater solidarity than ever

*Message from President Charles Michel for ‘The State of the Union Conference Europe’*

Current circumstances mean I cannot be physically present to speak to you today from Florence. However, as I say these words, I am very much in Florence in spirit: in this city from which the European University Institute extends its influence; and in this country, where the pulse of Europe has always been strong, and where it beats all the more strongly in these days of such suffering due to the pandemic.

You will therefore not be surprised to hear that it is to the distinguished Italian and European Alcide De Gasperi that I look for inspiration.

On 10 December 1951, De Gasperi, one of the two Italian founding fathers of Europe, stated the following in a speech on the plans for a European Defence Community ... and I quote: *'History, with its similarities and coincidences, its links which when broken are instantly forged anew, shows us that the uniting of our forces is likely to dispel the rancour in our hearts, and can give us peace within Europe. The pooling of our experience doubles the strength of our national potentialities, by giving them fresh impetus towards the creation of a still more advanced and still nobler civilisation.'*

When De Gasperi gave this address to the Council of Europe, the European Coal and Steel Community, a cornerstone of what was to become the European Union, was in the process of being created. Yet its founders were already suggesting, to Europeans who had been waging war against one another not even ten years before, to create a union specifically based on defence.

But the defence issue is not what interests me most right now. Though the geostrategic context should prompt our Union to do more in that regard. What I’m interested in here is the reaction to a major crisis - the Second World War - when Europeans ‘united their forces’ by ‘dispelling their rancour’. In doing so, they were able to invent something unique in the history of humanity: the largest area of freedom and prosperity, established voluntarily by free peoples. What De Gasperi called ‘a still more advanced and still nobler civilisation’.

Today many people are comparing the coronavirus crisis to a war. Others reject that metaphor. Never mind this debate: what matters is that we can all engage in fighting this adversity. And we all agree on one thing: this pandemic, the first for a century, is the biggest crisis to affect the whole planet since the Second World War.

The question I would ask, as a European leader looking to Florence for inspiration from their famous Italian elder, is this: what inspiring European project should we be setting ourselves? What project will
help us draw the right lessons from the test we are facing and help us emerge from it stronger, more resilient and in a better place?

For the challenge we face is not just to get through the crisis. Pandemics, like economic crises, have a beginning, a middle and an end: we have started to fight this one and thrown considerable resources at it, and we will win the battle. There is no doubt about that. The real, huge challenge for our generation will be to go beyond that victory, and turn this unprecedented crisis to our advantage. And to draw from it the lessons and the transformative energy we need to build a better Europe and a better world.

Meeting that challenge is not merely a practical and tangible necessity. It is also our pressing duty, particularly as the pandemic takes the lives of some of the last representatives of another generation: the one that experienced the ravages of the Second World War and then rebuilt Europe, and built the European Union.

What, then, should our objective be? Every one of us knows this from personal experience: COVID-19 has been threatening our physical and mental health. But it is also ruthlessly attacking the social and economic health of our countries.

For the past few decades in Europe, peace and prosperity have been our focal points. Of course, we are not going to cast those goals aside today. Far from it. But I believe that from now on, we need to link them to a value that encompasses them but also goes beyond them. A value which we are acutely, newly aware of these days, all the more so for how fragile it suddenly appears: our well-being.

What is well-being? It is what the virus struck at the heart of, and it is defined in terms of quality much more so than quantity: the quality of our personal, physical, mental, social, economic and cultural lives. And these values, which underpin human dignity, can only flourish in a caring society.

A caring society, where individual well-being and collective well-being are fundamental to one another - let us make this Europe’s new horizon, let this be what we direct our energies towards.

I am thinking firstly of well-being in terms of health: we are learning just how much this fundamental right depends on high-quality healthcare systems, which would be nothing without their staff, who must be given the recognition they deserve.

I’m also thinking of climate well-being, which is at risk from a less obvious, but even more existential threat than a pandemic.

I’m thinking of digital well-being, which presents a vast world of opportunities, but also challenges.

And of course, I’m thinking of social well-being. This requires a constant striving for agreement and balance between economic actors. But it also presupposes free, open, transparent societies which are based on the rule of law and guarantee fundamental values. The rule of law implies, at European as well as national level, the separation of powers and mutual respect between institutions, while respecting the fundamental principle of the hierarchy of norms and the primacy of European law.

Lastly, that caring society can only be credible if it also cares about dignity, well-being and progress in
the rest of the world.

The ambitious and unifying objective I’ve described will require a practical roadmap. This is the plan for recovery and transformation, which we must make and put into action.

In this regard, people have spoken of a new ‘Marshall Plan’, which was named after the American Secretary of State who devised it. Perhaps we could call our project the ‘De Gasperi Plan’, after one of the key contributors to implementing the plan to rebuild Europe? I’m putting the idea out there.

We have explained the structure of this plan, and we will soon work on developing it in cooperation with all European institutions, the 27 Member States and all parties involved in European integration, but above all with the European citizens.

The Green Deal and the Digital Agenda must form the backbone of the plan, even more so after this crisis than before it. Why is this? Because these two projects represent powerful engines for transformation and progress.

The first, because it involves converting an existential necessity for our planet into economic opportunities. And the second because it will allow us to mine a new type of deposit: digital data, for the benefit of our newly established individual and collective well-being.

To reach the objective I am proposing, and to find the means to match the ambition, we will without doubt need to live up to the achievements of the EU’s founders in terms of overcoming our differences and seeing beyond limited short-term interests.

And last but not least amongst our challenges ...

We need energy and human resources. On this, I would like to express my firm belief that Europeans have within them the means necessary to create this better Europe and better world. They have the capacity for resilience and solidarity; we have seen it on a daily basis during this crisis. And they also have the capacity for the innovation and renewal which have allowed Europe to reach its level of prosperity and freedom, unequalled in the world.

Just as Alcide De Gasperi and his fellow founders drew their transformative strength from the trials of war, it is my wish, and my personal commitment, that our generation can now work towards creating a Europe which will maintain all its greatest achievements. But a Europe which ‘by uniting forces and dispelling rancour’ will also move closer to that which over these last weeks we have found to be so simple, so precious, so essential, and yet more fragile than we ever imagined: a caring society. This is how our Union will emerge from its current crisis stronger, more united and with greater solidarity than ever.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you a day full of lively, inspiring and passionate debate.

[Video message of President Charles Michel]

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