

## **AT THE ROOTS OF EUROPE: POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION ECCLESIA IN EUROPA AND THE ROLE OF ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHIVES**

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**Resumen:** Entre 1994 y 1999, la Iglesia Católica promovió cinco sínodos especiales, uno para cada Continente de la Tierra: África, América, Asia, Oceanía y Europa. El 28 de junio de 2003, el Papa Juan Pablo II promulgó la exhortación apostólica post-sinodal *Ecclesia in Europa*, dirigida a toda la Comunidad Europea, a instituciones y ciudadanos, para ilustrar los resultados del Sínodo de las Iglesias europeas. El documento quería ser una invitación a considerar su pasado, sus raíces cristianas, en el gobierno de la nueva Europa, especialmente en vista de la mayor ampliación de la Unión Europea planeada entre 2004 y 2007. Esas raíces culturales y cristianas están fácilmente disponibles en los archivos eclesiásticos de todos los países europeos, un patrimonio único y que, después del Concilio Vaticano II, la Iglesia católica ha mejorado mucho.

La comunicación investiga los principales documentos que llevaron a la Iglesia a este importante camino de conocimiento de los archivos, también a la luz de un breve análisis del texto de la exhortación apostólica *Ecclesia in Europa*, con el fin de que la gente entienda el papel de los archivos eclesiásticos en la historia europea.

**Palabras clave:** Archivos eclesiásticos; Iglesia católica; Europa; Juan Pablo II.

**Abstract:** Between 1994 and 1999 the Catholic church promoted five special synods, one for each Continent of the Earth: Africa, America, Asia, Oceania and Europe. On June, 28, 2003, Pope John Paul II promulgated the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, addressed to the whole European Community in order to illustrate the results of the Synod of European Churches held in 1999. The document wanted to be a way for taking in consideration one's own past and the Christian roots looking to provide the governance of the new Europe, especially in the perspective of the largest enlargement of the European Union planned between 2004 and 2007. Those cultural and Christian roots are readily available within the ecclesiastical archives of all European countries, a priceless patrimony which, after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic church aimed to enhance more and more. The present work illustrates the main documents that led the Church to highlight the importance of the ecclesiastical archives in the European history by a brief analysis of the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*.

**Keywords:** Ecclesiastical archives; Catholic church; Europe; John Paul II.

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## 1. THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

On January 25, 1959, ninety days after his election, Pope John XXIII announced to the world his decision to convoke a new ecumenical council (Alberigo & Sherry, 2006). Second Vatican Council was the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, one hundred years after First Vatican Council. It brought a moment of wide reflection within the Church, but it was abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871). The eight hundred conciliar bishops who took part to the Council succeeded, however, in sanctioning two extremely important dogmas: Papal infallibility and Catholic Faith (Nobili-Vitelleschi, 1876). Juridically, Second Vatican Council can be considered as strictly connected with the First Vatican Council, because it was closed only in 1960 as a formal necessity to permit the opening of the new Council. The Church's intention was out of completing the previous council, but it wanted recall its universality (Sullivan, 2002).

The real changes were related to the whole perspective of the life of the Church, and in particular to the challenges of the contemporary world. The opening of the Council in a crowded Vatican basilica was impressive: for the first time, the audience of the Council Bishops was made up by representatives from almost every Country. Pope John XXIII started the works with a speech that has gone down in history: *Exult the Mother Church (Gaudet mater Ecclesia)*. The main tasks of the Council were the defense and the propagation of the doctrine: the greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council was the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine. This doctrine takes into account the whole human person, made by both body and soul, indicating to behave like pilgrims who are on their way to the heavenly homeland. This shows the way our mortal life is to be conducted, in order to reach the goal set for us by God, by meeting our duties concerning our earthly and heavenly cities. All human beings, individually or joined together in society, are constantly and throughout their lives required to seek heavenly things by the means of earthly things, but in such a way that the use of temporal goods does not threaten their eternal happiness (John XXIII, 1962a).

It was clear that the pontiff's aim was to explore new ways for the Church's doctrine to be developed in the present. The Council Fathers aimed to transmit «whole and entire and without distortion the Catholic doctrine which, despite difficulties and controversies, has become the common heritage of humanity» (John XXIII, 1962a, 6.2). Consequently, the Pope clearly pointed out the spirit of the Council, which could give an immense contribution to the passage of the Church to a new historical era. It was a crucial element for the success of the Council: the magisterium of the Church must have a predominantly pastoral character meeting the needs of the present times by showing how Catholic doctrine is true rather than emphasizing the condemnation of other cults. As reported in the solemn opening of the Council, the *punctum saliens* is not, therefore, the discussion of the general fundamental doctrine of the Church, repeating the teaching of the ancient and

modern Fathers and theologians, which is supposed to be already present and familiar to the spirit. For that, there was no need for a Council. From the renewed, serene and peaceful adherence to the whole teaching of the Church in its completeness and precision, as from the Conciliar acts from Trent to Vatican I, the Christian, catholic and apostolic spirit of the whole world is awaiting a doctrinal penetration and a livelier formation of consciences, in perfect fidelity to authentic doctrine (John XXIII, 1962b).

## 2. A NEW APPROACH TO HISTORY

Culture and History must be included in the instruments for the success of the Council. Consequently, the archives of the Church must also be included. The urgency of a deep reflection about History, in particular related to the history of human social processes, was a theme already debated by the previous Pope Pius XII (Rossi, 2020). During his long mastery, he promoted various actions in this direction, even if adopting a sober and shy behavior. In the act of calling for the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII underlined the close bond that unites Christ to mankind history. With the apostolic constitution *Human Salvation* (*Humanae Salutis*), the Pope claimed that the Church have to be more involved in a re-evaluation of History, that is considered an element of salvation (together with God) for humanity:

the forthcoming Council is called to offer a possibility for all men of good will to turn their thoughts and proposals toward peace, a peace which can and must come above all from spiritual and supernatural realities, from human intelligence and conscience enlightened and guided by God, Creator and Redeemer of humanity. These fruits, which we so eagerly expect from the Council and on which we like so often to dwell, entail a vast program of work which is now being prepared (John XXIII, 1962c, 9-10).

History becomes "friendly"; it becomes a "medium". History is memory, the memory of the divine, sign of Christ's presence, and so it is a reminder of "salvation". These indications are contained overall during the debate on liturgy, church, and gospels, because they show the relevance of the historical condition of Christianity. One of the most evident signs of this conception can be seen in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et spes*), promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965, in which an entire chapter is dedicated to promoting the progress of Culture. It is here that the conciliar message emerges: «Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected one with the other» (Paul VI, 1966, 53). According to the Pope, therefore, «human culture has necessarily a historical and social aspect and the word "culture" also often assumes a sociological and ethnological sense. According to this sense we speak of a plurality of cultures» (Paul VI, 1966, 53). According to the Second Vatican Council, culture is an essential vehicle for the life of every man, particularly for a Christian

man, becoming precious in everyday life by the help of History, whose testimonies are kept in the archives.

### 3. THE ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHIVES BEFORE AND AFTER THE COUNCIL

The acts made by Popes in relation to ecclesiastical archives are too much in number to be debated here. Nevertheless, it must be reminded that, during the twentieth century, all the Popes have expressed their thought on the archival question of the Church (Rossi, 2020). In particular, the promulgation of the *Code of Canon Law* edited by Pope Pius X and by Pope Benedict XV in 1917 must be cited. In this act, archives obtain further legitimacy. Canons 372-379 and 382-383 prescribe in detail the provisions and innovations about the life of ecclesiastical archives. The *Code* establishes the rules concerning the conservation of the bishop archives, illustrates the subjects assigned to them, the functions of the ecclesiastical chancellor, and the secrecy of some documents (Lauro, 1985-1986).

Pope Pius XI, and especially Pope Pius XII, took great interest in the archives of the Church. In fact, thanks to them were presented important norms regarding the specialization courses offered by the School of Library by the Vatican Apostolic Library and the ones by School of Palaeography, Diplomatics and Archives by the Vatican Secret Archives. Specifically, Pope Pius XII had established the Pontifical Commission for the Ecclesiastical Archives of Italy, that Pope John XXIII transformed in a Vatican Dicastery (Rossi, 2020). Pope Paul VI himself was very attentive to the history of the ecclesiastical archives, promoting variously the interventions elaborated by the national episcopal conferences to promote their conservation. Furthermore, in 1988 Pope John Paul II established the Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of Artistic and Historical Heritage through the apostolic constitution *Pastor Bonus* (John Paul II, 1993). Subsequently, according to the *motu proprio Inde a pontificatus* (1993), this Commission was renamed as the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church.

As stressed above, the memory of History is an essential tool for the transmission of Catholic Tradition. For the Catholic hierarchy, therefore, the ecclesiastical archives represent the collective memory of evangelization, one of the many pastoral tools useful for a spiritual re-reading of the events of Jesus' life and for sensitize «consciences to the *sensus ecclesiae*», as well as being «memory of evangelization [that] gives evidence of the *plantatio ecclesiae* in all the places where the preaching of the gospel has arrived. As a pastoral instrument, it gives the sense of history to each individual ecclesial community and this can so perceive its own past and open itself to the future»<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from

<[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc\\_com\\_pcchc\\_pro\\_20011008\\_it.html#Gli\\_archivi\\_ecclesiastici](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_pro_20011008_it.html#Gli_archivi_ecclesiastici)> (last access: December 2019); translated by the Author.

The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church has assumed a major role in the life of ecclesiastical archives and libraries. On this regard, two fundamental documents were realized: the circular letter to the diocesan bishops in 1994 dedicated to *Ecclesiastical libraries in the mission of the Church*, and the much more important circular letter *The pastoral function of the ecclesiastical archives* (1997). This latter document, in particular, makes the Holy See sanctioning the centrality of the archives in the life of every Catholic community, also stating that:

Besides the production of such *cultural goods*, the Church has been interested in their pastoral use and, consequently, in the protection of that which she has produced in order to express and carry out her mission. Part of the latter is the care for conserving the memory of many and different types of pastoral actions through archival documents. In the mind of the Church, *archives are places of memory of the Christian community and storehouses of culture for the new evangelization*. Thus they themselves are a cultural good of primary importance whose special merit lies in recording the path followed by the Church through the centuries in the various contexts which constitute her very structure. As places of memory archives must systematically gather all the data making up the articulated history of the Church community so that what has been done, the results obtained, including omissions and errors, may be properly evaluated (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 1997).

#### **4. THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION ECCLESIA IN EUROPA**

From April, 10, to May, 8, 1994, it took place the first Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops (Synod) for Africa at the behest of Pope John Paul II. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation promulgated by the Pope was named *Ecclesia in Africa* (September, 14, 1995). Following the success of that initiative, between 1997 and 1999 John Paul II promoted four other special synods: one in America (from November, 12, to December, 12, 1997, that was followed by the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, January, 22, 1999), one in Asia (from April, 19, to May, 14, 1998, that was followed by the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, November, 6, 1999), one in Oceania (from November, 22, to December, 12, 1998, that was followed by the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, November, 22, 2001) and, the last, in Europe (from October, 1, 1999, to October, 23, 1999). With the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (June, 28, 2003), the pontiff invited the whole Europe to hope. The document, in line with other acts of the Magisterium of the Church, aimed to highlight the role of Christianity in Europe and in its governance, especially in view of the most enlargement of the European Union scheduled between 2004 and 2007 with the simultaneous entry of ten countries (i.e., Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia).

The exhortation was made up by a brief introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, and a hope-message for the future. In total, there are 121 paragraphs in

which John Paul II deals about religiosity in Europe and the role of the Church in the European reality. The starting point is provided several times by passages in the texts and from the book of the Apocalypse, «a “prophetic revelation” which discloses to the community of believers the deep and hidden meaning of what is taking place» (John Paul II, 2003, 5).

The exhortation was published forty-five years after the Treaty of Rome (1957), that was the birth of the European Economic Community, a precursor of the European Union. In less than half a century, the member countries of the European Union had quadrupled, and the Pope’s aim was to stimulate a reflection on the guiding principles of a political and social process hitherto unknown in the history of humanity. Specifically, he stressed the importance to explicit the historical references of this process. The interlocutors were not only the civil institutions, but also the religious ones: the exhortation highlighted the need to rediscover the value of the proclamation of the Gospel, as a sign of hope, to a Europe that seemed to have lost it: «Have no fear, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you» (John Paul II, 2003, 1).

Therefore, the whole document focuses on the centrality of the mission. The contemporary Christians are called to take a position in front of Christ: they must choose whether to follow the norms and messages of the Church or to abandon Christ's teaching: according to John Paul II, only keeping in mind the teachings present in the Catechism of Catholic Church (and above all in the Gospels) it is possible not to lose hope (John Paul II, 2003, 65). The Church in Europe has the mandatory and urgent task of announcing the hope of the Gospel to everyone, baptized or unbaptized. If Europe wants to be a building solid and harmonious, it must recognize and respect the heritage that have distinguished itself in history thanks to Christianity (John Paul II, 2003). The document deals with the following topics:

- socio-psycho-demographic analysis of Europe (paragraphs 7-10);
- examples of saints who have marked the history of Europe (nn. 13-14);
- identification of the laity in daily living environment (nn. 15-16, 41 and 49);
- Christian roots of Europe, with reference to the European Constitution (n. 19);
- priestly celibacy, formation, and commitment of the clergy (nn. 34-37, 50-52, 61-62, 77);
- inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism among Christians, and between Christians and other religions (nn. 17, 30-32, 53-57);
- young people and school and university education, or places of formation in the faith and the Gospel (n. 58-62);
- attention to the mass media: evolution of the means of communication and of the proposed values (n. 63);

- charity and voluntary service toward man in society (weak, poor, sick, etc.) and toward environment (nn. 84-89, 104-105);
- analysis of the importance of the family as the basis of society, and reflections on the marriage bond and on the marriage education (nn. 90-94);
- importance of life, and condemnation of abortion and euthanasia (nn. 95-96);
- reasoning on the phenomenon of immigration and the culture of reception (nn. 100-103);
- hope for a new Europe: universal values, respect for historical and cultural peculiarities, concept of "unity in diversity" (nn. 31-32, 108-121);

## 5. EUROPE AND ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHIVES

The reflections proposed in *Ecclesia in Europa* imply the knowledge of one's own past and roots. The *sensus* of the ecclesiastical community, the history of how a particular parish was originated, as well as the traditions and the customs of a country are to be found entirely in various cultural, artistic and social testimonies. The ecclesiastical archives, in this sense, perform a fundamental role for the transmission of history. Not by chance, after the promulgation of the letter concerning the pastoral function of the archives, it arose a wide reflection about the identification of strategies for promoting the preservation and fruition of ecclesiastical historical archives within the Catholic Church (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 1997).

In other words, conservation and pastoral valorization means a daily commitment that, in recent years, has become fundamental for ecclesial activity. As a consequence, conservation means transmission, assuming the value of a real moment of Tradition without underestimate both the quantity and the quality of documentation stored in ecclesiastical archives.

«The will on the part of the community of faithful and, in particular, of Church institutions to gather from apostolic times onwards the witnesses of faith and cultivate their memory expresses the oneness and the continuity of the Church» (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 1997, 1.1). This position is part of a theological framework about the care made by both priests (or the entire clerical *corpus*) and the Christian communities themselves in order to preserve their own memory. Memory is not only the past; memory is also the present that is to be carried out into the future. The archives also constitute the memory of Evangelization, as well as the mark of the pastoral action by the bishops within their own diocese. The Archbishop Michele Castoro has recently affirmed that archival papers, combining together the aspects pertinent to human history and those intrinsically spiritual, are testimonies themselves of the incarnation of Christ made Man for us. For these considerations, it is essential to read the cards in their

context, and rebuild and return it intact even when the documents are rendered outside their home environment, for example within a web portal<sup>2</sup>.

«That the shapers and the architects of Europe rise up!». On May, 9, 1945, when the Old Continent was ruined by the Second World War, Pius XII spread worldwide through a radio message the need for a new and better Europe, a new world, and a better universe based on God's love, loyalty to His commandments, respect for human dignity, equality, and rights for all peoples and states (Pius XII, 1945). This reflection anticipate the core of John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Europa*. In fact, this apostolic exhortation is an invitation to an active participation to the formation of a new political, economic and territorial structure. It is an invitation to a concrete commitment in political life in order to avoid the "disengaged skepticism", the "pragmatism" and the "utilitarianism", following the example of the founding fathers of Europe (e.g., Alcide De Gasperi, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Jean Monnet; Semeraro, 2010).

The "passion" for Europe dominates the entire papacy of the Slavic pope. In fact, John Paul II launches a new perspective and revolutionizes the way of thinking of Europeans, opening wide-ranging horizons several times. The Polish Pope's idea of Europe does not stop at the Berlin Wall or at the Iron Curtain, but it goes from the Atlantic to the Urals. It is stressed in thousands of speeches, appeals, and messages. Not by chance, in 1985 he dedicates the encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli* to Saints Cyril and Methodius, two brothers who evangelized the Slavic peoples (John Paul II, 1985). Moreover, he collaborates to break down the Berlin Wall in 1989. It strives strenuously for Europe to find common Christian roots. On October, 11, 1988, at the Palace of Europe in Strasbourg, Karol Wojtyła gave a speech to the European political representations in which he declared that Europe offers a significant example of the cultural richness of Christianity, and that it must not be forgotten or even denied (Szulc, 2000). According to the pontiff, Christianity has a public vocation and an active presence in everyday life. The theme of religion and Christianity must also be present in the inspiration of ethics and social reality: it is a legacy of the past that can be the model for the future of Europe and for the future of its inhabitants (John Paul II, 1988).

The themes proposed by John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* can be easily found also in the magisterium of his predecessors and his successors. The basis of these reflections is the transmission of the doctrine of the Church above all through the memory of the past, and therefore through the preservation and study of ecclesiastical archival documents. The universality of ecclesiastical items is a theme that the Holy See considers of extreme significance; the valorization of the architectural, artistic, book, and documentary goods make it possible to discover the true face of the Church: a reality made up by men. The same men whom at the time of the Second Vatican Council Paul VI defined as the protagonists of a new age of human history; the men for which «New ways are

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <[https://bce.chiesacattolica.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/1\\_Castoro.pdf](https://bce.chiesacattolica.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/1_Castoro.pdf)> (last access: December 2019); translated by the Author.



open, therefore, for the perfection and the further extension of culture» (Paul VI, 1966, 54).

The dream of John Paul II about a united Europe that looks towards the East and promotes world civilization is clearly expressed in the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*. Thus, after more than sixty years from the signing of the 1957 Treaties of Rome in the "Sala degli Orazi e dei Curiazi" in the Campidoglio, it is right to recall the commitment that the pontiffs made in the XX-XXI centuries and who were convinced advocates of United Europe. In line with the teaching of the Fathers of the Council, the appeal of John Paul II to the young and to the inhabitants of the new political and territorial reality is as timely as ever:

Europe needs to make a qualitative leap in *becoming conscious of its spiritual heritage*. The impetus for this can only come from hearing anew the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the responsibility of all Christians to commit themselves to satisfying this hunger and thirst for life. Consequently "the Church feels it her duty to repeat vigorously the message of hope entrusted to her by God" and says again to Europe: "*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty Saviour!*". Her invitation to hope is not based on a utopian ideology; on the contrary, it is the timeless message of salvation proclaimed by Christ. With the authority she has received from her Lord, the Church repeats to today's Europe: Europe of the third millennium, "*let not your hands grow weak!*"; do not give in to discouragement, do not resign yourself to ways of thinking and living that have no future because they are not based on the solid certainty of God's Word!". Taking up anew this invitation to hope, I repeat to you again today: *Europe*, as you stand at the beginning of the third millennium, "*Open the doors to Christ! Be yourself. Rediscover your origins. Relive your roots*". Down the centuries you have received the treasure of Christian faith. It has grounded your life as a society on principles drawn from the Gospel, and traces of this are evident in the art, literature, thought and culture of your nations. But this heritage does not belong just to the past; it is a project in the making, to be passed on to future generations, for it has indelibly marked the life of the individuals and peoples who together have forged the continent of Europe (John Paul II, 2003, 120).

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