

Speech by the President of the European Council

Mr. Herman Van Rompuy

La Ramée Abbey - 22 May 2014

Dear Organizers,

Dear Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1) The ideal city

I should like to begin by inviting you to follow me **to the ideal city**.

This ideal city is not Plato's city-state, or the city described by Francesco Colonna in *The Dream of Poliphilo*, although it is close to it.

Nor is it the city conceived of by the French Humanist François Rabelais with his Abbey of Thélème, a hexagonal building where the prevailing atmosphere is one of Christianity tinged with Platonism.

The ideal city which I invite you to follow me to does not resemble, either, the city depicted by another Renaissance artist, the painter Francesco di Giorgio Martini, who was born in Siena, not far from Pienza.

Pienza, that other possible ideal city designated as a World Heritage Site, born of the urban vision of the future Pope Pius II.

By the way, did you know that Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, who transformed the Tuscan village of Corsignano into a model town, was probably one of the most important Popes there has ever been?

He is the only Pope to have written his memoirs, *The Commentaries*, a veritable political and religious testament.

So, you will say, for Christians the ideal city is perhaps the Heavenly Jerusalem described in the Apocalypse of Saint John, or Saint Augustine's great work, *The City of God*?

Yes, indeed, but these cities are only metaphors...

The ideal city to which I should like to take you is at once body and spirit.

It is, she is - because it is of course a Lady, the One, the Only, as the philosopher Plotinus would have said - a womb, mingling river and sea waters and giving birth to all the beauty in the world.

She is between land, sea and sky and is, as it were, a soul, or a representation of the soul.

So follow me and, as the Molière of Venice, Carlo Goldoni, wrote in *The Foundation of Venice*:

"Allons, amis, sur ces petites îles,

Former la plus belle , la plus riche

Et la plus merveilleuse des cités,

Que les marais se couvrent de pieux nouveaux, Et que sur eux, uniques au monde,

S'élèvent places et demeures,

Et le Palais et le Temple..." .

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- although Venice has not achieved complete harmony with a distinctive form of social organisation based on the highest moral and political principles;

- although Venice is perhaps not the ideal earthly city in the sense that it is probably not the result of urban design aimed at architectural and human perfection;

you will agree with me that, more than any other city, it comes close to being the ideal city to which we aspire and that inspires us.

That's why we can call Venice an 'ideal city', because she embodies a dream.

Besides, was not the plan of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice inspired by the plan depicted in *The Dream of Poliphilo*, the book to which I referred just now, a book regarded as one of the most beautiful produced in the Renaissance and printed (in Venice, of course!) by Aldo Manuzio in 1499?

2) European culture

I began my train of thought with Venice, without asking you if you liked it (not my train of thought, but Venice☺).

But speaking to an audience claiming to be, and I quote: "an informal professional and expert network for national heritage heads", a network "that provides a forum for information and experience exchange about the management of the historic environment in the twenty-first century" (end of quote), I am sure that you don't "like" Venice: you simply "love" Venice, as I do ☺

And Venice, as you will have realized, serves me only (and Venice will forgive me for this) as a pretext.

A pretext for speaking to you **about European culture and cultures, singular and plural.**

About culture in the broader sense.

Let us recall the words of Umberto Eco: *"This is what constitutes the basis of the European cultural identity: an enduring dialogue between literatures and philosophies, musical and theatrical works.*

And it is this identity that is the foundation of a community".

What forges our European identity is expressed in our culture - that is, in the way in which we Europeans approach the other.

In the way in which we engage in dialogue, in which we share and exchange, discover and rediscover, interpret and re-interpret our cultural heritage.

In order to assimilate it better, and thus better to develop it. Not denying the past but, on the contrary, using it as a shore from which to build a bridge towards the other shore which is our future.

A bridge or bridges, between our past, our present and our future, but also bridges between the particular and the more general, between a city, a country and a Union.

3) The historic environment and the challenge of mass tourism

And, if I return to my example of Venice - you will forgive me - the city of 450 bridges, it is because Venice represents, better than any other city, **the challenges which now face every historic city**, every urban planning and architectural reality.

Not every city, it is true, receives twenty-five million visitors a year with a local population of fifty-eight thousand people!

Dividing, for Venice, the number of tourists by the number of inhabitants, is as if each of us had a new tourist to stay in his home every day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year! A new tourist in our home every day, for each of us, and even two new tourists every day in July and August!

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, this is one of the challenges which Venice has to face today, and which Bruges and Toledo will face tomorrow.

Every day the inhabitants of these cities, that enrich our present and light up our future, are left to confront that challenge on their own - that is not too strong a way of putting it - the challenge of mass tourism.

4) The innovative solution

To meet this challenge and the challenge of constructing cities - in urban planning, economic and social terms - it seems to me essential to listen more to the people who live there, and enable them to use **technologies** which can help them to exercise greater responsibility as citizens.

Let me explain.

4.1. Economically

If Venice is not to become a mere theme park, it must attract enterprises which are non-polluting and, in view of the city's history and geography, are connected to the crafts of working with wood, paper and books, water and glass.

In short, industries which use advanced, non-polluting technologies and do not require too much infrastructure.

In my view, incorporating enterprises of this kind into the fabric of Venice and other European cities is the highest of priorities.

4.2. Socially

Economically. But also socially, for a city lives through its inhabitants.

Inhabitants who enjoy living in a city where they can work and where they can be on neighbourly terms with other people sharing in a way the same space, the same environment.

That's why the "Neighbours Days" that were held in a number of cities on 16 May are, as to me, an essential component of how to encourage citizens to embark on a better "citizen-ship".

The aim of this is to strengthen community ties, to develop a feeling of belonging to the same neighbourhood, and create a sense of solidarity between neighbours.

Thanks to the feeling of participating personally to a shared and common urban venture.

In Venice, this might be called "campiellism", based on the word "campiello", little square.

And also for this, new technologies can be used to help this "campiellism" develop.

Not so that everyone is constantly looking at their smartphone and becoming asocial in the process.

But so that everyone is able, thanks to the applications on their smartphone, to help their city by providing information. To make their neighbourhood more viable and a better place to live.

Just as there was a Euro Plus Pact, so in future there should be a "Campiellism Plus Pact", an added value given to neighbourhoods by and thanks to the people who live in them.

But innovation does not stop there.

4.3. Creativity

Technology can help us protect our cultural heritage better.

Satellite data now enable us to see when ancient buildings are moving more than half a centimetre per year and need to be stabilized.

This is a fine application of technology for the benefit of our cultural heritage.

But it is only one example. It is by increasing the number of "creative" enterprises that we can combine technology and culture in future and also achieve stronger economic growth and meet the challenge of unemployment.

In our Union, the creative industries account for over 3% of our economy, and employment in them is also growing more rapidly than in other industries.

And, indeed, digital technologies protect culture as well as promoting it.

5) The need to evolve

If I refer to technology here, it is because a city, every city, must **evolve**.

Nothing is more harmful for a city and its inhabitants than to stagnate, technologically, culturally, in terms of urban planning and therefore economically and socially.

A city, every city, gives shape to the world, its world, and it is this continual and continuous shaping which ensures its vitality.

As the art historian Sergio Bettini has written, "*a city communicates with us by reference to its fundamental codes, which epistemology calls space and time*".

Space when, for instance, Pope Sixtus focused on streets, not just buildings, so that the street became the basic element in the language of the city.

As a result, Baroque Rome was configured by the straight streets which linked the seven great Roman basilicas.

But it was also configured by time, for if Baroque Rome highlighted the characteristics of buildings themselves, it was because they were meant to be admired at walking pace rather than from the speed of a car.

The measure of time by which we experience a work, especially a work of urban design, is not, therefore, without impact on the form of the work itself.

This was the success of Rome in the Baroque era.

As it was the failure of twentieth-century Venice, when it failed to renew itself by rejecting Frank Lloyd Wright's plan for the Masieri Memorial, a residence and library for architecture students along the Grand Canal.

To put it in the words of Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the most brilliant architects of the twentieth century, with which I shall end:

"Architecture should always keep alive that which most merits being preserved, and that implies eliminating - architecturally - what is already unfit to live, if one wants the city itself to live (...).

Drawing up the plans for a building for Venice is like drawing up the plans for a building for any city dominated by the unique character of a culture. It demands love on the part of the true artist, and love for him".

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.