

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism

Unity and Diversity: Europe's Approaches to Culture and Languages

Georgetown University

Washington DC, 7 February 2006

Check against delivery

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear students,

1 Introduction

Few places are more comfortable for me than a conference hall in a **great American university**. As you know, my responsibilities as European Commissioner include higher education and culture, so this campus and this audience make me feel at home.

Centres of learning on both sides of the Atlantic bear testimony that our **deep common roots** are not confined to history.

A happy coincidence will help me make this point. In two days' time, the President of the European Commission, **José Manuel Barroso**, will receive an *honoris causa* degree from your University.

This is a very good example of the continuing mutual interest and appreciation between the two shores of the Atlantic.

For both of us, **Georgetown University is like a friendly home**, which—as the song says—is “more comfortable [...] the second time you call”.

José Manuel taught at your School of Foreign Service; as to me, I first came with my degree in engineering to **study international relations in 1994**.

I suspect that was the decisive turn in my education. The experience I made here has served me well in all my years of service and—to this day—I preserve great memories of those months.

In places like this university, our long, **shared history** is still feeding our debates, it is bearing intellectual fruits, and it’s shaping our present and future lives.

Let us take a couple of facts about Georgetown as examples.

The first fact **is your date of birth—1789**—when Father Carroll acquired this plot of land overlooking the Potomac. **1789** is perhaps the best piece of evidence of how European and American history are intertwined: this is when George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States and the French revolution started.

1789 was also the year when Madison submitted the Bill of Rights to Congress and France’s National Constituent Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

Historians tell us that both **Madison and the Marquis de Lafayette** were inspired by Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights and that Mason himself took his cue from the English Bill of Rights of 1689.

In a sense, the foundational **texts on both sides of the Atlantic are like twins**: they share the same genetic code and were born at the same time.

We should recall these facts when we dwell on our economic, social, and cultural differences. The differences are there—nobody can deny this—but the **Atlantic is in fact a big pond of common values** and traditions: human rights, the rule of law, democracy, and our undying love for freedom.

The second fact is perhaps subtler but just as symbolic. While preparing my visit here, I remembered that your official colours were decided as a gesture of reconciliation after the Civil war, which had deeply affected your College.

I like this story because it reminds me of the original reason behind Europe's process of integration. In the **words of Robert Schuman**—one of our founding fathers—"war between France and Germany [should become] not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible".

2 The EU

Schuman's words could not be clearer: **securing peace on the continent** is the original intent of our process of integration.

To do this, the countries of Europe have done the unthinkable: they have given up some of their sovereign powers and pooled them under common institutions.

The breadth and depth of this geopolitical innovation has no precedent in history. The 1951 agreement of six countries over **coal and steel** has now become a political entity that spans the continent.

Our institutional arrangement is equally unprecedented. The EU is not a federation, but it is much more than a trade block such as NAFTA or Mercosur.

In fact, this is the core of the current debate in Europe. We have a flag, a currency, and a Parliament directly elected by the people. We are working on a common foreign policy and on military capabilities. **What now? What does the Union want to be?**

50 years ago, our community sought to bring down trade barriers and create a common market. Then it began to take an increasingly political tint. The first direct election of the European Parliament was held in 1979, and we haven't looked back since.

The Union has also had **an immense power of attraction across the region**. The original six members became nine in 1973 when Denmark, Ireland, and Britain joined. Three more countries joined in the 1980s, and another three in 1995 for a total of 15.

For most of those years, an ideological rift and the cold war were keeping Europe's East and West artificially apart. With the collapse of communism in Europe, the continent could revive the century—**old dream of reunification**.

This is the part of the story I can tell you first hand, because Slovakia—my home country, once part of the Eastern bloc—joined the Union on May 1, 2004 along with nine others.

I believe the decisive reason why we all embraced the Union was **our craving for peace, democracy, and freedom**. And we knew the Union was the best guarantee that the change would be irreversible.

In this respect, the original plan of Schuman and of the other founding fathers of a united Europe is not a mere historical fact but a continuing reality. The Union continues to be **a community of values**—and peace sits on top of them.

More countries will join in the coming years, especially from the Balkans. I have no doubt that what has worked for us will work for them as well. The Union will be the decisive factor for the security, reconciliation, and eventual integration of the region.

At this juncture, the EU needs to turn the page: over the next few years, it should seek to strengthen the bonds that keep together its countries and regions, its institutional systems, and above all its peoples.

This was the main objective of the constitutional process which was set in motion in 2003. Unfortunately, this new chapter has not started well. **The Constitutional Treaty** was rejected by French and Dutch voters last year.

2005 was a difficult year for Europe, but we should not dwell on the bad news only. In February President Bush paid an official visit to the European institutions. In December the government of Russia had a joint plenary meeting with the European Commission.

Both events are unprecedented and they mean that Europe's presence on the international scene is growing slowly but surely in spite of our divisions.

So, as you can see, there are also reasons for optimism. Besides, the Union has always advanced by leaps and bounds and **has always come out of its crises stronger, more experienced and more mature.**

In historical perspective, a pause for reflection was not to be ruled out. In this light, the suspension of the constitutional process is also an opportunity for some serious soul searching.

3 Winning hearts and minds

'Soul' is the functional word here. The Union's responsibilities have grown over the years; today, about half of Europe's legislation originates from the EU institutions.

However, there is a widespread perception in the media and among the population that economic issues prevail over cultural, social and political values.

In other words, there is the perception that material concerns have overshadowed the search for Europe's soul.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to Europe. The logic of business and of the market is also dominating public discourse in the States and elsewhere.

Sustained economic growth is, of course, fundamental because we need the material means to achieve our ideal ends. However, I believe that **we should turn to our cultural and political values** to avoid confusing means and ends.

It is true that Europe's most spectacular achievements are tangible: the internal market, the Euro, even the vilified agricultural policy.

However, these are things that touch the minds of EU citizens, not their hearts. As **Jacques Delors**, a former President of the European Commission, said: **“you can't fall in love with the single market”**.

This is why serious policies to foster cultural and civic integration are a necessity for us, not a luxury, because they would help redress the imbalance between the rational and the emotional sides.

This imbalance is dangerous because it widens the gap between Europe and its citizens. Unless we refocus on the democratic legitimacy and the political ends of the EU, our project of integration would become unsustainable.

We need to **bring Europe**—its values, its debates and its policies—**closer to the citizen.**

4 Intercultural dialogue

There is no doubt that intercultural dialogue will be one of the central debates for the future of the Union.

I called for a **European Year of Intercultural Dialogue** as soon as I took office in 2004. Since then, serious disturbances have shaken the body social of some European countries of old and established democratic tradition.

In the light of these events, my initiative has acquired a new sense of urgency. The Year of Intercultural Dialogue is planned for 2008 and will cover three main areas:

- **First**, we will get **Union members to talk to each other**, involving especially the civil society and the countries that joined in 2004. This is because Europeans will never know enough of each other; Europe will always be a work in the making.
- **Second**, we will open avenues for **dialogue between the Union and the rest of the world**, because our whole history teaches us that international relations work best when there is a deep understanding of the culture, the motives, and the aspirations of the other.
- **Finally**, we will bring our **action down to our own cities and countries**. Last year's events teach us that we need to find more and better forms of dialogue in our own societies, especially regarding Europeans of recent immigration.

I would like to expand a bit on these three points, starting from the last. There are signs across Europe that racism, xenophobia and discrimination are raising their ugly heads again.

I guess you are a particularly sensitive audience on these issues. The political and social debate in this country has revolved around racism and discrimination for a long time and the fight is not over.

But I also know that Georgetown has stellar credentials in this struggle; it is not by chance that your College was led by an African–American—father Healy—as far back as 1874.

Europe and America have had very different histories of immigration and social integration; however, the fundamental challenges remain the same: **tolerance, respect and equal opportunities** so that everyone can do his or her best to build a peaceful, dynamic, and creative society.

4.1. Soft–power

As to the other areas, there is growing recognition that **intercultural dialogue lies at the heart of international relations**. Let me explain what I mean in some detail.

Future historians will describe our time as the age when the world shrank and flattened. This is the process commonly called ‘**globalisation**’, a term that many people use to mean many different things.

Of these many meanings, I prefer the one that points towards **‘interdependence’**. Interdependence is more obvious on the regional scale. Europe, for instance, has always been a mosaic of languages, cultures and institutions in constant interaction. So, if globalisation is about our mutual interdependence, Europe’s process of integration can be defined as an attempt at managing globalisation.

Of course, our ambitions are on a regional scale, but even so the EU is the only workable attempt to harness the forces of globalisation and put them to work for our interests, our values and our ultimate goals.

Globalisation has also made us more keenly **aware of diversity and complexity**. During the cold-war years, many local situations could be described in the terms of a confrontation between the two blocs.

Today things have changed. We know that we need to shed our prejudices about the others and overcome the initial and—one should add—all too natural sense of threat and distrust. Today, we have realised that we need to know and understand beliefs and practices that belong to cultures other than ours.

Again, I feel comfortable talking about intercultural dialogue in these terms here; if only because Georgetown is home to the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

This is the sense in which **intercultural dialogue should underpin international relations**. If we are serious about bringing peace and prosperity to our complex world, we should learn to listen to each other, engage everyone in dialogue without preconceptions, and restore the primacy of politics and diplomacy.

Even as I say this, I am very well aware of the difficulties of the Union as an international actor. In spite of being a highly integrated economic giant, we often find it difficult to speak with one voice.

At the same time, apart from the growing recognition I referred to earlier, many world leaders are looking at the **EU as a viable model of organising relations between countries.**

The EU, for its part, is keen to share the unique experience and know-how it has gained over the past decades. I see it as our responsibility **to bring our fundamental values to the world:** co-operation, solidarity, democracy, and the rule of law.

5 Unity in Diversity

Finally, **intercultural dialogue is very much a domestic agenda for the EU.** Europeans will always be busy getting to know each other because the Union is not—and will never be—about erasing the differences between its countries and peoples.

Recognising Europe's **cultural diversity** lies at the foundation of our idea of intercultural dialogue. In fact—if you ask me—there is a sense in which the phrase is redundant, because culture, any culture, is always already a dialogue.

In this respect, our genetic code differs from that of the US—traditionally described as a melting pot.

We regard our **wealth of cultures, languages and traditions as a precious gift** from the past to be cherished and preserved. We regard the Union’s increasing diversity as an asset, not as a threat or a problem.

The fundamental challenge of our process of integration is in fact how to preserve distinct cultural identities while developing a multicultural society.

5.1 Multilingualism

The best evidence of this approach is perhaps our **language policy**. As you know, the EU is the only supranational or international organisation that explicitly grants its citizens the right to use their national languages in their dealings with the European institutions.

Our multilingualism policy is **a deliberate tool of government**. The EU sees the use of its citizens’ languages as one of the factors which make it more transparent, more legitimate and more efficient.

Last November, the Commission adopted a Communication called “A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism”. It is our first comprehensive policy statement in this area and follows by a year the explicit inclusion of multilingualism in my portfolio, also a first for the European Commission.

Over **80 indigenous languages** are spoken within the borders of the Union and **20 of them are officially recognised** by our common institutions.

In this way, every citizen can read and understand European legislation, communicate with the EU, and participate in policymaking in a tongue he or she is familiar with.

Some ask whether we should not do with languages what we have done with our common currency, the Euro. The answer is simple: we should not. Languages are infinitely closer to the heart of individuals and communities than coins and notes.

The name of the money I carry in my pocket does not define me in any significant way; whereas reducing our wonderful diversity of languages would undermine the richest legacy we have inherited from our past.

Each and every one of the many languages of Europe opens up the wealth of culture and traditions of a community. They are all equally precious to us.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to conclude with a general reflection.

For many years now, we no longer think of our process of integration mainly as a means to **prevent conflict in Europe**. War among our members has finally become truly unthinkable.

After half a century, the **seeds planted by the founding fathers of a united Europe** have grown into a tall tree with many branches. We have already picked several delicious fruits, whereas others need some more time to ripen.

You can see this process of maturity in many of our policies and debates. Today they are about sharing a space, finding better ways to live together, helping each other build our common future.

These are our **real challenges for the future**, because they address the issues of social cohesion and inclusion, of solidarity and peace, of a positive impact of the EU on the world scene. They address the core reasons that **keep us together**.

This is really what the Union is about. Our economic and political achievements would have no sense of direction if they were not aimed towards these higher ends.

Thank you.