

January 2026

EUROPE: DARING TO HOPE

At a time when strengthening the unity of the European Union has never seemed so essential; while geopolitical upheavals and strategic power games are hitting the efforts to build it head-on; while member countries are unable to agree on the means to achieve it; while internal political tensions in certain countries are weakening their role in this integration; schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular, are asking themselves not how to solve today's problems, but how to prepare young people to envisage the future of a united Europe.

The aim of this document from the European Committee for Catholic Education is to present the role that Catholic schools intend to play in the education of young Europeans, beyond academic objectives, in the service of a true purpose: education as a place of humanization and learning about life in society, thus promoting understanding of the values and challenges of the European Union from a perspective of hope. By value, we mean the quality of what is admirable, a goal to be achieved by every one of us.

1. The context

Europe and young people

Recent studies (DJEPA 2022, FEPS 2022, etc.) show that European institutions and their mechanisms are not viewed positively by young people in the Union. In general, there is a loss of confidence in political action at the national and supranational levels. On the other hand, young people's desire to get involved in local community life is greater, particularly in the areas of combating discrimination and protecting the environment.

These studies also show that young people feel a certain unease about the various health, climate, security, and economic crises we are experiencing. This makes it difficult for them to project themselves into the future and envisage positive developments in society.

In this context, the education system must build on young people's desire to get involved, to help them look resolutely to the future, their future, which they must build together with other Europeans. Schools have a particularly important role to play, alongside parents, in this area.

Europe and education

Education and teaching are not areas of competence for the European Union as set out in the Treaty of Rome. However, it is clear that, from very early on, the Union has sought to promote cooperation between Member States, complement their actions, and encourage the sharing of innovative practices in education.

Since the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2007, initiatives in the field of education and training have been adopted and developed by the European Parliament. The Union now provides a framework enabling national authorities and European stakeholders to cooperate to improve their education policies.

This translates into programs that promote encounters and collaboration between educators, young people, and adults, such as Erasmus Plus, eTwinning, and others.

It also translates into systems that provide a framework for learning, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The European Committee for Catholic Education (ECCE)

The CEEC was created in 1974 on the initiative of Catholic education leaders from six countries: Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, and the Netherlands. Today, it has 30 members and extends beyond the European Union (EU) to include Scotland, England & Wales, Switzerland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Ukraine. It brings together more than 40,000 schools with approximately 8 million students.

Since its creation, the CEEC has focused on promoting cooperation between its members to ensure the development and improvement of teaching and pedagogy. It also ensures that the reality of Catholic schools is considered by the various states.

Although this objective is included in its statutes, it has never sought to establish close ties with the decision-making bodies of the European Union, as it has lacked the resources to do so. However, the CEEC is now considering establishing closer ties with these institutions, not for lobbying purposes, but in a spirit of sharing a vision of the European space as a place where peoples can coexist.

2. The school's mission

In the current uncertain context, what can the mission of the school be? How, and in what ways, should it educate young people so that they view Europe in a positive light?

First, it must give them **the keys to understanding** so that they can grasp the challenges of European integration. If they do not understand them, they will turn away from Europe.

- One possible starting point is history: the history of the formation of the Union, but also the history of each of the peoples that make it up. How can we understand the reactions and attitudes of a particular state or population towards its neighbours if we are ignorant of the history of their relations? How can we find convergent references in each country's history that will enable Europeans to construct a common narrative?
- Sociological and economic approaches can also be of great help. The economy is the gateway chosen by the Union to undertake its construction. How can we understand where Europe comes from, and where it is going, without any economic reference points?
- Another entry point is culture, particularly literature. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "literature and the arts [...] strive to express the very nature of man" (Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 62). We must not limit our understanding of relations between peoples to economic exchanges but rather understand them through exchanges between cultures.

It must then propose tools to enable people to live better in the European space. Young people will have to live together in this space and, for some, it will even be a strong professional requirement.

- These tools are above all those of encounter and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Even in countries close to us, we experience misunderstandings that challenge our own references. Schools can help students move from the colonizer's perspective, which considers their own points of reference and practices to be universal, to the anthropologist's perspective, which seeks above all to understand others as they are.
- The tools for inhabiting the European space are those of communication and, in particular, those of language proficiency. Whether it is the language of the other or a shared third language, people

who want to connect must find a common means of exchange. Understanding the language of others tells us a lot about them, because, as Seneca said, "*language is the garment of the soul.*"

- Finally, school and university exchange programs are probably among Europe's finest achievements. Participation in these programs is undoubtedly excellent preparation for what lies ahead.

3. The vocation of Catholic schools

It is by drawing on their own specific characteristics that Catholic schools fulfil their mission of providing education in the general interest in European countries. These characteristics are marked by a vision of man and his relationship to society that is intrinsic to Christian anthropology. It is also marked by the sharing and promotion of the values of the European Union, values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union).

In an increasingly fragmented and individualistic society, Catholic schools seek to promote the individual as a unique being in relationship with others. It is in this Christian anthropology that they wish the children and young people they welcome, to truly take root. They invite institutions and political leaders to place the human person at the centre and as the goal of any organization. Rooted in the Gospels, this is the very essence of its project. While it is true that the Gospels say nothing specifically about education, Christ's whole attitude is educational, both in his relationships with his contemporaries and in the way he spoke to them and taught them. His approach is a striking example.

In a society marked by secularization, Catholic schools in Europe wish to welcome the children and young people entrusted to them, as they are, wherever they are in their journey and whatever their religious or philosophical beliefs. This is fundamentally what they are called to do: "*All men, whatever their race, age, or condition, have, as persons, an inalienable right to education*" (Declaration Gravissimum Educationis, 1965).

What characterizes Catholic schools is their educational project, of formation and teaching, which they propose, and which families embrace. Many non-Catholic families enrol their children in Catholic schools because of the positive school environment they find there, the quality of education and teaching, and the respect shown for their own beliefs.

In a society marked by exclusion, Catholic schools do not seek to promote a retreat into identity that would result in the rejection of diversity in beliefs and practices. On the contrary, Catholic schools aim to be a space for dialogue and acceptance of differences. In doing so, they are an expression of freedom of education and a guarantee of educational pluralism.

Catholic schools aim to enable young people to view Europe not with fatalism and mistrust, but with hope. This hope draws its strength from the certainty that it is possible for everyone to influence their political, economic, and natural environment, both locally and across Europe.

4. Some perspectives

For the CEEC, the following proposals are both strong convictions and points of vigilance for the functioning of education systems in the various member countries. At each of our biannual assembly, we review these issues to identify what we see as dysfunctions and to see how we can help the national Catholic education structures that are confronted with them.

Recognition of freedom of education

The state monopoly on the education system undermines the pluralism that is essential in the field of education. This pluralism is necessary to create educational and pedagogical emulation. It is also

necessary to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear today that a single offering cannot answer the range of legitimate expectations of families.

The demand for responsible autonomy

To fulfill its mission, the Catholic school must enjoy responsible autonomy, which is essential in its relations with the State. It cannot contribute to the common good if it is relegated to the role of a substitute, an alternative to public service. This desired autonomy is not a demand for independence but a framework that allows for the development of pedagogical innovations.

Respect for religious education

Religious education is essential to truly perfect a comprehensive general education. Ideological initiatives aimed at eliminating this education in countries and regions where it has historically existed seriously undermine the human condition. To deny a person's spiritual dimension is to deny the person themselves. The purpose of this education is not to convince anyone to adopt or abandon a belief. On the contrary, it allows everyone to clarify and deepen their convictions, whatever they may be.

The primary role of families

Catholic education, faithful to a long tradition, recognizes the pre-eminence of the role of families in education. While in some cultures, the state seeks to replace families, which are considered "incapable" of truly taking charge of their children's education, we believe that, instead of disqualifying parents, we must reposition them and, if necessary, support them so that they can fulfil their role as primary educators.

The European Committee for Catholic Education is available to enrich the reflection on the role of Catholic schools in Europe with any person, movement, or organization that wishes to do so.

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