

Conference

**Cultural heritage at the heart  
of the revival of the European project**

**What role does cultural heritage play in shaping a European way of life?  
How to promote it today?**

Collège des Bernardins, 30.10.2019, 11h-12h30

**To protect the European way of life we must rediscover our different  
relationship to culture**

**Introduction by Antoine Arjakovsky**

What role does cultural heritage play in shaping a European way of life? How to promote it today? To speak of unity in the respect of diversity, is it enough in order to defend our principles and the political construction of the European Union? We are asking ourselves these questions today with a heightened awareness since Mrs Ursula van der Leyen proposed to entrust one of her new Commissioners with the responsibility for the “protection of the European way of life”.

Seen from the Collège des Bernardins this responsibility is essential. This is why we published this year a book entitled "Getting back the taste of European adventure" with ten specific proposals, one of which is to explain how we can revive Europe with a cultural and heritage awareness renewed. This very place, by its history, by its architecture and by its mission, testifies since 8 centuries of the inseparable link between the openness of men to Divine Wisdom and the quests of human wisdom. The famous Rosace of the Collège des Bernardins built around 1245 is nothing but the symbol of the encounter between these two wisdoms, divine and human. Our postmodern era tends to ignore this cultural, intellectual and spiritual heritage. But the recent fire of the Notre Dame cathedral, reminded Europeans, without always understanding why, that this heritage was viscerally linked to their common conscience.

As an introduction to our panel, I would like to explain the reasons for this emotion and briefly recall the four layers of meaning that Notre Dame Cathedral has in the consciousness of Europeans, the classical, the modern, the post-modern and the ecumenical one.

The classical relation to art, and not the relation to classical art, consists in believing that there exists an ontological reality of infinite and objective beauty. In "Gothic Architecture and Scholastic Thought", Erwin Panofsky has shown that Gothic art, whose beauty has seized Europeans in the 12th-14th centuries, finds its depth in a particular way of conceiving being. This is the conception of the art of scholastic thought. For him, Our Lady, thanks in particular to the technique of flying buttresses, is in the first place the symbol of a new way of representing the antinomic tension of human thought towards the divine light.

The modern era has lost this thirst for conciliation between the world of being and that of appearance because in the vision of certain heirs to Saint Thomas Aquinas, who radically distinguished nature and supernature, human rationality lost its capacity to co-create with God. The French Revolution, as we know, revolted against what it considered a trickery and suppressed the bell tower of Notre Dame. And yet Eugène Viollet le Duc, who was also a modern, erected there around 1860 a new arrow with at its summit a rooster containing three relics: a parcel of the Holy Crown, a relic of Saint Denis and one of saint Genevieve. He thus constituted a true "spiritual lightning rod" protecting all those who worked for the praise of God, inside the cathedral. But Gustave Eiffel with the erection of the tower three times higher which bears his name dethroned in the collective consciousness the pretension of lightning rod of the arrow of Viollet le Duc.

The post-modern consciousness, largely secularized, made of Notre Dame a place of memory, one of the most visited places by the tourists of the world, not necessarily because of its Gothic style, nor even in the name of its pretension to protect the inhabitants of Paris, but rather because of its unique place in the history of France. It is here that Napoleon Bonaparte was made emperor in December 1804. It is still there that takes place the famous novel of Victor Hugo published in 1831. Pierre Nora devotes a chapter in its famous places of memory of the history of France by placing it in the volume of the "high places" between "Vézelay" and "the chateaux of the Loire" just as he dedicated a chapter to "Viollet le Duc and the restoration" in the volume on the heritage.

This patrimonialization of memory was thus accompanied by a neutralization of the still living symbol of Our Lady within the Christian consciousness. From an ecumenical perspective, on the other hand, Our Lady is not exclusively the symbol of human tension towards the divine light, nor only a spiritual lightning rod, nor just a place of memory of the French nation. It is above all the place of worship, of expectation and glorification for every human being of the meeting between the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem. At this level of spiritual consciousness Notre Dame cathedral is a place fundamentally open to all human beings as long as they are open and searching for meaning. Paul

Verlaine was one of the poets who rediscovered at the end of the nineteenth century the presence in the world of the wisdom of God and its links with the Virgin Mary. He invited everyone to discover in his dreams "strange and penetrating" the face of a "woman unknown and whom I love and who loves me, and who is each time neither quite the same nor quite a other, and love me and understand me".

If the European way of life is inseparable today from the defense of the rule of law and the dignity of every human being, it is also closely linked to the history, to the cultural, intellectual and spiritual heritage of Europeans. Suffice it to say that Notre Dame was one of the places of invention and diffusion of polyphonic music in the fourteenth century throughout Europe. This music is a symbol par excellence of unity in diversity.

This realization means that the time has probably come to rethink openness to the Spirit and openness to others. If truly Our Lady is the symbol for all Europeans of these four different levels of consciousness, classical, modern, post-modern and ecumenical, then the urgency is not only to rebuild the framing and the roof of Notre Dame. It also consists of offering education throughout Europe to all Europeans not only in European history but also in these four levels of spiritual and cultural awareness. In my opinion, this rediscovery of our common cultural heritage, which transcends and integrates all national identities at the same time, will enable us to relaunch solidly the construction of the political project of the European Union.

We are fortunate today to have among us four personalities who are mobilizing in their own way for the defense and promotion of the European way of life, André Wilkens, Director of the European Foundation of Culture; Lydia Carras, President of Elliniki Etairia; Sébastien Maillard, director of the J. Delors Institute, Androulla Vassiliou, vice president of Europa Nostra. My question to everyone is the same: "What role does cultural heritage play in shaping a European way of life "? How to promote it today? "

After their interventions (about 7 to 10 minutes), we will propose to 3 experts of the subject to react freely and spontaneously (also 7 to 10 minutes) to what they have heard, namely Philippe Barbat, Director General of Heritage in French Ministry of Culture; Gijs de Vries, Professor at the European Institute of the LES in London, and Laurence Farreng, Member of the Committee on Culture and Education in the European Parliament.