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Society for the Environment  
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- European Cultural Heritage Summit 2019 -  
European Policy Debate

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*Collège des Bernardins, 20 rue de Poissy*

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Antoine Arjakovsly has from this wonderfully conserved building, the College des Bernardins, given us a most appropriate introduction to our subject, namely “What role does cultural heritage play in shaping a European way of life? And how to promote it today?” It is a most appropriate introduction because he dwells on Notre Dame as his central theme. He described four different ways in which French people have seen Notre Dame.

Not one of these means anything to most Greeks: neither the relationship of Gothic architecture to scholastic thought, nor the monument’s complex history in relation to the advance of secularism, nor Notre Dame as a place of memory, nor even as an

important signpost on the road to our current ecumenical insistence -in Europe at least- on the rule of law and the dignity of every human being.

And yet... and yet, on the morning after Notre Dame burnt, the telephones at Elliniki Etairia were burning with messages demanding we open an account to receive contributions for the cathedral's restoration. It was not that the French Government needed the inevitably small contributions of the Greek public. It represented a combination of an outpouring of human sympathy with another European people and the acceptance of something which too many of those who enter such monuments persuade themselves to deny, namely that they are entering the architectural presence of the transcendent, as Antoine Arjakovsky might have put it, one of those buildings where, if we are honest with ourselves, we must accept that human architects have succeeded in expressing the divine. All around Europe, as also elsewhere in the world, there exist such buildings, let me just mention the Parthenon in Athens, the Pantheon in Rome, small early Celtic churches in Ireland, and some stave churches in Norway, Ayia Sofia, the Cathedral of the Divine Wisdom of Christ built in Constantinople, the Great Mosque of Cordoba, the Church of the Holy Trinity in Subotica, our neighbour Notre Dame herself, the Synagogue in Old Prague,

Palladio's St. Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, St. Paul's Cathedral in the City of London, and others.

The burning of Notre Dame was a catastrophe. It can also serve however as a blessing. It can lead us to appreciate the deeper, existential significance of heritage. It can teach us to nurture the central role of human solidarity, certainly in responding to immediate crises, but also in continuously extending our sympathies and in guarding our minds against our inherited prejudices.

If cultural heritage, as I have just argued, already does play a crucial role in shaping our still emergent but already so valuable European identity and way of life, how can we more effectively promote it today? I shall suggest four ways:

- By walking
- By eating but also by abstaining from food or foods
- By learning
- By conserving.

You will not be too surprised that I begin with “**walking**”. After all, only yesterday ELLINIKI ETAIRIA obtained a European Union Award / Europa Nostra Award for our project of “Paths of Culture” in Greece. It was a project that began in response to economic crisis, the severest economic crisis in any European country since World War II. It has given some valuable jobs to young people. It has brought more trekkers and rambles to Greece. Walking however also turns us away from the consumerist speed of travel by automobile to a more measured pace of life, demanding physical effort and a perceptive eye. It makes us sensitive once again to the constant and profound interplay between nature and culture in the landscapes of Europe, and opens us to a wider range of human contacts than some forms of mass tourism.

You will be surprised that my second category referred to **food**. Yet food is not just fundamental to every people’s way of life but is becoming ever more central to our common existential planetary challenge, as witnessed by the burning of forests in the Amazon. Here too, sharing the experiences of others opens horizons and teaches us to rejoice in diversity, as we do with music. The overall context has now altered however with climate change. On this I shall give you an example from Greece. In a recent and very large survey of Greek public opinion on climate change, ELLINIKI

ETAIRIA discovered that after recycling, reuse and preference for public transport, the highest percentage of declared action by Greek citizens against climate change was the 30% or so of the Greek population who today follow the traditional Orthodox Christian practice of alternating feast and fast. This represents a fundamental difference from the self-centred and utilitarian ethos of consumerism.

You will certainly not have been surprised by my having mentioned “**Learning**” and “**Conserving**”. After all both of these are what Europa Nostra is all about. Yet, where “learning” is concerned, whereas Europa Nostra and its member organisations have achieved a great deal, the European institutions, I think, are falling far short. To many Europeans, these institutions appear remote, secretive, power-oriented, bureaucratic and themselves over-influenced by national prejudices. Our former Executive Vice-President John Sell and my husband, at that time Europa Nostra’s longest serving Vice-President, both suggested time and again that the European Union should not indeed touch political history programmes in schools but should work actively to combine ethnic with European cultural history-teaching, both in EU member states and in accession countries. The European institutions have thus far attempted no such thing. Sometimes, looking at the consequences, I recall the sharp

ancient Greek saying: “Those whom the Gods wish to destroy, they first make mad”  
– “Μαίνονται πρώτον οι θεοί ον βούλονται απολέσαι”. For how is the EU to protect a  
“European way of life” if it has not previously acknowledged and fostered the  
teaching of the European cultural heritage?

Finally, “**Conserving**”. Well, ELLINIKI ETAIRIA learnt two good lessons in humility  
with the 2018 Grand Prix, received by the small but outstanding, eighth to ninth  
century, iconoclast church of St. Kyriaki, in the middle of nowhere on the island of  
Naxos. First we were humbled and simultaneously enlightened by the fact that it was  
no Greek citizen but rather citizens of Switzerland who initiated and supported the  
conservation effort for over a decade. Second, we were surprised and  
simultaneously delighted when the church’s conservation was finally completed. We  
thought that the inauguration ceremony, at this remote mountain site, might possibly  
be attended by some fifty people. Instead, people streamed in from all over the island  
by the hundreds, certainly not only aesthetes and intellectuals but shepherds and  
farmers and seamen and mechanics, all bringing their offerings of food, not just for  
themselves but to be shared with others, in celebrating a gem of their and our  
cultural heritage, lost and now regained.

If “defending a European way of life” is meant as anything more than an intelligent move in public relations, it is to considerations and, more important, to activities such as these I hope and trust our European leaders will address themselves. In Greece we have learnt during the hideous crisis years of the past decade that our natural and cultural heritage combined with existential faith, can help heal the deepest wounds. They have encouraged a much degraded but also unjustly denigrated society, gradually to begin recovering its self-confidence and to defend democratic institutions, not least the rule of law and human dignity against the siren calls of nationalist populism. If this has been so with us, it can, I believe, prove to be so in all of Europe. There is however nothing automatic in the process. It calls on us to draw on every acknowledged element of strength, as on every latent element of positive value in our simultaneously diverse and united European cultural heritage.