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The Mediterranean on the Threshold of the New Millennium

The Mediterranean on the threshold of the new millennium does not offer a very rosy picture. Its northern coast lags behind Europe, and its southern coast lags behind the northern one. The whole of the Mediterranean region is encountering difficulties, both in the north and in the south. But can a region torn apart by conflicts and divided by differences be considered a whole at all? Israel and Palestine are in armed conflict, Turkey and Greece in conflict; the two parts of Cyprus are consumed with mutual hatred; the Balkans were afflicted by wars; there are difficulties in Lebanon and elsewhere.

The European Union pays no attention to the Mediterranean; Europe is neglecting "the cradle of Europe". Explanations offered by European officials cannot convince those to whom they are addressed. Perhaps even the officials themselves do not believe them. The ambitions of the continent do not coincide with the expectations of the coast. The coastal area suffers because of its own hinterland. Decisions crucial for the Mediterranean are made elsewhere, or without its representatives. This breeds mistrust and discontent. New divides are emerging, and old ones are deepening - namely between continental and coastal Europe, and between the northern and southern Mediterranean.

Cries of enthusiasm at the sight of the sea and islands are becoming more and more sporadic and short-lived. Sunsets have spread over the landscape, "crepuscularisms" inspire poetry. Restlessness has crept into history - that is, into the understanding of it. The direction North - South has become controversial in both science and politics. The Mediterranean is disappearing from the chronicles in which the feats of our time are recorded.

The thought of the South is awakening in gulfs, it is rising in rebellion in ports. We have witnessed efforts to change the present situation - various proposals in statements and programmes: the Athens, Marseilles and Genoa agreements, "The Plan for Action for the Mediterranean" (PAM), and especially "The Blue Plan" (Plan bleu) adopted in Sophia - Antipolis, a suburb of Nice, with development stages to "the horizon in 2025"; the agreements signed in Naples, Malta, Tunis, Split, Palma de Mallorca, and a particularly important Conference in Barcelona in 1995, the preparations for which were long and thorough... All these attempts, along with the promises that accompanied them, have not met expectations. Tempting promises of "cooperation", "partnership", "exchange", "solidarity", ... have not borne fruit. Their number and repetition make debates on the Mediterranean less and less convincing.

The exchange between the European Union and the Mediterranean region dropped significantly after the fall of the Berlin Wall; despite everything, markets in Central and Eastern Europe seem more interesting and more profitable to investors. The countries on the African coast receive only a modest amount of help, just like the developing countries. Some of them do not accept the concept of "the Mediterranean" because they feel it hides belated ambitions of colonialism. Prejudice prevents overcoming the negative legacy of the past. Both sides of the Mediterranean - the southern and northern - have become more important on the maps unfolded by strategists than on those spread out by economists.

Almost everything has been said of "the vast ocean" (this is a biblical expression) which has become "a strait". Its significance changed through time and space, yet the awareness of changes within the ocean itself was not present. The Mediterranean lagged behind modernity. It did not embrace its criteria, demands and signs. For a long time the Mediterranean had been the centre of the world and it was difficult for Mediterranean countries to accept the fact that there were other, more important centres, to which new paths led and where greater discoveries were expected. "The garden of history" became a victim of historicism. "The source of the myth" struggled with mythologies, both its own and those of others. "The idea of the Mediterranean" and the Mediterranean itself were not able to come to terms with each other. The mental picture of the reality and the reality itself replaced each other. The way of thinking gave in to mental stereotypes. The truth about itself was concealed by illusions of the truth. The identity of essence, which is timeless and inherent to the coasts of the Mediterranean, cannot be brought into harmony with the identity of agency, because the latter is helpless or made impossible. Following the tradition, which is difficult to resist, the Mediterranean is seen as something from the past and nothing more. The admiration of its "glorious past" has not always done it good: the Mediterranean needs the present and the future too. The great achievements of the Mediterranean are accompanied by the thought of expatriation.

To again name the troubles "The Inner Sea" carries with it is a futile exercise; but, at the same time, it would not do anyone any good to withhold them: a polluted coastline, a damaged environment, a lack of order, poor organisation, unlawful construction, corruption in both the literal and figurative senses of the word, migration from hinterland to the coast, and from the coast as far from one's own hinterland as possible. The best traditions, those which have tried to combine art with the art of living, have resisted such a fate. The Mediterranean waits for this fate as an injustice or a punishment.

In this vast amphitheatre one and the same repertoire has been playing for far too long - the words and gestures on the stage are becoming familiar and predictable. Rhetorical formulae, the dialectics of politics and of other traditions of the Mediterranean spirit, have been in use for too long and are worn out. The

relations between the centre and the periphery, between the places near by and those far away, between symmetry and asymmetry have acquired a meaning they did not have in the past. Euclidean geometry is reliable, but not adequate - new dimensions of space and existence have been discovered. With a new voyage ahead, it is necessary to check what shape the crew and the equipment are in. The Mediterranean has waited for its Renaissance for a very long time.

The participants in the performance ask themselves questions and look for answers to these questions:

"Is there a Mediterranean outside our imagination?" The Mediterranean in reality is different from that in the imagination - this can sometimes be an advantage, but sometimes it is a disadvantage.

"To conceive an alternative culture, a culture inherent to the Mediterranean" - this proposal can also be heard on the stage. This is not something that can be easily or quickly carried out. It requires preparation and determination.

"To resolve the differences in our views on the Mediterranean" - we could begin with this, but even this cannot be taken for granted. Every once in a while there comes a period when illusions seem attractive, nostalgia dangerous, aberrations fatal.

"Old, torn ropes, which were used to tie ships and fates, lie at the bottom of the sea just off the coast." Ignorance and intolerance tore them where the sea had not eaten them away. Some of them were in use for too long and turned to dust.

"Is there a Mediterranean culture?" There is no such thing as a single Mediterranean culture. There are several cultures in the bosom of the one and only Mediterranean culture, with some similarities and some differences between them. They are only rarely joined, and they are never the same. They owe their similarities to the sea between them and the coming together of the nations, forms and inspirations on the coasts of this sea. The differences between them come from their different backgrounds, histories and affinities. Neither the similarities nor the differences are constant and absolute. Sometimes the former prevail, and at other times the latter. The rest is mythology.

Leonardo da Vinci wrote in one of his less known notebooks: "From East to West there is a division in each point." Everything that happened in the Balkans had to happen, so that we could grasp the gravity of this statement: so many "divisions" so close together in such a small area! In the Balkan Peninsula Greek tragedy was born. In the Middle East the holy scriptures of the three religions of one God were written. The war that has been going on for decades in the Holy Land, like the war in the Balkans, cannot end by itself. It was proved once more that the Mediterranean cannot decide its fate without help from others.

This sea also suffers because of the events that took place far away from it. The attack on the two big skyscrapers in New York at the very beginning of the millennium, on 11 September 2001, resounded all over the Mediterranean. We could see once more how the condemnation of a crime - a crime that should be condemned - can be generalised at will and applied without foundation: Islam

and Islamism are not one and the same, neither are Islamism and fundamentalism; within fundamentalism the mystical belief differs from the militant ideology which makes use of monstrous forms of terrorism. The misuse of these concepts gives birth to distorted visions that are harmful to the Mediterranean.

The anxiety of ancient seamen on fragile galleys sailing to unknown seas has long since been described. It is still felt by those who take to the open sea not knowing what lies ahead, or by those who are returning to the port wondering what is waiting for them there. The coast, too, has found itself at the forefront of the question of how to prevent "divisions in each point", the divisions that are of no use, divisions that no-one needs.

This question cannot bear postponement and will not take excuses for an answer.