**Message from Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker on the occasion of the Conference of the European Economic and Social Committee in Rome**

Monday, 13 March 2017

**EN**

Dear friends,

I would first of all like to thank Georges for speaking on my behalf, as my diary unfortunately makes it impossible for me to be with you. I am therefore counting on my friend Georges to convey to you my regrets and also my thanks.

You are all aware of the importance I attach to the work of the European Economic and Social Committee and to events like the one taking place this morning. These are not just empty words. I mean it sincerely. I have had a long European political career, which has given me the opportunity to appreciate directly the value and remarkable quality of your opinions, which are always intelligent and instructive.

The Commission has just launched a wide-ranging debate on the future of Europe, and so it is only natural that I can confirm that we will be requesting the Committee's opinion on this important topic, and your contribution will be of great value in helping us to clarify our ideas.

In its White Paper, the Commission presents five scenarios with different paths open to us, all of which aim to preserve the unity of the 27.

Some, who have a different approach to the debate from mine, have criticised me for not dictating the path to be followed. But I did not want to nip the debate in the bud. That said - and I am sure that this will not surprise you - I do have a preferred scenario, because I have firm beliefs.

I firmly believe that the European Union is the source of its Member States' strength. And I believe that we cannot build the future in Europe, or anywhere else for that matter, if we do not put the fate of human beings at the centre of our policy actions.

We need to recognise what is important to our fellow citizens, in order not to lose their support. We must listen to what the people of Europe have to say to us. What we do, we do for them, and we must do it with them.

And because the social partners and civil society play a key role in Europe, at both national and at European level, I would like to ask you all to get to grips with this debate, to take it to your countries and your regions, and to give it as much publicity as possible.

Your conference today is a contribution to this, and I wish you a day of valuable, frank and fruitful exchanges.