Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, the European project cannot be restricted to a narrow technocratic or economic vision. That is why the Council of Europe is so important to the deepening of this project, as the organisation which, because of its members' geographical, cultural and economic diversity, best reflects the wealth of Europe and possesses the best conditions to adjust and define orientations for the major issues facing us.

The defence and promotion of human rights, the preservation of our cultural heritage, the environment, drugs, bio-ethics, social security, the terrible facts of exclusion within our own societies, and the role of science are some of the important issues which the Council addresses, and to which it must continue to direct particular attention.

I should like specifically to refer to science and its intimate link to democracy. Democracy needs science. We either continually deepen the scientific bases of our knowledge of nature, the human being and society, and so promote a spirit of criticism and participation, or we witness the inexorable destruction of the powers of argument and, with their disappearance, the legitimacy of the order on which democratic society is based.

Within the context of such crucial issues it is not superfluous once again to emphasise the role that citizens' associations can and must play in discussing, promoting and defending the Council's ideas and aims.

Citizens must be mobilised. In such uncertain times the success of democracy will depend to a great extent on the "institutions" answer to citizens' legitimate desires. In this context we do not have to underline the specific responsibility of parliaments as the centre of political life in democratic and representative regimes.

The Council has made serious attempts in some fields to co-ordinate converting efforts with non-governmental organisations, thus reinforcing the direct and active participation of the individual in the pursuit of its actions and initiatives. But we must go further and increase the direct articulation with civil society to mobilise all possible resources for a joint combat which will enable us to stand up to the major challenges facing us today.
I mentioned social exclusion: it is the other side of a reality marked by the conquest of economic competitiveness within a context of productive globalisation and disappearing frontiers. It is a European problem and as such must be dealt with, otherwise we shall see our societies becoming increasingly and dangerously dualistic and weakened in their internal cohesion.

When faced with the issue of unemployment we cannot abstain from determined, purposeful policies served by measures which are compatible with the size of the problem that we wish to attack. In this struggle, in this essential congregation of means and efforts, it seems to me to be important to enhance associativism and the ideas of collective interest and public service. In particular, I think that it is necessary to rally European intellectuals and creators round the great causes of civic participation, the fight against dualism, poverty and exclusion. What better way to demonstrate the energy and ability of this Council of Europe and of democracy than to enhance the constant struggle for the eternal values that we share, resorting to the new technological means which are the mark of our times?

Why not launch throughout Europe a major campaign to promote associativism and to disseminate the revised European social charter, supported by the media, making an appeal to the many intellectual creators who are anxious to pledge themselves to joint combat against the dualism and exclusions undermining our societies? I, for my part, will give all support to such an initiative stemming from the Council.

Ladies and gentlemen, no democracy is perfect. There are always differences between the rights set down in the texts and their enactment, requiring leaders and citizens constant presence and their attention - their permanent awareness.

Politics is always aimed at human beings. Their welfare is the essence of any progress worthy of the name, and this fact must always prevail over and be present in our scientific and technical advancements, which are so often conditioned by material interests which deflect them from their noblest designs.

Respect for human beings, for their inalienable rights, which are the essence and raison d'être of this Council, leave me to make a heartfelt appeal, here and now, for the total abolition of capital punishment on this continent. I am backed up in this earnest appeal by the fact that Portugal was a pioneer in this area, having abolished the death penalty more than a century ago.

I would equally like to express our wish to see this Assembly and the governments represented at the Council approve the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine as soon as possible.

Such are the times in which we live that the Council must, always and before each challenge, show its vitality. I am convinced that that is what it will do.

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, 20 years ago, when it became the 19th Member of the Council of Europe, Portugal demonstrated its determination to defend human rights and its commitment to European construction. Twenty years later, 39 European states are represented here. Today democracy is another word for Europe.