



## Contribution from Paxos



### Opening Speech by the Representative of Paxos, Greece

Fellow villagers of Europe,

It is with great pleasure and satisfaction that we find ourselves once again amongst you, our friends, loyal to the aims of the Charter of the Villages which we signed in December 1999 at Wijk aan Zee in Holland.

I must confess that I feel a little uncomfortable in that I am obliged to re-iterate matters that are self-evident to the majority of us; matters which we expressed with such clarity when we drew up the Charter of the Villages.

I believe that the starting point in my thoughts, and yours, is our common concern for not only the survival, but the development of our villages and their societies, with all their peculiarities and unique problems.

In the Charter of the Villages, we stated that our villages stand out, primarily because:

- They are characterized by their small size, economically, culturally and with regard to their population; although let us not forget - small is beautiful!
- The participation of the inhabitants in various activities is always voluntary and on a very personal level.
- Culture is something that concerns everyone - traditions and cultural heritage are continually evolving.

Unfortunately today, the above special characteristics (which are also our strengths) are under threat. On one side, the large towns and cities, who are already in past decades have bled dry their most vital resource, that of human dynamism, especially that of the young and energetic. On the other side, we have universal standardization which is already greatly affecting our lives. To sum up in two words: urbanization and standardization. In both cases, if no real resistance is encountered, it will be all too easy for the core identity of the 'village' to be lost. The balance of centuries, which includes the simultaneous evolutionary process responsible for local colour and cultural identity, would be seriously disturbed.

There has already been a substantial infiltration of influence and ideas from the world outside 'the village' and this input has been viewed as something to emulate. If this emulation continues unchecked 'the village', as we know it today, will change radically, becoming simply a bad copy of 'the town'. In all small communities such as our villages, local government and the various associations have a large and difficult role to play. They not only act as a filter for outside influences and as a center of resistance, but also as a seat for the birth of ideals and the creation of culture which have to be 'exported' to the starved (in every sense of the word) cities. Naturally, we cannot shut the door in the face of positive and constructive progress, but we need to choose carefully what is useful to us and mould it to our needs thereby avoiding corrupting the character of our small communities. I truly believe the time has come for us to become the prototype for life in the cities, something that will demand stubbornness and hard work to achieve.

Today we are reaping all the benefits of the intensive farming methods used in Europe over the past years. Mad cow disease, dioxin poisoning, foot and mouth disease are all the products of a production process which does not have as its aim human needs, but economic gain. We believe that such agricultural growth, which destroys the environment we live in and seriously affects the quality of the food we consume, is a dead end. Sooner or later all of us, towns and villages alike, will have to face this dead end. Thankfully there are still people and countries that resist.

A move towards agricultural growth without the aid of chemical assistance, without the 'imprisonment' of animals and with a more immediate relationship between producer-consumer, has already started in Europe. It is probably a little extravagant to claim that this provides an immediate solution to the problem, however it is the right and only direction to move in. Already many consumers are demanding ecologically-friendly produce and as this demand grows, it will encourage farmers to return to more gentle and environmentally friendly production methods. The role of the village thus becomes a primary one, both in this area and also in that of environmental protection. Decision-making, in this essential role, often presents a dilemma to those involved, when local economics have to be added into the equation.

Over the last decade on Paxos, our greatest achievement has been the stopping, by the local community, of aerial spraying of the olives with toxic pesticides and a reduction in the use of chemical fertilizers. Over 2.2 square kilometers of olives and vines are now cultivated ecologically. However, although the problem then becomes one of promoting and making available the produce, this in no way detracts from the fact that a start has been made and an example have taken things even further than we have. Unfortunately, the road towards extensive use of ecological methods in agriculture is a long and bumpy one. Too many interests are at stake, bureaucratic problems and any progress can chiefly be attributed to the conscious decisions made by both producers and consumers.

The institution of the Cultural Villages in a unique and promising conception that began as an attempt by some visionaries to provide a voice for part of our society. In the short time we have been active, we have already achieved several goals. Firstly we contacted people from various countries with different lifestyles and degrees of development, and ascertained the existence of common values or common problems. We then saw how easy it was to converse with one another, to agree, to make joint decisions and especially to have fun and enjoy one another's company.

The Charter of the Villages, which we drew up together, is certainly our greatest achievement so far. It is difficult for the concepts expressed in the Charter to become known to a wider audience and thus to eventually embrace the whole world. Certainly we would wish to move further forward and become better known. The difficulties we are encountering in our task originate precisely from the very way of life we are trying to avoid.

Impersonal bureaucracy, a lack of fundamental democracy at every level of government and the indifference of citizens to anything requiring voluntary participation or effort are the thorns strewn in our way. However, I see you all here once again and take strength from this and the belief that our long-term endeavor will be productive. This is shown by our persistence and stubbornness in supporting our beliefs from every corner of Europe, in spite of the adversities which present themselves with every move we make. We should not be discouraged by the slow pace at which our concept progresses, or by the difficulty our fellow man has in comprehending our aims. Maybe we will not be the ones to change the world, but if nothing else, our efforts will act as the foundation to support others with the same aim in the future.

Our tour in the summer of 2001 will act as our ambassador, conveying the spirit, the concepts and the daily routine of our small but humane communities, to every region we pass through.

The relationships between our villages have gone way beyond a simple fraternization and this has been proven over the past few years. Naturally, such a union lends more weight, more presence to our villages, perhaps even securing the economic subsidies that are vital in our struggle to achieve certain goals. Without disagreeing as such, I must confess to a certain skepticism, if only the fear that maybe such recognition would make us complacent and we would lose the initial spontaneity and vision we have driven us up to now. I fervently hope that all will proceed smoothly and that we will continue our efforts without prejudice and inhibitions.

Man was born in nature, raised in her embrace, developed a soul and achieved great things.

Culture was born in the villages and from the villages emerged great ideas; architecture, the creation of ideals such as democracy, solidarity and humanity etc.

We have said it many times, and we say it again - villages are the fundamental unit of society and they should be supported and strengthened. Disturbing this natural harmony would have an extremely destructive effect on the structure of our society. Without villages there is no future; villages are the hope of the world and we, as the soul of those villages, continue our struggle.