

# WHY TWELVE? – THE HISTORY AND THE MEANING OF THE TWELVE STARS ON THE EU'S FLAG

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## ABSTRACT

*More than fifty years after its adoption by the Council of Europe and some thirty years after its adoption by certain institutions of the then European Communities – the predecessor of the European Union –, there are doubts about the origin and meaning of the European Union's flag and also about the connection with today's European Union. The author of the current article strives to answer these questions by examining the alleged Catholic symbolism of the flag and the circumstances and motivations of its adoption by the European Communities.*

## KEYWORDS

*Flag of Europe  
Marian flag  
twelve stars  
Council of Europe  
European Union  
Catholic symbol  
Strasbourg  
Heitz  
Lévy  
Delors*

## 1. The history of the flag and its meaning

### 1.1. The underlying questions

More than fifty years after its adoption by the Council of Europe (CoE) and some thirty years after its adoption by certain institutions of the then European Communities, there are still some doubts about the meaning of the flag of the European Union (EU) and the exact origin of the design. Why does the flag of the European Union only have 12 stars instead of 27?<sup>2</sup> What do the stars in the flag symbolise? Also, the identity of the designer

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2 | The actual number of states in the EU as of March 2024.



can be established only with a high probability according to statement of Paul-Henri Spaak – one of the CoE's Founding Fathers –, who claimed that the idea of the circle of stars was the outcome of parallel proposals, and so it was not possible to attribute the design to one specific person.<sup>3</sup> – However, the latter can be refuted as elaborated on below.

What makes the history of the flag more interesting is its adoption by the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the EU: while the CoE recommended its own flag for adoption from the very beginning – that is a few days after its adoption by the CoE – for the then already existing European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and repeated the recommendation for the EEC after its establishment, the latter searching for its own identity refused it, despite some of its leaders were in favour of the idea of the common symbol. The then pros and cons are still valid: a common symbol that expresses Europe's unity versus the risk that common people confuse these organisations. The EEC only adopted it as its own symbol in the 1980's, when Jacques Delors – probably the most influential Commission president up to this date – decided to do so. In the same time the CoE – the original owner of the design – decided to include a distinctive mark, namely a stylised 'E' letter into its emblem – but not in the flag – in order to make it distinct. The choice was not without historic precedents: the flag with the letter 'E' was one of the first symbols of the European project, however it was never adopted officially.

### | 1.2. *Historical oversight of the 'procurement procedure'*

In order to answer the above questions, one has to 'travel back' to 1949, when the CoE was established, since the official flag of the EU was designed under the CoE's aegis. The CoE was established with the strong backing of Winston Churchill. Its aim was 'to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress'. Ten states signed the initial declaration: Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. By 1955 there were 14 full members (with the addition of Turkey, Greece, Iceland and West Germany) and one associate member (the Saarland).<sup>4</sup> – The status of the latter played a role in the choice on the number of the stars.

After its creation, the CoE wanted an emblem or a flag to represent itself. The 'procurement procedure' of the flag can be well-traced due to the fact that CoE's website offers a rich archive with notes, memorandums of the then leaders and also recommendations and resolutions of CoE bodies.<sup>5</sup> On 23 November 1949 Baron Paul Michel Gabriel Lévy, the then Director of Information at the CoE sent a minute<sup>6</sup> to Jacques-Camille Paris, the first Secretary General of the CoE in which Lévy shared his thoughts about the pressing need for an emblem for the CoE. In his view, the lack of an emblem poses the risk of the further use of the flag of the European Movement attributed to Baron Duncan-Sandys.<sup>7</sup> The problem with the flag of Duncan-Sandys lied in the fact that it represented a federalist

3 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 81.

4 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 81.

5 | The CoE Archive is available on the CoE's website [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cvce.eu/en/collections/eisc/european-organisations> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

6 | Minute of Paul Michel Gabriel Lévy, the then Director of Information at the CoE to Jacques-Camille Paris, the first Secretary General, 23 November 1949. (CoE Archive).

7 | A conservative politician and the son-in-law of Winston Churchill.

organisation, which strived for the creation of the United States of Europe. – Therefore, this flag is also called as the ‘federalist flag’.



The ‘federalist flag’<sup>8</sup>

The CoE invited suggestions from the public. Several proposals were submitted. Hereby the author introduces some of the most notable designs. Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi – the president of the Pan-European Movement – in a Memorandum of July 1950<sup>9</sup> presented to the CoE, argued in favour of his design with the Blue Sky, the Sun and the Red Cross. In his opinion the future flag of the CoE should comply the following conditions: should be a symbol of common civilisation and present a European emblem instead of provoking any national rivalry, should represent tradition and should be beautiful and dignified. In his view the flag of the Pan-European Movement designed back in the twenties complied these criteria. In his view the Blue Sky is the natural background of the Sun and represents peace, while the Sun is the eternal symbol of light, spirit, progress, prosperity and truth. The Red Cross is the world-wide recognised symbol of charity and brotherhood of man. In his view the Cross is the symbol of Europe’s moral unity and inseparable from Europe’s history and civilisation,<sup>10</sup> which could not be opposed by the non-Christian minority. Although he did not name them, but he most probably referred to the Turkish,<sup>11</sup> who opposed the use of cross from the very beginning. In his letter of February 1952 Filippo Caracciolo – the then Deputy Secretary General of the CoE – suggested that a crescent could be added in the upper left-hand by Muslim countries.<sup>12</sup> While initially it did have a support among the decision makers, later it was decided that using a cross

8 | Old flag of the European movement. Madden, Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Flags\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Union#/media/File:Old\\_flag\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Movement.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Flags_of_the_European_Union#/media/File:Old_flag_of_the_European_Movement.svg).

9 | Memorandum presented to the Council of Europe by Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, President of the Pan-European Movement, Secretary General of the European Parliamentary Union (Gstaad, 27 July 1950) (CoE Archive).

10 | In the Memorandum he also claims that the Sun with the Cross has Celtic and Germanic origins.

11 | As the Christian minorities in the Near East do not oppose the national symbols of the Crescent and the Star of David. – He added.

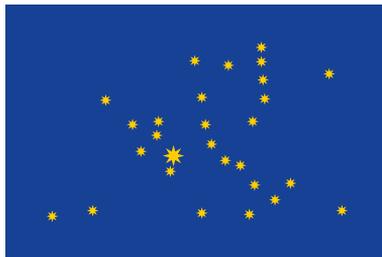
12 | Letter from Filippo Caracciolo to the Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE, Strasbourg, 7 December 1951. (CoE Archive).

– an overtly Christian symbol which is unacceptable for Muslims<sup>13</sup> – is contraindicated given that the CoE was supposed to create international unity and reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>



The flag proposal of Coudenhove-Kalergi<sup>15</sup>

It also appears that, by means of two letters dated, respectively, 25 January 1952 and 13 February 1952, the former Spanish diplomat, Salvador de Madariaga, who at the time was President of the European Centre for Culture, put forward a design for a flag with a blue background on which there were a number of gold stars on an imaginary map of Europe, indicating the capitals of the Member States – which were independent in 1938 –, with a larger star denoting Strasbourg.



The flag proposal of Salvador de Madariaga<sup>16</sup>

While the CoE Secretariat criticised the proposal for being too intellectual – that is being hard to be understood by an average citizen – it welcomed the colour combination of gold and blue, which led to another design: a wreath of fifteen golden stars on a blue background. The number of the stars would represent the actual number of the Member States just like in case of the United States' flag. Germany objected because the 15<sup>th</sup> star

13 | For a theological explanation please see: Cliteur, 2019, pp. 195–196; see also: Fatoohi, 2023, p. 70.

14 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 82.

15 | Coudenhove-Kalergi's Europe Flag Proposal. Swiätópôtk, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coudenhove-Kalergi%27s\\_Europe\\_Flag\\_Proposal.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coudenhove-Kalergi%27s_Europe_Flag_Proposal.svg).

16 | Salvador de Madariaga Flag Proposal (01 December 1951). Germenfer, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salvador\\_de\\_Madariaga\\_Flag\\_Proposal\\_\(01\\_December\\_1951\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salvador_de_Madariaga_Flag_Proposal_(01_December_1951).svg).

would have stood for the Saarland, which Germany claimed it as its own sovereign territory. The Germans argued that there should only be 14 stars. France insisted that the Saarland must get its own star. After months of argument, it was agreed as a compromise that the number of the stars should not represent the number of the Member States.<sup>17</sup>



A flag proposal with 15 stars<sup>18</sup>

Having considered the above, one has to conclude that the stars do not stand for individual countries. They never did. So, where do the 12 stars come from and who is the intellectual father of the design? The CoE Archives hold numerous designs attributed to Arsène Heitz,<sup>19</sup> an employee in the internal mail service of the CoE. His sketches show blue flags with yellow stars in various numbers (from 11 to 15) and arranged in various ways. One of the designs shows the current one,<sup>20</sup> which Heraldic description is the following: 'On an azure field a circle of twelve golden mullets, their points not touching.'

In January 1955, the Committee of Ministers meeting at Deputy level decided to select just two designs, one with the circle of twelve stars, attributed to Heitz, and the other with the constellation of stars proposed by de Madariaga. The preferred choice of the Deputies was Heitz's design, which was finally adopted by the Assembly and by the Council of Ministers on 8 December 1955.<sup>21</sup>

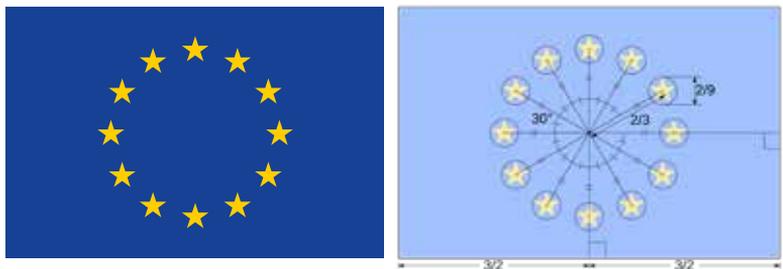
17 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 82.

18 | Proposed 15-star flag of Europe (1953). Alsacht, CC BY-SA 4.0. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Proposed\\_15-star\\_flag\\_of\\_Europe\\_\(1953\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Proposed_15-star_flag_of_Europe_(1953).png).

19 | The flag proposals of Heitz are available in the CoE Archive [Online]. Available at: [https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/proposals\\_for\\_european\\_flags\\_from\\_arsene\\_heitz\\_1952\\_1955-en-3c8f111a-6be6-4111-a433-20f1a7f9fdb.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/proposals_for_european_flags_from_arsene_heitz_1952_1955-en-3c8f111a-6be6-4111-a433-20f1a7f9fdb.html) (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

20 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 81.

21 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 82.



The winner design and its geometric description<sup>22</sup>

Credit for the design of the flag is given basically to Heitz, who in any case did the artwork for the first flag produced, according to the CoE's own website. Arsène Heitz himself, in 1987, claimed that his role in designing the flag was of paramount importance. Father Pierre Caillon, who refers to a meeting with Arsène Heitz tells of having met the former CoE employee in August 1987 at Lisieux in front of the Carmelite monastery. It was Heitz who stopped him and declared 'I was the one who designed the European flag'. Carlos Eduardo Cossermelli also credits Heitz with being the author of the design. Following in the footsteps of Father Caillon, Cossermelli went to Strasbourg on 13 February 1998 and met the 84-year-old widow of Arsène Heitz, who did not deny the role played by her husband in the design of the flag. Moreover, the issue of three postage stamps by the French postal services in 1975 – on the twentieth anniversary of the flag's adoption – could be seen as further confirmation of Arsène Heitz's involvement: a photograph of Heitz and the caption 'Coauthor and designer of the European flag' appeared on the stamps.

Who was the other co-author? Paul Lévy, the Director of Press and Information Services of the CoE at the time claimed the credit too. Actually, Lévy claimed all the credit for the proposal himself and tried to portray Heitz's efforts as insignificant: 'Arsène Heitz, who was an employee in the mail service, put in all sorts of proposals, including the 15-star design. But he submitted too many designs.'<sup>23</sup> In a 1995 video-interview<sup>24</sup> taken in front of the Palace of Europe (*Palais de l'Europe*) Lévy answering the reporter's question neither denied that the flag was his design nor wasted a single word to credit Heitz's efforts. However, evidence show that Lévy could not be credited with the design. Instead, he should be credited with being a firm supporter of the idea of adopting a flag and the one who had the patience and determination to carry out the whole symbolic operation of the choice of flag by the CoE between 1949 and 1955. Also, he was the one, who pursued his efforts up until 1966 trying to get the European Communities to adopt the flag. Some others argue that the credits for the design should be attributed to Gerard Slevin, at that time assistant to the Chief Herald of Ireland and one of the heraldry experts of the

22 | Left picture: Flag of the European Union. Council of Europe, Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_Europe.svg#Licensing](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Europe.svg#Licensing). Right picture: EU Flag specification. Ssolbergj, CC BY-SA 3.0. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EU\\_Flag\\_specification.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EU_Flag_specification.svg).

23 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 82.

24 | European Parliament: Interview by Paul M. G. Levy on the creation of the European flag – Part 2 [Online]. Available at: [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/interview-by-paul-mg-levy-on-the-creation-of-the-european-flag-part-2\\_EP091626](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/interview-by-paul-mg-levy-on-the-creation-of-the-european-flag-part-2_EP091626) (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

Council of Ministers of the CoE. However, that theory does not hold firm, because Slevin's involvement in the work on the European flag certainly postdates the designs of Heitz. It is most likely that Slevin 'only' contributed to the drafting of the heraldic description of the European flag.<sup>25</sup>

That is to say, crediting Arsène Heitz with the original design and Lévy for his determined 'lobby work' seems to be the soundest conclusion.

### 1.3. What does the twelve stars symbolise? – The alleged Catholic symbolism in the EU flag

[The flag] is the symbol not only of the European Union but also of Europe's unity and identity in a wider sense. The circle of gold stars represents solidarity and harmony between the peoples of Europe. The number of stars has nothing to do with the number of Member States. There are twelve stars because the number twelve is traditionally the symbol of perfection, completeness, and unity.<sup>26</sup>

As the above citation from the EU's webpage shows, the contemporary explanation of European Union officially points to secular interpretations, without explicitly denying any religious meaning of the flag. The CoE's webpage on the other hand mentions some religious examples: '[the twelve stars] bringing to mind the apostles, the sons of Jacob, the labours of Hercules, the months in the year, etc.'<sup>27</sup> The flag's Catholic symbolism took on greater meaning for many who examined its origins. Some argue that there are too many 'coincidences':<sup>28</sup> first of all, both the 'Spiritual Fathers' of the flag – Arsène Heitz and Paul Lévy – and the vast majority of the Founding Fathers of the CoE were devout Catholics. Some of the latter experienced the versatility of the modern nation states' borders,<sup>29</sup> therefore according to some opinions they were pursuing the creation of a united Europe<sup>30</sup> based on anti-communism, democracy and Catholic social principles<sup>31</sup> with the Vatican's explicit support.<sup>32</sup> Also the flag was adopted on a day important for

25 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, pp. 81–82.

26 | European Flag [Online]. Available at: [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-flag\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-flag_en) (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

27 | The European flag [Online]. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/the-european-flag> (Accessed: 24 March 2024).

28 | Guth and Nelsen, 2014, pp. 1–2; pp. 9–11; Jenkins, 2014; Gogolashvili, 2021.

29 | Robert Schuman and Alcide de Gasperi both found their national identities changed by border shifts after the First World War, which suddenly made Schuman French and De Gasperi Italian. – Jenkins, 2014.

30 | As some argue the Catholic Church always preferred periods when the political order was closer to an imperial model as the Holy Roman Empires than to nation states and that the long-time 'natural political order' of Europe is not the rather young system of nation states, but empires. – Driessen, 2020; see also: Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, 2005; see also: Szabó, 2015, pp. 155–164; see also Jacques-Camille Paris' address on 24 February 1950, in Rome, on the role of the Council of Europe in the policy for European unification (CoE Archive).

31 | Jenkins, 2014.

32 | Pope Pius XII welcomed the signing of the Treaty of Rome as 'the most important and significant event in the modern history of the Eternal City' – See: Maillard, 2015; see also: Tombiński and Maria, 2017.

Catholics. – More on that later. – Based on the first point, it is not surprising that according to a research done by Guth and Nelsen the Catholics seem to display more positive attitude towards the integration than the Protestants. At least in the ‘old’ Member States. This is however not true for the ‘newer’ Member States<sup>33</sup> and the Holy See is seemingly displaying a less Europe-centric attitude recently.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, the shade of blue chosen for the flag is associated with Mary and the gold or yellow is often used to represent the eternal glory by Catholic artists.<sup>35</sup> Last, but most importantly the wrath of the twelve golden stars resembles to a passage from Revelation 12:1: ‘A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. [...]’<sup>36</sup>

Heitz, who according to sources was member of the Order of the Medal of the Immaculate Conception,<sup>37</sup> held that his inspiration came directly from the above cited passage. While there is no direct mention of Mary’s name in the above-mentioned passage, Catholic theologians clearly identify the woman as the mother of Jesus.<sup>38</sup> At other occasion too – in August 1987 –, he emphasised the religious inspiration of his flag design: ‘the flag of Europe is the flag of Our Lady’ – as he once stated. As Father Caillon recalled a conversation with Heitz, the latter told him: ‘I suddenly had the idea of putting the 12 stars of the Miraculous Medal of the Rue du Bac on a blue field.’<sup>39</sup>

Thirdly, as mentioned above, the day of the flag’s adoption also seems to underline Catholic symbolism: the Council of Ministers adopted the flag – a day earlier than originally planned – on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>40</sup> Lévy in a 1995 video-interview claimed that it was the then Secretary-General who proposed that the resolution should be adopted on the 8 December 1955. – This in Lévy’s opinion contradicted the practice according to which final decisions were made on the closing day, which should have been the 9<sup>th</sup> of December.

Anyhow, neither the October 1955 Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE<sup>41</sup> nor the 8 December Resolution of the Committee of Ministers that adopted the flag<sup>42</sup> mention any confessional explanation for the design. The latter explains the symbolical description as follows:

33 | However, this correlation is not that straightforward in case of the ‘newer’ Member States, where the EU’s contemporary liberal social policies are met with frown. Guth and Nelsen, 2014, pp. 2–3; for a detailed analysis on the Polish perspective, please see: Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka, 2023, pp. 105–120.

34 | Relations are currently in a change between secularised Europe and the Catholic Church lead by a non-European, thus less Euro-centric Pope. See: Maillard, 2015.

35 | Guth and Nelsen, 2014, p. 9.

36 | Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%2012&version=NIV> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

37 | Guth and Nelsen, 2014, p. 10.

38 | Die Welt: Der Sternenkrans ist die Folge eines Gelübdes, 1998.

39 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005a, p. 82.

40 | Guth and Nelsen, 2014, p. 10.

41 | Recommendation 88 (1955) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE on the Emblem of the Coe, 25 October 1955 (CoE Archive).

42 | Resolution (55) 32 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 8 December 1955. (CoE Archive).

Against the blue sky of the Western world, the stars symbolise the peoples of Europe in the form of a circle, the sign of union. The stars are twelve in number and are invariable, the figure twelve being the symbol of perfection and entirety.

Actually, all of those allegations pointing to confessional reasons by Heitz were made much later: by the time of designing and adopting the flag neither Heitz nor Lévy mentioned any Catholic connection. Later, Lévy denied religious inspirations. However, some sources allege that he was 'obsessed' with creating a twelve-star flag after he saw statue of St. Mary in Strasbourg Cathedral. The most probable reason for not revealing Catholic religious inspirations is given by an interview taken with Heitz's widow who explained the 'discretion' about the flag's Catholic origins:

It was necessary to keep the secret, because there is not only the Catholic religion in Europe. Not to mention all the atheists who would have had his project rejected, starting with France, a secular state by nature.<sup>43</sup>

Her words are justified by the reluctance of some Scandinavian countries to join the EU's predecessor, claiming that it is a Catholic organisation under the Vatican's influence.<sup>44</sup> While it is hard to deny the Catholic influence on the integration project<sup>45</sup> it is worth mentioning that this is an oversimplification of the issue: e.g. in the case of Finland other considerations too, played a role.<sup>46</sup> As a further example for the Catholic symbolism of the flag, in the contemporary France certain members of the parliament regularly try to remove the EU flag from the National Assembly of France. In 2017 Jean-Luc Melenchon – leader of the far-left 'La France Insoumise' – wrote to President Macron:

Mr. President, you do not have the right to impose a confessional European emblem on France. The refusal of the 2005 Constitutional Treaty, in which this emblem was proposed, is worth the decision of the French people on the subject.<sup>47</sup>

43 | Vandel, 2014.

44 | Guth and Nelsen, 2014, pp. 1–2.

45 | Driessen, 2020.

46 | The model of 'Finlandisation' was named after the Finns who – after the Second World War in a 1948 treaty with the Soviet Union (Ystävyys-, yhteistyö- ja avunantosopimus) – in exchange for Moscow's promise to respect Finland's independence undertook to pursue a neutral foreign policy. The latter was not only a military neutrality, but also the renunciation of European integration. See: Britannica: Finland – The postwar period [Online]. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Finland/Nordic-cooperation> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

47 | Fofana [Online]; Durand, 2017.

It is also worth mentioning that the Joy to Ode – the non-official hymn of the EU<sup>48</sup> – is often mistaken with the Catholic hymn Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee and perceived as another proof of the integration's Catholic roots by the Protestants. Furthermore, Guth and Nelsen argue that the prevalence of religious iconography on the Euro banknotes and coins are also a sign of the religious origins.<sup>49</sup>

What is more interesting that the Turkish delegation, while showed determined opposition of featuring a cross on the flag – as an offensive symbol for those with Islamic faith –, never opposed the chosen flag design with the wrath of twelve golden stars on an azure background. One may wonder if they did not realise its alleged Catholic symbolisms, or they realised and accepted it as the Islam also acknowledges Mary as the mother of Jesus, a prophet in the Islamic religion.<sup>50</sup>

Not everybody sees the flag as a confessional symbol, however. In 1990 Václav Havel – who was the President of the former Czechoslovakia at that time – gave a more modest interpretation in his address to the Parliamentary Assemblé of the CoE:

To me, the 12 stars in your emblem do not express the proud conviction that the Council will build heaven on this earth. There will never be heaven on earth. I see these 12 stars as a reminder that the world could become a better place if, from time to time, we had the courage to look up at the stars.

As Eckart Klein notes in his writing on the CoE's symbols: 'it is certainly true for this emblem as well as for all other symbols that they not only tend to reflect what has already been done but what should still be achieved.'<sup>51</sup>

#### | **1.4. The symbols of the Cathedral of Strasbourg as possible inspirations**

As mentioned in the above point, Heitz claimed that he took the inspiration from religious artefacts. First of all, from the European stained-glass window that is the altar window of the Cathedral of Strasbourg (*Cathédrale Notre-Dame-de-Strasbourg*), which represents the Virgin dressed in blue. Seated on her lap, Baby Jesus wears a red outfit – a symbol of royalty – and in his hand, he holds a lily, an emblem of the city of Strasbourg. The upper part of the stained-glass window features the flag of the European Union: twelve gold-coloured stars on an azure blue background.<sup>52</sup>

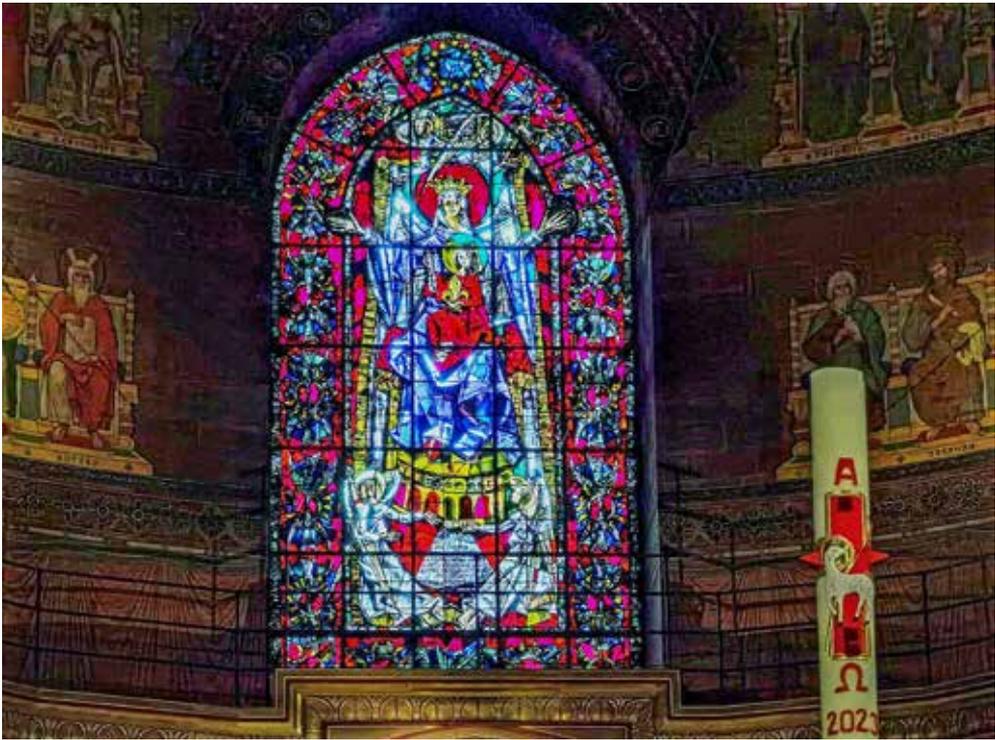
48 | While the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe – which never came into force – contained a provision on the symbols of the Union, the Lisbon Treaty is silent on the matter. However, sixteen States – namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic – declared in declaration No. 53. that 'The flag with a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background, the anthem based on the 'Ode to Joy' from the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven, the motto 'United in diversity', the euro as the currency of the European Union and Europe Day on 9 May will for them continue as symbols to express the sense of community of the people in the European Union and their allegiance to it.' (OJ 2007 C 326/337).

49 | Guth and Nelsen, 2014, p. 11.

50 | However, her story and its interpretation differ from that offered by the Bible, including the significance of Jesus. For a detailed theological explanation please see: Leghaei, no date; see also: Samaha, no date.

51 | Klein, 2017, p. 6.

52 | Guernie, 2023.



The window above the main altar made by Max Ingrand<sup>53</sup>

Some theories suggest that Heitz was inspired by the ‘European stained-glass window’ of the Cathedral of Strasbourg, however these allegations do not stand firm if one considers that the flag was adopted in 1955 and the glass stained window was a gift of the CoE in 1956 – an idea attributed to Jacques-Camille Paris – to replace the old one, which was destroyed during the Second World War, and that the new altar window is not a replica of the old one, it is a contemporary piece of art – made by Max Ingrand<sup>54</sup> – showing a different motif<sup>55</sup>.

53 | Strasbourg - Notre-Dame de Strasbourg - Choir - Le vitrail de l'Europe (The Europe Stained Glass Window) 1956 by Max Ingrand (1908-1969). Txllxt TxllxT, CC BY-SA 4.0. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Strasbourg\\_-\\_Notre-Dame\\_de\\_Strasbourg\\_-\\_Choir\\_-\\_Le\\_vitrail\\_de\\_l%E2%80%99Europe\\_\(The\\_Europe\\_Stained\\_Glass\\_Window\)\\_1956\\_by\\_Max\\_Ingrand\\_\(1908-1969\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Strasbourg_-_Notre-Dame_de_Strasbourg_-_Choir_-_Le_vitrail_de_l%E2%80%99Europe_(The_Europe_Stained_Glass_Window)_1956_by_Max_Ingrand_(1908-1969).jpg).

54 | For an introduction of the artist, please visit: Max Ingrand: French designer, glassworker, and decorator. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.casatigallery.com/designers/max-ingrand/> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

55 | Please see the original altar window: Massiot, G., & cie. (1910). Strasbourg Cathedral: View of nave looking towards apse and altar. [Online]. Available at: <https://curate.nd.edu/show/1c18df68770> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

Based on the CoE's press release from 1956 the CoE's intention with the gift was to symbolise a unified Europe:

It will be both an important landmark in the work of restoration of the Cathedral and a historical reminder of the efforts towards European union made at Strasbourg and of the first Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, the late Jacques-Camille Paris.<sup>56</sup>

It is also clear from the press release that, the CoE tried to emphasise the secular nature of this symbol and the event by – somewhat surprisingly for an inauguration ceremony held in a church – dispensing with a mass: 'The ceremony in the Cathedral will be partly secular and partly religious. It will not be a Mass, the Chapter<sup>57</sup> having agreed to change the hours of Sunday services.'<sup>58</sup>

There are other Marian symbols both inside and on the facade of the Cathedral, which Heitz could have seen and could have been served as an inspiration: there is a statue of St. Mary with a halo of 12 golden stars around her head inside the Cathedral. There is another Marian statue on the Cathedral's outside facade. Heitz himself claimed that he was inspired by the religious motif of these statues when creating the flag.<sup>59</sup> – This time there is no anachronism in the story, since these artefacts were created well before the December of 1955.



Statue of St. Mary inside (left) and outside (right)<sup>60</sup>

56 | CoE Press Release IP/1009 PL/MG 17/10/56 (CoE Archive).

57 | According to both Catholic and Anglican canon law, a cathedral chapter is a college of clerics (chapter) formed to advise a bishop.

58 | CoE Press Release IP/1009 PL/MG 17/10/56.

59 | Gogolashvili, 2021.

60 | Left picture: Statue of Virgin Mary in the transept of the cathedral of Strasbourg, France. Created 1858/9, restored 1899, 1934, 1954 and 1998. Tangopaso, Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://hu.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/F%C3%A1jl:Statue\\_of\\_Virgin\\_Mary\\_in\\_the\\_Cathedral\\_of\\_Strasbourg.jpg](https://hu.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/F%C3%A1jl:Statue_of_Virgin_Mary_in_the_Cathedral_of_Strasbourg.jpg). Right picture: Statue de la Vierge et l'Enfant Cathédrale de Strasbourg. André Alliot, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue\\_de\\_la\\_Vierge\\_et\\_l%27Enfant\\_Cath%C3%A9drale\\_de\\_Strasbourg.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_de_la_Vierge_et_l%27Enfant_Cath%C3%A9drale_de_Strasbourg.jpg).

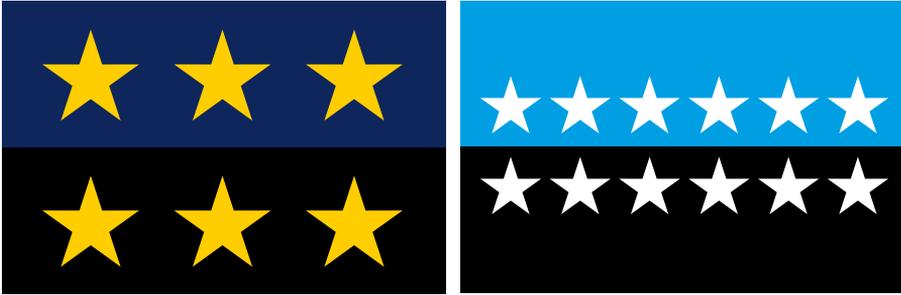
## 2. 'Grand Theft Flag' or rather the acceptance of a long-standing offer?

Just like CoE, the newly established ECSC and the EEC eagerly sought for a symbol, which could represent the idea of Europe for every European people independently from their nationality and religion. The problem was that the 'perfect flag' was already owned by another institution. While the CoE always advocated that the other European integrational organisations should adopt its flag, both the ECSC and the EEC was reluctant to adopt the CoE flag in the beginning since they wanted a unique and distinctive symbol. While the ECSC found one and used until its winding-up, the EEC after almost thirty years of reluctance opted for the full-fledged adoption of the CoE flag.

### | 2.1. *The early years*

Shortly after the adoption of the flag with the blue background and the golden stars on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception – namely 8th December –, the then Secretary General of the CoE – Léon Marchal – sent letters to René Mayer, the then President of the ECSC High Authority and René Sergent, the then Secretary-General of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) informing them on the choice of the flag. He also expressed his hope that their organisations would adopt similar emblems.<sup>61</sup> The ECSC, perceiving itself as supranational organisation working towards a federation, did not want to adopt the symbol of a 'simple' intergovernmental organisation such as the CoE. The OEEC refused to adopt the emblem for quite the opposite reason: in its view the CoE was aimed at creating a political union that did not respect national sovereignty. Instead of the CoE flag, the ECSC adopted a flag with six gold stars on a half black, half blue background. The ECSC chose the 'American-way' of increasing the number of the stars with the new entries ending up with twelve silver stars by the time it was lowered on 23 July 2002 on the day of the ECSC Treaty's final expiry.

61 | Guth and Nelson, 2014, p. 9.



The original and the final version of the ECSC flag.<sup>62</sup>

Walter Hallstein, the first president of the EEC Commission, proposed the examination of the adoption of an official symbol for the Communities, that is the ECSC, the EEC and the Euratom. In his view a flag was needed not only for prestige reasons, but for practical and operational ones. As he pointed out: the lack of any symbol of identity had been particularly apparent during the official events where the Presidents of the three European executives took part.<sup>63</sup> Marinus Van der Goes van Naters, was appointed as rapporteur to examine this issue in his report. In his first report of November 1959,<sup>64</sup> the rapporteur focused on the right of legation, the question of flag was a secondary issue in the report. However, a note of the then Secretary-General of the CoE – Lodovico Benvenuti – was attached to the report in which the Secretary-General claimed that the CoE in no way claims exclusive right to the use of the flag with blue background and the twelve golden stars, since it is the symbol of whole Europe. On the contrary: he suggested that the EEC should not adopt a flag with six stars, since than a comparison would surely be made between the number of the stars and the number of the Member States. He concluded that the number of the stars should be symbolic – that is twelve – while at the same time, every institution should be free to place symbols or acronyms on the flag. In his supplementary report of October 1960<sup>65</sup> Van der Goes van Naters placed greater emphasis on the flag claiming that it was a mistake not devoting the necessary attention to the issue of the flag in the previous report and confuted Lodovico Benvenuti's arguments annexed

62 | Left picture: Flag of the former European Coal and Steel Community, six star version. Holek, Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Coal\\_and\\_Steel\\_Community\\_6\\_Star\\_Version.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_European_Coal_and_Steel_Community_6_Star_Version.svg).

Right picture: Flag of the former European Coal and Steel Community, twelve star version used since 1986 onwards. Holek, Public Domain. Source of picture: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Coal\\_and\\_Steel\\_Community\\_12\\_Star\\_Version.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_European_Coal_and_Steel_Community_12_Star_Version.svg).

63 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005b, p. 2.

64 | Marinus Van der Goes van Naters, Report on behalf of the Political Affairs and Institutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliamentary Assembly on the problems posed by the European Communities' external relations, in particular the right of legation and flag (9 November 1959) (CoE Archive).

65 | Supplementary note to the Report on the problems posed by the relations of the European Communities with the outside world, in particular the right of legation and flag (October 1960) presented by Mr van der Goes van Naters (Doc. No. 87) (CoE Archive).

to the previous report. The rapporteur argued that the flag with the blue background and the twelve golden stars is not the symbol of Europe: it is the symbol of the CoE. – This allegation is supported by Lévy's statement in the above cited 1995 interview, where he said that the ministers insisted that it is not the symbol of Europe, but the symbol of the CoE. – Furthermore, Benvenuti's idea to use the flag with distinctive symbols or acronyms would confuse the public and would lead to assumptions that the EEC institutions are part of the CoE.<sup>66</sup> The rapporteur argued in favour of the six yellow stars on a blue background and suggested the CoE's stability practice that is keeping the number of the stars constant regardless of later accessions to the community.

A month later the issue was discussed during a plenary debate in the European Parliamentary Assembly of the EEC – called as the European Parliament since 1962 – where the majority of the representatives could only agree in one thing: organising a competition in order to select a distinctive flag for the European Communities.<sup>67</sup> While some initial steps were taken – namely a meeting took place with the potential experts who would sit as the jury<sup>68</sup> – the competition was never realised and for some twenty years the issue was off the agenda.<sup>69</sup> – It is not hard to see how this time almost coincides with the twenty years of the so called 'Eurosclerosis'.

## | 2.2. *The Impetus in 1979 and the 'Battle of Commissions'*

The issue of the flag gained momentum in 1979, when the European Parliament was first elected by universal and direct suffrage. A motion for a resolution was tabled on 31 October 1979 by Ingo Friedrich and other MEPs from the Christian-Democratic Group (EPP).<sup>70</sup> The motion concerned the adoption of a European flag for the EEC. The heraldic description was absolutely identical to the CoE flag although neither the CoE nor the CoE resolution adopting that flag was mentioned in the proposal. On 5 November 1979, the motion for a resolution was put before the Political Affairs Committee. The committee's report suggested that the European Parliament should reach an agreement with the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE with a view to the complementary and cooperative

66 | 'No one can be expected to wear the tie of another club' – as the rapporteur quoted a member of the British Parliament.

67 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005b, pp. 4–5.

68 | Note for the Chairman of the Political Affairs Committee of the European Parliamentary Assembly (Brussels, 13 February 1961) (CoE Archive).

69 | By all means, on certain occasions, the issue of a common flag was raised: at the 1970 Universal Exhibition in Osaka (Japan), the EEC was represented by a flag with six gold stars. In 1973, the European Parliament adopted its own emblem with a blue background and the letters 'EP' and 'PE' placed at the centre of a golden laurel wreath linked by three rings. It was later replaced by the twelve stars. – It is hard not to see the similarity with the CoE's suggestions. – In May 1975, a flag was flown at the Palais des Congrès in Brussels. The flag featured twelve stars at its centre, plus a thirteenth having double the diameter of the others. It is also worth mentioning two initiations: first, the Commission launched a competition in late 1972 open to professional graphic designers and draughtsmen in the Member States and the candidate countries. In this case, the purpose was not to design a flag but an emblem to be used largely for publicity purposes. As the second initiation, in 1978 the MEPs Colette Flesch and Hans Jürgen Klinker proposed that the Community should be represented by a European flag at the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980. The Commission cast a chill over the company: it reiterated that there were no plans in this respect. See: Curti-Gialdino, 2005b, pp. 5–6.

70 | European Parliament, session documents 1979-1980, doc.1-454/79 (CoE Archive).

nature of the two institutions. In the opinion of Kai-Uwe von Hassel separate symbols may jeopardise the sense of unity. Others were of different opinion, however: some claimed that adopting the same flag would result in confusion and that it is the proof of the lack of ideas.

A resolution was adopted by the European Parliament almost four years later, on 11 April 1983,<sup>71</sup> with 50 votes in favour, 19 against and four abstentions. It was decided to ask the Chairman of the Political Affairs Committee to contact the chairman of the appropriate committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE on the issue. On 28 April 1983, the Secretary-General of the European Parliament, Hans-Joachim Hopitz, forwarded the resolution to Franz Karasek the Secretary-General of the CoE. Karasek welcomed the European Parliament's resolution on the adoption of the flag. The Bureau of the European Parliament decided on 2 February 1984 to seek the opinions of the Political Affairs Committee and the Legal Affairs Committee. While the Political Affairs Committee was in favour<sup>72</sup> of the CoE's suggestion, namely that the institutions of the European Communities should adopt the CoE flag with their distinctive marks, the Legal Affairs Committee chaired by *Simone Veil*<sup>73</sup> was on a different opinion.<sup>74</sup> The opinion highlighted the risk of confusion, if the European Communities adopted the same flag as the CoE. As Veil emphasised, the public was already confused enough by the use of names that were difficult to differentiate – Council of the European Communities, European Council, CoE – and by the fact that at that time the Parliamentary Assemblies of the two organisations held their plenary sittings in the same building in Strasbourg. She stressed furthermore that while the CoE and the Communities undoubtedly had 'parallel and complementary interests' and the Community treaties expressly provided for cooperation between them, they were 'distinct and independent political entities which each member of the European public should be able to recognise and distinguish'.<sup>75</sup>

In the meantime, the matter of the flag was brought before the Council of the European Communities. The German delegation – which initiated the issue before the Council –, in a view with the closeness to the end of the European Parliament's term suggested that the Council should consider adopting the CoE's flag as the flag of the Communities if an appropriate agreement could be reached between the European Parliament and the CoE. Despite the initial enthusiasm in the Council, the negative opinion of the 'Veil Committee', persuaded the Council formation not to decide on the matter before the European Parliament had come to a final decision.<sup>76</sup>

The Fontainebleau European Council<sup>77</sup> considered that it was important to promote the identity and the image of the Communities among the people of Europe. In their view

71 | OJEC 1983, C 128, p. 18.

72 | Opinion of the Political Affairs Committee, 21 March 1984 (Source: Historical Archives of the European Parliament).

73 | The first woman ever to preside the European Parliament.

74 | Opinion on the adoption of a flag for the European Community for the Bureau of Parliament, rapporteur Mrs Simone Veil, 26 April 1984, doc. PE 90.049/fin., Annex to 7 BE, meeting of the enlarged Bureau 23 May 1984, (Source: Historical Archives of the European Parliament).

75 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005b, pp. 7–8.

76 | Curti-Gialdino, 2005b, p. 9.

77 | 25–26 June 1984.

symbolic instruments like a flag and an anthem would have been appropriate tool.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, it was decided to set up an ad hoc Committee called 'People's Europe' chaired by Professor Pietro Adonnino – also a MEP at that time – made up of representatives of heads of state or government.<sup>79</sup> The Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE, welcomed<sup>80</sup> the decision of the Fontainebleau European Council to set up an ad hoc Committee on a 'People's Europe'. However, it expressed its concerns about the creation of new symbols of European identity that would add to the confusion among European citizens. Therefore, it emphasised that the symbols of the CoE 'are available for use by the Communities'.<sup>81</sup> As a 'response' to the Adonnino Committee, the Consultative Assembly of the CoE set up a Commission of Eminent Statesmen chaired Emilio Colombo.<sup>82</sup> In its first report,<sup>83</sup> the 'Colombo Commission' recommended that the Communities should adopt the CoE's European flag and the organisations should adopt other common symbols such as the European anthem and Europe day.

### 3. 'We are going to take it!'

As Jacques Delors – president of the Commission 1985-1995 – mentions it in his *Mémoires*.<sup>84</sup>

On arriving at the Commission, I discovered that the institutions could not agree on the choice of a European flag. Without even trying to find out more, I accepted the proposal from the Parliament [...] I had been told that it was the flag with twelve stars of the Council of Europe. We are going to take it! [I said].

On 12 March 1986, during an 'interinstitutional' working lunch in Strasbourg attended by Pierre Pflimlin, the then President of the European Parliament, Hans Van den Broek, the then Dutch Foreign Minister and President-in-Office of the 'Foreign Affairs' of the Council, and Jacques Delors the issue of the flag was speedily resolved. Paul Collowald – who at that time served as the Director-General for Information and Public Relations of the European Parliament – has reconstructed the conversation anecdotally:

78 | The European Council also suggested considering the formation of European sports teams and the minting of a European coin, the ECU (Presidency Conclusions, Bull. EC, suppl. 7/85, p. 5).

79 | Adonnino, 1985, pp. 438–449; Barbi, 1986, pp. 79–93; Tousignant, 2005, pp. 41–59.

80 | Recommendation 994 (84) of 3 October 1984 on the future of European cooperation (CoE Archive).

81 | CoE, Parliamentary Assembly, Recommendation 994(1984), part. A(iv), reproduced by M. Gödner, *Politische Symbole der europäischen Integration*, annex 1. 28. (CoE Archive).

82 | The Commission, chaired by Emilio Colombo, had the following members: Hélène Ahrweiler, José Maria de Areilza, Pieter Dankert, Maurice Faure, Knut Frydenlund, Kai-Uwe von Hassel, Alois Mock and Geoffrey Rippon.

83 | The Report of the Colombo Commission is reproduced in Annex I to the General policy of the Council of Europe – Future of European cooperation – Examination of the first report of the Committee of Eminent European Statesmen (Colombo Commission), Rapporteur Harald Lied, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, doc. 5455 of 13 September 1985, pp. 16–25 (especially p. 20).

84 | Arnaud, 2004, p. 632.

Delors, turned to Pflimlin and asked: 'Where shall we start, Mr President?'

Pflimlin replied: 'Let's start with the flag.'

Delors grasped the opportunity: 'Why not? What do you propose?'

Pflimlin then said: 'I propose that we take the flag as such, with no epsilon, no EP, no palms, as the flag of Europe, since the institutional details are not of much interest to European citizens ...'

Delors replied: 'Agreed. I'll try to get it through...'<sup>85</sup>

Delors's firm stance and the way in which he speeded up the issue of the symbols subdued those who – even within the European Commission itself –, had reservations about the advisability of a flag identical to the flag of the CoE.<sup>86</sup> The decision was made. On 20 March 1986, the Secretary-General of the European Parliament, the representative of the Secretary-General of the Council and the Secretary-General of the Commission, to whom the matter had been delegated by their respective Presidents, met in Brussels. They adopted provisions on the use of the flag, the emblem and the anthem. As for the flag they decided that the Community and its institutions would be represented by the same flag. Any flags in use until then was withdrawn according to the decision. On 15 April 1986, the European Parliament's Bureau decided to approve the provisions establishing that the flag of the Community was the same as CoE's flag. On 29 May 1986, the European flag was the first time raised on a thirteenth mast alongside the flags of the twelve Member States before the Berlaymont in the presence of the Presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Dutch Ambassador H. J. Charles Rutten, representing the President-in-Office of the Council. The official speeches stressed the values of peace, freedom and the importance of symbols. Pflimlin noted:

If Europe is built on law and institutions, it also needs symbols. The work of Europe will only be completed if it matters to the peoples of Europe. Throughout history, the flag has been always been the symbol of nations. It is now the symbol of Europe. For nations, the flag has been a symbol of combat. Let the European flag be the symbol of the peaceful fight for the European Union!<sup>87</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the above written, one may conclude that Arsène Heitz was clearly inspired by his Catholic faith, when he designed the flag. Paul Lévy, who supported Heitz's flag proposal was most probably likewise inspired despite his denial on religious considerations in the design. Similarly, it is hard to believe that the devout Catholic Founding

85 | Van den Broek does not seem to have advanced any objection on behalf of the Council. See: Collowald, 1993, pp. 47–48.

86 | In the European Parliament, a motion for a resolution on common European symbols had been tabled by Werner Münch (CDU) and other MEPs on 21 March 1985. Again, a socialist MEP expressed sceptical opinion: P Lieselotte Seibel-Emmerling asked, however, what value symbols such as the anthem and the flag could have for citizens who saw the EEC drowning in unsaleable production surpluses. Collowald, 1993, pp. 47–48.

87 | Pflimlin, 1991, p. 412.

Fathers of the CoE did not realise the Catholic symbolism of the twelve stars against blue background and the significance of the day on which it was adopted. However, it is not that obvious that they intended to publicly emphasise the Catholic symbolism of the flag. On the contrary, they discarded flag designs that featured Christian symbolism with a view to Turkey – a country with an almost 100% Muslim population – and also with a view to the atheist citizens of Europe. Following this logic, a flag that would display a purely Catholic symbol would have been unacceptable for the Protestants as it is proven by the reluctance of some Scandinavian states to join the EEC before the 1990s. In the author's view even if someone sees Catholic symbolism in the chosen design, its greatness lies in the fact that twelve is an important symbol for almost every culture and religion, past and present. Thus, almost everybody independently from religious, political or cultural background may identify with the flag of Europe.

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