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David Sassoli, the friendly hand

Political debate is often presented in the media as a fight, and as a result citizens see a great deal of tension and aggravation between politicians. And yet, above all, politics has a human face. Even if it rarely takes up much space in public view, that human face is essential for those of us committed to improving people's lives. Politics certainly entails heartache. But there are always people to remind us of our humanity, which is why I feel fortunate to have shared my path with David Sassoli, the president of the European Parliament.

With a background in journalism, he came to politics later in his life, with a social sensitivity that always placed him firmly on the side of the most vulnerable, always open to building bridges and finding common ground, and at the same time unrelenting when it came to defending fair causes. He was always a firm voice in the defence of European values, which are social democratic values. In striving for truth, solidarity and an open and participative democracy, he always spoke out passionately against those endangering the European project and sought to connect with young people. His youthful spirit and idealism meant he broke out from the confines of institutional rigidity, by adding spontaneity and warmth to each of his official duties, in his ever-friendly and sincere manner and with humanity.

As president of the European Parliament over the last two and a half years, he had to deal with the worst crisis to hit Europe in the post-war period. The pandemic shocked us with its acute attack on public health and the economic, social and humanitarian crisis that resulted. He strove to keep the Parliament open and functioning, even when it meant staying away from his own family, steering the ship through its darkest days. Under very difficult circumstances we learned to work together, and his big smile and friendly hand would always make things so much easier. On one hand he defended the need for a European response based on solidarity, with a jointly-financed recovery fund that we were able to pass in a record time thanks to his determination. But he never forgot, not for a single moment, about those who were most in need: during the most severe lockdown he set-up a soup kitchen and a welcome centre in the Parliament's premises for women suffering gender violence.

This example of his kindness is why so many people attended the minute of silence in front of the Parliament the day he passed away. A civil servant from a different political group from my own came over to me to express his condolences, telling me how much he appreciated the good treatment that the president had always showed to them. This is only one token of the many expressions of affection that a majority in the house had for him: because David was a passionate and committed pro-European, who believed in dialogue and in the common good, and who was above all a good person with a big heart.

Life teaches us lessons, and one of the most important ones for me is that each of us is the result of the people we meet in our lives. Some individuals leave an indelible mark on us, and David lives on in those of us who were lucky enough to know him.