



Archbishop urged Christians on the continent to follow Jesus's calling

Albin Hillert/CEC

The Archbishop of Canterbury has called on Christians to be “the peacemakers of Europe” at a time of uncertainty across the continent and around the world.

Addressing the General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches, meeting in Novi Sad, Serbia, Archbishop Justin Welby spoke of the danger that “fear of the other” poses to “Christian witness and presence”.

Like other parts of the world, Europe is in a “fragile phase” and its current geo-political uncertainty is “unsettling”, the Archbishop said.

But in his speech to leaders from many different denominations, he said that churches working together can help break down the walls that others seek to build.

“The Church breaks across boundaries and frontiers as if they did not exist. By being in Christ, I am made one by God in a family that stretches around the world and crosses cultural, linguistic and ecumenical frontiers, driven by the Spirit who breaks down all the walls that we seek to erect.”

The Archbishop said that Christians had been in Europe since halfway through the first century and through that time had survived many persecutions from the Roman Empire to post World War II Eastern Europe. He told members of the Assembly that he and his wife smuggled Bibles into Romania and what was then Czechoslovakia.

“Christianity in Europe does not depend on the organisation or governance of the Church, nor does it depend on the virtue of Christians, or the blessing of circumstances,” he said. “It is assured because it depends on the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Expanding on the call of the Church, he said: “History would indicate, and the command of Jesus direct, that the Church is first to seek to be a holy community, based in order, in mutual love, in humility, service and hospitality. That all sounds good and harmless, but it is in fact something that runs directly contrary to much of what we see going on in Europe today.”

He continued: “Secondly the Church’s presence and witness must be more powerful in its unity than the centrifugal forces within Europe are powerful in their fractures. Our ecumenical endeavours are not for the sake of organisational tidiness but so that the Church is a faithful presence and witness.”

He stressed the importance for churches to be reconciled, and said that he values greatly the Conference of European Churches and the work of ecumenism. He said that reconciliation “was “immensely costly, for it involves paying for sin, and was only created by the death of Christ on the cross.

“It is a journey of generations, for our historic resentments and hatreds rise in rebellion within our hearts. It is not agreement on all things, for

that is impossible, but the acceptance of diversity, even disagreement and yet love in all things.

“Let us be the peace makers of Europe, for in making peace we will demonstrate the presence of Christ to those who do not see Him, and we will be the present taste of Christ in a world of individualism, conflict, manipulation and hatreds.

Highlighting the diversity of denominations and faiths in Europe today, the Archbishop said it is “no longer the case that to be English is to be Anglican, to be French is to be Catholic, to be Swedish is to be Lutheran, to be Romanian is to be Orthodox.”

“There are Catholics and Protestants, Orthodox and Anglican, Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians in all our countries... there are also Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and many of no faith at all.

He said this diversity was a gift, but stressed that “to live with that diversity must call for the gift of reconciliation through the church.”

“The more that people are gripped by fear of the other, and the more that those fears are played on and manipulated by political leaders, the more the Church is to exist in witness and presence demonstrating the hospitality, the humility, the service and the love in a disciplined and virtuous life.”

Read the full text of the Archbishop's speech:

'Christian Presence and Witness in Europe: An address to the Assembly of the Conference of European Churches'

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Fear is the greatest danger that afflicts Christian witness and presence. It is fear of the other that causes us to put up barriers, whether within churches, between churches and for that matter between nations. It is fear of the Other that causes us to build walls, whether spiritual or physical. It is fear of the Other that leads to divisions and eventually to the fall of civilisations.

The Christian presence in Europe has existed since halfway through the first century AD. It has survived the persecutions from the Roman Empire, it has continued through what are often in England called the Dark Ages, the early medieval period in which different tribes from outside the Empire successively overran the Western Empire, after the deposition of the last Emperor in 476.

It has even survived its own internal dissensions, including the wars in Europe of the 16th and 17th Century which killed more than 1/3 of the population of Germany. It survived the destruction of Europe in the 1940s. It survived in Eastern Europe under persecution between the late 40s and 1989; I remember smuggling bibles with my wife into Romania and what was then Czechoslovakia.

The Christians in this Serbia have suffered greatly, and the links with the Church of England, older even than the 180 years of diplomatic relations, bear witness to the compassion between Christians at times of war and persecution. There have been recent difficulties, of great pain, as all wars, especially for those whose task is to reclaim the Prince of Peace.

Christianity in Europe does not depend on the organisation or governance of the Church, nor does it depend on the virtue of Christians, or the blessing of circumstances, it is assured because it depends on the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

In AD 410 the City of Rome was invaded and sacked by Goths. In the years that followed, and in reaction to this moment, St Augustine of Hippo started to write the book that was to dominate his literary output for the remainder of his life. City of God or, in Latin, De Civitate Dei contra paganos, is set against the background of pagan despair at the fall of Rome – the gods of that age in whom the people trusted proved not to be able to protect the city from its overthrow.

Europe is not in danger of falling. And there is no sense in which I suggest that Brexit or other crises currently around will derail the European Union or bring about the downfall of Europe. To suggest that would be akin to the old English saying that when there is fog in the Channel then the continent is cut off. But Europe, like other parts of the world, is in a fragile phase. Current geo-political uncertainty is unsettling. In my part of the continent there is a nation attempting to leave the EU, on the other edges of the EU such as here there are countries and peoples keen to get in.

For Augustine the fall of Rome showed the specious nature of putting faith in the earthly city. For Augustine the benefit of being a Christian is

citizenship of an eternal city. This comes through faith in Christ.

That cannot lead to complacency. The fact that Christianity survived in Europe does not indicate that it is indestructible, but that God protects the Church that he created and loves. Christian survival within Europe is not an objective of the Church, rather it should be for the Church to be obedient to the pattern of Christ, to be Christ's hand, mouth and love in this world today.

Jesus told his disciples that they were to be salt and light (Matthew 5: 13-16), both the means of preserving the society in which the Church exists and also the source of illumination that reveals both shadow and truth, that unveils what seeks to be hidden, and illuminates what inspires.

For the Church to be effective and to continue to be blessed by God, it must speak truth to the societies that it sees around it and act in a way that is consistent with the truth it speaks. In Serbia there is much to challenge us. One of my own priorities as Archbishop is the renewal of prayer and the monastic life. Here in Serbian Orthodoxy we see the prayer of the liturgy calling all to the face of Christ, and the life of the monasteries, a true foundation of any society that seeks to be healthy.

Luther referred to the Church as both justified and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*). Taking that into account, how should the Church act and witness in the Europe of the 21st Century, where the threats are war and terrorism, indifference, individualism and potentially economic crisis?

The first thing is community. In the early 6th Century, following the fall of the Western Empire, Saint Benedict, one of the patron saints of Europe, founded the first of his monasteries at Monte Cassino. The Rule of Saint Benedict, one of the most inspired and brilliant codes of conduct for any religious community, indeed any community, provided a flexible and imaginative way of life that attracted tens of thousands of people into its obedience over the next centuries.

The Benedictine monasteries sought to be places where the virtues were practiced in humility, with hospitality, and in service to one another, imitating Christ. Their aim was above all that those who were part of them ended their lives as journeys towards Christ.

As a collateral and unintended benefit, the Benedictine monasteries and the other orders that sprang up preserved European civilisation and learning, recreated diplomacy, started universities, schools and hospitals, and were a foundation of the learning that broke through in the Renaissance.

History would indicate, and the command of Jesus direct, that the Church is first to seek to be a holy community, based in order, in mutual love, in humility, service and hospitality.

That all sounds good and harmless, but it is in fact something that runs directly contrary to much of what we see going on in Europe today.

Populist calls to preserve our way of life against the other, to put up walls and barriers, to smother dissent and disagreement, to ignore——

international obligations recognised as morally binding since Jesus spoke of the Good Samaritan, all these will be deeply challenged and will be hostile to a church that is truly itself hospitable.

On the very small stage of Lambeth Palace in London, where we welcomed a Syrian Muslim family of refugees, driven from their homes under shellfire, wounded and harried, the hate mail we received demonstrated the unpopularity even of small gestures.

Secondly the Church's presence and witness must be more powerful in its unity than the centrifugal forces within Europe are powerful in their fractures. Our ecumenical endeavours are not for the sake of organisational tidiness but so that the Church is a faithful presence and witness.

The Church breaks across boundaries and frontiers as if they did not exist. By being in Christ, I am made one by God in a family that stretches around the world and crosses cultural, linguistic and ecumenical frontiers, driven by the Spirit who breaks down all the walls that we seek to erect. My second priority as Archbishop is reconciliation. We are Ambassadors of Christ, we should be the sweet scent of holy love and reconciliation. The gift of reconciliation must call the church to unity, and thus we value greatly the CEC, and the work of ecumenism.

Reconciliation is also far more than that, it draws us into seeking to be peace makers, for they will be blessed and called the children of God.

Reconciliation is immensely costly, for it involves paying for sin, and was only created by the death of Christ on the cross. It is a journey of generations, for our historic resentments and hatreds rise in rebellion within our hearts. It is not agreement on all things, for that is impossible, but the acceptance of diversity, even disagreement and yet love in all things.

Let us be the peacemakers of Europe, for in making peace we will demonstrate the presence of Christ to those who do not see Him, and we will be the present taste of Christ in a world of individualism, conflict, manipulation and hatreds.

It is no longer the case that to be English is to be Anglican, to be French is to be Catholic, to be Swedish is to be Lutheran, to be Romanian is to be Orthodox. There are Catholics and Protestants, Orthodox and Anglican, Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians in all our countries. For that matter, there are also Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and many of no faith at all. That diversity is one of the gifts of the Europe of the EU, but to live with that diversity must call for the gift of reconciliation through the church.

The more that people are gripped by fear of the Other, and the more that those fears are played on and manipulated by political leaders, the more the Church is to exist in witness and presence demonstrating the hospitality, the humility, the service and the love in a disciplined and virtuous life which was so clearly demonstrated in the Benedictine monasteries, and which after a thousand years brought back to life the hope of a flourishing humanity.

The EU has been the greatest dream realised for human beings since the fall of the Western Roman Empire. It has brought peace, prosperity,

compassion for the poor and weak, purpose for the aspirational and hope for all its people.

It has always been challenged and always will. Brexit is only one of a number of challenges that Europe is facing and may well not be the most serious. It is complicated, but notwithstanding: a church that is confident in Christ, that hears the call of the Holy Spirit of God to presence and engagement across Europe, and that lives in the virtues of service, humility and hospitality, will be a church whose presence is assured and whose witness challenges human beings to higher standards of behaviour and calls them to faith in Christ, faith that is the route to salvation.

In its search for unity the Church challenges the divisions of our societies, in its hospitality it challenges selfishness, and fear of the other, in humility it can show how to acknowledge failure but to forgive and seek forgiveness. As Benedict saw, and Augustine dreamed, in such virtues human flourishing is founded.

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