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On being elected Pope on 13 March 2013, the Argentinian Jesuit Jorge Bergoglio became the first non-European to inherit the see of Rome in almost a thousand three hundred years.¹ Now four years a European bishop, albeit a unique one, Pope Francis has grown into this part of his new role with remarkable ease. His ministry as pontiff is to the whole world, yet Europe is the theatre in which he operates day to day. Moreover, Pope Francis has quickly made clear that he feels he has a particular mission, as pastor, to a continent in crisis, to a political project at a cross-roads and to that family of nation states which make up the EU and among whom, as Bishop of Rome, he now lives. He is quite self-assured in transmitting a message, borrowing the words of one of the EU founding fathers Alcide De Gasperi, to ‘our dear beloved continent.’

Born in Buenos Aires in 1936 as son of an Italian migrant father and a mother, also of Piedmontese stock, who was first-generation Argentinian, Pope Francis is keen to acknowledge his European roots. On receiving the *Karlspreis* from the city of Aachen for his services to the ideal of a united Europe on 6 May 2016, Pope Francis said, with emotion, that he felt ‘*like a son who discovers in Mother Europe his roots of life and faith.*’

Europe was far from being *terra incognita* to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires on his election as Pope. He had done his tertianship [final year of formation] as a Jesuit at Alcala in Spain in 1973, had spent three months in Ireland in 1980 as guest of the Jesuit community in Milltown Park after his spell as provincial superior in Argentina, and a few years later he was at the theology faculty run by the Society of Jesus at St. Georgien, Frankfurt, for a semester. Furthermore, as Archbishop and later as Cardinal, he will have been a frequent visitor to Rome. None of this necessarily implies an appreciation of how profoundly the political project, which

1 The last non-European pope was Gregory III (731-41), a native of Syria.

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evolved into today's European Union and spanned the adult life of the future Pope in Argentina, has shaped the politics, economics and culture of the greater part of his continent of adoption.

Pope Francis speaks about Europe as if it is a subject which really matters to him. Clearly, the European project cannot have the same emotional traction for Francis as it has for the native son/daughter. It is a tribute to those who have been briefing the pontiff on matters European, be that Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Archbishop Paul Gallagher at the Secretariat of State, or COMECE (Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the EU) President Cardinal Reinhard Marx, who as a member of his inner council will regularly have his ear, that Pope Francis has clearly understood just how much the European project and its future matter to the majority of EU citizens. The Pope addresses the subject of Europe with the ardour of the neophyte, casting himself in the role of concerned pastor and critical friend. His is not Olympian discourse, it is the passionate argument born of conviction.

The Pope has delivered four major speeches on Europe, three of them with the European Union clearly within his sights. The first of these was to the plenary assembly of the European Parliament [EP] at Strasbourg on 25 November 2014, the second was in the Sala Regia of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican on the occasion he was in receipt of the *Karlspreis* on 6 May 2016 and the third was again in the imposing setting of the Sala Regia on 24 March 2017, the eve of the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Treaty of Rome. The addressees on the first occasion were the 751 MEPs of the newly-elected EP, on the third occasion it was the twenty-seven heads of state and government of the EU² and the three presidents of the EU institutions, some of whom also witnessed the bestowal of the *Karlspreis*. Pope Francis addressed his remarks on Europe to those whose political mandates placed the destiny of the continent in their hands, although he made clear that through the MEP he also wished to speak to all 500 million citizens of the EU.³

At a moment when major questions hang over the EU's future and when populist rhetoric in the tabloid press and from the political right challenges its credentials even to the point of predicting its demise, Pope Francis emerges as a strong advocate of the European project. He assured the heads of state and government that he saw the EU as 'born of a clear, well-defined and carefully pondered project.' For Pope Francis the EU is a work in progress. He briskly saluted its achievements in perhaps too summary a fashion, but he

2 Theresa May, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was not in Rome for the 60th anniversary celebrations. She triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on 29 March and thus launched the Brexit process.

3 The fourth speech on Europe was also delivered in Strasbourg on 25 November 2014 and was to the plenary assembly of the Council of Europe.

was in a hurry to revisit the vision of the founding fathers, expand the understanding of a society in line with that vision and with the social teaching of the Catholic Church, and suggest the necessary components of any successful survival strategy coherent with the Union's calling.

It must have come as no surprise to his various audiences that Pope Francis insisted on Christianity's unique contribution to European culture. The 'community of values' as which the original EEC used to define itself embraces those values rooted in the gospel which are central to the European *Weltanschauung*. The European project itself was '*something completely new in human history*', the Pope insisted, '*that emerged by God's grace.*'

The founding fathers and their vision were central to Pope Francis' reflections on 24 March, above all, that aspiration voiced by Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian foreign minister in 1957, that the EEC be based '*on a particular conception of life that is humane, fraternal and just.*' When speaking to the EP in 2014 the Pope highlighted the hope which the political leaders, however bruised by war and its aftermath, had in their fellow man: men and women were capable of working together, of building bridges and of fostering peace and fellowship.

'ELDERLY AND HAGGARD'

The human being and his/her welfare have to be at the centre of the European project's ambitions. Human beings are endowed, the Pope insists, with a transcendental dignity which defines the parameters within which their welfare must be envisioned. He pleads for an inclusive approach, respect for human life from conception right through to natural death, and a particular plea for those whom old age has condemned to a life of loneliness and isolation. It is indeed touching to find the Pope, now eighty, drawing attention to the distress suffered by many of his own generation in contemporary Europe.

In all three of his addresses on the subject of Europe, where the focus was clearly on the EU as such, Pope Francis dwells at length on the profile of society most in keeping with the Christian vision. His description of the current state of European society in his speech to the EP as *elderly and haggard*, as no longer dynamic and pro-active on the world stage, as introverted and self-preoccupied and as having abandoned that calling to fertility, creativity and exploration of new frontiers which for centuries defined Europe, caused more than a few ripples in the world media. It was the image which caught the attention of the CNN evening news on 25 November 2014. The lapidary reminder from our South American Pope that the world was no longer Euro-centric came to many

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on the Strasbourg parliamentary benches and beyond, as a rude shock.

Pope John Paul II had pleaded for a European society characterised by *'openness'* in his 2003 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* and Pope Francis too challenges the European leaders of today to break down walls and to open the city gates to the many asking to get in. The migrant crisis is co-terminus with Francis' pontificate; he repeatedly pleads the migrants' cause. The siege mentality is firmly out of bounds!

Francis displays sensitivity to the tensions at the heart of what he recognises as an exercise more than worthy of esteem. The EU is a voluntary association of European member states who have pooled resources, taken some distance from their sovereignty and resolved to pursue the common good in order to achieve lasting peace and incremental prosperity for all their citizens. This unity of purposes frequently clashes with the diversity to be found in such a large and ambitious *'ever closer union'* of now twenty-seven countries. Perhaps with the subsidiarity principle at the root of the Catholic Church's diversity, world-wide but also within the confines of Europe, the Pope recommends holding unity and diversity in a delicate equilibrium.

The pursuit of the common good within Europe and in the wider world, towards which the EU has multiple responsibilities, requires that Europe demonstrate three capacities: capacity to integrate, capacity to further a culture of dialogue and a capacity to generate. Acknowledging the range of diversities within the family of twenty-seven member states, Pope Francis casts the concept of solidarity in high relief. He dismisses any element of condescension or charity even in his understanding of solidarity: solidarity means enabling those in need, setting them free. Dialogue is essential to a society that is open and enriched by diversity. The capacity to generate and create depends very much on how the European society of today empowers its young.

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

As a Jesuit who spent some years in the classroom, Pope Francis' concern for the young, for their education and their access to the labour market was integral to his view of Europe's future as generative of new life and of the creative ideas which will lead to the construction of a new and improved society. Our young people deserve an education which enables and emancipates, work opportunities consonant with their human dignity and conditions which make it possible for them to found families and provide for the next generation. Pope Francis has made the Christian family a priority of his pontificate, he has mainstreamed it in his view of

EU priorities and, as *Amoris Laetitia* and his planned presence in Ireland for the World Meeting of Families in 2018 make clear, it promises to remain central to his social doctrine.

When Pope Francis addressed the EP on 25 November 2016, not only was he conscious of being guest of ‘*an institution which is fundamental to the life of the European Union*’ but it was deliberate choice made *en connaissance de cause*, to visit Strasbourg before he visited any of the individual EU capital cities.⁴ He was speaking to MEPs in the early weeks of the new five-year legislature. Some one third of the MEPs were sitting in Strasbourg for the first time. The Juncker political programme had been presented, otherwise the drawing board was blank. There were those at the top of the European institutional structure, Commission President Juncker, EP President Martin Schulz and Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, who had invited Francis to visit, who were anxious to set their political aspirations against a moral and spiritual canvas. The Pope supplied that.

In the EP and in his two following addresses on the subject, Pope Francis made clear that in his considered view Europe as his audience understood it had a future. The EU was an unfinished political project driven by the pursuit of noble ideals, and yet it was in need of re-appropriating some of the foundational values which launched it in the first place. Francis was not shy about casting religious faith as an element in the new humanism central to the project’s survival nor about highlighting the formative role played by Christianity in the defining and moulding of European culture thus far. There was nothing abrasive about the way he introduced religion into his reflections: even the most die-hard atheist would have raised an eyebrow had he left it out.

All three addresses are optimistic in tone; they advocate a hopeful approach to the future, they exude a confidence in the on-going success of the European project. That success, in the Pope’s view, is conditional on the application of what Elie Wiesel termed a ‘memory transfusion’, a re-kindling of the fire by reviewing the aspirations of the founding fathers through the prism of the *status quaestionis* of the EU’s evolution in the second decade of the new century. Structural and administrative reform will certainly be needed, the perceived gulf between the EU institutions and the member states and citizens they are there to serve must be overcome, and the long-term aim must be the fashioning of a society which is inclusive, goes beyond just the pursuit of human rights and has distributive justice as a core value. Hope is the key and Francis

4 The Pope’s visit to Strasbourg was not combined with a state visit to France nor even to the city as such. Strasbourg Cathedral was celebrating its 1000th anniversary but Pope Francis did not visit it.

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repeats that his primary purpose in addressing those who have the responsibility of ushering the EU across the threshold of a new generation is to infuse hope and encouragement.

Pope Francis' entitlement to speak to the EP and to the EU heads of state and government may derive from his own position as a head of state, but the words and the spirit in which they are delivered are those of a religious leader and pastor with a spiritual understanding of the contemporary world and a vision for its future rooted in his Christian faith today. He is a critical friend but he wants the Church in the EU to play its role in accompanying, supporting, occasionally rebuking if necessary, and contributing to the European project as it moves forward into an uncertain tomorrow. The Pope insisted on the readiness of the Holy See and COMECE to enter into meaningful, open and transparent dialogue with the institutions of the European Union [a dialogue opportunity provided for under Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty – Treaty on the Functioning of the EU].

It can be said that for a man who is relatively new to the complex world of European politics and who has other more pressing matters in his in-tray, Pope Francis displays remarkable understanding of the unique political project which is the EU. He may not understand its administrative architecture or the protocols under which it is governed, but he shows remarkable appreciation of the political and economic imperatives which have propelled the EU's staggered progress, and finds himself broadly sympathetic to its social aspirations. He believes that Europe is gifted and, by way of a final message, the Pope challenged the EU leaders and politicians, and through them all citizens, to work to make Europe rediscover the best of itself. That Pope Francis believed the European project had a promising future is made clear by the peroration of his 60th anniversary address: 'I make my own the words that Joseph Bech⁵ proclaimed on Rome's Capitoline Hill: *Ceterum censeo Europam esse aedificandam*' – 'Furthermore, I believe that Europe ought to be built.'

5 Joseph Bech, prime minister of Luxemburg in 1957 when the Treaty of Rome was signed.