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Patrick H. Daly

The European
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On a visit to the offices of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany's leading broadsheet, in Frankfurt on 11 April 2016, Martin Schulz, while still President of the European Parliament and shortly before his return to main-stream politics in his native Germany, warned that, unless immediate remedial action was taken, the European Union would "implode". The bankruptcy of the European project was the subject of a lengthy essay by Arnaud Leparmentier in the *Idées* supplement of *Le Monde* on the weekend before Mr. Schulz' visit to the *FAZ* and it was but one of many elegiac pieces published in quality broadsheets and journals of repute across Europe in the six months which followed. Gloom and pessimism marked the political discourse concerning Europe across the cusp of the new year, which was to mark the EU's diamond jubilee.

Despite the closing of ranks since the 23 June 2016 referendum made Brexit the direction of travel for the UK and the collective resolve among the twenty-seven to push forward with the European project, articulated by Angela Merkel in the wake of Donald Trump's first visit to Europe as US president, scepticism among politicians and pessimism among press commentators dogged the EU throughout the spring of 2017. The multiple failures of the populist right at Europe's polling booths combined with the prospect of Angela Merkel, with her steady hand on the European rudder into the foreseeable future, and the optimism and energy of France's new president, Emmanuel Macron, unashamed to brandish his Europhile credentials, suggest that, feeble though it yet may be, the tide is turning.

The undertakers, who seemed so close to the city gates in the summer of 2016, may still be in a holding position, yet for many, uneasy questions about the EU's future persist. Certainly the rhetoric which marked the EU 60th anniversary celebrations

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held in Rome on 25 March of this year, was sober and low-key, the aspiration to “ever closer union” conspicuous by its absence. In an interview given to the new quality Brussels-based tabloid *POLITICO* on the eve of the Brexit referendum, Mario Monti, former Italian PM, EU commissioner and a true believer in the Schuman vision of European integration, claimed that the crises hitting the EU in geometric progression made “disintegration” of the whole project a real possibility. As if taking the words out of Mario Monti’s mouth, the Archbishop of Strasbourg, Jean-Pierre Grallet, claimed that the Brexit vote and the multiple crises at the heart of the European family made it necessary to “re-construct” the entire project from scratch.

The siren cries of our journalists, mainstream politicians and senior diplomats are not without justification. All agree that the EU is in crisis. The European project has been negotiating turbulent waters since the 2008 financial collapse. Its social cohesion is under severe threat with sustained levels of youth unemployment, particularly on the Mediterranean littoral. Its neighbourhood policy has been unfocused for a generation and now, coming by stealth upon a Europe languishing in complacency, the migration challenge of 2015-16 has stretched the EU’s resilience to breaking point. There was up until recently a sense that the EU was coming off the rails.

The accumulation of political, economic and social problems, especially as they have succeeded one another with such speed and, to some extent, feed off one another, have combined to engender the current crisis. The challenges faced by the EU today are particularly bitter for those member states from the East who joined with such enthusiasm in 2004. The cold shower of disappointment and disillusionment which followed hot on the heels of the biggest and most ambitious enlargement in the Union’s history has not assisted the political and social cohesion of our European family.

THE CHURCH TO THE RESCUE

Bearing all the obvious explanations in mind, it has to be said that an understanding of the true nature of the crisis is eluding even the most canny of the political commentators. Perhaps the oldest, most venerable actor on the European stage can profitably be brought into the loop. The Church has regularly come to Europe’s rescue in the past, not least from the Island of Saints and Scholars in those ages characterised as “dark”. It is the contention of the present author, who has been able to observe the workings of the EU at close quarters over the three years leading up to the Brexit plebiscite, that insights emerging from the Church and lessons from her history can provide an analytical key to understanding the current crisis.

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Moreover, values which are at the heart of Christianity can set the rescued European project on a surer path into the future.

What has temporarily de-railed the European project is less the Brexit vote or the accumulation of political, economic and social challenges, and more the EU itself as an institution, as a unique corporate entity and as an innovative political project, has not succeeded in negotiating its transition into the third generation. The history of organised religious life in the Church, particularly in the Latin west, offers a hermeneutic key.

Organised communal religious life has been an integral part of the Catholic Church's history from almost the beginning. Since Pachomius (c.290-346) set up his monastic community in Upper Egypt in AD 320, the Church has seen the foundation of monasteries, convents, chapters of canons regular, orders of mendicant friars, clerical orders, active sisterhoods and missionary congregations which have been an integral feature of the Church's life and indispensable in the furtherance of its apostolic mission. Of all the orders, communities and religious families founded or established since the days of Pachomius, 95% have disappeared. And virtually all of them foundered, collapsed, were suppressed or morphed into something totally different, in the third generation.

The new religious orders or ecclesial movements which flourished in the twenty years after Vatican II (1962-65) are now sailing into very turbulent waters, with many of them on the verge of dissolution, as they too negotiate transition to the third generation. Those many political analysts and commentators who are trying to understand why the European project is foundering might have important lessons to learn from the history of the Church's religious orders.

Monasteries, religious orders, missionary congregations, secular institutes and other analogous organisations had a founding father/mother, elaborated a rule of life shaped by cultural and geographical conditions, and a sense of mission largely determined by the specific needs of the society of their day. The death of the founder/foundress, a move to a different location or culture, or the State moving in to take over the apostolate for which the religious order was founded (e.g. education, health care, orphanages, social welfare) all engendered an identity crisis, confusion regarding mission, or loss of social relevance.

Other circumstances too conspired in the disappearance or dissolution of religious orders, monasteries and convents, but all too often it was the crisis of a project which had come loose of its moorings, had become unsure of its specific identity and lost sight of the goal which inspired its foundation in the first place. A significant additional contributory factor – and here the parallels

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with the EU are especially pertinent – was when the institution and its survival became an end in itself, when concern about plant blinkered vision, when a sense of entitlement deafened those on the inside to disturbing questions from without.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN TRANSITION

It is an instructive mental exercise to swap the religious families, whose rise and fall have affected Church life down the centuries and made a particular impact on the Catholic world as the twentieth century drew to a close, for the family of nations which is the EU. The founding fathers (one of whom, Robert Schuman, is being seriously considered for canonization), venerable though they may be, have all withdrawn into their niches and are no more than names in the history books. The devastation of war which they wished to banish for ever is fast disappearing from living memory. Resort to arms in resolution of conflict never crosses the most contentious of European minds.

The urgency of collaboration in pursuit of a shared goal, the image of Europe as a “project” or the family of nations being possessed of a “mission” no longer feature in contemporary political discourse. The felt *need* to pool resources, to distance ourselves from inflated ideas of sovereignty and to pursue the common good in preference to particular interest are no longer part of the contemporary European mind-set. The squalid deal brokered by the then UK prime minister, David Cameron, at the 2016 March EU Council in view of the 23 June referendum struck many as motivated by short-term self-interest. The set of factors which launched the European project (all with direct parallels in the life trajectory of religious orders) are all things of the past.

An amnesia has clouded the EU’s beginnings, the project has lost its energy and sense of purpose, the technocrats have replaced those who saw public service as the pursuit of a political ideal. What happened repeatedly over the centuries to religious orders and congregations, and analogous communitarian movements within Orthodoxy and the Reformed tradition, is now happening to the European Union.

The dearth of inspirational engagement with the European project, which so many have detected in those who today guide the destiny of our continent, admits of an explanation beyond historical amnesia or political aspiration no longer focused on a target which enjoys consensual support. Politicians, diplomats, civil servants, the chattering classes and the increasingly powerful Fourth Estate – in print and on-line – for the first time in the EU’s sixty-year history can no longer necessarily be assumed to have passed through the Catholic education system nor to have imbibed

their values from the Sunday sermon. Many are completely unchurched; those who were taught by the Ursuline Nuns, the Dames du Sacré Coeur, the Sisters of Mercy or the Christian Brothers are fewer in number. A smaller coterie are beneficiaries of the Jesuit *ratio studiorum* or of those colleges run by the diocesan clergy formerly known as minor seminaries.

The language of the Bible and the conceptual imagery of the scriptures which shaped so much of the earliest self-understanding of the architects of the European project is as strange to those today at the helm as Mandarin or hieroglyphics. This shift of cultural gear, this religious no-man's land inhabited by most of those who work within the European institutions, and this virtual inability to connect with the conceptual language of the historical European project means that the third generation, intellectually, culturally and spiritually, is negotiating uncharted waters.

Has the Church, cast even today as *Mater amabilis* and *Sedes sapientiae*, and committed as it is, not least through the ministry of COMECE (Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community), to accompanying the European project, any solution to propose? Has she any survival skills to share with those negotiating the transition to the third generation?

In attempting to answer these questions a brief return to our religious orders will help. The "third-generation" crisis explains 95% of all demises of religious families, but there were those that survived. Benedictine monasticism has been around for a thousand five hundred years, the Dominicans and Franciscans (male and female branches) were founded in the 13th century and the Jesuits have been with us for five hundred years. These survivors have been through the hoops of reform many times, they have gone through a series of re-births, they have almost disappeared and, only through charismatic leadership, been revived, albeit often in a different shape.

Whether it was Dom Prosper Guéranger in restoring monasticism to France at Solesmes in the mid nineteenth century, or Henri-Dominique Lacordaire reviving the Dominicans at much the same period, or Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross re-shaping the Carmelites in Counter-Reformation Spain, the first and indispensable step was a *retour aux sources*. What applied in these religious families was particularly true of the Society of Jesus: Joseph Pignatelli SJ in the nineteenth century revived the Society after its suppression by a rigorous return to Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and to the historic Jesuit commitment to schools and education, while in the twentieth century, under the charismatic guidance of Pedro Arrupe SJ, the General Congregations of the Jesuits again re-invented the order through looking again at its

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origins through the post-modern prism of the Church's needs and mission in the wake of Vatican II.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Can we detect any survival strategies, other than this repeated attempt to touch base with their origins, in the history of those few religious orders that did survive? The history of religious life shows how some religious families strengthened their internal discipline, some set asceticism in higher relief, some set the bar of spiritual aspiration higher. The origin of the Cistercians was in a stricter, more fundamentalist application of the Rule of St. Benedict, and later at the convent of Port Royal or in the abbey of La Trappe, the order re-energised and rejuvenated itself through Spartan discipline, severe fasting and spiritual renewal. Other orders did the opposite. They relaxed their rules, made themselves more flexible, adapted themselves to emerging apostolates their order had not engaged in at its beginnings: the same Cistercian family in the Austria of Joseph II is a case in point.

Other orders which survived beyond the third generation simplified their internal governing structures or did away with practices that limited them: the Jesuit decision not to have choral divine office is one of many examples of flexibility with a purpose. All those communities, female as well as male, that survived regularly re-discovered a sense of mission and recalibrated their priorities: more prayer, less fasting, more preaching, less church-bound activities, more outreach. Finally, some orders survived because of their daring in crossing new frontiers, physical or ideological, and in this way showed that new things were possible. Matteo Ricci's ministry in China, the Jesuit "reductions" in Paraguay, the priestly ministry facilitated by Vincent de Paul and, above all, the work with the poor of the Daughters of Charity in 17th century Paris, were all new and brave initiatives, but they were survival strategies too.

This *retour aux sources* which proved so vital for the few religious orders that survived is urgently required for the EU in its third generation. And a splendid opportunity to engage in this exercise presents itself in 2017, the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome and the tenth anniversary of the Treaty of Lisbon. The EU institutions themselves or Brussels-based organisations, such as COMECE, can spear-head this reflection by organising seminars, putting on conferences/congresses and publishing imaginative material which captures the founding inspiration of the European project. The debate stimulated by the Brexit campaign in the UK and its overspill into the wider Europe has not been unintelligent but, despite the Brexit outcome, it should be continued into 2017.

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The EU's institutional structure and its current administrative machinery have become self-serving, just like those religious orders which allowed the institution to become an end in itself. The nobility of the European project must not be compromised by conferring a sacred or immovable character on its institutions or administrative architecture. The institutional framework is only a means to an end, just like the religious order has the shape and tradition it has in function of its apostolate. The way the classic 19th and 20th century missionary orders underwent total transformation in the post-colonial era has many lessons to teach the EU, as an institution, as it moves into its third generation. Others too can be derived from our analysis of the survival tactics different religious families resorted to over the centuries.

ECCLESIA IN EUROPA

The European project is encountering difficulties not just because it has cast itself loose of its historical moorings. Nor can its problems be ascribed exclusively to metal fatigue in both its political and administrative structures. We have seen how lessons from the Church's history, read through the prism of modern experience, can help.

The Church also brings vision to the debate about Europe. The abortive Year of the Citizen (2013) revealed a huge sense of exclusion and disengagement from the European project among the 300 million or more EU voters. One contribution the Church could make to reclaiming the cohesion goal is to revive that idea so dear to Pope John Paul II and so central to his apostolic allocution *Ecclesia in Europa* (1997) that Europe breathes with "two lungs", that two distinct histories, two traditions of the great Church and two great *Weltanschauungen* need to be blended so as to shape the Europe of tomorrow. Steps taken by Pope Francis to make this common Christian identity a reality is an oblique contribution to easing Europe too into the new (third) generation. World Youth Day in Krakow in July of last year was a particularly significant moment in the Church's pursuit of the East-West cohesion ideal. The political slippage in Hungary and Poland suggest that the EU too could take greater care of its Eastern lung: cohesion, inclusion and an enhanced sense of collective ownership are essential ingredients to the EU project's survival.

One further observation on how the EU in its third generation can move out of the present quagmire of confusion and lethargy is particularly important. And here the voice of the Church is *ad rem*. The failure of collective action and solidarity between member states in the face of the migration crisis as well as the "deal", alluded to earlier, negotiated by David Cameron last spring

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before the Brexit referendum campaign was launched in the UK, reveal that the pursuit and protection of particular interest has won the upper hand over the pursuit of the common good. A fractured Europe, a Europe which operates at different speeds and in different gears, will only recover the original sense of purpose which inspired earlier generations and galvanized them into common action which has produced so many benefits – all too often unsung, alas – once we recover an understanding of the common good. Those Catholic religious orders which survived institutional and ideological crisis at moments of generational transition did so largely through recovery of the shared good they sought to pursue. The EU can do the same.

A SPIRITUAL REMEDY

There is a coda to this analysis of the generational transition at the heart of the current crisis in the EU. It is added as an afterthought, but it is directly related to values. In late 2015 Anselm Grün, Benedictine monk and best-selling contemporary German spiritual writer, published a book entitled *Avarice*.¹ The dust cover is bright red. It is a warning. This most recent work of Grün's is about the inordinate pursuit of wealth, the unrestrained satisfaction of human desire, and the insatiable thirst for power. Grün, and there are few contemporary authors who draw on the rich treasury of the Church's wisdom to such effect, provides the great natural virtue of restraint as the antidote to avarice. And few remedies could be more useful to the EU as it pilots its way into the third generation than the pursuit of temperance. There are few surer guides, with a richer store of spiritual and practical strategies on its armoury, on the application of the principle of temperance than the Catholic Church. One of the greatest services a Catholic Church anxious to render service to the EU, at this critical juncture in its history, is to rehabilitate and re-profile the virtue of temperance.

The case for linking the current much-bewailed crisis in the EU to difficulties in passing the torch of Europe as a project, as a work in progress, to the third generation is very strong one. There is the allied conviction that those now in the driving seat of Europe are not only at a two-generation remove from the founding fathers but no longer are heirs to the Christian *Weltanschauung* which has contributed so much to shaping the EU to date. Ireland was six years a member of the EEC when its new and youngest-ever *Taoiseach* Leo Varadkar was born, France was twenty-one years a member when Emmanuel Macron, its new president and youngest French head of state since Napoleon, was born: these two young men

1 GRÜN, Anselm *Gier: Auswege aus dem Streben nach immer mehr, Vier Türme Verlag, Munsterschwarzach 2015*

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must negotiate the EU's future on a global chess board in perpetual motion and where Europe, "old continent" thought it may be, is no longer at the centre. What applies to our new generation of political leaders applies a fortiori to the millennials, to those coming of age in the twenty-first century, whose massive support for Jeremy Corbyn in the June general election in the UK made clear their desire to take ownership of their political destinies. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, writing in *The New Statesman*, claimed that "a new generation of voters, including young professionals and freshly articulate members of under-represented groups, have said firmly they find a politics of self-interest, suspicion and nervousness incredible ... but they dislike far more the assumption that they can be persuaded to sign away their future."²

The key to understanding the difficulties of generational transition and the solutions to re-launching a noble human endeavour which, on the basis of its values let alone achievements, still recommends itself to reflective and concerned citizens, are to be found in the many dusty volumes of ecclesiastical history which are still on our bookshelves. Church history has pertinent lessons to share and as the torch of European integration is passed to a new generation those in the Church of today, especially those who have accompanied the Union across its sixty years of growth, would be proud to associate themselves with the claim made by the British novelist Ian McEwan, hopeful that a new, youthful pro-European movement is mustering even as Brexit talks stumble forward: "Many of us believe the EU remains the most ambitious, liberal political alliance in recorded history."³

2 *New Statesman*, 16-22 June, 2017, p. 47

3 *The Guardian*, Review, Saturday 3 June 2017, p. 5