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United Europe : What's up?

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In his Easter Urbi et Orbi message, Pope Francis voiced concern about the future of Europe. "The European Union is presently facing an epochal challenge, on which will depend not only its future but that of the whole world," he warned. "Let us not lose the opportunity to give further proof of solidarity, also by turning to innovative solutions. The only alternative is the selfishness of particular interests and the temptation of a return to the past, at the risk of severely damaging the peaceful coexistence and development of future generations." Pope Francis would be considered a globalist in today's political alignments, but his position represents a traditional Catholic position of a universal church. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus," proclaims Galatians 3:28. In short, we are all bound together as one human community, for we are all the children of God. That universal identity should override any other considerations that might divide us.

The Pope's warning, with its air of urgency, is an acknowledgement that the bonds of a common humanity--even among Europeans--cannot be taken for granted. Just as the Romantic rebellion followed the Enlightenment, nationalism is now displacing the globalism that seemed dominant with the end of the Cold War. If laws derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed, then who are the governed who provide that consent? Where are the boundaries of consent between the EU and its member states?

"The EU shouldn't be surprised that Hungary became the first country to rebel against the EU, after Brussels started to strip away freedoms, specifically when it came to border control and migration," Gerolf Annemans, a member of the European Parliament with the Democracy and Identity Group, replied to objections about Hungary's recent emergency legislation. "After all, Hungary, with its proud sense of national identity, was one of the first to rebel against the Soviet Union in 1956." To whom are the political leaders of Europe accountable? In the United States, that issue was settled by its founding Revolution. "No taxation without representation" If we are to be taxed, then we must have a say in how much we are taxed and how the money is spent.

That issue has now been convulsing Europe as it deals with the enormous expense of the coronavirus while it is still feeling the consequences of the financial crisis. When the euro was created, some critics highlighted the risk of establishing a monetary union without a fiscal union. The response was that Europe would grow in stages. Europe surmounts its crises by creating more Europe, and that appeal will, according to this logic, prevail again and Europe will emerge with an even stronger sense of solidarity. But that confidence has been brought into question by Brexit. The British people voted to leave the EU. To be sure, it was a small majority, but it was a majority, and they did not feel part of the European polis.

The United States has also been through this. In his first inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln made a last desperate appeal to preserve the Union. "Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection," he implored. "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

It is difficult to imagine a more eloquent plea, but it failed. The Union was held together not by the mystic chords of memory, but by the barrel of a gun--the bloodiest war in American history. When the Pope speaks of the peaceful coexistence of future generations, one has the sense he is looking to history, at how the failure to achieve a common human identity has led to division and bloodshed. The EU was designed, above all, not as an economic union, but as a steppingstone to that objective. But can Europeans succeed where we Americans failed? Can they find, will they listen to, their mystic chords of memory?

That is the challenge they face, and their answer will have a profound influence on the future of mankind.

About the Author

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