The Message of Coventry in Europe Today

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by the Bishop of Coventry
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1   European identity

Soon after the UK voted to leave the European Union, our political leaders came under a lot of pressure to explain what Brexit would look like.   And somewhat ironically, shaping a vision for Brexit meant occasionally – often reluctantly – explaining what our new relationship *with* Europe would look like.   When our leaders were in a more conciliatory mood – or simply wanted to reassure us that the practical benefits of EU membership, like cheap Spanish holidays, were not under threat – they would say, 'we are leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe.'[1]

When Prime Ministers have said this, they may have been referring to a simple matter-of-fact: it is possible to be in Europe but not in the European Union.   This is the case for Switzerland, Norway, and others, and it where us Britons find ourselves today – at least for those of us prepared to admit that our identity is still, in many ways, fundamentally and intrinsically European.   But, before I go any further, I want to say that, as Britons, our

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[1] For example, see 'The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU: PM speech,' given by then-Prime Minister Theresa May at Lancaster House, London, on 17th May 2017.

Europeanness is so, so much poorer for our exit from the Union, and many of us continue to feel a deep sense of loss about this as we continue to feel its effects.

And yet, if our sense of European identity is to survive Brexit, it is perhaps no bad thing that we've been compelled to think about what actually makes us European, to ask that timeless, familiar, perhaps slightly tired, question: *what is Europe?* Some don't believe that it was the intention of our Prime Ministers to invite serious reflection on European identity, or to think beyond pragmatic interests, when they said that we were 'leaving the EU, but not leaving Europe' – but that's what I'm going to attempt this morning. It is part of my calling as Bishop of Coventry to highlight the enduring and critical importance of European relationships to all of us, especially with Germany, and I'm starting to think about what that mission might look like in a post-Brexit environment.

To do this, I want to step back a little bit. To ask *what is Europe?* has me going round in circles, running into brick walls - and I use that metaphor deliberately, because if I am worried about the potential for Brexit to erect barriers around my country, then I am just as worried about those who would seek to do the *same* for the European continent, imposing rigid and intransigent definitions of Europeanness for the sake of excluding, even degrading, the 'Other.' When I observe the situation on the border between Poland and Belarus, I ask myself: what is Europe to the migrants sitting by that fence? What is Europe to those who would seek to

keep them out?   What is Europe to the leaders of Belarus and Russia, who some argue are weaponising the crisis?

I can hardly find anything in common between them.   My pessimism grows when I consider that the border between Poland and Belarus – the eastern border of the European Union of which we were once a part – feels so distant in the British imagination. Some would say that the border between the US and Mexico feels closer to us, at least culturally.   Either that, or we are so consumed with our own domestic border troubles - whether in the English Channel or in Northern Ireland.

But when I look at a crisis on the eastern, or indeed the southern, border of the EU, together with what is now the EU's western border with the United Kingdom, I see some typically European problems at play.   In the first case (the eastern border), a nervousness about where Europe starts and where it ends; a sense of cultural difference, even superiority, which quickly becomes cultural insecurity.   In the second case (the western border) a similar set of concerns, albeit on a more explicitly national level. And in both, as a result, present some interesting ironies: one day, Poland is engaged in a bitter struggle with Brussels over the rule of law, the next day, it is defending its border against the actions of leaders seeking exploit the plight of migrants to destabilise the European Union itself.   Poland's border is the EU's border.   In Britain, likewise, we would do well to remember that to debate how we'd like to be governed, as we did during Brexit, is itself something of a European habit, especially given that the ideas we

discussed – democracy, liberty, sovereignty – themselves derive from the rich European intellectual tradition. That's a thought which, I hope, would make Brexit voter and Remain voter uncomfortable in equal measure!

It is enough to say that in Europe, the concerns which divide us can be the same things which unite us - there is no clearer example than the sovereign state itself, that concept which was designed to put an end to seventeenth-century religious conflict, and went on to become the source of even more devastating conflict in the twentieth century.

2 European purpose and processes

With this in mind, and seeking to operate in the spirit of the European Union's motto: *unity amidst diversity,* I wonder whether we might think less about what Europe *is,* and more about what Europe is *for;* what Europe *does;* what we *do* as Europeans. Perhaps, to speak in British terms, if Brexit is in some ways a European phenomenon, then might there be distinctively European ways for us to *respond* to Brexit, and to many other problems? The English historian Anthony Pagden writes that, 'until 1945 at least, Europeans may have been one of the most consistently belligerent groups of peoples anywhere in the world. But, as with many of the general aspects of modern European history, the *opposite* was true as well: a perennial quest for an ideal of eternal universal peace'.[2] Therefore, we

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[2] A. Pagden (eds), *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge, 2002)*, p. 14.

strengthen our character as Europeans in the ways we find of living together in harmony, to heal wounds, to reconcile enemies, to pick up the pieces of the mess we often inflict upon ourselves.

These are European *processes.* They give us purpose and agency, they open up the possibility to all of us of participating in an act of being European, at all levels of society - the local, the national, the continental. They are about responding to our unique circumstances as Europeans, without elevating our sense of uniqueness. In 2016 Pope Francis warned against, and I quote, 'forms of reductionism and attempts at uniformity' which 'condemn our peoples to a cruel poverty,' because the 'identity of Europe has always been dynamic, multicultural…the soul of Europe is greater than the borders of the Union'. 'Europe' – he said – 'rather than protecting spaces, is called to be a mother who generates *processes*'.[3] And no one knew better the importance of building an integral set of processes and methods than the patron saint of Europe, Benedict himself, whose Holy Rule has laid solid foundations for common life and community over the centuries. It is a rule which, applied to civic life more broadly, can teach us how to value diversity, to listen carefully to each other, to promote cultural exchange, and to encourage the participation of all. It is worth saying, these are deeply ecclesial virtues; they are,

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[3] Address of His Holiness, Pope Francis, on the Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize (Vatican City, 2016).

as former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams argues, the 'politics of the Body of Christ.'[4]

I emphasise *process,* as Pope Francis did, for two reasons. The first, I have alluded to already: it is difficult and counterproductive to attempt to contain Europe within a narrow and exclusive sense of itself and its history. It is better and more fruitful to see the interplay of people and ideas, and to encourage the participation of all within what can truly be called a European *way of life.* Secondly, processes matter in the European context, because even if our ambitions - peace, unity, the common good - are noble, all is lost if the means we use to achieve these aims are corrupt. Indeed, we have seen the extension of control, the exercise of imperial might, religious intolerance, the persecution of minorities, and *war itself*, all done in the name of peace and unity. And it is central to the Christian character to look at a seemingly benign outcome with a slight degree of skepticism - to question the means to the end, to ask who might have been left behind along the way. This matters most of all with respect to *peace:* Jesus did not talk about 'peace' in trivial or unthinking terms – he called on us to be peace*makers,* he wept over the city which had not recognised the 'things that *make for* peace.' And this Christian attentiveness to methods and processes, this constructive skepticism, is exactly what Rowan Williams argues

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4 R. Williams, 'Benedict and the future of Europe,' in R. Williams, *The Way of St Benedict* (London, 2020).

underpins European creativity, culture and democracy[5] - those processes where we are encouraged to consider: how might we do better? How might we do differently?

3   European reconciliation

To the processes of democracy and cultural exchange, which are central to how we enable our common life as Europeans, I want to add a third: reconciliation. Reconciliation is fundamental to our work in the Diocese of Coventry, inspired by our Cathedral - it frames our understanding of the past, our handling of the present and our vision for the future. And it is a method, a process, that leads us in the direction of an *otherwise elusive* goal: true peace. God himself – who is our peace – did not remain elusive, but loved us into being, and then, through instituted a redemptive process of history, culminating in the incarnation, by which we might be reconciled with God and also with each other - even with our enemies. This vision for a community built upon the loving presence of God and reconciling power of Christ is what Paul presents to the Ephesians, unsure as they were about how to find their place as Gentile Christians in the new church which was and remains so bound up with the history of Israel. Paul writes:

> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two
> groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the

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[5] R. Williams, 'Europe, Faith and Culture,' lecture given at Liverpool Cathedral, during Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture (2008).

dividing wall of hostility…Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2.14-20).

This is the vision which Coventry works towards. We began in 1940 by heeding the prophetic words of the Cathedral's wartime Provost, Dick Howard, who, in the months following the bombing of the city, sought 'to banish all thoughts of revenge'[6] and instead inaugurated a remarkable journey of reconciliation with Germany. But our mission now spans all of Europe, indeed the globe, as the Community of the Cross of Nails binds over 200 centres across the world into a common journey of reconciliation.

What the Coventry process of reconciliation reveals most explicitly, I think, is this rich and profound interplay between our reconciliation with each other and our reconciliation with God. It is a process of reconciliation that has its decisive moment in the cross, and is in the *shape* of the cross – horizontally, with each other; vertically, with God. This establishes a profound unity, rootedness, and perfection, amid our human reconciling efforts which so often, by themselves, seem imperfect, fragile, painful, cumbersome. It reminds us of the need to rebuild broken

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[6] From Dick Howard's Christmas 1940 Sermon broadcast by the BBC to the then British Empire.

relationships, and indeed to rebuild the church, directly and consciously in the shadow of the ruins of our past. The English author Paul Kingsnorth wrote recently that, 'If you live in the West now, you are living among [Christendom's] ruins. Many of them are still beautiful — intact cathedrals, Bach concertos — but they are ruins nonetheless'.[7]

In Coventry, we actually live among the literal ruins of two cathedrals – the first destroyed in the course of the dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII, and the second, more infamously, by Hitler's Luftwaffe in 1940. In different ways, to stand among these ruins is to stand among the ruins of Christendom. And yet, when Jacques Maritain wrote of his desire to restore true Christian democratic values in the aftermath of the Second World War, he was clear, and I quote, that this would 'take place in the midst of ruins.'[8]

For Coventry, the way to faithfully undertake the reconciling mission given to us by Christ – in the midst of ruins – is to make ourselves vulnerable in the face of our differences, our disagreements, our past failings, and to address the challenges and opportunities that characterise our common life, *in the light of Christ*. There are those who, seeking to rebuild Christendom, or at least a 'culturally Christian' Europe, pursue a vision of a

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[7] P. Kingsnorth, 'The West has lost its virtue,' *UnHerd* (30 August 2021), https://unherd.com/2021/08/why-the-west-will-collapse/

[8] J. Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (San Francisco, 2012), p. 24.

continent that is artificially 'pure', and which falls into the classic European trap of defining itself against the 'Other'. But, to draw inspiration from St Benedict's Rule again, there should be no contradiction between our commitment to harmonious common life, to live in a plurality, with all the challenges that such a commitment brings, and our relationship with God. This is written into Coventry's character. It is there in the decision that was made after the war to leave the ruins of the old cathedral untouched, but also to incorporate them into the new cathedral.

But it is about much than the symbolism of the cathedral. Coventry invites each and every one of us, in human terms, to participate in the mystery of God's economy through the process of reconciliation which simultaneously unites us with each other and with God. This is encapsulated in the prayer which Coventry gives to Europe, and to the world: *Father, forgive.* We are invited to embark upon the process of reconciliation by standing together before God in the humility of penitence. We are invited to acknowledge our responsibility, our culpability, so that by first establishing unity in God amid our common brokenness, we might, through God's boundless forgiveness, establish renewed unity in our human relationships.

And just as God's forgiveness is boundless, so our act of reconciliation, by definition, cannot be set within bounds. It is a contradiction, in Christian terms, to suggest that two groups of people are irreconcilable. For Christian faith, as long there exists a wound, then the possibility of healing will always be greater.

As Christians, where there is disunity, *we cannot help but seek unity.* Instead of setting ourselves apart from the Other, our instinct is to seek out the Other. It is a process which was expressed simply by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamar in his 1985 essay *Die Vielfalt Europas*, when he wrote that the European method is 'to experience the other and the others, as the other of our self, in order to participate with one another'.[9]

To draw once more from the St Benedict's Rule, we must learn that our self-awareness as Europeans before God and before each other is what delivers us from self-*absorption.* *Christian* self-awareness draws us *out* of ourselves, into the light of Christ and into the arms of our neighbours and the Other.

It is the same instinct which, as I mentioned at the start, might have provoked some of us, as the negotiations wore on, to realise that Brexit would actually mean *rethinking* our relationship *with* Europe, and ultimately, *rebuilding* it. It means realising that a victory for Brexit might have been won at the expense of our nation's social cohesion, or, perhaps more accurately, that it was won *because* of the fundamental lack of cohesion which characterised British society to begin with. Coventry, in a spirit of Christian humility, service and creativity, looks inwards to our local society and outwards to Europe and beyond, seeking to heal

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[9] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future,' in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany, 1992), p. 238.

wounds wherever they might be found. We do this in the spirit of what I think it means to *act,* in all spheres of interaction, as Europeans, as a company of nations. And the churches have a critical part to play in embodying within their own lives and relationships a process of reconciliation as they step closer to a common life, so that 'through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 3.10).