

# INSIDE THE VATICAN

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## **A EUROPE NEITHER LIBERAL NOR CHRISTIAN?**

By Kishore Jayabalan

The recent “no” votes on the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands, along with the failure among EU nations to reach an agreement on budgetary matters, have revealed major cracks in the institutional edifice of Europe. For years these weaknesses were evident to anyone with eyes to see, but this has not prevented official “Europe” from entering crisis mode. As an American and a former official of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace who’s been living in Rome the past five years, I’ve come away with these general observations.

European unity has generally been a “Christian” idea (its main architects were people such as Robert Schumann, Konrad Adenaur, Jean Monnet and Alcide de Gasperi), so we can ask whether there has been a “Christian” perspective on Europe’s recent problems. From an institutional standpoint, nearly all of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches have been in favor of European integration and continue to be so. The European Catholic Bishops Conference in Brussels (COMECE) recently issued two positive statements on Europe, despite the failed referenda. More significant were the appeals by Pope John Paul II for Constitutional recognition of the “Christian roots” of Europe, appeals that were quickly rejected by the French president of the drafting committee, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. The Holy See did express its satisfaction that another main concern, whether national legislation on the status of religious institutions would be protected, was adequately addressed. All in all, the official voices of the Church have been supportive of the European project.

Yet in my visits to various parts of Europe over the years, I have met many lay Christians who were much more critical of “Brussels”, shorthand for the EU institutions headquartered in the Belgian capital. Their difficulties with the EU usually had to do with the increased secularization of European public life and the effects it has had on marriage and family life, education and biotechnology. These were typified by last year’s rejection of Italian minister Rocco Buttiglione’s nomination to the European Commission. In effect, Buttiglione was denied the position because he was a believing and practicing Catholic who supported the Church’s teaching on homosexuality.

In fact, there are many reasons why the idea of European unity is suffering a crisis of confidence. At one level, the anger directed at Brussels is a reaction against the centralization of too many aspects of European life, with layers and layers of Commissions, Councils, and Working Groups staffed by unelected members deciding on arcane matters that should be left for local populations to regulate. In European parlance this is often called the “democracy deficit.”

With the introduction of a single currency in 12 European countries, individual nations are no longer in control of their own monetary policy, which is now formulated by the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. Fiscal policy, on the other hand, remains the responsibility of

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national politicians, who were supposed to be restrained by strict limits on deficit spending. This division resulted in all sorts of economic perversities, and the spending limits were scrapped when it became clear that France and Germany would not adhere to them.

The euro has also suffered from a lack of popular support. While official inflation rates in the euro zone remain low, any Italian can easily tell you how much the price of a cappuccino or a pizza has increased since the euro arrived. Wages have not increased at the same rate, leading to a large drop in purchasing power. Much of the Dutch “no” vote was motivated by reports that the guilder has been undervalued at the time of conversion to the euro, leaving the Dutch relatively poorer.

Even more serious is the lack of economic growth in many parts of Europe. France, Germany and Italy, three of the largest European economies, have seen little or no growth over the last five years, and unemployment is regularly over 10 percent. My personal experience of Italy’s extremely rigid labor market is that no employer wants to take on new hires because it is virtually impossible to fire an unproductive or otherwise unsatisfactory employee, all in the name of the “European social model” and misapplications of the word “solidarity.” Sooner or later, Europeans will come to realize that the poorest members of society, those without the family and political connections, suffer the most when the state is in charge of the economy.

But the economy is not everything. The French “no” campaign centered their campaign on a general fear of “the Polish plumber” who’s willing to work more hours for less money than the natives. Anti-immigration polemics arose in the Netherlands with the popularity of the murdered politician Pim Fortuyn and intensified following the brutal killing in broad daylight of controversial film director Theo Van Gogh at the hands of an Islamic fundamentalist. Just about every opinion poll in Europe shows that the people are strongly against the accession of Turkey into the EU. Following the expansion of the EU from 15 to 25 countries and generally rising levels of immigration, it’s clear that European countries are simply not able to assimilate new arrivals into functioning, respected members of society.

Populist demagogues have always been able to exploit economic downturns and the fear of immigrants. There is ample evidence that the French “no” vote was a protest against the mere possibility of economic reforms, disparagingly referred to as “Anglo-Saxon liberalism.” But in an increasingly globalized economy, countries cannot cut themselves off from competition and expect to maintain their standard of living. It is no accident that countries such as Ireland, Spain, the UK, and Slovakia, which have undertaken bold (and often politically difficult) free-market reforms are also the ones with the fastest growing economies. For the moment, however, the protectionist, anti-immigrant, anti-expansion blocs with no positive vision to offer are gaining in popularity.

A more fundamental reason for the “no” vote is what George Weigel has called a crisis of “civilizational morale” reflected in the failure of Europeans to reproduce themselves. Birthrates throughout the continent are well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per family, and would be even lower if the more “fruitful” Islamic immigrants were factored out. Recent trends away from organized religion to radical secularization in both public and

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private life are certainly at work here, resulting in a Europe that is neither liberal nor Christian. Societies without foundational principles are bound to wither away.

Reflecting on the future of the European project, we may take some educated guesses at its future. Europe may continue along its present socialistic and secularized path, resulting in fewer opportunities for a shrinking population, followed by more popular backlashes and restrictions of the European project. The vacuum left by this retreat would most likely be filled by the religious and political beliefs of Europe's growing Islamic populations. Or there may be some necessary electoral changes and reforms, with new leaders proposing to take advantage of Europe's large, well-educated, and technically-skilled workforce. Europe may start to tackle some of its institutional and structural defects and join the 21st race for global competitiveness.

But can Europe prosper without recognizing its spiritual identity? In 1991, Pope John Paul II published his last "social encyclical" *Centesimus Annus*, addressing the moral and cultural foundations of a free and virtuous society. The encyclical is still an edifying read, with its treatments of the failures of socialism, the welfare state, materialism and consumerism. The late Pope also called attention to changes in the modern economy of developed nations, which had been moving towards more trade- and knowledge-based systems. Most importantly, he promoted the creativity and ingenuity (in a word, the entrepreneurship) of the human person as our greatest resource and called for a renewal of Christian humanism. Remarkably absent in the Pope was any sense of nostalgia for "Christendom" or other outdated models; indeed all Europeans are aware of the bloody wars and totalitarianisms of the past. This humanism has its roots in a Christian culture with a rich history of splendid achievements as well, but it is a humanism for the men and women of today. It may well be Europe's only hope.

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