

Cologne Letters

An old man's musings on Christian perspectives

November 2014

4



*“Europe is Christian in its very roots. The two forms of the great tradition of the Church, the Eastern and the Western, the two forms of culture, complement each other like the **two ‘lungs’ of a single body**. Such is the eloquence of the past. Such is the inheritance of the peoples who live in this Continent. ... In the differing cultures of the nations of Europe, both in the East and in the West, in music, literature, the visual arts and architecture, as also in modes of thought, there runs a common life-blood drawn from a single source.”*

(St John Paul II in his [Euntes In Mundum](#),

Apostolic Letter on the Occasion of the Millennium of the Baptism of Kievan Rus, 25.I.1988)

*“Venerable John Paul II ... expressed the hope for a renewed awareness of the profound, common cultural and religious roots of the European continent. Let us return to (his) vision of a Europe that **breathes with both lungs**, to restore the spirit not only of believers, but to all the peoples of the Continent, thus promoting trust and hope by rooting them in the age-old experience of Christian faith! ... In this way we will be able to seek a common future together, one in which freedom and dignity may be recognized as fundamental values of every man and woman ...*

(Benedict XVI at a [concert](#) promoted by the Patriarchate of Moscow and All Russia, 22nd May, 2010).

A lot of time has elapsed since the last issue of *Cologne Letters*, due to, among other things, my preoccupation with what came to be called “the Ukraine crisis” which is becoming rather harmful for Europe, needing its “two lungs” to properly breathe. This is true not only on the cultural/Christian but also political and economical levels¹ After all, what makes Russia part of Europe is derived from its shared Christian roots and values. Whatever can be said about *Vladimir Putin*, this fact is implicit in his many public pronouncements; see e.g. his dream of “[a harmonious economic community stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok](#)”.

Before turning to the Christian level, at which these “breathing problems” are perhaps the most painful, let me expound my rather unorthodox position on the other two levels by quoting from an email to an American friend:

“As for Ukraine, Russia, and Europe, I am afraid I am taking a perspective different from the mainstream American position. I tried to describe them briefly [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

¹ EU, notably Germany, providing the technological know how, complementing the European East, notably Russia, with its vast natural resources that it feels has to defend.

Europe's two lungs

I tend to agree with the criticism that neither Bush Junior nor Obama

had a strategy for what they were/are doing in the Middle East, except for military intervention without realistic ideas of what they wanted or want to achieve. ... During the Iraq war Assad's Syria was a relatively safe haven for Iraqi refugees. And after Syria was destabilised, without Putin making Assad to give up his chemical weapons arsenal for destruction, Obama would have been forced to keep his word since the red line about the use of chemical weapons he drew was apparently crossed (by Assad or those who pretended to act on his side). Assad is certainly not an advocate of democracy, but it is more likely that without him (and the Russians who kept him militarily alive) the *Islamic State* — that today everybody rightfully condemns — would be even stronger.

Ukraine has become another piece in the chain of destabilised countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Syria. Is it such wonder that Putin didn't want Russia to be the next one, or that it grabbed Crimea containing its important military base to save its access to the Black Sea? After that, Putin seems happy to let Ukraine leave Russia's field of direct in-

fluence, and will only do what he can to keep it destabilised at the expense of the EU.

If in Syria the US and Russia are waging a proxy war, then Assad is Russia's proxy but who is America's? If it is the *Islamic State* warriors who got out of Obama's hands, are they not much worse than the East Ukrainian "separatists", who apparently got out of Putin's hands?

Sorry for getting somewhat emotional, but it is rather sad that the dream of a united — culturally as well as economically — Europe that was gradually, albeit very slowly, coming to fruition since 1989, seems to have been shattered or at least strongly hindered. EU is safely linked to the US (not only militarily but after TTIP also economically), and Russia is being forced to turn away from Europe towards China. *Cui prodest?*"

In March 2014, in an article called [Bush's Chicken Kiev Comes Home to Roost](#) one reads:

"History buffs may recall that ("Chicken Kiev") was how *New York Times* columnist *William Safire* characterized a [speech](#) that President George H.W. Bush gave to the Ukrainian parliament on Aug. 1, 1991, when, as Safire [put it](#), "he lectured Ukrainians against self-determination." [The author seems to be referring to this part of the speech: 'Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred.']

Yet seen from today, some of Bush's larger concerns about how Russia might react to losing Ukraine seem ... "prudent." Moreover, the kerfuffle around Bush's speech is a useful reminder of the long-running struggle between (US) foreign-policy realists and idealists.

Indeed, Bush Senior seems to have been more

"The United States saw the events in Ukraine as either an opportunity for moral posturing or as a strategic blow to Russian national security. Either way, it had the same result: It created a challenge to fundamental Russian interests and placed Russian President Vladimir Putin in a dangerous position. His intelligence services completely failed to forecast or manage events in Kiev or to generate a broad rising in eastern Ukraine." (George Freedman in [Ukraine, Iraq and a Black Sea Strategy](#))

reasonable and realistic than Obama — more precisely, those who push him into an anti-Russian (indirectly also anti-European) position — and — comparing the two Iraq wars and their consequences — also than his son.

On the Christian level, there are the sad news about the political/nationalistic pronouncements coming from the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, notably [Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion](#). The latter publicly [called Ukrainians to stop complaining](#) about Russian policy towards Ukraine at the *Synod on Family* in Rome — a most inappropriate venue for this sort of attacks, especially since Archbishop *Sviatoslav Shevchuk*, head of the Greek Catholic Church, was in the audience.

The Russian Orthodox Church is, well, Russian, but European Catholic representatives have already come a long way from openly expressing nationalist sentiments and hostilities towards other nations. Archbishop *Sviatoslav Shevchuk*, head of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine should respect this in his pronouncements about the Ukrainian-Russian controversies and conflicts in the East of his country. According to a [report](#), his predecessor, the 81 years old Cardinal *Lubomir Husar*, is certainly aware of this supranational character of Catholicism. Without elaborating further, let me just make two points.

Mons. *Josef Beran* was consecrated Archbishop of Prague only in December 1946, although the Prague Archbishopric had been vacant since 1941 after the death of Archbishop *Karel Kašpar*. It has been rumoured that his appointment was that much delayed because of some harsh statements Beran made directed at Germans as a nation (rather than at Nazis, etc).

The second point comes from a rather personal experience. During the Dubček thaw in 1968, while still in Czechoslovakia, I could accept a CNRS scholarship for a stay in Paris. Of the many impressions I am now reminded of one I had in a church². There I found two commemorative plaques. One was dedicated to Paris victims of the First World War, the second to those of the Second World War. The first one explicitly mentioned Germans as the perpetrators, the second had no such reference. Obviously, here something "evolved" also in Catholic thinking.

² Saint-Gervais? Anyhow in the vicinity of the Paris Town Hall (Hôtel de Ville).

Extraordinary Synod on the Family (October 5 – 19, 2014)

Certainly those who expected this *Synod* to become just another celebration or defence of the *status quo* (concerning *both* doctrines *and* pastoral praxis) were deeply disappointed, to put it mildly.

Since my knowledge of Italian is practically non-existent I have been following the heated discussions about the direction the Synod is, or seems to be, taking from English language sources, including those on the conservative end taking an unprecedentedly hostile position towards Pope Francis, more precisely his exhortations, using a language that even the most liberal Catholics would not have dared to apply to his predecessor. I shall not link to these extreme sources, only to two moderate ones, speaking from a position closer to my own “taste”: *John L. Allen’s Crux* and Fr *Robert Barron’s Word on Fire*.

Whatever the outcome, it won’t be known until after recommendations — that will come from the next year’s Synod as a results of this Synod and the public (or not so public) discussions that will follow throughout the year — will be accepted, and in what form, by the Pope. As far as Francis himself is concerned I still do not think I have to rescind any of my speculations in *Cologne Letters* 2 of March 2014.

Commentators usually distinguish between “conservative” and “progressive” Synod Fathers, bishops and cardinals. The extreme wing of the “conservatives” is usually seen as personified by Cardinal *Raymond Burke*, who among other things [challenged the Pope](#) — [accusing him of “lacking of clarity”](#) — to issue a “long overdue” statement defending Catholic teaching that Burke saw as under attack (by Francis’ emphasis on mercy?). On the other hand, the “progressives” see Cardinal *Walter Kasper* as their speaker, especially after his address to the *Consistory* at Francis’ invitation in February 2014, which caused distress, even alarm, among the “conservatives” including a number of influential cardinals. (In addition, Kasper’s reputation among African Catholics, bishops and others, might have suffered irreparable damage by his public [faux pas](#) that *Burke* did not fail to [exploit](#)).

These two extremes — represented by Burke

and Kasper — are apparently *irreconcilable* (and there is a strong possibility that for the Synod 2015 neither of the cardinals will be in the lime-light any more), whereas the differences in emphases (on doctrine or pastoral praxis respectively) between Benedict XVI (who appointed Burke to head the *Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura*, a position Burke himself admits he might lose) and Francis (who openly supported Kasper’s theology) can be seen more as *complementary*.³

Well, also the Pope hinted at this distinction between “so-called traditionalists” and “so-called progressives and liberals” in his [concluding conciliatory speech](#) at the Synod that earned him five minutes of standing ovations. Nevertheless, I would like to offer another perspective, another dividing line, as seen by me as an outsider (as far as Canon Law rulings are concerned):

Sometimes in the seventies the then Melbourne Archbishop *Frank Little* (after having been grilled on some questions about Catholic morals) stated something like “If you cannot understand any other answer only YES or NO, then the answer must be NO.” (I wonder if his successor, now Cardinal, *George Pell* thinks the same.)

I think this can be applied also to a distinction between those who *can*, and those who *cannot* (or will not) understand, even seek, any other than simplistic YES or NO answers to questions the Synod raised. This concerns applications of “eternal” Catholic (though [evolving](#)), doctrines (on traditional teachings about family, sex etc) in pastoral praxis. A praxis that not only changes in time but is also dependent on the cultural environment (that e.g. in Western Europe differs from that in Africa). The simplistic answers here are *both* those that want to preserve the *status quo* — in pastoral praxis that rigidly forbids, without taking into account any alleviating, e.g. personal, circumstances — *and* those who want

³ See my December 2002 article [Kardinálska polemika](#) (in Slovak). Ratzinger — the later Benedict XVI — debating Kasper along the lines of doctrine vs pastoral care, that twelve years later became the focus of the Synod. Here also, Ratzinger seems to put more emphasis on doctrine, Kasper more on pastoral praxis.

to adjust the doctrines (up to ignoring them) to fit practically any specific circumstances.

This distinction puts both the “conservative” and “progressive” extremes on one side of the dividing line, leaving the other side for those, Synod Fathers and their advisers, who are on Francis’ side seeking concrete solutions in exceptional (or not so exceptional) situations allowing the application of mercy without compromising the doctrine. As [John Gehring](#) put it,

Both conservatives, who are doing a victory lap, and progressives, who are licking their wounds, are missing the big picture about this meeting, and still fail to grasp the deeper meaning of the Francis papacy.

Francis closed the synod by beatifying Paul VI and his homily did not contain any reference to *Humanae Vitae* (the encyclical that became famous by its rejection of “artificial” birth control) but instead gave a quote from the late Pope:

By carefully surveying the signs of the times, we are making every effort to adapt ways and methods ... to the growing needs of our time and the changing conditions of society.

There is another distinction that in my opinion is often being blurred in the pronouncements and exhortations of some Catholic apologists, including Synod Fathers. This is the need to differentiate between doctrines and their application in Catholic *pastoral* praxis on one hand, and between the *advise* the Church can give to the world that is not (no more) Christian, i.e. inspired by Christian or even Catholic insights. To differentiate between concerns *ad intra* — related to matters intrinsic to the life of the Catholic Church — and concerns *ad extra* — related to how the Church sees the world, how it thinks the society as such should function. It is again Francis, who is aware of this distinction, e.g. when speaking about the “[crisis in the family](#)”:

In this moment, from the sociological point of view or from the point of view of human values, or from the point of view of the sacrament, of the Christian sacrament, there is a crisis in the family.

Here the terms “sociological” and “human values” obviously refer to *ad extra*, whereas “Christian sacrament” refers to *ad intra*.

Eight years ago *John L. Allen* had this to say about an international gathering of more than 400 Catholic ethicists that took place in Padua, Italy, July 8-11, 2006 that he sees as bringing for-

ward the “[African \(or southern\) perspective](#)”:

... in the eternal Catholic tension between a theological focus *ad intra*... and *ad extra*... the needle at Padua clearly swung in the *ad extra* direction. Most speakers seemed concerned with bringing the tradition of Catholic moral reflection to bear on issues such as globalization and economic justice, HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and genocide, violence and discrimination against women, and assaults on human life in various forms.

While Padua had its fair share of grumbling about the bishops and about Rome, theologians from Europe and North America seemed more likely to make this into an explicit focus of theological debate. Generally speaking, theologians from the south were less likely to go down that path, whatever their opinions on the issues may have been.”

Does this not describe also the differences that came into focus at the 2014 Synod? The African emphasis on *ad extra* problems (with more or less traditionalist views *ad intra*) contrasted with “grumbling” Westerners, although this time the grumbling was both ways — against tradition as well as against Francis’ pastoral (and intellectual) openness.

The controversies the Synod had to deal with (and where the distinction between *ad intra* and *ad extra* was most often ignored, especially by the “conservatives”) concerned two affected groups of Catholics: **(A)** homosexuals and **(B)** the divorced, civilly remarried.

Here is my two pennies worth on these topics:

(A) The problem of Catholic homosexuals can be reduced to the question of compulsory celibacy. Ironically, had homosexuality not been removed as a mental disorder from the DSM in 1973, but still universally accepted as a handicap, it would have been easier to argue for special dispensations for Catholic gay pairs (like a lame person is dispensed from regular attendance of the Mass). This is the *ad intra* side of the problem. The *ad extra* side is concerned with what is called *marriage equality* or *registered partnership*, and these are not within what the Church can make rulings about, only recommendations.⁴

⁴ As for myself, I think redefining the concept of marriage to suit a very small minority has sociological consequences that should be subjected to criticism from within sociology, a criticism acceptable also to those who do not regard the Bible as an authority. As for registered partnership, well I have registered my computer, so why not allowing people to register their friends? Another

On the other hand, take “Are our communities capable of proving that, accepting and valuing their sexual orientation, without compromising Catholic doctrine on the family and matrimony?” (*Relatio*, the midterm report on the work of the Synod) and compare it with “Are our communities capable of proving that, accepting and valuing Slovak identity, without compromising the principle of equality of all nations?” As they stand, what silly questions.

A better question is: “Can celibacy be forced on people born with homosexual orientation that they cannot help (in distinction to bisexuals who can be asked to deny “one half” of their sexual inclinations)? By the way, according to one [survey](#), only 1.7% of US Americans are homosexual (gay or lesbian) and 1.8% are bisexual. Among the 1.7% apparently only a minority are Catholics living in a steady relationship. There is no reason to assume that elsewhere in the world the ratios are essentially different. So exceptions, i.e. dispensations, would be applicable only to very few cases. A dispensation from lifelong celibacy for “approved” Catholic homosexual pairs in a steady relationship is perhaps a good place where mercy could be applied.

Also, I think one cannot ignore traditional environments, notably African, where giving too much consideration, even “valuation”, to homosexuals (beyond the above dispensations in special cases), would be met with cultural resistance. I think this, reflected also in the voice of African Synod Fathers (rather than the rigid positions of Cardinal *Burke* and other Westerners of his ilk) should be taken into account before a final position on these matters is arrived at. That, of course, does not mean that the Church in its *ad extra* strivings should not fight discrimination of homosexuals, even criminalisation of homosexual acts in traditional societies.

(B) There are, I presume, three categories of divorced Catholics *remarried outside Church* without annulment:

thing is adoption — or even “creation” — of children to satisfy the gay couple’s desires. All these things should be argued publicly also by Christians, but not on the basis of what the Church teaches, since for some this may be counterproductive to the argument.

(a) those who asked for annulment but were denied;

(b) those who cannot ask for annulment for special “technical” reasons;

(c) who do not want to ask for annulment because they claim both their marriages should be equally valid.

I think one should not be worried about the third group, since that would mean compromising the very sacrament of (Catholic) marriage. As for (a), a “merciful” approach could mean looking for new ways of appealing against that decision. This is apparently related to the calls, indirectly supported also by Francis, to ease — streamline is the word, I think — the annulment procedures. Here “psychological handicap” or “intention on both sides of the contract” are venues, that might be open to “merciful” interpretations. Those in category (b) might be in a position — depending on the nature of the “technicalities” — where dispensation, considered from case to case like in the case of homosexual pairs, might be a way of applying mercy without compromising the doctrine.

A third problem, only touched upon in the Synod (as far as we can know), was the question of *cohabitation* of young Catholic pairs. I think again, a pastoral approach should distinguish between those who intend to get married in the Church “after they are sure with their relation” and those who do not care about sacramental marriage. Obviously, the first group more than the second deserve a “merciful” approach when offering them a solution to their situation.

These suggestions — actually, more an analysis of varied situations — are all “shots from the hip” and I am not going to defend them explicitly. After all, I am neither a Canon lawyer nor a person with pastoral praxis.

Perhaps I should finish with making this explicit: my Catholic identity is characterised by an *a priori* loyalty to the Pope, then Benedict XVI now Francis, since I do not see them as contradicting but as complementing each other. Not rebellious archbishops, even cardinals, be it *Bezák* or *Burke*, and certainly not priests or laymen calling for “[disobedience](#)” or “[uprising](#).”