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“ON WHICH VALUES IS EUROPE BUILT? CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCHES”

by Metropolitan Krystof

On many occasions of our every day life and in a number of situations we, in Eastern and Central Europe, meet with a lack of solidarity, with selfish (mostly economically- based) interests of individual persons and of various interest groups and corporations.

At the same time, we witness a lack of understanding between and among people on the community-level and even within families and with friends. In the last one or two decades, we could see in many places in Europe also a lack of understanding among religious communities. Serious clashes and even wars were presented to the public as being fought on a seemingly religious basis or for religious reasons.

Last but not least, we could see tensions and conflicts not only between religious communities but also within them. The most striking phenomena which we could observe in Europe were, and perhaps still are, growing misunderstanding and mistrust among people and their leaders, political institutions and representative bodies.

In some cases in Eastern and Central Europe, these developments can be described as an unwanted and paradoxical result of the newly-attained freedom which was, on the other hand, wanted, needed and necessary - if the life of people and their communities in all their aspects and on all levels, including the religious one, was to continue.

Can we, however, say that all this is “understandable”? Can we say that it is absolutely “normal” for Europeans to be driven only or mostly by economic and pragmatic self-interest? Shall we really say that it is “normal” that there are perhaps no common values in Europe - values which people would truly accept, respect and confess?

In contemporary Europe - and not only in Europe - we can observe a serious crisis concerning the values which people follow in their life. People cannot find meaning in their life – they miss values which would give meaning to their efforts and transcend them, even if their material status is improving.

Many Europeans today miss values for which they would struggle and possibly even sacrifice their life for, from their free decision and from their free will

Allow me to emphasise that free will is respected by our Creator Himself. So this must be respected also by us. The respect for one’s personal opinion and one’s personal decision (if this is not limiting the freedom of another person) is one of the important pillars or values, on which contemporary Europe and its system is based. This is a fact. Yet we know that some respected religious leaders today, together with some politicians, would like to see freedoms restricted. The liberal approach can be sometimes problematic for those who

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try to represent revealed truth and values which are of Divine origin and which also have serious implications for the moral and ethical life of many individuals.

So when we accept respect for individual freedoms as one (possibly sometimes problematic) pillar of Europe – what are the really deep reasons for today’s crisis of values? First of all, it seems that the global economic and monetary system (which is the most powerful system or structure today and which is based on growing consumerism of a growing number of people) pays very little or no attention to values other than increasing production and consumption of goods and services of all possible kinds.

The fact that this has an end in itself is obvious. However, if our decision-making and freedom to choose is limited only to the shelves of supermarkets and hypermarkets, it can become ridiculous.

At the same time, it seems that international and national political institutions are quite happy with the situation as it is. People are more or less “happy” with their struggle for more material goods and enjoyments offered by advertising. Millions and millions of people, men and women in their free time, are fully occupied with their new interactive toys such as new cars and IT technologies.

The system also offers to a considerable number of people the opportunity to work hard and to slowly improve their material status. Social and economic exclusion of some marginalised groups and the growing gap between the rich and poor is presented by the media as either something that is not a real problem or as something that can be easily solved.

The environmental implications of the global (and also European) 24-hour economy based on increasing production, consumption and transport are mostly not discussed.

We can say that in Europe we have accepted a happy global economic system or paradigm which is working more or less hand-in-hand with political representatives. To avoid unpredictable developments and possible problems arising from them, all alternative models within our society are either administratively restricted or closely monitored.

One serious problem is that this newly-emerging and closely monitored world in which people live, produce and consume for today, can hardly be called a responsible society or a community of any kind.

Another serious problem is that this economic system based on growing production and consumption quite quickly consumes natural resources and irreversibly destroys the global eco- system which forms the common basis for our life.

What can we as religious communities and as religious leaders offer to our contemporaries in this situation? How can our values in Europe be redefined so as to be, on the one hand, understood by the others and, on the other hand, accepted?

First of all, I think that more than anything the re-discovery and re-emphasis of the European religious identity as a value in itself is needed.

Certainly we should not be afraid to confess the Christian roots of our European civilisation. We should be proud of these, without overlooking or putting down other roots which in the past had or still have an impact on the shape of European life. Here perhaps we should not disregard but rather also embrace the tradition of freedom, enlightenment and tolerance which – if we like it or not - taught Europe democracy and human rights.

When saying openly that Europe has Christian roots, we should not disregard Judaism and Islam which also had and still have an impact and a place in the forming of our European reality. Last and not least, by saying that Europe has Christian roots we should be aware that many of our co-citizens are either atheists (which we do not like) or have their roots in religions which are not even based on the tradition of Abraham.

However, possibly more serious for Europe than the confessing of its Christian roots, would be how we define Christian values for Europeans and how we would explain why we

think that it is important and nice that we have a Christian origin - so that people would understand and embrace Christian values and accept them in their thoughts, deeds and lives.

Speaking about our Christian values, we should perhaps first of all avoid speaking mainly about the artistic value of our Church buildings and the theological meaning of our ancient chants or customs which are certainly very valuable for us.

We should know that for many Europeans all these things are mere historical artefacts or phenomena (which again we do not like) and which have very little or nothing in common with the course of their everyday lives.

I think that it is important to speak about Christian values which can be and must be defined as virtues which are lived and accepted first of all by us as Christians.

Here we must speak about solidarity and compassion, instead of widely-accepted selfishness. We must speak about the inner value of a man, created in God 's image, which everybody receives from his Creator, instead of the value of a man as an economical unit.

We should tell people about spiritual wealth which can make them happy and which they can accumulate, instead of material wealth which often leads them into emptiness and despair.

We should be able to speak also about the value of sufficiency, instead of endless competition for more material goods and higher consumption.

Last but not least, we should speak about the value of asceticism and the giving up of some material things, since this approach can save God's creation and the entire world from environmental suffering and destruction.

We certainly should be able to offer the value of family, friendship and sharing, which are the values which can give a deeper meaning to people's lives and transcend them.

To get more space for values such as solidarity, compassion, spirituality, sufficiency, family, friendship, and community, we must certainly receive more cooperation, listening and acceptance for European Churches from the side of the European institutions. Since it is absolutely clear that, without these values, life in Europe and in the world can become meaningless and hard, no matter how many cars, computers or mobile phones people would have.

The beauty of our Christian belief in The Holy Trinity, The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, is expressed in hundreds of cathedrals and thousands of churches all over Europe.

At the same time, our belief and its value has been expressed for two thousand years by people's lives - men and women - who filled their lives with virtue. I would be very happy if the value of Christian virtue would be rediscovered by us and explained better to Europeans, since virtue is a value in itself and opens a proper and responsible way to wisely use our freedom and the gift of life for the benefit of ourselves, our neighbour and the entire creation.

When speaking about values, we should be aware that life itself, and human life especially, is a precious and extraordinary gift. In our service, we certainly can help many Europeans to rediscover its value.

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