

# The Bishop of St Albans' Presidential Address

## Diocesan Synod

12 March 2016

It's interesting that the jokes that the many Brits tell about the Irish are exactly the same sorts of the jokes that the French tell about the Belgians or the Spanish tell about the Portuguese. All nations across the world have a level of antipathy about their neighbours. That is just from where we start.

But how does this lead in to what is quite a serious issue about the European Union referendum on 23 June. I have no intention of trying to persuade you to vote one way or the other, but I do want to make some general points about the European Union and how as Christians we might approach the referendum.

First, I need to register my profound disappointment at the level and focus of the debate so far in the media. Much of the discussion has been narrow-minded and mean-spirited. It has tended almost exclusively in the popular media to focus around two main themes:

- Are we going to be economically worse or better off if we stay or leave?
- Which option is going to help us keep the most migrants and asylum seekers out of our country?

Virtually no one seems to be grappling with the big questions about what sort of country and what sort of Europe do we want to be in the coming decades. Few people are asking how we can all co-operate to build a better, fairer world. I've heard very little about how the European Union could contribute to solving some of the big challenges facing us. So let me try and address some of these matters briefly myself. But first a quick history lesson to set my comments in context.

Let's not forget that the origins of the EU lie in the failure to establish a lasting peace after the First World War, during which around 20 million people were killed in Europe. The Great War was a catastrophe which, it was hoped, would never be repeated and yet, within a generation, the world was plunged back into war and a further 60 million people were killed between 1939 and 1945. As a result, the search for a lasting peace became even more urgent. After such unbelievable levels of killing, everyone realised that something had to be done to prevent it happening again. We shouldn't be complacent and think it couldn't happen again. Perfectly intelligent, rational nations in Europe thought it couldn't and it did. Thus began the stirrings, which were to result in today's EU.

Ben Ryan, in a very helpful book, argues that there were three elements in the 'European project': **solidarity, subsidiarity**, and an '**explicit moral and religious vision**'.<sup>i</sup> That moral/religious vision was embedded in the Judeo-Christian heritage which had underpinned Europe and shaped our institutions for more than 1500 years. It was embodied explicitly in most of the Christian Democrat parties on the continent, who drew on Roman Catholic social teaching. It wasn't a credal statement but it was profoundly Christian and we need to give thanks to God for those people who saw the bigger picture coming out of our faith.

The first steps were concerned with '**solidarity**' among European nations and were focused on the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, codified in the Treaty of Paris in 1951. This was established with the express intention of integrating the coal and steel industries so that France and Germany simply couldn't go to war again – they'd be unable to re-arm.

As well as establishing and maintaining peace, there was also a profound concern for economic prosperity and, in particular, to improve living and working conditions. This was expressed in the new name, the European Economic Union, which was established by the Treaty of Rome in 1958.

The other element, **subsidiarity** (a term which is came with a Christian heritage: it was lifted from the Papal Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931), and was about ensuring that decisions are taken 'as closely as possible to the citizen' ... 'The Union does not take action ... unless it is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level'.<sup>ii</sup>

Ryan suggests that one of the greatest changes since those early days is that 'the European economic orthodoxy has changed from a paternalist Christian Democrat model, which saw economics as a tool to deliver solidarity and improved standards of living, to a more free market-dominated model in which the market and economic performance indicators have become an end in themselves'.<sup>iii</sup>

One of the practical results of this change has been that the question that many individuals and nations now ask is "Are we going to be better off financially in or out of Europe?" But if we approach Europe just on the basis of what we can get out of it, then the European enterprise collapses, just as a nation or community or indeed family, collapses if every member demands to get more out than they put in. In order to flourish in any sort of relationship we have to be willing to contribute, not simply to take. It is also pertinent to ask why, as the second wealthiest nation in the EU, we should expect other nations to give us money?

These questions, it seems to me, are not dissimilar to some of the debates that went on during the last British General Election, which is why the document '*Who is my Neighbour?*' written by the House of Bishops, is still pertinent. Those of you who read this document will recall that it posed six questions or highlighted six values that we should put to prospective parliamentary candidates. The questions, with minor amendments, might equally be asked of the EU.

The bishops wrote:

"We encourage voters to support candidates and policies which demonstrate the following key values:

- Halting and reversing the accumulation of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, whether those of the state, corporations or individuals.
- Involving people at a deeper level in the decisions that affect them most.
- Recognising the distinctive communities, whether defined by geography, religion or culture, which make up the nation [or in this case the EU] and enabling all to thrive and participate together.

- Treating the electorate as people with roots, commitments and traditions and addressing us all in terms of the common good and not just as self-interested consumers.
- Demonstrating that the weak, the dependent, the sick, the aged and the vulnerable are persons of equal value to everybody else.
- Offering the electorate a grown up debate about Britain's place in the world order (or here, we might ask 'in a reformed EU') and the possibilities and obligations that entails".

These sorts of questions stop us in our tracks and challenge our self-absorption. They invite us to look outwards to others, which is a fundamental Christian theme. Think, for example, of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where it is the foreigner of another faith who is commended for demonstrating God's love.

This hit me profoundly this week. I found myself in a small gathering with a young Syrian Dad who's just come as an asylum seeker. He's managed after a terrible journey to bring his young children here and he's being interviewed.

I was just looking on and afterwards I walked across to him and I just felt I wanted to reach out to him. I took his hand and I said: "I want to tell you that I for one am glad that you are safely here, with your family." And the young dad burst into tears. He said, "I thought everybody here hated us." What a comment! This young dad trying to do what any dad would do to protect the children. I've been deeply moved by it all week as I've thought about it.

This morning I want to suggest to you that, as good as the six values are, in 'Who is my Neighbor' are, as Christians in the Diocese of St Albans we might want to be even more ambitious in our engagement with this process. Week by week, individually and corporately, many of us pray the *Living God's Love* prayer. We might be tempted to think that it is really about how we order our church life. But what does it mean in the context of this referendum to pray that we may live God's love 'with generosity and joy, imagination and courage'? Where are the visionary voices saying, 'isn't there something greater that is going to be a blessing to us and to others?'

Instead of being consumed with anxiety about what we are getting out of the EU, might we ask "how can we approach it with generosity and joy?" Instead of giving into fear, we might ask for the 'imagination and courage' to think about what we can contribute for the flourishing of the world.

That doesn't, of course, mean that we stop asking hard questions. It doesn't mean that the EU may not need to reform. But it does mean that we need to pray that, under God, we might make a distinctive Christian contribution to the discussions and debates that we will all be having over the coming months.

Now before General Elections, the churches have an honourable track record of hosting hustings as a broker. I want to encourage as many local churches together: to think about offering a venue where we can enable those sorts of discussions to take place. They need to be robust, they need to be tough they will certainly attract strong feelings but we can also engage in that with a generosity of spirit as we think about the offering that we can make.

Perhaps some of the Christians in this nation can enable through engagement with these discussions, a greater vision, a vision of the sort of Europe where we might want to work for the common good. Where we might be able to carve out a narrative which asks 'who is my neighbour?' and how we might work out together how we can do that, not just because that will also bless us, as it always does when we meet the 'other,' but actually for the common good of all the nations in Europe. I pray that we might do that together.

Living God, draw us deeper into your love;  
Jesus our Lord, send us to care and serve;  
Holy Spirit, make us heralds of good news.  
Stir us, strengthen us, teach and inspire us  
to live your love with generosity and joy, imagination and courage;  
for the sake of your world and in the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Alan St Albans

### **Two prayers for the EU Referendum**

God of justice and truth, we pray for the forthcoming referendum that we may debate the issues with honesty and openness. Give us wisdom to vote wisely that nations may seek justice more than advantage and mercy more than power; that all the peoples of Europe may live in security and peace; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Eternal God and light of the nations, in your Son you teach us that riches are to be found in sharing, not acquiring, and health is to be found in participation, not in isolation. Guide us in using the privilege of choice to work for the dignity and flourishing of all. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ryan, B, (2015) *A Soul for the Nation*, London: Theos, p.15

<sup>ii</sup> Op cit p.17

<sup>iii</sup> Op cit p.23