

The nationalism of exclusion

Justice and Peace Europe Concerted Action 2015 on growing racism and xenophobia in Europe

Across the European continent elections at regional, national and European level have shown a new rise of parties advocating the supremacy of narrow national interests over universal human values as well as international commitments and obligations. As a trans-European phenomenon this is a matter of serious concern. It reflects much more than an understandable reaction to the obvious fact that, from time to time, European or national political institutions do not function well. Therefore, we, the Conference of 31 European Justice and Peace commissions, ask political leaders at all levels and the actors of civil society at large to join ranks in developing a robust response to growing racism and xenophobia in Europe, in order to ensure respect for the rights of every individual and to seek unity in diversity as the basis for a rich and truly human society. As Christians we endeavour “*to take an active part in public life, and to work for the benefit of the whole human race, as well as for [our] own political communities*”¹.

1) Nationalism has different meanings in different parts of Europe. For instance, some political parties with a nationalist programme ask for more autonomy or a specific state for their nation or ethnic group within an existing European state. This is a legitimate political goal and cannot be condemned as long as it is pursued by democratic and non-violent means and expressed with respect for the “Other” within the society. Nor can it justify any form of hate speech.

2) The social teaching of the Church insists that all human beings are equal, but it also affirms that nations, cultures and minorities within existing nation states have rights and must be respected. Therefore nothing can be said neither against a strong attachment to one’s place of birth, against loving one’s mother tongue nor against participating in the culture of a nation. The latter is not – as we all know – immutable but is in constant change and we are all actors in experiencing this change. Nevertheless, we often have good reasons to be proud of our family or our local community. We also have good arguments for being attached to our country and we could be prouder of the achievements of the European Union or the group of nations gathered in the Council of Europe.

3) What concerns us is an increasing tendency to seek popularity and power through simplistic political programmes and slogans based on the idea that prosperity and security can only be achieved by unilateral national measures, if necessary to the detriment of other peoples. These slogans regularly find their way into parts of the mainstream media, and are, thus, amplified and orientate the general political agenda of a country in a nationalistic direction. Often racist or xenophobic in their expression they inevitably bring to mind the belligerent and ultra-nationalist politics which preceded both World Wars. By suggesting that the nation, nationality and their underlying founding myths are an

¹ Saint Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, 146

appropriate response to our contemporary challenges, those parties and their advocates refer to a paradigm of exclusion that will make matters worse instead of solving any problem at all.

4) The 'nationalism of exclusion' - as we suggest calling it - is contrary to the value of human dignity. It denies justice because it defines fundamental rights on the basis of national, racial or religious origin and - *in fine* - it poses a threat to social cohesion at local level and to peace among European states. Respect for the human dignity of every person flows directly from our belief in the risen Christ and in God's creation of man and woman in his image. 'Justice and Peace' is our name. We therefore commit ourselves to oppose the nationalism of exclusion with forceful determination.

5) To look for a single, simple solution to the complex realities of life is an innate human reaction. By playing on the deepest fears of people, populist nationalist politicians seek to obtain power by offering simple solutions, ignoring the facts that solutions based on injustice or the marginalisation of a part of a society can never lead to a peaceful and progressive community. There are no quick and easy responses to deep-seated structural challenges arising from diverse societies and a globalised economy.

6) The issue of migration is one very pertinent example to illustrate a tendency to ignore realities. Migration is the foundation of the existence of humankind. To the historic causes of migration such as demographic pressures and political/religious conflict we must now add climate change. These pressures will continue and in some circumstances will increase. Moreover, rapidly ageing societies in Europe face a growing shortage of labour. To ignore these realities and to seek stopping the flow of migrants by a complete closure of borders is both unrealistic and inhumane. Other solutions should be developed at European and international levels. Sharing the responsibility of hosting distressed refugees at the European level; contributing towards the framework of international law for the peaceful settlement of conflicts and the rebuilding of crisis states; strengthening development aid in order to allow people the choice to remain or to return to their country of origin; and integrating foreigners into our communities - these although more complicated offer the only humane and practicable options. It needs to be stressed as well that without migration Europeans will not be able to maintain a high level of social care for the ill and the elderly and for other social services.

7) Another example is the European Union. In the discourse of nationalistic parties the European Union is made responsible for the current economic downturn, social inequality and unemployment. They therefore regularly advance the thesis that leaving the European Union would be the best solution. They become, however, much less explicit when asked to explain how they see the future of their country within the contemporary economic chain of production, distribution and consumption. This chain has become definitely and irreversibly global. No doubt, the European Union is not perfect, but it continues to be an instrument to maintain peace and resolve conflicts on our continent. Let us also not forget that people in other parts of the world continue to express

their admiration for the degree of cooperation achieved among European states. Attacking the European Union or other countries has to be recognised for what it is – a smokescreen.

8) How to counter the nationalism of exclusion? The response involves us all and it is related to our common European values with its respect for human dignity at the core. They are our strength, not that of the populists. Set against a version of history, which is contrary to the facts let us go instead for realities. Let us recognise prevailing fears in Europe today and admit our own uncertainties, but let us take seriously the lessons we can learn from history: War among nations is the worst that can happen. Racist and xenophobic violence in word or deed is unacceptable from a moral and legal point of view. It must be condemned and penalised. From a deep love for our common values we derive courage. Courage to withstand incriminatory and false speech, courage to stand up in public against exaggerated misrepresentations.

For Christians the nation cannot be a supreme value and feelings of national supremacy are unjustified. The Christian vision of universal justice and peace does not allow for any kind of chauvinism. It calls for solidarity and respect for all. A genuine national interest is best promoted within the wider perspective of the universal common good.

We therefore recommend to those who hold political responsibilities:

- to devise economic and social policies that allow people to find meaningful work and assume responsibility for themselves and their families and that offer them effective support when confronted with the inevitable and various risks of life
- to develop a consistent European migration policy including an effective sharing of responsibilities and measures to counter all forms of forced migration
- to renew their commitment to European integration by offering positive appraisal and constructive criticism and to withstand any temptation to scapegoat the European Union for domestically generated problems.

We ask European citizens, the organisations of civil society and the Churches:

- to discuss the value of a strong identity as the basis for an inclusive society with strong social cohesion
- to speak out against and question all expressions of nationalist rhetoric in private and in public life
- to deepen democracy, solidarity and respect for human dignity through education and example
- to value human dignity as an essential part of our common European heritage.