SAFEGUARDING AND SUSTAINING MALTA’S CHRISTIAN VALUES
WITHIN THE SOUL OF EUROPE

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The fifth anniversary of our country’s accession to the European Union provides us with the opportunity to revisit the significance of this accession and take pleasure in the overcoming of any associated or consequent trials. It could also be an occasion to take on, with renewed vigour, issues that we are already struggling with or that shall come up in the coming years. It is, perhaps, not just renewed vigour that we need, but also the wisdom to mine untapped energy, both human and cultural, which is there, awaiting acknowledgement and accurate assessment.

I am, of course, confining my area of remit to what is expected of me, namely, that concerning values: cultural, Judeo-Christian and, therefore, human. These values pertain to what has been described as “the soul of Europe”. They are constitutive of the European project as we know it, though, in their primitive form, they are rooted in times preceding the very advent of Mediterranean Christianity. Christianity - I would say, as a student of Christian theology - purified and perfected these values.

The Catholic Church in Malta, as in the rest of Europe, along with other Christian confessions, states that the contribution of Christians is indispensable to the safeguarding, and possibly, if such is the case, the restoration of Europe’s soul which is a soul that has its roots deeply embedded in the Christian faith. That the European soul is deeply embedded in the Christian faith is as evident everywhere as one allows it to be. It is certainly evident in Malta. Notwithstanding the multiculturalism that seems to be budding in Maltese society, it is universally acknowledged that the soul of our society is, at its cultural core, Christian.

The paradox is that this soul, which was so active at the very inception of the European idea that developed into what is now the European Union, is constantly striving for acknowledgement and this struggle is fast becoming one for survival. Italian scholar and statesman Marcello Pera says it all in the typical manner of hefty axioms: “Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner hitherto unknown by humanity, excludes God from the public conscience”. The controversy, earlier in this decade, regarding the mention or non-mention of the Christian roots of Europe in the constitutional treaty that finally had to be abandoned is proof of it. Malta took part in the debate. The outcome of the controversy was against Malta and those who like us were part of the side favouring the recognition and the explicit mention of the Christian roots of Europe. The outcome was in favour of those who, for historical and other reasons, had opposed the inclusion of any such mention.

Nevertheless, as Jose Manuel Barroso, the European Commission President, has pointed out, quite to my comfort as a Christian, “many of the founding fathers of Europe were Catholics”. He went on to say that notwithstanding the fact that the European institutions are secular, Christian thought can hardly be evicted from the European idea. Well, Catholics and other Christians of Europe must make sure that it is not - not for reasons of empty conceit but because Christians know that there is no greater guarantee of truth about the human person than Christ.

To be sure, my impression is that the immediate prospects are not in “our” favour. In certain instances of European Union legislation, as also in several declarations of the Council of Europe, the “Christian” soul of our continent is too often ignored or expressly rejected. It is sad but hope, nevertheless, persists. As Christians, it takes a little bit more than a defeat at any point in time to be put down. In any case, it is the Catholic Church’s deeply held conviction that, in the words of the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “truth is not determined by a majority vote”. Majorities, which in day-to-day praxis are essential, do in fact fluctuate.

It is gratifying to say that, during the five years of full membership in the European Union, Malta has, generally speaking, sought to give its contribution to the promotion of those values that are traditionally constitutive of the European soul and are also treasured by Maltese society.
Having, as a result of Malta’s accession to the European Union, became a full member of COMECE - the acronym for the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community - the Maltese Episcopal Conference has also sought, through COMECE, to give its contribution to the authentic soul of Europe. It has sought to do it not only through the unceasing promotion of the Christian, and therefore the truly human, values, but also by striving to safeguard them in the growing body of European legislation.

The Church in Malta and Gozo has sought to do this - as I have just said - through full participation in COMECE, as well as through the support of various Church agencies (such as the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice) and including Kummissjoni Il-Knisja f’Malta u l-Ewropa (The Church in Malta and Europe Commission) first established by the bishops of these islands in 1993. The Commission has given significant support to our members of the European Parliament, either upon their request when they felt the need of knowing the local Church’s view regarding specific issues, or on the initiative of the Commission (CMEC) when it felt that the parliamentarians needed to be alerted about something. In this case I have been following closely St Paul’s counsel to Timothy: “Preach the word in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim 4,2).

Over the last five years, as even before the referendum which led to Malta’s accession to the European Union, the Church in Malta has also sought to raise the awareness of its clergy and laity of their responsibility - before accession, in order to participate in the vote that was held on it, and, following accession - to contribute, together with other European citizens, at every level of the construction of the European project.

Referring to the upcoming June 2009 European Parliament elections, the COMECE bishops meeting in March 2009 - Bishop Mario Grech representing the Maltese Episcopal Conference was among them - state that “every Christian not only has the right but also the responsibility to be actively engaged in this project by exercising his or her vote”. They go on to say that the “participation of Christians is essential in order to rediscover ‘the soul of Europe’ which is vital to fulfil the fundamental needs of the human person and the service of the common good”.

Bishop Grech and his fellow bishops representing the Episcopal Conferences of the member states of the European Union justify their advice to the Christian citizenry of Europe by saying that the European Parliament, “through its powers and competences (which would be further enhanced by the final ratification of the Lisbon Treaty) must contribute to these aspirations and goals”.

Over the last five years, the Church in Malta has given its contribution, however small, to several European issues that concern the dignity of the human person. The human person lies at the top of the Christian agenda at any time and at any place. Indeed the human person lies at the core of many issues arising in European Union affairs, at times even of issues that appear to be only remotely related to human dignity. On many of these issues, whenever it was felt necessary, and generally with the welcome support of a very efficient secretariat at the COMECE headquarters in Brussels, the Kummissjoni Il-Knisja f’Malta u l-Ewropa (CMEC) successfully secured the collaboration respectively of the Government, of the European parliamentarians and of other officials at local EU desks. The most recent of such issues have included these areas of human interest:

1. The protection of human life in all its stages of development and especially where it is threatened as by research that involves the use and destruction of human embryos;

2. The upholding of member states’ freedom from the imposition of European legislation that threatens their right to protect or promote spiritual, ethical and social values pertaining to national culture;

3. The protection of a work-free Sunday as an essential pillar of the European Social Model and as part of the European cultural heritage, a day that contributes in balancing work, family life and social or cultural commitment;

4. The promotion of the rights of the weaker members of European society who, besides the unborn, include children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, immigrants (both legal and illegal), as well as those who are socially excluded because of life-style, race, education or financial condition;
5. The safeguarding of the dignity of persons who are ill and suffer from rare diseases. In this case the Catholic Church lobbied hard as recently as during the month of April 2009, with only limited success since there was a split vote favouring pre-implantation selection of embryos.

The Church - as I said - has tried to give its contribution in these areas relating to the dignity and security of the person and human rights. The outcome of its contribution is not, sadly, often successful. In a report on the eradication of rare diseases recently voted by the European Parliament, the Christian “side” failed to marshal a majority of votes against the proposed pre-implantation selection of healthy embryos (292 in favour, 222 against, 15 abstentions). Through this May 6, 2009 vote, the European Parliament voted not only in favour of efforts to be made by member states to avoid rare diseases which are hereditary through “genetic counselling of carrier parents”, but also “through pre-implantation selection of healthy embryos”. Thus, rather than supporting patients with rare diseases, the European Parliament introduces the notion of avoiding, and indeed suppressing, human beings with rare diseases inter alia by “pre-implantation selection of healthy embryos”.

An amendment providing that this should be done only where it is “not contrary to existing national laws and always on a voluntary basis” was in fact included in the recommendation, but even with this amendment the parliamentary vote provides political backing for the “selection” of people according to their status of health. It would be naive to say that this enactment would eventually not lead to some kind of direct or indirect pressure by society on the people concerned.

Malta’s accession to the European Union brought our society into a milieu, hitherto more or less distant, that challenges ethical values that had not been hitherto seriously questioned here. This new situation compels us not only to give personal, intellectual and existential account of such values but also to explore ways to defend and promote them.

Together with the many peoples of the rest of Europe, the people of Malta and Gozo possess many shared values. They also have an essentially common culture, to some extent a joint history, and shared aspirations, all of them more or less rooted in a Christianity that, notwithstanding the variety of confessions which at once disfigure but also enrich it, constitutes “the European soul”. Millions of European citizens identify with this soul, people ranging from practising Christians, whose number is too often underestimated, to cultural Christians, that is, those who, though non-practising, attribute value to the value-wise “Christian” substance of Europe.

Often the European soul is also sustained by non-Christians, including both people who belong to other religions such as Judaism and Islam as well as people who reject religion, but who prize a “religious capital” - capital here to be understood in terms of “capital retention” as against “capital expenditure” - which guarantees to them, as to all European citizens, freedoms, dignity and rights which may be less present in cultures that have not known - or only barely come into contact with - Christianity and its values.

Confining myself to the Catholic ethos, without thereby excluding that what follows may also pertain to other forms of religious and non-religious value systems, I would say that practising Catholics in Malta and elsewhere in the EU, cultural Catholics and even non-Catholics who share with their Christian brethren the truths and values of Christianity, should be one in identifying also as their own the anxieties of the local Churches of Europe and in supporting our Christian leaders calling upon Europe to guarantee:

- respect for human life from conception to natural death and its inclusion in all EU legislation, programmes and policies;

- support for the family founded on marriage, understood as between one man and one woman, and as the basic unit of society;

- the advancement of the social rights of workers, providing them with working conditions which respect their health, safety and dignity;

- the endorsement of economic governance based on ethical values in order to achieve sustainable human development within the EU and at global level;
- the promotion of justice in the relationships of the EU with developing countries through financial assistance and innovative partnerships;

- the manifestation of solidarity, by shaping policies that help the weakest and poorest in society, including particularly people with disabilities, asylum-seekers and migrants;

- the protection of creation, by addressing the problems of climate change and encouraging a moderate life-style, and

- the promotion of peace in the world through coordinated and coherent foreign EU policy.

These European issues are all of particular concern to Malta both as to its own interest as well as to its co-responsibility for Europe together with the other member states. But I would say that there are three issues of peculiar interest to Malta. They are the issues of illegal immigration, cultural integration and family legislation. These three issues are bound to engage all the resources, human, economic and cultural, that we shall be able to strike. They pertain to the Christian soul of Europe.

To conclude, I should say that five years are a little too little to enable us to appreciate the true and permanent significance of Malta’s accession to the EU. This is especially the case as regards the spiritual, cultural and religious values that pertain to the human being.

On the other hand, today’s EDRC exercise is important, because in seeking to explore the significance of Malta’s accession to the EU five years ago we not only identify what is already significant but we can also measure it against - or better still in the light of - the experience of member states who are our elder partners in this adventure.

May I add here that European integration cannot be considered as an entirely new and hitherto foreign experience for Malta. Our history, with the Order of St. John, made of Malta a microcosmic concentration of European culture and was, according to its time, an expression of the soul of Europe. There is, of course, no subtle suggestion here that the soul of Europe as expressed by 16th to 18th century Malta should be the paradigm of the European soul today. Nevertheless it is an experience that helped construct the Europe that we enjoy today and that we all desire to make ever more friendly to the human person. This is the stuff of Christian hope.

In their most recent statement about the EU, the Bishops of COMECE have said that they “support and promote the European Union as a project of hope for all its citizens” (20 March 2009). These words illustrate the vision for Europe that both the late Pope John Paul II as well as our current Holy Father Benedict XVI have promoted. It is the vision of the European Union’s Catholic founding fathers - a Europe that retains and matures in its “human” soul.