



**How to beat the bigots and broaden narrow minds**  
**By Archbishop-elect Mario Conti**  
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In the few short weeks since the announcement of my appointment as Archbishop of Glasgow, the one question which recurs in almost every interview is: 'What are you going to do about sectarianism?' The truth, of course, is that neither I, nor, I suspect, any other single individual can hope to solve a problem which has deep historical roots. On the day my appointment was made public I stated, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek manner, that I came as 'an innocent' from the northeast. It is not completely true to say that my native diocese is a bigotry-free zone. Once, as an uninvited guest, I attended public meetings in Wick and Thurso called by a religious group to denounce the wickedness of the Catholic Church. I doubt whether they would happen today.

However, it is true that the issue of sectarianism is now, more than ever, at the forefront of my mind. Especially after a recent dinner where my table companions were consular representatives, captains of industry, bankers, representatives from the worlds of politics and religion, and a couple of ministers of state. We were hosted by a member of the European Commission and the discussion focused on British attitudes to the European Union. It occurred to me that there is a link between the issues of sectarianism and European integration. In both cases one could discern a mentality primarily focused on protecting narrow interests; a failure to respond to the opportunities to build larger communities of support and affection.

So how can this mentality be tackled most effectively at both local and international level? Of course, the fundamental condition for any progress is a willingness to sit down and engage in dialogue. This approach has produced significant results in the on-going discussion between the Catholic Church and other Christian bodies, culminating most recently in the joint declaration of understanding between Catholics and Lutherans on the question of justification (a theological equivalent of the Great War).

We must also remember the enormous achievement of the EU's founding fathers: the French economist Jean Monnet and Premier Robert Schuman, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Italian Premier Alcide de Gasperi. These were men of vision and faith. They accomplished what many in the early 1950s believed impossible; they put in place structures which ensured a new era of peaceful co-operation between nations which had been at war for almost as long as they had been in existence.

Peace within the borders of what has become the EU is too often overlooked. For 50 years the Catholic Church has accompanied the process of greater European interdependence, with encouragement. This year Pope John Paul said: 'Among reasons for satisfaction, one must mention the progressive unification of Europe, recently symbolised by the adoption of a single currency by 12 countries. This is a decisive step in the long history of this continent.'

I regret that in our own country there has been a lamentable lack of interest in our common European inheritance. Perhaps the closed-minded bigotry which demeans many people in their attitude to religion is, alas, also present in the aggressively anti-European stance adopted by some politicians and commentators. All too often the fine work of dialogue and harmonisation, work which aims to support the common good of all at a European level, is minimised and despised by those who prefer parochial safety to the vulnerable adventure of interdependence.

Sections of the press let us down. Lurid tabloid headlines about Brussels's rulings on bananas or Eurodiktats on chocolate coarsen our culture, depress the standard of debate and debase our country's standing in Europe. The Catholic Church has no truck with such petty isolationism. It proclaims a message of common relevance to every man woman and child in Europe and beyond.

Although I am a great supporter of closer European integration, I must sound a note of caution. In the head-long rush for more effective trade rules and early tax harmonisation we are in danger of falling into two traps. On the one hand lies a culture of consumption, dislocated from any system of values and, on the other, a continent-wide isolationism; a kind of European 'I'm all right Jack' mentality. And this at a time when economic disparity is an ever-widening chasm between north and south, the First and Third Worlds. European integration was not meant as an end in itself, but as a means to an end, namely that of promoting a more just, stable and peaceful continent, which could in turn contribute to a better world.

Given that the expediency of a constitution for the EU has recently been questioned, it is essential to make increasingly explicit the goals of European unification and the values on which it must rest. I am concerned, therefore, that no mention was made of communities of religious believers among the partners who are to contribute to the reflection on the 'Convention' instituted at the Laeken summit last December. In the words of Pope John Paul: 'The marginalisation of religions, which have contributed and continue to contribute to the culture and humanism of which Europe is legitimately proud, strikes me as both an injustice and an error of perspective.' Any attempt to build a European identity among the nations of the old continent is doomed to failure if it does not take into account the history of the continent and the religious sense of its people.

We have come a long way since the intellectual Hilaire Belloc exclaimed: 'Europe is the faith and the faith is Europe' -- meaning the Catholic faith. I suspect his assertion, memorable though it is, was based on wishful thinking. Today, Europe is a melting pot of 100 languages and almost as many religions and faith traditions. Those traditions must be recognised in any new European constitution.

At the same time, Europe cannot set itself up as an exclusive club, unwilling to share the benefits of unity with others from the East and ultimately with the poorer nations of the south. Such a Europe would be unworthy of its own origins. Expansion of the EU is a sine qua non if it is to continue to enjoy the support of the Church. I recall very well the appeal of John Paul II in Gniezno, Poland, in 1997 to European leaders: 'May they not leave any nation, not even the weakest, outside the group they are building.'

Which takes me back to sectarianism and the lessons that we can draw from the model of European integration. In the first place I see the need for bravery on the part of community leaders. We need men and women at a local level with something of the vision and determination of Schuman and De Gasperi, prepared to say what needs to be said, and labour tirelessly for greater understanding.

Secondly I see the need for some serious soul-searching among all faith traditions. We need to have the courage to ask ourselves whether we have, explicitly or implicitly, encouraged hostility towards those of other faiths, remembering that sins of omission can be just as serious as sins of commission. I recall the powerful words of my predecessor when he expressed his 'shame' as Archbishop of Glasgow at the treatment meted out to asylum seekers by some of our fellow citizens.

Thirdly, I see the need for the rebirth of a sense of universal brotherhood, capable of looking beyond name, ethnic origin, football scarves and skin colour. Our common humanity is the fundamental ground of unity; the common fatherhood of God is its source and guarantee.

As a Christian I believe that the effect of Christ's death and resurrection is to unite all of humanity in renewed creation. As Jesus himself put it: 'When I am lifted up I shall draw all to myself' (John 12:32). The cross and the resurrection should be the source of communion and fraternity. It is a scandal, in the fullest sense of that word, that those who call themselves Christian turn religion into an excuse for hatred, injustice and violence.

Finally, I believe we can learn from the European experience that no effort to tackle sectarianism and division can succeed by ignoring the spiritual side of our nature. It cannot be done without vision.

If perverted religion must share some of the blame for causing the problems of bigotry, then authentic religion must play its part in solving them. The French philosopher, Montesquieu, quipped in one of his letters: 'No Kingdom has ever suffered as many civil wars as Christ's.'

If my period of service as Archbishop can contribute to the breaking down of just some of the misunderstandings, enmities and prejudices that have disfigured the noble face of Glasgow, then I shall be content. And it will no doubt be evident from what I have written above that my desire to promote community harmonisation is drafted on a larger canvas.

