

**THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH AND OF CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPE**  
**A perspective from Central and Eastern Europe**  
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The process of European unification has been part of globalization, that great social and cultural revolution that entered a new and very intensive phase after the fall of the Soviet empire.

Globalization *contributed significantly to the fall of communism*. When the communist regimes, with their state-planned economies, censorship of information and repression of cultural freedom, were drawn into the global market of goods and idea, they quickly became lost in the sharp winds of competition.

During manifestations in autumn of 1989 the slogan was heard in these countries: "*Back to Europe!*"

One popular Czech political anecdote suggested a Nobel Prize for surgery for Brezhnev - he had succeeded in transplanting the heart of Europe into the digestive tract of the Soviet Union. Now that had to be remedied. But it's much easier to make soup out of fish than fish out of fish soup.

Was the admission of post-communist states into the EU a sufficient response to the call "Back to Europe"?

Some - like Bishop Homayer - suggested instead of "European enlargement" to use the term "*Europeanisation of the EU.*" They wanted to emphasize that it is not just a quantitative growth of an existing entity, but a *qualitative transformation* that will change *both* parts of Europe. But qualitative transformation is a long, challenging, dynamic process. It requires much more than economic and administrative interconnection.

The emergence of a united Europe, defined as a community of shared values, presupposes and implies a cultural and spiritual process in all European countries: the education and cultivation of *European consciousness and conscience*.

It was time to *reconsider the question of European cultural identity*. And it was certainly a great opportunity for Christians. It was necessary to present a realistic vision of what Christians can offer to a post-Christian, strongly secularised Europe. This involved freeing ourselves from the nostalgia for medieval Christianitas, the premodern "Christian Europe" as imagined by the 19th century romantics.

Some people thought that Christianity (and especially the Catholic Church) could play after the fall of communism a similar integrative role in Europe as it did after World War II. at the cradle of European unity. For many reasons, *this has not happened*.

European society and the Church and their mutual relation have undergone a *profound transformation* during the second half of the 20th century.

The efforts of the Second Vatican Council to change the unfortunate strategy of confrontation with modern society, philosophy, science and culture into a relationship of dialogue and compatibility probably *came too late*.

"Modern man", to whom the Church offered in the opening sentence of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* partnership and solidarity, was no longer interested in this partnership. This courtesy was met with little reciprocity.

The Council aimed at *coming to terms with modernity*. This process was brought to a dignified conclusion by the pontificates of two great popes, John Paul II. and Benedict XVI. But it was exactly the time, when the modern age was ended.

The Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s marked another step in the process of secularization and changed the position of the churches in Europe.

The Council did not prepare the Church for the radically pluralistic world of postmodern culture that has gradually come to dominate our civilization in the last quarter of the 20th century.

The exodus of the Church from the modern to the postmodern era, from modern to postmodern form of Christianity requires a deepening of theology and spirituality. It requires a theology that is not just an academic discipline and a spirituality that is not just emotional piety but a union of theology, the intellectual reflection of faith, with its spiritual and existential dimension and its responsibility in public life. (Pope Francis writes about this in the document *Ad theologiam promovendam*.)

Communist-dominated countries and the churches in those countries, when they suddenly found themselves in a completely new cultural and social context, were *even less prepared* for this change.

At the European Continental Synod in Prague in February 2023, it became apparent that the churches in *some post-Communist countries had not yet absorbed Vatican II enough*. The Council was held at a time when Catholics in those countries, due to ideological censorship, had no or minimal access to the theological literature that formed the intellectual background of the Council. Without this knowledge of the intellectual context, it was impossible to understand the meaning of the Council adequately. The post-conciliar renewal in these countries was mainly very superficial, limited practically to changes in the liturgy; *the mentality needed to change more*.

(But there is another, often underestimated testimony to be recalled.

I recall the testimony of my teachers of the faith in Czechoslovakia, where the persecution of the Church was probably the most severe. Some priests, who had spent long years in Nazi and then Communist prisons and concentration camps, experienced there a “concrete ecumenism” – nearness and fraternity not only with Christians of other Churches but also with secular humanists and even with nonconformist Marxists. Some of them (in the spirit of the prophets) embraced the years of persecution as a divine lesson, as a purification of the Church from its earlier triumphalism. They dreamed in prison of a future form of the Church– an ecumenical, open, poor, and serving Church. When they were released from prison in the late 1960s, they embraced the reforms of the Council

with enthusiasm and understanding as a God-given challenge. The synodal renewal can build on their spiritual heritage today and tomorrow.)

Immediately after the "annus mirabilis" of 1989, Christians in post-communist countries experienced many surprises.

First came the American fundamentalist evangelical missionaries with a Bible in one hand and a hamburger in the other, preaching a Christianity in a way, which was not compatible with the European cultural mentality.

Then came the conservative Catholics from the West who wanted to present the post-Communist Church as the Sleeping Beauty who happily slept through the Second Vatican Council. They wanted to kiss her like a prince in a fairy tale to awaken her to her pre-modern beauty.

The conservative Catholics, especially from the US, offered an attractive role for the churches, decimated by communism: The Church of the Martyrs, purified by persecution, will now teach moral lessons to the "corrupt West"! Ex Oriente lux – ex Occidente luxus!

This dangerous self-illusion, primitive black-and-white world picture was unfortunately for many Catholics in Eastern Europe attractive and seductive.

Some Christians after the fall of communis *could not live without an enemy.*

A new enemy image, simple concept of the "corrupt West", became the ideal replacement for the old one. Catholics, once persecuted by the Communists, now began to use the anti-Western rhetoric left in their subconscious by the brainwashing of Communist propaganda.

This negative image of the West (inherited from the soviet communist propaganda) has later become the main ideological weapon of Putin's ideological war, preparing the hot war, which began with the aggression

against Ukraine. This ideology is blessed by the Russian orthodox Church, whose Patriarch Kyrill is Vladimir Putin's former colleagues from KGB. The same anti-western ideology (often referring to "Christian values") is being used against the EU and NATO by nationalist populists in Hungary and Slovakia, who are trying to break up the EU from within. Today, populists, nationalists, political extremists and religious fundamentalists are on the rise in Eastern and Western Europe and pose a serious threat to Europe, its unity, democratic character, resilience and survival in the face of the threat of nuclear conflict. It is clearly documented that the intense propaganda war against the EU and NATO is financed by Russia. Russian propaganda specifically targets conservative Catholics who have always had an affinity for authoritarian regimes.

*What role has and could the church play in the post-communist world?*

After the fall of dictatorships, the postcommunist societies were deeply *wounded*. In an open society, former dissidents and fighters for freedom now had to live side by side with former collaborators and secret police confidants. A path had to be found between the desire for revenge and the easy trivialization of guilt. The process of healing and reconciliation tends to be challenging - guilt must be confessed, called by name, and a path of repentance and satisfaction must be embraced. Christians should be experts in the process of reconciliation – Church should be “*field hospital*”. Let us admit that this task remained *unfulfilled* - and we are still suffering the consequences.

The first half of the 1990s was a time of bitter disillusionment in Central Eastern Europe. Those who understood EU membership as an invitation to sit soon at the richly set table of the West were soon disappointed. Many of the last communists have become the first capitalists. The overestimation of economic transformation and the neglect of education for democratic culture led to the fact that some post-communist countries have been controlled by oligarchs - former communist elites, the only

ones with the capital of money, influential contacts, and information after the fall of communism. 'Wild capitalism' in some postcommunist countries is leading to major social problems.

*The de-communisation process* underestimated the extent of the moral and spiritual damage to society that communism left behind - almost half a century in Central Eastern Europe and over 70 years in Russia.

After the war, West Germany went through a thorough process of denazification and became a state with a highly developed democratic political culture, solidarity, and a deep sensitivity to world poverty, the persecuted and refugees. The German Catholic Church played an important role in this process. It has generously assisted the churches in the post-communist countries in a significant way.

The eastern part of Germany under Soviet rule never underwent denazification (the GDR was a country of 'good Germans') - we see the fruits of this in the success of dangerous nationalist populists like the AfD today.

In Russia, there is a deep economic, moral, and demographic crisis. The attempt to democratize Russia under Yeltsin has wholly failed. "Democracy" has become a dirty word in Russia.

The Putin's regime has nothing to offer its population except the drug of national messianism. The main reason for the Russian aggression and genocide in Ukraine was the Russian regime's fear that the example of the democratizing "color revolutions" in the former Soviet republics would awaken civil society and the desire for democracy in Russia itself. Now, however, the Russian public is mainly manipulated by propaganda and intimidated by repression, and the opposition is very weak and liquidated; the Russian regime cynically murders its opponents.

Putin is following Hitler's strategy - first to occupy regions with linguistic minorities, then the entire foreign territory, and if not stopped, he will move on. If the West were to betray democratic Ukraine, and if Ukraine

were to capitulate, it would encourage not only further Russian military advances but also dictators and aggressors all over the planet.

Unfortunately, Western illusions that Putin will keep some agreements and make compromises and that he can be considered a partner in diplomatic negotiations are as dangerous as the naivety of the West before the threshold of World War II.

The goal must be **a just peace**, not the peace of graveyards. In this regard, the West should listen to the experience of countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Georgia and Baltic states. At a time of the real threat of global war, our wishful thinking must not obscure the harsh realities. Love for the enemy in a case of an aggressor —as we read in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*—means to prevent him from doing evil, in other words, *to knock the weapon out of his hand, to stop him*. I afraid this is the only realistic way to peace in Ukraine.

*What is the future of the Church and Christianity in Europe?*

A time of global change is naturally a time of turmoil and crisis. We know from the history of salvation as narrated in the Bible and from the history of the Church that God repeatedly puts his people through periods of *crisis and trial*.

Crises are *challenges to change*. They show us that we can no longer continue on our current path (in our way of living and working, in our relationships) in the same way we have been doing; *we must change*. That is why every crisis is a *kairos* - an opportunity to respond creatively to Jesus' key sermon: Μετανοώ! Be transformed!

*The Church is facing the necessity of a profound reform.*

The situation of the Church has a striking resemblance to the crisis just before the Reformation in the 16th century - before the *double* Reformation, Protestant and Catholic.

*Abuse scandals* play a role similar to the role once played by the scandals of the sale of indulgences. The phenomenon, which at first appeared to

be marginal, revealed the need for *changes in the whole system of the Church*.

The crisis of credibility of the Church due to the unexpected number of cases of sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse *is only one striking aspect* of this crisis. The crises that our Church is going through today *must be seen in a broader context*. This crisis has many faces and many aspects; it is not easy to distinguish what belongs to the causes and what to the consequences.

The call to ***synodal renewal*** of the Church is a God inspired response to the signs of the times.

Let us not expect rapid changes in the institutional form of the Church - such expectations would only lead to disappointment - and let us not pin our hopes only on these *external* changes. Synodal reform must be above all a change of mentality: we are looking for ***a new, deeper way of being Church in today's world***.

Active Christians are a minority in Europe today. A lot depends on whether they want to create *a ghetto*, as Ron Dreher, an apostate from the Catholic Church and a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, proposes in his book *Benedict Option*, popular in certain Catholic circles, ***or a creative minority***, as Benedict XVI. called for.

Christianity *has lost the form of religion* (religio) in the sense of the verb "re-ligare," to unite, in the sense *of the integrative power of the whole society*, of a common language understood by all.

But it can be ***a religion in the sense of the verb re-legere, to read again***. It can offer a new hermeneutic, a new, more profound understanding of how God speaks to us through Scripture and tradition, but also through the signs of the times. The synodal reform needs first of all deepening - prophetic theology and spiritual renewal.

The Easter message of the Resurrection tells us that the presence of the living Christ among us is still *an open, ongoing story*. This forces us to think anew and more deeply about where *our Christian identity* lies. The essence



of our Christian identity is the living, risen Christ, so it cannot be enclosed in simple definitions and old images. The Spirit leads us to discover ever greater Christ (*Christus semper maior*).

It needs open hearts and open minds. If we hear his voice again, let us not harden our hearts.