The Christian Foundations of Europe:

The Idea of Europe

from Saint Columbanus to the Origins of the European Union

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The early medieval Irish monk Columbanus has been called the first European. His is one of the earliest and strongest voices of early Christian Ireland, the first Irish person to express a sense of Irish identity in writing, and the first to introduce us to the concept of a united Europe. Columbanus (c. 550-615) and the French statesman and politican Robert Schuman (1886-1963) are two historical figures at either end of the spectrum of European history who have both been lauded in different ways as “Fathers of Europe”. Despite the vast chronological gap that separates both men, what connects them was their idea of Europe: Columbanus was one of the first to voice the idea of Europe as a distinct community, while Schuman sought to build a new supranational community in Europe after the Second World War that was inspired by the same heritage and thought that had motivated Columbanus.

Robert Schuman in Luxeuil

Five years after the end of the Second World War, a group of statesmen and scholars met in the sleepy market town of Luxeuil-les-Bains in the Franche Comté region of eastern France. They were there to commemorate the 14th centenary of the birth of Columbanus, who had founded the monastery of Luxeuil soon after his arrival in this region of France in 591. An academic congress had been organized alongside other festive commemorations to celebrate his legacy. But what was unusual about this congress was its political profile – it had been orchestrated by the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman. A bevy of leading European statesmen, diplomats, and high-ranking Church officials including among other European dignitaries, the Irish Prime Minister John A. Costello, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sean McBride, Eamonn De Valera, and Monsignor Angelo Roncalli, future Pope John XXIII, who converged on Luxeuil in response to Schuman's invitation.

Schuman was a devout Catholic deeply influenced by the Catholic social teaching of Pope Leo XIII and the influential French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. Only two months prior to the Luxeuil conference on 9 May 1950 Schuman had made the

historic declaration in Paris that would mark the foundation of the European Community: the Schuman Doctrine. The previous summer in Strasbourg he had declared: “We are carrying out a great experiment, the fulfillment of the same recurrent dream that for ten centuries has revisited the peoples of Europe: creating between them an organization putting an end to war and guaranteeing an eternal peace. … Our century, that has witnessed the catastrophes resulting in the unending clash of nationalities and nationalisms, must attempt and succeed in reconciling nations in a supranational association. This would safeguard the diversities and aspirations of each nation while coordinating them in the same manner as the regions are coordinated within the unity of the nation.” So, behind the arcane academic discussions at Luxeuil, Schuman had a very pragmatic reason for bringing together leading European statesmen here – he wanted to sound out the idea of a European coal and steel community based on the premise that by pooling coal and steel production (the most important materials needed for the arms industry) and by merging economic interests, future war in Europe could be prevented. In his vision for a united Europe, Schuman drew inspiration from the figure of Columbanus who he praised as “the patron saint of all

those who seek to construct a united Europe.” While it would not be until April 1951 that the European Coal and Steel Community, the forerunner of the modern European Union, was launched, the July 1950 conference at Luxeuil gave a new lease of life to a long-dead saint whom Pope Benedict XVI more recently lauded as a “Father of Europe.”

Now, sixty-nine years after the Treaty of Paris (1951) that ratified the start of European economic integration, when the future of the European Union itself is uncertain, it is an opportune time to reflect on the origins and ideas that first underlay and gave impetus to this movement of European integration. What does Europe now mean and what does it mean to be European when much of the scaffolding that supported the historical development of Europe has fallen away or been discarded as irrelevant or cumbersome in contemporary European societies? When history as an academic subject is increasingly relegated to the sidelines in our secondary schools and universities, does the past have anything to say to us today? Can we still learn from the past? These are some of the questions that I wish to explore in this lecture by framing Columbanus and Robert Schuman as bookends to the development of the idea of Europe.

The idea of Europe as a distinct geopolitical, cultural, and religious zone only developed during the course of the Early and High Middle Ages (500-1300). For the ancient Greeks and Romans, Europe had merely been a geographical term devoid of any greater meaning, simply the third part of the world after Asia and Africa.

From the Ends of the Earth: Columbanus and his World

The Irish monk and émigré Columbanus was one of the first to use the term in a new way. He was born into a world of flux on the very edges of the late antique world. On early medieval maps Ireland is literally shown off the map – it was peripheral in every sense of the word. From the perspective of civilized Graeco-Roman culture it was the barbarian island par excellence. Sixth-century Ireland was an ancient rural society by the time Columbanus was born there, sometime around 550, in the fertile farmlands around Mount Leinster in southern Co. Carlow. His birth coincided with the tail end of a period of endemic plague that had swept across Europe from Constantinople (now Istanbul) killing many in its wake. The new religion of Christianity spread by foreign missionary bishops Palladius and Patricius (Saint Patrick) in the mid-fifth century was gaining ground and slowly

transforming Irish society. Columbanus's family may well have been first-generation Christians. But the old religion was far from dead. Around the time of his birth the last pagan festival at Tara, the sacred site of the high king, was celebrated when the new high king ritually took possession of Eriu, the goddess of the land. The high kingship was a ritual kingship claimed and fought for by the most powerful of the regional kings of Ireland who vied amongst themselves for supremacy. Below them were perhaps as many as one hundred petty kings who ruled small tribal kingdoms or *tuatha*. This was a small world of closely-knit farming communities where one was defined by one's social role and class within the group. Ireland has always been politically divided and it was no different at this time when new dynasties were on the make. Columbanus may have had links to the Ui Bairrche, a royal Leinster dynasty who controlled parts of southern Leinster but who also had ties to northern Ireland, particularly with the monastery of Bangor. One of the Ui Bairrche kings retired there in the mid-sixth century and it was there that Columbanus entered monastic life following his formation in Biblical studies with a famous scriptural scholar in Co. Fermanagh (Abbot Sinilis of Cleenish). His later Italian biographer, Jonas of Bobbio, who undoubtedly knew some of Columbanus's

Irish monks, ascribed his religious conversion to a holy woman. Columbanus received a strict and disciplined monastic formation in Bangor under the founder abbot, Comgall, and may have served as the head of the monastic school there. Monasticism was ideally suited to Ireland's rural economy and social structure and the sixth century was the Golden Age of Ireland's monastic foundations (among them Clonmacnoise and Glendalough).

Columbanus remained a monk of Bangor for perhaps as long as twenty years before he received permission from his abbot to leave Ireland for the rest of his life. The ritual of *peregrinatio* or ascetic exile was the next step in his monastic vocation. This was a commitment to entrust oneself entirely to God on an adventure where only He knew the destination. For the Irish it was a form of martyrdom and a heroic act – only very experienced monks were given permission to undertake it. Paradoxically, according to Irish law, the monk's status rose to that of a petty king or bishop on undertaking this act. It was also a Christological ritual. The monk further deepened his association with Christ by renouncing the comfort and security of his homeland and by a total surrender to the Will of God. This imitation of Christ was symbolically reinforced when Abbot Comgall entrusted twelve of Columbanus's brother

monks to accompany him on his voyage and he became their new abbot. By taking the Cross of exile and social alienation and the message of the Gospel back into the disintegrating heartlands of the former Roman Empire, Columbanus and his monks heralded, like John the Baptist, the need for repentance and the imminent return of Christ. When Columbanus and his monks left the shores of Belfast Lough in northern Ireland probably in the summer of 590 it is unlikely he had any definite destination in mind. This wasn't a pilgrimage in the later medieval sense of travelling to a sacred place, rather the act of pilgrimage itself was sacred as the monks let their boat and steps follow the guidance of the Spirit – it was more like Walkabout in the Australian aboriginal tradition.

Columbanus landed in Brittany from where he travelled inland, following the waterways and ancient Roman roads, to the court of King Guntram I at Chalon-sur-Saone in Burgundy. Guntram was the most powerful of the Frankish kings who ruled Gaul at this time. The Franks were the most successful of the Germanic peoples who carved out a kingdom for themselves in the post-Roman world – they gave their name to the modern nation: France. The royal dynasty of the Franks were the Merovingians who divided Gaul into three kingdoms amongst

themselves – Guntram was a member of this dynasty and ruled the kingdom of Burgundy. The Church in Gaul was controlled by the kings and the Gallic bishops, usually members from the older Gallo-Roman senatorial aristocracy, who served as civil servants and advisors to the monarchs. This powerful network, not unlike an old boys club, brooked no competitors to their spiritual authority and were suspicious of independent holy men such as Columbanus. But the bishops were also largely responsible for disseminating Christian concepts of kingship inspired by Old Testament models of rulership. Guntram especially took on this mantle of Christian kingship and he was praised at the time for being a model and good king. As an exile and outsider in a foreign land, Columbanus had to work through established networks of power. He needed protection from a "strong man", and, according to Irish law at the time it was the duty of a king to provide hospitality and protection to an exile. Columbanus may have met Guntram soon before his death in 592 and it appears he was persuaded by the king to establish a monastery in the foothills of the Vosges mountains in a royal hunting reserve. An abandoned Roman route-way fort which was royal property was granted to Columbanus and he established his first monastery at Annegray

near the site of an ancient cult place to the Goddess Diana (Annegray). Not long after he established another monastery 15 km away within the Gallo-Roman town of Luxeuil, the site of natural thermal springs, a place of healing and pilgrimage in Antiquity. There was already a long-standing Christian community in Luxeuil by the time Columbanus settled there, so Columbanus was not introducing Christianity *ex nihilo* in this area, although we do not know the extent to which Christian practice and norms had penetrated this society. Again, Columbanus established yet another monastery at Fontaine/ Fontanas ("The Springs") 6 km from Luxeuil. Three monasteries were established one after another all within the same area. While Jonas of Bobbio, Columbanus's biographer, later stated that this was due to overcrowding and the influx of new recruits, Columbanus's own writings written in the region may give us a more accurate clue. Columbanus complains of folk practices which were still essentially pagan in nature, of baptized Christians still going to *fana* or pagan shrines – sacred places in the countryside, and of magic practitioners – including the clergy! Columbanus seems to have pursued a conscious strategy of appropriating ancient spring cult sites along route networks in the Luxeuil area by establishing

his monasteries there and by so doing incorporating them within a Christian pastoral framework. He did this no doubt in dialogue with the king who was invested in the spread of Christian norms and practices among his subjects. Spring cult sites were especially important in pagan Ireland and many of these were Christianized by Columbanus's contemporaries – and are still venerated as holy wells in rural Ireland. This was a missionary strategy not unique to Columbanus or the Irish monks as we know from the Roman mission sent to Anglo-Saxon England in 596 by Pope Gregory the Great where the Roman monks converted pagan temples into the first churches in southern England.

Columbanus and the Gallic Bishops

Despite Columbanus's success as a monastic founder and his patronage by the Merovingian royal dynasty, tensions soon arose both within and without his monasteries. The biggest threat were initially the Gallic bishops who were alarmed by his refusal to acknowledge their authority and jurisdiction over his monasteries and by his rigid adherence to Irish customs which included following a different method of time reckoning for calculating the date of Easter and another style of tonsure. The heart of the issue was not about finding a solution to the correct method of

calculating the date of Easter—Columbanus knew this—but about authority and where that authority lay. From the bishop’s perspective Columbanus was an upstart who had broken Gallic ecclesiastical law in refusing to subordinate himself and his communities to the local diocesan. The conflict at its essence reflected a gulf in Christian praxis between Columbanus and the bishops. From the beginning, Columbanus had sidestepped the bishops’ authority. His monasteries were situated near diocesan boundaries while the altar he used in his monastery was consecrated by an Irish bishop. These were strategies by which he deliberately distanced himself from the Gallic episcopate. Columbanus’s hauteur towards the bishops was undoubtedly a reflection of cultural differences. Columbanus’s ‘impudence’ may be ascribed to the fact that abbots and leading ascetics in Ireland had the same status as that of an ordinary bishop and were entitled to sit with bishops on synods. Abbots in Ireland were not subject to their local bishop. In Columbanus’s view monks and bishops were two distinct but parallel callings that were mutually exclusive of one another.

If the core issue of the conflict concerned authority, of which the Easter controversy was just one aspect, the matter was further

compounded by the fact that both parties drew their claim to authority from different sources. The bishops relied on legislative precedent—to the prior canonical tradition of the Gallic Church. For Columbanus, the authority of the Bible was primary. By his faithful adherence to the teachings of the Gospel—which were contrary to the lifestyles of some of the bishops—Columbanus saw himself as being above the authority of the bishops. He outlined that the authority and example of the Scriptures were above that of their episcopal powers. He was, by his rigid imitation of Christ and adherence to scriptural teaching, beyond their jurisdictional scope. He pleaded for toleration and simply to be left alone.

Columbanus sidestepped the bishops by appealing directly to the Pope in Rome. This was an unusual course of action for the time as the Gallic Church was a force unto itself and was used to settling its own disputes in synods. Columbanus considered the bishops corrupt petty bureaucrats who did not have the moral authority to judge him. Many, he complained, had paid money for their election to episcopal office – the sin of simony – and many continued to have sexual relations with their wives after episcopal consecration. Pope Gregory the Great was also concerned about these abuses in the Gallic Church. It is in this context that

Columbanus first uses the term Europe in his typically florid address to the Pope in the letter he wrote from Burgundy in 600: ‘To the Holy Lord and Father in Christ, the fairest Ornament of the Roman Church, as it were a most august Flower of all Europe in her decay (*totius Europae flaccentis augustissimo quasi cuidam Flori*), to the distinguished Bishop (*egregio Speculatori*), who is skilled in the Meditation of divine Eloquence, I, Bar-Jonah (a poor Dove), send Greeting in Christ.’ The imagery here is complex and multilayered. Columbanus compares the Pope to a flower of a wilting-dried out Europe. His use of the term Europe in a specific geographical sense does that preclude that he may also be alluding to Ovid’s account in the *Metamorphoses* of the classical myth of the Pheonician princess Europa who was seduced by the God Zeus/ Jupiter in the form of a white bull whom she decked with flowers before she was carried off into the sea and who gave her name to the Continent. As one historian has commented on this passage in Columbanus’s letter, ‘The rhetorical contrast between a wilting Europe and its spiritual head, bathed in light and clothed in imperial epithet, reveals a new cultural landscape, however rugged and as yet fitful.’ By contrast, Pope Gregory still saw himself and Rome in an imperial context of the Eastern

Roman Empire – he was a loyal servant of the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople and Rome was the westernmost frontier of the Byzantine Empire. Columbanus was beginning to voice a new consciousness.

As an immigrant and outsider, Columbanus transcended the petty factionalism and ethnic myopia of his environment by appealing to a supranational sense of unity grounded in scriptural authority: the message, most fully expressed by Saint Paul, that we are all one in Christ. As the successor of the Apostle Peter, the Pope is the spiritual head of this community. Columbanus looks to the Pope for leadership – Rome exercises a magnetic pull for Columbanus, but not as the former capital of a world Empire, but as the most holy city of the martyrs Peter and Paul. Columbanus's principal abbatial churches of Luxeuil and later Bobbio were dedicated to Saint Peter, as were the majority of Columbanian monasteries. Columbanus begs the Pope to pray for him at the shrines of the saints. The veneration for Rome as the resting place of the apostles and the early martyrs was reflected in the Old Irish word for a cemetery: *ruaim*.

Columbanus writes about his desire to go to Rome, a desire that was never fulfilled despite a later Bobbio legend that had him

travelling to Rome on the back of a bear to meet Gregory the Great. Nevertheless, Columbanus may have tried to bring Rome to the Vosges where the dedications of his Vosges monasteries mirrored to some extent the Christian topography of Rome. Annegray was dedicated to John the Baptist, Luxeuil to Saint Peter, and most unusual of all, Fontaine to the Roman martyr Pancras. Columbanus may have received relics of Pancras from Gregory the Great or his delegation of Roman missionaries in 596 on their way north to Anglo-Saxon England. Pope Gregory promoted the cult of Pancras and one of the first churches in Canterbury was consecrated to this saint. Gregory, the biographer of Saint Benedict, may also have sent a copy of the *Rule of Benedict* to Columbanus and it was through the Columbanian communities that the *Rule of Benedict* was first widely disseminated outside of Italy.

But despite these tenuous links to Rome, the Pope does not appear to have intervened with the Gallic bishops. Tensions continued to mount until 603 when Columbanus was summoned to answer before a synod of bishops assembled in Chalon. Suspecting it to be a show trial, Columbanus refused to go and instead wrote a bombshell of a letter that appealed directly to the

example of Scripture while dismissing the moral authority of the bishops to judge him. He seems to have envisaged that he had some kind of special diplomatic immunity as a religious exile. The political situation was also beginning to change at the royal court with the accession of a young boy king, Theuderic II, to the throne. Relations were initially good until Columbanus urged the king to marry. This would have jeopardized the leading role at court held by Theuderic's grandmother, the dowager queen, Brunhild (the historical character who would later morph into the Brunhild of legend and be immortalized in Richard Wagner's Ring cycle), who was the power behind the throne. Brunhild orchestrated Columbanus's banishment in 610 after relations had broken down between the king and Columbanus after the abbot had refused to bless the king's illegitimate sons and refused to allow the laity access to the inner sacred space of his monasteries. Theuderic pursued an ethnic strategy of banishing all the Irish and British monks from Luxeuil, while the local monks were permitted to stay. Columbanus and the Insular contingent were given a military escort of more than 600 miles to Nantes and the Atlantic coast where they were to be deported back to Ireland. But, somehow, Columbanus managed to escape. He wrote an emotional letter

from Nantes to the community back in Luxeuil as the ship weighed at anchor. He hints that his guards had taken pity on him and that they might let him escape. In Jonas's later more dramatic and miraculous account, the ship was prevented from leaving by a huge wave until the skipper allowed Columbanus and his monks to leave. Whatever the exact circumstances, the monks did escape, making their way to Paris and northern France. There they made contact with powerful Frankish aristocratic clans and were welcomed by rival Merovingian kings who were enemies of Theuderic's. Columbanus navigated the Rhine as far as Lake Constance where he settled briefly in the town of Bregenz – now in western Austria but at the time this was a frontier town on the edges of the Frankish sphere of influence. He established a short-lived mission station there but when the political situation became unstable in 612 following the defeat of his royal patron by his enemy Theuderic II, Columbanus left Bregenz and crossed the Alps into Italy. Later tradition records that Gallus, one of Columbanus's Irish monks, parted company with Columbanus at this point and settled as a hermit in the area. Gallus's hermitage would develop into one of the great abbeys of Carolingian Europe named after him, Sankt Gallen, which has preserved one of the

best collections of medieval manuscripts in Europe (the library of St Gallen).

Columbanus's letter to Pope Boniface IV, written in 613 from Milan, was a call for unity within the Church. Columbanus wrote as an outsider and this made him an ideal arbitrator for the Lombard king and queen who had asked him to write the letter. In his address to Pope Boniface, Columbanus, for the second and final time invokes the name of Europe, in much the same context as he had done in his earlier letter to Gregory the Great. It begins with the address: "To the most fair Head of all the Churches of the whole of Europe (*totius Europae*)." The Pope is seen to be the head of a European body of churches: in this period this meant above all western trans-Alpine Europe as opposed to the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire. Although Jonas of Bobbio, Columbanus's Italian biographer who wrote an account of the saint's life twenty-five years after his death, never uses the term Europe, his detailed account of Columbanus's odyssey from Ireland to Italy reads like an early travelogue through Western Europe and anchors Columbanus's vision within a concrete geographical and political framework. By the end of the seventh century we find a clear reference to Europe in the *Life of St*

Gertrude of Nivelles, whose death on St Patrick's Day is noted by the author who asks: "For who living in Europe does not know the loftiness, the names, and the localities of her lineage?" So, already by the end of the seventh century a sense of Europe had already developed. External threats to Western Europe served to give cohesion to a fledgling sense of unity. The rapid rise of Islam in the seventh century and the speed with which Islamic armies conquered the ancient Christian territories of the Byzantine Empire in the Holy Land and Egypt and then conquered most of Spain in the eighth century served to unify disparate ethnic groups to respond to this threat. The term "Europeans" is first used by an eighth-century chronicler to describe the composite forces under the leadership of the Frankish commander Charles Martel who defeated a Muslim army at the battle of Tours in 732, the furthest north a Muslim army every came in Europe.

Columbanus's *peregrinatio* on the Continent was characterized in equal measure by success and failure. As a monastic founder Columbanus established two monasteries—Luxeuil and Bobbio—that were to have a lasting impact on their host societies as vibrant centres of religious life, hubs of economic

exchange, culture and learning and which lasted for over a thousand years up to the French Revolution. Columbanus introduced a new and dynamic model of monastic foundation that sidestepped the oversight of bishops and provided the Frankish elites with an attractive vehicle for establishing monasteries that could maintain control over their land while simultaneously helping their salvation and enhancing their status. By seeking to remain independent from external authorities so that he could remain true to his vocation as an ascetic exile, Columbanus inadvertently served as a catalyst for an explosion in monastic foundation that in time reconfigured the spiritual and economic topography of Western Europe. More than one hundred new monasteries were founded within a century of Columbanus's death largely in the north and east of the Merovingian kingdom. This was achieved through a close co-operation between the Merovingian royal court and Columbanus's monastery of Luxeuil, an interrelationship that marked a new symbiosis in how secular authorities and monastic groups related to one another.

As an author Columbanus left behind a corpus of work – six letters, two monastic rules, a manual of penance, thirteen sermons, and two poems – that are our primary source of

information about him as well as one of the most remarkable sources for this period. He was the first to express an Irish sense of identity in writing and the first to introduce us to the idea of a united Europe. His writings reveal a man who was fully engaged with the issues and the leading figures of his age. While Columbanus was successful at winning patronage and followers at the highest levels of society, his unwillingness to compromise and his autocratic style of leadership led to conflict both with those who had supported him and from within his own communities.

Columbanus's death at Bobbio in 615 marked the culmination of a remarkable European odyssey of some 2,000 miles that had begun some twenty-five years before when he had set sail from Ireland with a group of twelve monks. Columbanus transcended the petty factionalism and ethnic myopia of his environment by appealing to a supranational sense of unity grounded in scriptural authority. While the full extent of this vision would not be worked out until the following centuries, Columbanus gave voice to a new Continent that was taking shape in the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire. The idea of Western Christendom and Europe began to merge so that over time they became synonymous. While Dante never used the term

“Europeans”, but merely the “inhabitants of Europe” by the time of Pope Pius II in the mid 15th century he was using the term “European” as a synonym for Christian and this interchangeable use of the term continued into the 17th century.

Building Europe After the Second World War

In the post-war period Christian Democrat politicans like Robert Schuman in France, Alcide de Gasperi in Italy, and Konrad Adenauer in Germany drew on the same ideas and resources in their plans to build a new Europe from the ruins of war as the idea of a unified Europe began to take shape. In his vision for the future of Europe, Schuman drew inspiration from the social encylicals of Popes Leo XIII to Pius XII, the political philosophy of the French Catholic writer Jacques Maritain, and the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas with which he was well versed. This was a political philosophy grounded in the Gospel and focused on how to build societies centered on the common good. Yet Schuman was not advocating a return to theocracy, but clearly understood the necessity for the division of Church and State. Schuman was deeply conscious of the historical context that had given rise to Western European civilization and of the similarities between his own time and that of the early medieval world in particular. In his

political manifesto, *Pour L'Europe* ("For Europe") which was published posthumously soon after his death in 1963, and which he collated from his numerous political speeches, he stressed the importance of cohesion for the European peoples. While Jean Monnet's idea of pooling coal and steel production provided the start-up experiment on a practical level of binding France and Germany closer together, Schuman knew that the project would ultimately flounder if it remained primarily an economic and technical enterprise. He was fully aware of the dangers of excessive bureaucracy and technocracy and the kind of administrative paralysis that this could lead to: "European integration must, generally speaking, avoid the mistakes of our national democracies, especially excessive bureaucracy and technocracy … Administrative paralysis is the basic danger that threatens any supranational organisation." Schuman's vision was much more ambitious and far reaching – the economic and technical merger were merely the preliminary conditions in creating "a cultural community in the most elevated sense of the term." This was to be a community fostered by education, free movement of peoples within Europe conscious of their historical affinities and ties. European unity would not, he realized, be

achieved by European institutions on their own.

Conclusion

Throughout European history the Church was the guardian of the universal principle, unless it happened to be sidetracked by short-sighted national interests. Pope Benedict XVI wrote a book on this subject while a young theologian, called *The Unity of Nations – A Vision of the Church Fathers*. There is much to recommend that view, and supra-ethnic ideas of Church and Christian Empire remained attractive throughout the Middle Ages. This was a community sprung and nurtured by Christianity and Christian pioneers such as Saints Benedict and Columbanus. It was from these roots that Robert Schuman and the Christian Democratic founders of the European Union drew inspiration. It is a vision that has largely been lost. In his address to the European Parliament in November 2014 Pope Francis highlighted some of the challenges now faced by the European Union. He drew attention to the sense of alienation and loneliness felt by many people and to the prioritization of economic and technical issues dominating political debate, to the detriment of genuine concern for human beings and the transcendent dignity of the human person. At the same time he highlighted the prevalent cultural

amnesia and disregard for Europe's Christian heritage which helped shape our Continent and his conviction that "a Europe which is capable of appreciating its religious roots and of grasping their fruitfulness and potential, will be all the more immune to the many forms of extremism spreading in the world today, not least as a result of the great vacuum of ideals which we are currently witnessing in the West."

With the decline in Christianity in the West, which provided a unifying moral and soteriological framework for so many centuries and which substantially shaped European societies and values, the loss of this cohesive metanarrative coupled with rising inequality poses grave risks for the future of genuine democracy in Europe. As the British journalist and political commentator Douglas Murray observed in his 2017 book *The Strange Death of Europe*: "At any time the loss of all unifying stories about our past or ideas about what to do with our present or future would be a serious conundrum. But during a time of momentous societal change and upheaval the results are proving fatal. The world is coming into Europe at precisely the moment that Europe has lost sight of what it is." He concludes his book with some reflections about the past and how we perceive our heritage: "Any solution to

our crisis would also involve not only a fresh attitude towards our future but a more balanched attitude towards our past. It is not possible for a society to survive if it routinely suppresses and otherwise fights against its own origins … I cannot help feeling that much of the future of Europe will be decided on what our attitude is towards the church buildings and other great cultural buildings of our heritage standing in our midst. Around the questions of whether we hate them, ignore them, engage with them or revere them, a huge amount will depend.” Common stories not only inform and shape who we are, they also influence and shape our social reality. In making connections with our past and with acknowledging the historical roots of Europe, we can perhaps better navigate the future. What is less acknowledged today within the European Union and in society more generally are the Christian semantic and philosophical roots that lay behind the European project from the very beginning, the idea of European unity that Columbanus first tentatively voiced some 1,400 years ago and which in turn inspired Robert Schuman at the start of his very own European venture.

Suggested Further Reading:

Saint Columbanus: Selected Writings, ed. Alexander O'Hara (Dublin: Veritas 2015).

Columbanus and the Peoples of Post-Roman Europe, ed. Alexander O'Hara (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Jonas of Bobbio: Life of Columbanus and His Disciples, Life of John, Life of Vedast, ed. & trans. Alexander O'Hara and Ian Wood (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press 2017).

Alan Fimister, *Robert Schuman: Neo-Scholastic Humanism and the Reunificaiton of Europe* (Peter Lang, 2008).