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The Pope, Europe and the role of religions on the continent: the turning point under Leo XIV

Pope Leo XIV's visit to [Metz](#) on 28 September could mark an important moment in the papal attitude towards Europe. The programme combines an interfaith meeting with an event entitled "*At the roots of Europe for peace and unity*". This juxtaposition reflects the doctrinal shift that appears to be taking place. Pope Leo XIV is part of a long-standing tradition of Europeanism, but 'Christian roots' are now being reclaimed by nationalist and populist movements, which are turning them into a cultural identity and a civilisational frontier. The Pope therefore seems less concerned with asking Europe to proclaim its Christian identity than with preserving the rule of law, pluralism, subsidiarity and religious coexistence. Hence, Europe would no longer simply be a Christian stronghold but become a bulwark against the brutality of Empires.

METZ: CONTINUITY IN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS AND A BREAK WITH DOCTRINE

Metz carries great symbolic significance: a border town, once French, then German, and now French once more, it lies at the heart of a unified Europe designed to prevent the return of continental wars. The sequence of events—an interfaith gathering followed by a reflection on the '*roots of Europe*'—combines heritage and coexistence. Whilst the speech is yet to be delivered, Leo XIV has already outlined its direction: [addressing the European People's Party last April](#), he recalled the Christian inspiration of De Gasperi, Schuman and Adenauer, as well as 'Europe's Christian heritage'.

What is new is the meaning attributed to this heritage. It serves not primarily to demand legal recognition of a historical Christianity, but to defend the primacy of the person, the common good, participation, the distinction between the political and the religious, and the limitation of power. Being a Christian in politics, Leo XIV explains, does not imply confessional politics. Whereas Rome once called on Europe to remember what it had been, the new pontificate might invite it to preserve what it has become: a space founded on law, human dignity and pluralism.

A EUROPEAN DOCTRINE BORN OUT OF TRAGEDY

Papal pro-Europeanism emerged relatively late. In the 19th century, plans for unification often originated in liberal circles that had been partly formed in opposition to the influence of the Church. The papal conversion to the European cause arose as a result of war. [Benedict XV](#) described the 1914–1918 war as the '*suicide of civilised Europe*' and sought to curb nationalism, subject states to arbitration and prevent military force alone from determining the fate of peoples. Before being shaped by its Christian roots, the papal vision of Europe was thus a response to unchecked power.

[Pius XI](#) further developed this approach. In the face of totalitarianism, Rome made the link between European peace, the freedom of civil society and the limitation of state power. The absorption of society by the state was to be countered, in particular, by subsidiarity

and the preservation of autonomous intermediary bodies. Pius XI condemned the Catholic nationalism of Action française and supported Aristide Briand's federal project. In 1932, the Holy See was able to imagine the continent's future in the form of the 'United States of Europe'.

With [Pius XII](#), a second dimension emerged: Europe was conceived as having been historically shaped by Christianity. In 1948, he recalled that Christianity had been the 'soul' of medieval Europe, whilst [supporting](#) the unification championed by Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Alcide De Gasperi. Two strands coexist: one, institutional, based on reconciliation, federalism, human rights and subsidiarity; the other, civilisational, which regards Christianity as the historical matrix of Europe. Christian memory should lead the former great powers to renounce the idolatry of their sovereignty.

[John XXIII](#) and [Paul VI](#) subsequently universalised the papal doctrine. The priority became world peace in the face of the nuclear threat, development and the international order. *Pacem in Terris* (1963) linked peace to truth, justice, solidarity and freedom. Paul VI made development the new name for peace. Europe continued to receive Papal support but temporarily ceased to be a focal point of Rome's concerns.

JOHN PAUL II: A HIGH-POINT AND CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIAN EUROPE

[John Paul II](#) restored [Europe](#) to a position of exceptional centrality, devoting nearly three hundred texts to it. In his eyes, Europe could not be reduced to either the European Economic Community or the West: it breathes with two lungs, Eastern and Western. Slavic, Byzantine and Orthodox Europe is part of the same history as Latin Europe. [Cyril and Methodius](#) became co-patrons of the continent, and Constantinople regained a vital role in this spiritual reunification. John Paul II's vision was inseparable from his Polish experience. Small nations must be able to resist the empires that seek to absorb them;

European solidarity protects them from the 'sin of power' without abolishing their cultural sovereignty.

However, following the collapse of the communist bloc, John Paul II became more critical of European integration. He saw a peaceful, liberal Europe under the threat of materialism, relativism and the loss of objective moral foundations. The controversy over 'Christian roots' in the draft European Constitution captured this concern. The Holy See called for their recognition and a reference to God; the text ultimately retained cultural, religious and humanist heritages, as well as rights, democracy and the rule of law. John Paul II did not, however, wish to restore a theocratic state: he recognised popular sovereignty, political autonomy and limited government. The difficulty lay in his wish to have a Christian foundation recognised as preceding this autonomy.

This controversy nevertheless politicised the expression of 'Christian roots': spiritual genealogy became a marker of identity. [Benedict XVI](#) expanded on the diagnosis of a crisis arising from the rupture between reason, culture and Christianity. With [Francis](#), the change was above all a shift in perspective: he viewed Europe from its peripheries – through the lens of migrants, poverty, the climate and dialogue with Islam. Europe was no longer being called upon to rediscover an essence, but to assume its responsibility in the world.

FROM 'CHRISTIANITY AS RENEWAL' TO 'CHRISTIANITY AS IDENTITY'

Leo XIV has emerged against a transformed backdrop. In the early 2000s, Rome feared that Christianity would fade from the European consciousness. A quarter of a century later, it has also become culturalized: secularisation detaches Christian symbols from their religious content and makes them available as signs of heritage, civilisation and belonging. Sociological de-Christianisation can thus go hand in hand with a rhetorical re-Christianisation of nationalism.

This 'Christian matrix' is being reinvented around a sense of being a threatened minority. It pits a historic people against cosmopolitan elites, migration, multiculturalism and moral transformations perceived by some as being imposed. The rhetoric of Nature, the Nation and Normality can transform the nation into a 'bulwark nation', defined by moral as well as territorial boundaries. This phenomenon extends beyond Catholicism and is spreading through transnational political, religious and media networks.

The second Trump administration has boosted this dynamic. In Munich, on 14 February 2025, Vice-President J. D. Vance described a Europe that had betrayed its values through censorship, mass immigration and discrimination against Christians, while moving closer to Eurosceptic forces. Other US officials have called for a 'civilisational alliance' between Christian nations. The conflict therefore runs through Christianity itself, between an open conception of its heritage and an identity-based conception of the nation.

LEO XIV: FROM A RETURN TO ONE'S ROOTS TO THE DEFENCE OF THE EUROPEAN ORDER

Leo XIV has not renounced his Christian roots; he has simply redefined their purpose. [They do not constitute a title to ownership of Europe but should serve as a source of inspiration for the common good](#). Without abandoning Catholic anthropology, he appears less interested in a 'war of values' than in the limitation of power through the rule of law and the primacy of the person.

He appears to embrace many of Europe's acquis: political autonomy, plurality of opinion, democratic deliberation, the rule of law, international cooperation and the protection of civil society organisations. Subsidiarity, derived from Catholic social teaching and enshrined in the European treaties, helps to avoid both absolute sovereignty and excessive centralisation. Added to this are solidarity, redistribution and the dignity of work.

The emphasis placed on immigration highlights the distance from 'identity-based' Christianity. Leo XIV advocates neither unlimited openness nor closure: he combines the protection of individuals, legal pathways, integration and reception capacity. This 'open and regulated Europe' refuses to turn the foreigner into a civilisational enemy. When asked about Islam as a threat to Western Christian identity, he advocates dialogue and coexistence between Christians and Muslims. Europe is therefore not destined to become a Christian stronghold resisting 'submersion'.

EUROPE AS A BULWARK AGAINST THE RESURGENCE OF EMPIRES

The Russian war in Ukraine and tensions with the Trump administration lend this shift geopolitical significance. Leo XIV advocates for a 'just and lasting peace' in Ukraine and a vision for Europe's future that differs from the 'Christendom 2.0' espoused by certain post-liberals. More broadly, his objection concerns a world in which great powers seek to impose their will by force, from Ukraine to Greenland, from Venezuela to the Middle East.

Despite its weaknesses, the European Union is founded on the opposite principle: its member states have submitted part of their sovereignty to common law, the courts and negotiation. This reality ties in with the oldest strand of papal Europeanism: Benedict XV sought to contain Realpolitik, Pius XI to neutralise nationalisms, and Pius XII to persuade the great nations to consent to a higher unity. Europe could therefore become less a territory to be defended because it is Christian than a space to be defended because it has built a system in which force is limited by the law. It would serve as a bulwark against new empires without itself becoming an empire. The continuity with John Paul II remains, but the rule of law, universal dignity and institutional cooperation are becoming the contemporary expressions of the Christian heritage.

THE NEW RELIGIOUS GEOPOLITICS OF EUROPE

Rome's repositioning comes at a time when the religious landscape of Europe is fracturing. Within Catholicism, the term 'Christian roots' can refer either to historical responsibility, dignity, solidarity and the limitation of power, or to a national identity to be defended against immigration, Islam, European institutions or cultural change. Similar tensions are running through Protestant circles, between conservative factions and the established churches committed to the rule of law, ecumenism and openness.

The rift within the Orthodox Church is more dramatic. John Paul II dreamt of a Europe with two lungs and accorded Constantinople a pivotal role. Now, however, Moscow and Constantinople have been deeply divided since the recognition of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The war has politicised this rift: Moscow equates the Russian religious sphere with the nation and an Orthodox civilisation distinct from the West, whilst Constantinople rejects Moscow's claim to organise the Orthodox world around Russian power.

The conflict does not stem from Constantinople's proximity to Rome: it centres primarily on Ukraine and canonical authority. However, the ecumenical rapprochement between Leo XIV and [Bartholomew](#) highlights the divergence between these models. Two Christian geographies are taking shape: one centred on religious nations defending their identity and sovereignty; the other centred on a pluralist and ecumenical communion where differences do not justify confrontation. Leo XIV clearly favours the latter.

ISLAM AND JUDAISM: MOVING BEYOND THE GEOPOLITICS OF HOSTILE COMMUNITIES

Religious pluralism is becoming crucial as hatred-driven acts and speech continue to rise. Various European reports concur that such behaviour is becoming normalized, that religious visibility

is a factor in vulnerability, and that there is a continuum between prejudice, discrimination and violence. Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim rhetorics have remained high since 7 October 2023, whilst anti-Christian acts continue to be numerous. The Israel-Gaza conflict and Islamist terrorism are exacerbating these tensions.

[Leo XIV rejects geopolitics of hostile communities.](#)

He advocates a pluralism pacified by the rule of law, founded on human dignity. Christians and Muslims are called upon to reject persecution, discrimination and the political exploitation of God. The programme of events planned for Metz thus takes on its full meaning: the Pope will meet with religious leaders before speaking on the 'roots of Europe'. These are no longer a dividing line between legitimate heirs and newcomers, but a resource for organising pluralist coexistence.

FROM CHRISTIAN EUROPE TO EUROPE'S CHRISTIAN LEGACY

The visit of Leo XIV to Metz could mark a new stage in papal thinking on Europe. Its continuity is clear: Benedict XV saw it as a bulwark against war; Pius XI against nationalism and totalitarianism; Pius XII supported its unification and its Christian vocation; John XXIII and Paul VI included it within a global doctrine of peace; John Paul II defended its spiritual unity and its roots; Benedict XVI continued this line of thought; Francis shifted the focus towards the peripheries.

Leo XIV's challenge is different: European Christianity is no longer merely threatened with oblivion; it risks being exploited as a political identity. The cross, roots, family or nation can become a barrier against foreigners, Islam or the European Union. The Pope rejects this logic: he recognises nations and borders, but refuses to sanctify sovereignty or to dehumanise migrants. Without renouncing Catholic ethics, he prioritizes subsidiarity, solidarity, social justice, cooperation and religious freedom.

Europe could thus become the new bulwark: not that of Christendom against the outside world,

but that of rights against empires built on force, and of believers living in peace against communal hatred. The originality of Leo XIV would lie in this shift: Christian roots would no longer be a marker of identity, but a responsibility. If Metz confirms

this direction, Europe will be called upon to protect human dignity, the rule of law against the law of force, and the ability to live together without turning difference into enmity.

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