FAITH, FUTURE AND EUROPE

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Address by John Bruton, former Taoiseach at the Novena at Knock Shrine Co Mayo at 12 noon on 14 August 2019; This Novena takes place every year in the Basilica of Our Lady in Knock Co Mayo and is addressed by people from different walks of life.

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I have been asked to talk about “Faith, Future and Europe”.

I will start with Faith. There is a deep need for faith in every one of us, even in those who have never believed in God or who have ceased to do so.

Archbishop Neary put it well when he said in Westport on Reek Sunday recently

“People dont stop wanting God, because they stop believing in Him”.

The enduring hunger for meaning is there still. And in the absence of answers, there follows anxiety, depression and a deep sense of being alone. Without transcendent meaning, without faith, life can become a day to day trek from one insignificant goalpost to the next.

Of course people have doubts. But as Archbishop Neary told the pilgrims in Westport;

“Faith is not primarily concerned with pinning down certitudes, but rather being open to a sense of wonder and awe, which will cut through our conservative certitudes and our liberal self righteousness”.

Faith challenges both of them.....conservative certitudes as well as liberal self righteousness. Faith asks us to look beyond our settled opinions. It asks us to abandon our lazy relativism, asks us to have the confidence and the courage to distinguish between what is true and untrue, good and evil, to recognise that some rights people have are more important than others, and that choices have to be made.

Of course this sort of thing is sometimes difficult for us, as Catholics, to speak up about even to our own families, and it is difficult for our Church to say to the wider public.

It can be difficult to pass on the faith to our children and grandchildren.

As Archbishop Neary said on another occasion, the Church, that is all if us, is being led

“ to newness, new awareness, new duties, new forms of mission, new possibilities that may puzzle us, which may scare us, and make us defensive”.

Above all, Faith opens us up to something bigger than ourselves. Faith is something that transcends, and gives meaning, to everything else.

In so doing, it answers a deep human need in all of us.

Faith is a gift. A gift from God.

But it is also a decision. A decision that each one of is free to make, the decision to accept the gift....or not to do so.

Like marriage, it is a commitment. Faith is a commitment.

What has this to do with Europe?

The late Pope, John Paul II, answered this question in an Apostolic Exhortation in 2003, addressed to the faithful in Europe.

This was just after his own country had joined the European Union. He was hopeful about many things.

He praised the new openness of European peoples to one another.

He was pleased with the growth of a European consciousness among people and he was pleased with the growing unity of Europe.

He said

“There is no doubt that, in Europe’s history, Christianity has been a central and defining element....the Christian faith has shaped the culture of the continent”.

He went on

“Europe must recognize and reclaim, with creative fidelity, those fundamental values, acquired through Christianity,

of the affirmation of the transcendent dignity of each person,

the value of reason,

freedom,

democracy,

the constitutional state and

the distinction between political life and religion”.

He said he wanted Catholics, and Christians generally, to get involved with European institutions so as to help shape a European Social order respectful of the human dignity of each man and woman, and thus in accordance with the common good.

He wanted them to understand that faith and reason are not antagonists, they complement one another.

But he was worried about Europe’s loss of its Christian memory, a loss which he feared would be followed by a pervasive fear of the future.

He was right. That fear of the future in Europe is greater now than it was in 2003.

Without a reference to its religious heritage, Europe is disconnected from the source of its most deeply held shared values, shared values that can give it confidence and courage.

Without a sense of the” faith of their fathers”, Europeans lose some of their moorings.

At times, it seems as if relativism has become the real religion of the modern European.

We incline to see no evil, so we don’t have to become involved.

We are afraid to say what we believe is right, in case it might give offence.

We think everyone has their own truth, and there is nothing that is true for everybody. No such thing as absolute truth, such as revealed by Christ. No overriding value system.

Europeans should realize that democracy needs a value system, a value system to guide it in the exercise of its freedom.

As Alexis de Tocqueville, writing about American Democracy in the nineteenth century said

“Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot”.

Without a higher order of values, everything becomes subject to temporary majorities.

Let me take the example of human rights, is there any priority among the rights that humans ought to enjoy?

Is a child human before it is born?

Ought that child enjoy any human rights?

Is the right to life not superior to other human rights, in the sense that without life, a human cannot enjoy any other human right.

The teaching of our church offers clear, sustainable, rigorous and logical answers to deep and difficult questions like these.

As it does, with equal rigour, to questions of peace and war.

As we have seen recently on this country, democracy, if guided only by relativism, offers no useful answers.

All it can do is suggest for the PROCESS of decision making...a citizens assembly or the like.... but it does not ,and cannot, answer the substantial moral questions around human life, and its rights.

The argument is only on the level of pragmatism at best, or of emotionalism at worst.

Our challenge, in this generation, is to convince young Europeans, young Irish people, of the modern value of their Christian heritage.

How can we do this?

Let me give one example of how young minds might be opened to faith.

We can ask them to look at the churches and cathedrals of Europe, build over generations, with the savings of people who were immeasurably poorer and far fewer in number that we are today

Through these beautiful buildings we gain a window into the value system of our ancestors, into what they regarded as important.....

Why did they make sacrifices to build churches and cathedrals that many of them would never see finished in their lifetime. Why?

There is a five letter word that explains that....FAITH.

Faith in God.

Faith in something greater than today.

Faith in something beyond their own lives, or even beyond the lives of their own great grandchildren.

Faith in eternal life.

A cathedral, or a basilica like this one, is more than just a landmark.

It is a signpost to the future!

We can regain that faith in the future that our ancestors had, we can regain that sense of transcendence, that sense of place in a greater scheme of things. And we can help others to do the same.

That is why we are here in Knock today.

The laity will have a bigger role in the future of the Catholic church.

As Archbishop Neary might have put it, the laity, as it takes an increased role in evangelisation, will have to undertake

“new forms of mission, new possibilities that may puzzle us, which may scare us, and make us defensive”.

But that is so much more interesting than sticking to the old road of social conformism, of giving out, but of doing nothing much about it.

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