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Award-winning Czech priest says Francis leading the church in epochal shift

Pope Francis is highlighting issues that, until now, have been relegated to the shadows

Christa Pongratz Lippitt

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Father Thomas Halik, a leading Czech intellectual and internationally known author, has praised Pope Francis for helping inspire people, including non-believers, to navigate the ongoing epochal shift from the Modern Age to radical global pluralism.

But at the same time Father Halik, who was ordained and worked secretly as an underground priest in the old Communist Czechoslovakia, has accused populist-nationalist political leaders in Europe of exploiting

the fears that such an epochal shift is generating in many people.

Currently professor of sociology at the Charles University in Prague, he told participants at an important ecumenical gathering in Austria that Francis' pontificate could be seen as a new chapter in the history of Christianity.

"The church must go new ways. Yesterday's Christianity can hardly be a source of hope for today's and tomorrow's Europe," said the 69-year-old priest, a former adviser to the late Czech President and intellectual Vaclav Havel.

He made his remarks in a keynote address on the future of Europe at the start of a March 14-16 conference in Vienna sponsored by the Pro-Oriente Foundation. It was entitled "Quo vadis Europe? Challenges for the Church and Society" and brought together 18 experts from 14 countries to discuss the problems facing Europe since the immigration crisis of 2015.

In his talk, Father Halik said Pope Francis is highlighting issues that, until now, have been relegated to the shadows. These include mercy, solidarity with the poor, protection of the environment and understanding for people in morally difficult situations.

The Czech priest-intellectual predicted that "secularization will not have the last word in the ongoing historical development" of Christianity, but he insisted believers would have to become a "creative minority" to take the place of the eroding current model of the church (*Volkskirche*). He said this transformation could not be stopped by "any kind of new evangelization."

Instead, he argued that the church must emphasize the therapeutic strength of faith and must help cultivate a social climate in which human beings' dignity take centre stage. He stressed his conviction that this is how the church could be of great service to democracy.

Father Halik then turned to the current European crisis, saying it was not so much an economic as a spiritual crisis.

"People are frightened of losing their identity in a world that is becoming more and more complex and incomprehensible. Many politicians who champion the protection of a Christian Europe have definitely never held a Bible in their hands," he charged.

He specifically criticized Hungary's Viktor Orban, the Czech Republic's Milos Zeman and Slovakia's Robert Fico. He said all three were exploiting and profiting from "fear and stupidity." Father Halik described them as having a particular gift for expressing "what people think who don't think."

"Hatred of Muslims, of liberal views, of the EU and of homosexuals is their creed," he said.

But Father Halik noted that populism and nationalism were not confined to Europe. He offered Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the United States as proof, adding that Christians have a duty to resolutely oppose such developments.

One participant at the Pro-Oriente conference, Hungarian religious sociologist Andras Mathe-Toth, also sharply criticized the present political course taken by Victor Orban. In an interview with *Kathpress* after the gathering, the Szeged University professor accused the Hungarian prime minister of following a “hatred policy” and of trying to exploit churches and Christianity.

Mathe-Toth said fear of outside influences and threats to the country’s perceived homogeneity had made Hungary susceptible to populism. He expressed hope that there were still enough people left in Hungary who would say “enough” to going along with this sort of politics.

The sociologist slammed the Orban government for pushing a political agenda founded on “hatred of Muslims, immigrants, George Soros, civil society and freelance journalists.”

“This is something that must be stated openly in plain language,” he exclaimed.

Mathe-Toth was then asked what Hungary’s bishops think of Pope Francis. The professor said a few were openly and “loudly” against him, while the majority of them are not sure what to think.

“They no longer know where right or left is,” the professor said.

However, he noted that recently a number of Hungarian bishops have begun to show their approval of the current pope and are increasingly saying so in the media.

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