

# What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

**This is the text of a talk by Very. Rev. John Arnold, sometime Dean of Durham and now President of the European Ecumenical Council. It was delivered at the Pax Romana Conference held at High Leigh in December 2009.**

## **Introduction**

The Book of Revelation begins with seven letters, not to the churches of Europe but to the churches of Asia. Those churches were all very different and the messages addressed to them were all very different too, but they have one thing in common and that is the last sentence: "Let anyone who has ears listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches". Then as now, no one could afford to ignore the challenge and the comfort of the Holy Spirit of God to the churches of their continent, however different their situations.

Twenty years ago it was not just the quiet Spirit of Saint John's Gospel, breathed gently into the disciples on Easter Day, abiding in them, leading them into all truth, nor was it only the irruptive, charismatic Spirit of the second chapter of Acts, giving boldness and clarity in telling to the nations the mighty works of God. It was also the profound and disturbing Spirit of which Saint Paul speaks and with which Saint Paul wrestles in chapter VIII of the letter to the Romans – a Spirit which assures us that we are children of God and fellow heirs, if we are fellow sufferers with Jesus Christ and participate with Him in the struggle of creation to bring to birth a new age. For that is what was happening in Europe then. After more than forty years of enforced stagnation and false peace, we were experiencing the birth pangs of a new age, overwhelmed by the release of pent up forces, and in our weakness not even knowing how to pray as we ought, only trusting that the Spirit would take our inarticulate groans and cries and turn them into prayer according to the will of God.

For forty years I, like many others, had been praying for the end of the Cold War (in which I had been a soldier) and for the demolition of the Berlin Wall, which was its most potent and most blatant symbol. Now I have learned that, when we prayed and our prayers remained unanswered for so long, life was difficult; but when our prayers were answered, life became impossible, impossibly difficult but also infinitely more worthwhile, as we moved from false clarity into genuine confusion. The danger was that the confusion would lead to anarchy and chaos, to destruction and despair. The Christian hope was that it would lead to a world set free from bondage to decay, to a world more human and therefore more divine, enjoying the glorious liberty of the children of God. The interim result, as always in human history, is somewhere in between.

## **The Call to Fellowship**

Churches are challenged to provide for community, for fellowship, for the nurturing of truly human relationships at a level between the blind impersonal forces of politics, economics and nationalism on the one hand, and the despairing egotism of the isolated individual on the other. For these are among the spirits, which were hastening to enter the room of Central and Eastern European consciousness, now swept clean of the evil spirit of Marxist-Leninism and open to seven even more wicked spirits.

Another of these was hardness of heart, consistently taught as a virtue in communist states to such an extent that, it is said, the words for compassion, mercy and loving kindness were no longer to be found in Soviet Russian dictionaries. The emphasis was on being tempered like steel, not on being tender and loving. It was for Christians to bring back compassion into societies, which had forgotten the very word. And the task was made more difficult by the sudden and unprepared arrival of Western capitalist attitudes, which appeared to justify new forms of hardheartedness, ostensibly more attractive because more effective than the old ones. We have to ask, 'Effective for whom?' As the churches of Central and Eastern Europe struggled to meet the new opportunities for service and evangelism in their societies, they also had to cope with the appalling entail of long years lived in totalitarian police states. The unlocking of secret files and simply of memories led to endless recrimination, envy and malice and to a poisonous mixture of cheap forgiveness and un-assuaged guilt. Christians needed to listen again to the words of Jesus Christ: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" 1 and recommit themselves to the fellowship, which had meant so much in the darkest days of the Cold War.

And it is precisely the New Testament concept of fellowship, *koinonia*, communion or community, which is the Christian antidote to atomistic individualism, to chauvinistic nationalism and to monolithic internationalism. For *koinonia*, while stressing those things which are held in common (that is what the word *koinos* means in Greek), favours diversity, freedom and spontaneity. That it is chiefly concerned with relationships both human and divine is shown by the company it keeps in the well known phrase: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 It is the key concept in all

contemporary attempts to describe the nature of the unity, which Christians and Christian churches should seek. But it may also be part of our vision of the unity we seek for the peoples and nations of Europe.

### **Eastern and Central European Disintegration**

Under Communist tyranny the combination of religion and nationalism played a large part in many places in keeping alive the hope of eventual liberation from an atheist ideology and an alien regime. This combination now became extremely ambiguous and extremely dangerous. The Christian churches are responsible, historically, both for the unity and for the disunity of Europe. The most intractable problems, as we still see from time to time in Ulster, occur where social and ethnic hostilities are reinforced by religious difference and vice versa. It had been my hope that the solution to our problem in the United Kingdom and Ireland would lie in the Europeanization of Ulster. After all, what is the meaning of a border between the Six Counties and the rest of Ireland in a Europe with no internal borders at all? The Republic of Ireland has been transformed by its integration into the European Community; and we may look for comparable changes in the Irish Churches. The Europeanization of Ulster was my dream. My nightmare was the Ulsterisation of Europe. As the tide of Marxist-Leninist hegemony went out, many old differences emerged from under the sea of common misery between the Orthodox Romanian majority and the German and Magyar Protestant and Roman Catholic minorities in Transylvania, for example, and between the Roman Catholic Croats and the Orthodox Serbs in former Yugoslavia, where the end of the Cold War brought hot war back to the European mainland for the first time since the 1940s. Yet, as recently as 1989 the churches had said together at the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel: "There are no situations in our countries or on our continent in which violence is required or justified."

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At the end of an age, which proudly claimed to be an age of socialist internationalism, it is still a task for the churches to avoid the perils of combined ethnic and religious strife, and to keep faith with the New Testament understanding of the church as a supra-national fellowship and of discipleship as conveying a common citizenship. As St Paul wrote to the Philippians "Our citizenship is in Heaven." 4 Can we make our own the vision of the second century writer of the Epistle to Diognetus? "Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. They dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life, yet the nature of their citizenship is marvellous, and contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, but they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is home to them and every homeland foreign." 5

### **Western and Central European Integration**

There is a challenge in this early Christian vision to both nationalism and to internationalism. No one can claim that their position is the only possible Christian one, but there is a place for Christian discipleship in the discussion, first because our ecumenical understanding of the catholicity of the Church commits us to keeping open a vision, which embraces the whole of Europe, a Europe open to the rest of the world; and secondly because the European institutions, which are unique in the world, though unequivocally rejecting ecclesiastical control or interference, all welcome the active participation of the churches in the building of the new Europe. They actively seek their help in giving it a heart and a soul as well as a mind and a body. Jacques Delors himself said the 1980s: "If in the next ten years we have not managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spontaneity and meaning, the game will be up. That is why I want to revive the intellectual and spiritual debate on Europe. I would like to create a meeting place, a space for free discussion open to women and men of spirituality, to believers and non-believers, to scientists and artists. We must find a way of involving the Churches."

### **What is Europe?**

But what is this Europe of which we speak? Unlike Africa, North and South America, Antarctica and Australasia, it has no clear geographical identity. What makes it anything other than a complex peninsular at the Western end of the Eurasian landmass? Let me hazard a definition.

Europe is the area which had been contiguously Christianised by the end of the middle ages – before the great discoveries and the opening up of sea-routes to other continents. Though astonishingly diverse in languages, tribes and nations, Europe was unified by a single faith. Even schism between Eastern and Western Christianity and the fragmentation of the Western churches at the Reformation did not destroy belief in the underlying unity of European culture and civilization and a sense of its distinctiveness from the rest of the world. That sense of distinctiveness is not unlike the original use of the word Europe by, for example, Herodotus to describe the Greek as opposed to the barbarian world. Europe, which was not in common use in the middle ages, came to be used more and more in the post-reformation, post-renaissance, post-voyages of discovery period in the sixteenth century. It was first used in its modern sense, however, by the chronicler Isidore Pacensis, who describes as

Europeans those who fought with the Franks against the Muslims in 732 AD. From then on Europe was identified with Christendom, until the rise of secularism in modern times.

It now means the territory of historic Christendom from the Atlantic to the Ural, despite the facts that Judaism and Islam contributed a great deal more to the making of Europe than has generally been acknowledged, many Europeans do not now believe in Christianity, there are many more Christians in other parts of the globe and there are many immigrants and some converts to other world faiths in Europe. Major attempts in the twentieth century, however, to replace Christianity as the spiritual and mental guide of Europe, either by neo-paganism in its Fascist form or by atheism in its Marxist-Leninist form, have failed. We may well be the first generation in history to belong not only to a post-religious but also to a post-atheist era. And, while it is no longer possible to define Europe as being essentially over against Islam, it is simply alarmist to predict an Islamic future for our continent. Europe is a bigger threat to Islam than Islam is to Europe, as second and third generation immigrants fall prey, just as much as do Christians, to the prevailing secularism. Whether or not this will continue to be the case for both religions remains to be seen.

### **Europe and the World**

Increased internal integration has sharpened the questions about the relationship of Western Europe to the rest of the world. The problems associated with large-scale movements of people, with refugees and migrants, have increased. Countries like Italy and Ireland, which understood themselves as countries of emigration, have had to re-adjust to immigration; and the churches have to deal with questions not only of aid and care, but also of the rebirth of right-wing populist political activity, sometimes in their own midst. 1992 was the fifth centenary of 1492 and of the so-called discovery of America. The sounds of celebration of a *Europe sans Frontières* were well nigh drowned out by cries of anguish from Latin America and the Caribbean about five hundred years of conquest, slavery and exploitation. Some of the ethical bills of history, like the ecological bills of nature, are now being presented for payment.

Europe has taken much from the world. It has also given much to the world; but science-based technology, which is transforming our planet – the most powerful, effective and potentially beneficial of our gifts – is a poisoned chalice. It is poisoned by the worst of all our schisms, the one between religion and science, which has left us on the one hand with fanatical forms of Christian faith, which have parted company with reason and with evidence, and on the other hand with a means of exploitation of persons and of nature, which has parted company with respect for God, for humankind, for life and for the good Earth itself. Fortunately, there are signs of rapprochement, and the furthering of an alliance between religion and science for the good of all humankind must surely be one of the chief tasks for Europeans in the coming decade. If we don't do it, who will?

But the schism between religion and science is not the only problem, which Europe has exported to the world and must solve if the world is to know peace. There is also the political and spiritual problem of developing a truly human society. After more than forty years of stagnation there was the opportunity after 1989 for real political movement in Europe, an opportunity, which was largely missed. While it looked as if Communism had lost the battle for hearts and minds, it could not be said that capitalism as a total world-view had won. It just looked as if there was no alternative. The closer it comes to triumphing totally, the more questions are raised, as they are by the Holy Father in his recent encyclical, about its capacity to control itself, to heed the cries of the poor at home and abroad, to seek the paths of justice and of peace, to care tenderly for the Earth, which alone can sustain growth and affluence and the precious gift of life itself, and to provide a society in which all can participate and make their contribution to the common good.

This latter point in particular poses a challenge to the churches, which are the guardians and bearers of the ideal of fellowship. If the tide of democracy comes in all over Europe, the European churches will not be able to remain as an archipelago of pre-democratic structures and attitudes; they will find themselves summoned to more open, more egalitarian and more participatory ways themselves in accordance with their own best insights, and to the unity, which they profess in the Creed but fail to manifest in their lives, a unity which they owe to the world not least in reparation for the disunity, which they have exported to the world.

### **Christian Unity**

We have to face the fact that, so far as unity is concerned, the nations of Europe have made more progress than have the churches, which should have led the way. The Leuenberg Agreement of 1974, which was in its day a great achievement, overcoming longstanding theological differences between Evangelical-Lutheran and Calvinist-Reformed churches in Europe and establishing pulpit and altar fellowship between them, has not led to many, or indeed any, actual unions. The map of European Protestantism is as much a patchwork quilt as it ever was, with some making a virtue out of necessity and speaking of the actual fragmentation of the churches as though that were itself the God-given diversity, which must be preserved in any greater unity. But the divisions

of Protestantism weaken its witness, its service and its ability to develop a coherent strategy towards Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy and towards Europe itself.

One breakthrough was the Meissen Agreement of 1991 between the Church of England and the German Protestant Churches, establishing a very high degree of communion between these churches, but on the matter of interchangeability of ministers, falling short of full unity. The agreement is entitled *On the Way to Visible Unity*. The goal of unity which it envisages is more binding than the pulpit and altar fellowship of Leuenberg; and as is the case in all unity negotiations involving Anglicans, questions of the ministry and of episcopacy play a larger part than they do in purely Protestant conversations. We all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to East German Protestantism for the role it played in the fall of the Berlin Wall and of Communism. By its participation in the conciliar process for Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation and by forming a whole nation in the theory and practice of peaceful protest, it saved Germany from civil war and Europe, indeed the whole world, from a potential Third World War, which would have been an unimaginable catastrophe. That a revolution could occur in Germany of all places without a single shot being fired or drop of blood being shed is a miracle of discipleship to the Prince of Peace, which is rapidly being forgotten and ought to be remembered. Shortly after the revolution, however, the masses of people who had flocked to the Prayers for Peace, which had under-girded the demonstrations, ceased to go to church. Once they had reached their destination, the passengers got off the bus, and East Germany is now among the most secularised places in Europe.

Meanwhile, the most successful unity conversations were those between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Scandinavian, Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, leading to The Porvoo Common Statement and Declaration 1992. The resulting 'Porvoo' Communion of about twenty-five million Lutherans with about twenty-five million Anglicans is a significant feature of the European ecumenical map; and it will certainly be a stimulus to the eventual union of something like fifty million Lutherans and fifty million Anglicans at world level. Other churches are beginning to take an interest in the Porvoo methodology, whereby we established the recognition of churches over the recognition of ministries and adumbrated a sustainable view of 'episcopacy in the service of the apostolicity of the church.' The result is a communion of two confessions, not a new compound Anglican-Lutheran Church. This is particularly attractive to ecumenically-minded Roman Catholics, as it offers a model of union between equal partners with no hint of dominance and subservience; and it is wholly consistent with the fine formula of the Malines conversations 1921–25 "unie, non absorbée" and the noble words of Pope Paul VI in 1970: 'There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican church when the Roman Catholic Church...is able to embrace her ever beloved Sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ...' The 'worthy patrimony of usage' included then a married clergy; it includes now women priests and it will include women bishops.

### **The Roman Catholic Church**

At the same time we have to reckon that, with the significant exception of Great Britain and Scandinavia, relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches in Europe deteriorated rapidly in the years following 1989. The speed, with which it established or at least re-established itself in Central and Eastern Europe, alarmed Protestants and infuriated the Orthodox. Only time will tell if this is, as we hope, a temporary rather than a semi-permanent phenomenon. Certainly internal tensions within the Roman Catholic Church are greater now than at any time in recent history. Many people had assumed that the Catholic Churches of Central and Eastern Europe, which had been prevented from participating fully in the Second Vatican Council and implementing its decrees, would now, as it were, be given the opportunity to catch up. In fact, almost exactly the opposite happened. The lesson was drawn that survival had depended on unswerving maintenance of the tradition and absolute loyalty to the Papacy; and this lesson was taught as the clue to revival as well as survival to the more liberal churches of Western Europe.

The 1990s saw the publication by the Vatican of a large number of documents of varied levels of external authority and intrinsic quality, beginning with *Veritatis Splendor* 1993. The best, such as *Ut unum sint* on Christian Unity 1995, are very good indeed and an inspiration to the rest of us, as are the subsequent encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI. Best of all, perhaps, was the Joint Statement with the Lutherans on The Doctrine of Justification 1997, though subsequent attempts to rehabilitate indulgences suggest that the implications have not been fully digested. Others seemed, at least to a friendly observer such as myself, to imply that the Church at the centre was deeply suspicious of its own bishops, whose powers at any level between the local and the universal were so clearly delimited, of its own laity, who were still viewed primarily as helpers to the clergy, and especially of its own theologians, who in accordance with *Ad tuendam fidem* 1998 had to promise 'to teach in accordance with the Magisterium, even when that teaching has not yet been formulated'. (George Orwell would have been proud of that sentence.) The Magisterium used to be 'that which is taught by the bishops everywhere.' It seems to have changed its meaning to 'that which bishops everywhere are instructed to teach.' They, and we,

should be happy with the doctrine of salvation through Christ alone, so clearly set out in *Dominus Jesus* 2000, but less happy with its doctrine of the Church, which by ignoring the action of the Holy Spirit in all believers presents us instead with a purely juridical and historical institution, making exclusive claims to be a church in the proper sense of the word. It upset many ecumenical partners and nearly prevented the publication of the *Carta Ecumenica* 2001, which sets out with admirable clarity the house rules for Churches to live together in Europe in the third millennium, and is a fruit of many years of happy collaboration between the Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Europe and the Conference of European Churches.

Even if he did not overthrow communism single-handed, Pope John Paul II made an enormous impact on Europe in the manner of his death as well by the achievements of his life. Perhaps his most lasting legacy to the Catholic Church will turn out to be the very large number of Episcopal appointments, which he made on his own authority and in his own image during a long pontificate. It remains an open question whether the strong centralising tendency of the Papacy will continue. Just as there is only one politico-military superpower in the world since 1989, so there is only one ecclesiastical superpower, which brings its own responsibilities, as well as opportunities. The media remain mesmerised by Rome; and that fascination is one of several things, which make us ask whether secularisation is not being accompanied by a new sacralisation of society. Meanwhile, the wholly unpredicted implosion of Catholic Ireland is leading to fears that something similar could happen in Poland or, indeed, anywhere where the passengers are getting off the bus. Certainly in Western Europe religion as obligation has given way to religion as choice; and there are many encouraging indications of vitality, such as the German *Kirchentags* and of people choosing to follow Jesus Christ, but as individuals and small groups, rather than as whole nations or in mass movements.

### **The Orthodox Churches**

The tensions between Protestants and Roman Catholics are as nothing compared with the tensions between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church, especially with regard to the Eastern Rite Catholic (Uniate) churches and what is perceived as the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church into historically Orthodox lands, where Orthodoxy is re-establishing itself in whole nations after decades of persecution designed to destroy it utterly. Unfortunately in some places there are forceful elements in Orthodoxy, which are restorationist, anti-western and anti-ecumenical. We need each other's help in preserving the true tradition whilst shedding the wrong sort of traditionalism, as we move out of the past with its mental and political tyrannies into Europe as it hopefully will be in the third millennium of the Christian era, traditional in doctrine and liturgy, democratic in its structures, open in its decision-making, egalitarian in its relationships between women and men. One sign of hope is the re-birth and revitalization of the religious life in Eastern Europe, unlike anything in the West, except perhaps in the ecumenical community at Taizé.

The relationship with Western Europe, not surprisingly, remains problematical. The historic Orthodox lands wish to benefit from the financial, social and political advances of the West, but they have not had the experience of the long march through the Renaissance, the Reformation and especially the Enlightenment, which made them possible and which the pillars of the European Union – the rule of law, pluralist democracy, human rights and religious freedom – simply take for granted. So membership of the European Union requires spiritual and cultural as well as political and economic development and understanding on all sides. Again, there are signs of hope.

Our churches need each other. They need unity both for its own sake and also as a sign to the world, not a bleak, enforced, monolithic unity but the personal unity for which Jesus Christ prayed on the night in which he was betrayed: "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that thou has sent me." 6

### **The Challenge of Mission**

In that great period of the renewal of the Church, which we call the Reformation and the Roman Catholic Renewal (Counter-Reformation), the mission to Europe and indeed to the world was carried out with courage and conviction, but also with a competitiveness and cruelty, which eventually was self-defeating. It was precisely the conflicts and wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which secularised the mind of Europe in the eighteenth century and left the churches ill prepared to cope with the industrial, political and intellectual revolutions of more recent times. To our shame it was our divisions as well as our devotion to the good news, which our missionaries took into the world. No wonder that Cardinal Martini and I in our Presidents' message from the European Ecumenical Encounter on Evangelisation in Santiago 1990 said, 'No to competition. Yes to co-operation.' For now there is a new chance, a new opportunity for renewal and for missionising the nations of Europe, which whether or not recently emancipated from dialectical materialism, have all become increasingly vulnerable to the practical materialism of the dominant socio-economic system. It will not do simply to replace the commissar with the consumer as the arbiter of what is right and good and true.

It remains one of the greatest challenges to make the good news of Jesus Christ credible, attractive and challenging to millions of Europeans who feel that their hopes and ideals have been betrayed as much by the churches as by political parties. Boris Pasternak is reported to have replied to a journalist questioning him about his religious beliefs: "I am an atheist, who has lost his faith." Are our churches in a position to minister effectively to our fellow Europeans who are atheists who have lost their faith? There are probably at least as many of them as there are Christians who have lost theirs; and they require equally skilled and loving care. The spread of sects, new age thinking, occultism and astrology shows that, when people cease believing in God or Utopia, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything. Only the love of God and of neighbour, revealed in Jesus Christ and shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, can lead them and us in the right way. Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

**John Arnold**

**Notes**

1 Matthew 7.1

2 2 Corinthians 13.13

3 Final Document.61

4 Philippians 3.20

5 *Epistola ad Diognetum* 5

6 John 17.21