

## BLOG POST

# BETWEEN FRANCIS AND VIKTOR, THE TUGS AND PULLS AMONG CENTRAL EUROPEAN CATHOLICS

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Shifting our focus beyond the speculative political messages, the [recent visit of Pope Francis to Hungary and Slovakia](#) calls for an examination of the role of the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> in Central Europe. In the broader sense, it prompts us to consider the reference to Christian values in Central European politics.

The relationship between Central Europe and Pope Francis is complex in more ways than one. Jorge Mario Bergoglio marks a certain departure from his two predecessors who had a close connection with the region of missionaries Cyril and Methodius: the Pole, John Paul II, and the Bavarian, Benedict XVI. However, when we delve deeper than simple matters of geographical and cultural ties, there seems to be something of a doctrinal chill between the current pope and many Central European Catholics. Against this background, the media have reported the striking difference in the number of believers who attended his visit compared with that of John Paul II in 2003. In this respect, it goes without saying that multiple factors are at play, not least the health crisis. Nonetheless, for some Slovaks, the problem lies in the overly

<sup>1</sup>. Without wishing to overshadow other Churches and religions in Central and Eastern Europe – note, for instance, that Viktor Orbán has a Calvinist background and that former Czech Republic Prime Minister, Jiří Paroubek, is a member of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church – I will focus this article on the Catholic Church and Central Europe in the strict sense, namely on the Visegrád four: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

“progressive” stance adopted by Pope Francis, not to mention his “pro-migrant” messages. A [similar perspective has been developed in Poland](#), while those [close to the FIDESZ party in Hungary](#) never miss an opportunity to criticise the Bishop of Rome, dubbing him the “[Soros Pope](#)”...

That said, the Pope’s visit shed light on more than just the internal tensions within the Catholic Church. Above all, it highlighted the strong disconnect between his adopted stance and the positions of the governments of the so-called Visegrád Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Theoretically, though, one would think the Bishop of Rome might be pleased with the insistence of the Hungarian and Polish governments on defending Christian values. In this spirit, Viktor Orbán criticised Western Europe for having “[renounced Christian Europe](#)” while Hungary and the nations of Central Europe – around the “Polish flagship” – are “in the process of restoring to their rightful place the time-honoured instincts for life, the liberating power of Christianity, the honour of work, national pride and duty towards our parents and children.” The same can be said of Poland’s current leaders where [Jarosław Kaczyński continues to hammer home the message](#) that “Every good Pole should know what the role of the Catholic Church is, because beyond the church there is only nihilism.” Speeches aside, the Hungarian government is not afraid to flaunt its [pro-family policy](#) as a symbol of its commitment to Christian values.

While the will to defend such values could only be agreed upon between Rome, Budapest and Warsaw, there is a stark and strong divergence regarding the interpretation of these same values. This has particularly applied since the 2015 migrant crisis. A distrustful and downright hostile stance towards migrants and Islam has been forcefully imposed among the political classes of the Visegrád countries, which is spearheaded by the Hungarian Prime Minister. Conversely, Pope Francis has constantly called for openness towards migrants, championing multiculturalism and interreligious dialogue. Pope Francis has repeatedly made gestures of generosity towards migrants just as he has [called for solidarity with Muslims](#). By contrast, the prevailing rhetoric spun in Central Europe seeks to uphold the notion of an inveterate difference between the two religions and of an [Islam that is irreconcilable with the values of Europe](#). Proponents of this school of thought are quick to liken immigration from Muslim countries to an “invasion”. Viktor Orbán simply echoed this idea when he presented Pope Francis with a letter written by Hungarian King Béla IV to Pope Innocent IV, appealing for help with the Mongol invasion that swept across Hungary and Europe.

Very few Central European leaders would publicly endorse this sentence from Pope Francis’ latest Encyclical, [Fratelli tutti](#): “Our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarised by four words: welcome, protect, promote and integrate.” In contrast, a number of people might feel targeted by a passage in the very same Encyclical that describes “an unhealthy populism” defined as a scenario in which “individuals are able to exploit politically a people’s culture, under whatever ideological banner, for their own personal advantage or continuing grip on power. Or when, at other times, they seek popularity by appealing to the basest and most selfish inclinations of certain sectors of the population. This becomes all the more serious when, whether in cruder or more subtle forms, it leads to the usurpation of institutions and laws.” Lastly, it should be noted that the disconnect stretches far and beyond the issue of migration. Pope Francis continually focuses on the polemical issues and was quick to do so on his visit to Hungary and Slovakia where he condemned [anti-Semitism](#) and [the excluded Roma people](#). The current Bishop of

Rome is also an avid advocate for the environment, an issue which Central European governments tend to put on the back burner whenever they are not toying with the idea of “climate scepticism”.

In this context, it is easy to notice the political motives behind the papal visit in Hungary given that it only lasted a few hours and was exclusively driven by the International Eucharistic Congress, this year held in Budapest. Compare this with Pope Francis’ three-day visit of Slovakia, in response to the invitation from President Zuzana Čaputová. Within the Central European political landscape, Čaputová is somewhat an exception to the rule. She is a former pro-environment activist, liberal-progressive and pro-European who advocates the legacy of political figureheads such as Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa. In essence, Čaputová embodies all the principles that are reviled by the “illiberal” Central Europeans. It is, in fact, true that Pope Francis ended up extending his visit to Budapest as he met Viktor Orbán alongside Hungarian President, János Áder. Be that as it may, his [speech to Hungarian bishops](#) came across as a thinly veiled criticism of the authorities. The Bishop of Rome constantly urged the need for a fraternal and inclusive society that is open to encountering others. His speech also serves as a reminder to the **Hungarian Catholic hierarchy, which has hardly voiced its diverging opinion in response to Orbán government policies and communications.**

Yet, if we extend our focus beyond Hungary, the real issue at stake is the positioning of the Church – as an institution, not forgetting all the local and charitable initiatives that it may undertake and which are fully consistent with Pope Francis’ message – and in the wake of national-populist ideology within Central Europe. Faced with political forces that propagate priorities which are specific and dear to the Catholic electorate – notably issues related to the family model and sexual minorities – and that more or less vehemently uphold a Christian vision of politics and European identity, Central European Catholic authorities tend to get carried away and turn a blind eye to the fundamentally controversial dimensions of the political agenda pushed by these political forces. This is especially true of countries where such political forces are in power, starting with Hungary, where a generous policy of public subsidies [challenges the very independence](#) of the Catholic Church.

In Poland, a deep and complex relationship has developed between the Church and the majority in power since 2015. The nature of this relationship is such that it alters the internal balances between conservative and progressive movements<sup>2</sup>. Synergies with Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) strengthen the most conservative circles in the Church. The prime example is that of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, director and founder of the polemical Radio Maryja. In the past, the radio station was heavily criticised by the European Parliament, the American Secretary of State, the Council of Europe, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and none other than the Polish primate and the Vatican. Despite his tempestuous relations with the Kaczyński brothers and his stance, which is often more radical on many subjects than those of the PiS, Father Rydzyk appears to be the man pulling the party’s strings. He is an influential figure who is the lynchpin of [a media and university empire that is now much more than the radio station created in 1991.](#)

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2. Meyer Resende (Madalena), Hennig (Anja): “Polish Catholic Bishops, Nationalism and Liberal Democracy” in *Religions*, 2021, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/2/94/pdf>

In the Czech Republic, the Archbishop of Prague, Dominik Duka, frankly expresses his admiration of personalities who promote a quasi “illiberal” stance within the sphere of Czech politics. This positioning is also closely tied to Europhobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Leading figures of this ideology include former Czech President, Václav Klaus, and his successor Miloš Zeman. In contrast to Poland and Hungary, in a highly de-Christianised country<sup>3</sup>, such collusion is more akin to the personality of the current Primate of Bohemia. What’s more, it appears more as rather superficial temporary alliances in the face of common adversaries - namely, the progressive and pro-European portion of the public opinion - rather than a bona fide ideological community. Not once have Václav Klaus, Miloš Zeman (or Robert Fico in Slovakia) staked a claim to the Christian Democratic tradition. Unlike them, Viktor Orbán is an active proponent of a “true” Christian democracy, likening himself to Helmut Kohl. Nor do the above leaders affirm that their dream is to “re-Christianise Europe”, unlike [Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki](#). Moreover, for the Czech Catholic Church, the natural political partner remains the small Christian Democratic party, KDU-ČSL, which is part of the mainstream within the European People’s Party (EPP).

As with many other issues in this part of Europe, a comparison over the last thirty years makes for compelling reading. In 1989, the Catholic Church supported a “return to Europe”, *i.e.*, swift adoption of the Western European model, as an important component of a civil society that campaigned against the communist regime. It was obvious for countries with an established religious background. First, in Poland, where the Church was vital to the opposition, helped by the figure of John Paul II, who embodied a synthesis of moderate Catholic conservatism and the spirit of 1989. The same can be said about Slovakia. A political movement, culminating in Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution” (November 1989), was kick-started by highly religious protests. One of the turning points was the “candlelight protest” held in March 1988, which was orchestrated by Catholic dissidents. However, the same goes for the Czech Republic where, despite the relative lack of religious observance, the Church was also in a rather favourable position. Significantly, the large-scale November-December 1989 anti-regime demonstrations were animated by the Catholic priest, Václav Malý. Václav Havel had forged a positive bond with the Catholic Church, as evidenced by the *Te Deum* celebrated on the day of his election as President of Czechoslovakia on 29 December 1989. Whilst Havel’s political rhetoric was not founded on specific and forthright religious inspiration, he did steer the public debate towards priority topics on which the Church could have made his voice heard, spreading its influence within civil society, in a continuation of the spirit of the pre-1989 period of dissent. Havel focused on priorities including the spiritual dimension of politics, the importance of the ethics, the individual’s responsibility to overcome challenges and a concern for the ideals of the European construction and an essentially “Western” direction for the country.

Thirty years on, an opportunity has clearly been missed. The Church in the Czech Republic has not been able – or perhaps willing? – to fully embrace these priorities. Instead it has focused on a commitment to social issues such as the defence of the traditional family model and a fight to reclaim property confiscated by the communist regime. To some extent in Poland and especially in Hungary, the Church is struggling to express an independent, critical viewpoint in relation to the government in power on issues

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<sup>3</sup>. According to Pew Research Center data, the proportion of people who consider themselves “highly religious” in the Czech Republic is 8%, compared with 17% in Hungary, 29% in Slovakia and 40% in Poland (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment>)

where the values of the Church should force it into positions that go against the grain of the dominant political stance – positioning itself more closely to Pope Francis than to Viktor Orbán. Without any shadow of a doubt, the Church has found its greatest success in Slovakia where it has struck a balance in its relationship with the political class. The task is unquestionably simpler in a country where “illiberal” momentum is less vigorous and with a political class which is more fragmented but relatively consistent in terms of its devotion to Christianity, a devotion reflected even in the country’s coat of arms.

All told, it is important to remember that Central European Churches are not monolithic structures. A recent incident in the Czech Republic makes for an interesting case in point: an [economist, Hana Lipovská, who openly emphasises her “Christian values”](#) as well as her radical Euroscepticism, was elected by an *ad hoc* coalition in the Chamber of Deputies to the supervisory board for public television. This election followed her nomination by the Czech Bishops’ Conference, thanks in particular to support from Cardinal Duka. Following a series of controversies and Lipovská’s decision to be a candidate on a far-right list for the next legislative elections on 8 and 9 October, the Bishops’ Conference decided to cut off all ties. Poland is also home to considerable tensions. **The Catholic Church veers between a tacit alliance with the PiS and a reticence when it comes to refugees and the issue of eroded liberal democracy**<sup>4</sup>. Polish Catholics are as divided as society as a whole. On the one hand, there are those who espouse liberal democracy and the European integration of their country. On the other, there are nationalist and “illiberal” movements, more or less radical. This conflict may result in permanently severed ties. Despite the lack of accurate data, in recent years, the number of acts of apostasy [appears to have risen substantially](#) in Poland.

Essentially, the Catholic Church in Central Europe must address a double-headed issue. First, what political affiliations is the Catholic Church prepared to establish? Second, what priorities does it wish to foreground as themes that steer public debate? Does the Central European Catholic Church wish to foster closer ties with Christian-democratic political forces, which, by tradition, are rather centrist and pro-European? Or rather, does the Catholic Church prefer to team up with national-populist groups that are more staunchly conservative? By its very nature, the Catholic Church is anti-liberal regarding societal issues. Will such an attitude force the institution into allying itself to political forces whose anti-liberalism reaches to the very heart of politics, thereby diametrically opposing the core principles of Western democracy? This line of thinking harks back to a distant past. It challenges the existing relationship between the Church and a Christian Democratic model as developed and reaffirmed during the twentieth century and which is closely linked to the founding fathers of the European project. [During his speech at the EPP Helsinki summit 2018](#) the President of the EPP, (the centre-right European People’s Party) and former Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, who is the custodian of this heritage, categorically stated what is unacceptable for a Christian Democrat: abandoning the core principles of liberal democracy and heeding to the call of bigotry and authoritarianism. On the Catholic Church’s side [these sentiments](#) were expressed by Czech Bishops’ Conference President, Jan Graubner: “It is not possible to hide behind a value which corresponds to the Christian vision of society and the world, while at the same time occluding or denying other Christian values.”

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4. Meyer Resende, Hennig *in the work cited*. See also: <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-catholic-church-ties-in-to-polands-judicial-reform/a-39809383>

Beyond relations with the Church, the Christian-Democratic concept, which simultaneously embraces liberal democracy and traditional societal values is hardly rooted in Central Europe. This is one of the factors that has made post-1989 democracies vulnerable to the lure of “illiberalism”. Faced with such temptation, an effective political solution also depends on the ability of other committed liberal democracy political circles to show empathy for the conservative electorate, both in Central Europe and elsewhere. This electoral group has been left dumbfounded by the sweeping societal changes in Western norms and customs. This is no easy task in the current climate of radicalised activist demands of all types. Though, confronting these trends with a spirit of compromise and moderation, isn't it precisely the strength and the very purpose of the European project?

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