Europe’s Pentecost

by Samuel Wells in the April 27, 2016 issue

People gather to celebrate Pentecost in Sumuleu Ciuc, Romania. Thinkstock.

On June 23, Britons will vote on whether to remain a part of the European Union.

The advocates of staying stress the pragmatic view, which seeks the flourishing of peoples in democratic conditions of sustainable affluence, so that justice reigns and diversity is upheld, while economic peril, cultural tension, and violent conflict are avoided. This view concentrates on getting the relationship between France and Germany right, since that interface has proved explosive in recent times. It sees economic union as a route to the flexibility and competitiveness of Europe in a global market. And it sees religion as an administrative problem. It recalls the Thirty Years’ War of the 17th century and regards that bloodbath, with its 8 million deaths, as the definitive statement that religious division causes terrible violence. With the rise of Islamist terrorism in the last 15 years this fear of religion is renewed, and the church is often seen as an antiliberal aspect of society that can be tolerated but must be closely monitored.

This is the dominant view among European technocrats. It’s not clear whether it can address climate change, migration, or austerity. This is the Europe that Pope Francis described as weary and aging, elderly and haggard, losing its fertility and vibrancy. It lacks a vision of transcendent good in which the claims of Christianity, of repentance and mercy, of abundant and eternal life can find a hearing.

We’re hearing less about the romantic view, which insists that there is something special about Europe—something tied to the interplay of classical civilization and

Christianity, something that the Renaissance highlighted and the best kind of humanism fostered. This view has a lot of time for national cultures, folk tales, swathes of forests, literature and philosophy. It desires to translate the cultural aspirations of Christianity—to ennoble the people, enrich their common life, and enhance their mutual flourishing. If the pragmatic approach has the solidity, earnestness, and attention to detail of northern European Protestantism, the romantic view has more of the artistic, idealistic character of southern European Catholicism.

Two things are clear: the idea that a nation such as Britain can simply withdraw from the European project is a fantasy. Yet the European dream of a realm of freedom springing out of a diverse people rooted in shared values has lost its sparkle. What might a renewed and realistic vision look like?

In the story of Pentecost, people from north, south, east, and west find they can each hear the gospel in their own language. It's not that there's just one language and everyone has to speak it; there is a myriad of languages but the barriers to those different languages are taken away. This offers a vision for Europe: not one megastate or one system for everything, but a model of diversity as peace, the harnessing of divergent cultures for enrichment, the challenge and engagement of many systems for the benefit of all.

A renewed and realistic Europe can't have sharp boundaries: it's not for one kind of people, and it's absurd to say Muslims don't belong. It can't be about keeping certain people out; it has to be about widening the tent and determining to flourish in new contexts. If it's worried about mass inward migration, it must invest in the countries from which immigrants are coming and eradicate their reasons for fleeing their homes.

Christianity in a renewed Europe can't be claiming Constantinian dominance or cultural superiority or historical entitlement. It must prove itself by acts of mercy, peace, and grace; by evident wisdom, understanding, and love; by facilitating education, reconciliation, and healing.

The European Union is founded on two principles—solidarity and subsidiarity. Both came from Catholic social teaching. Solidarity is the desire to support one another in good times and bad. Subsidiarity is the commitment to deal with problems at the most local level suitable to address them. There's not much wrong with Europe that

a return to these core principles wouldn’t improve.

But a renewed Europe must have a heart. For me, there’s only one place that has a claim to be the heart of the new Europe—and that’s Auschwitz. Auschwitz teaches humility to all European pretensions, honesty to all memories, warning to all language of purity and power. A Europe centered on Auschwitz won’t give in to nostalgia or content itself with pragmatics. It will be alert to the outsider and wise to malign ideology. Its Christianity will never forget that it comes from the Jews, and its rhetoric will never forget that becoming Babel is no idle fear.

The debate about Europe misses the point because those who oppose the EU or who care passionately for it do so for romantic reasons of culture and identity that are blind to the circumstantial details. But the public debate concentrates almost entirely on pragmatic claims that assume Europe was an economic calculation from the beginning and largely miss the historical and religious context. Is it a vainglorious tower of Babel or a creative outpouring of Pentecost? Europe has almost always been a mixture of the two. It still is. It’s not necessarily better together. But it’s almost certainly absurd apart.