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WaPo & Benedict on Immigration

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Distinctly Catholic

Serendipity. I am sure that the editors of the Washington Post had no idea that their publication of a news story about the rise of anti-immigrant political parties in Europe would coincide with the release of Pope Benedict XVI's Message for the World Day of Migrants. The Post's article did not mention the Pope's statement. But, I hope the voters of Europe who support these anti-immigrant parties, as well as their American counterparts, consult the Pope's text. His vision is humane and hopeful. It is the perfect anecdote to the fear-mongering that characterizes so much of the anti-immigrant fervor.

What is startling about the Post's report is the emergence of anti-immigrant parties in countries that have been known for, and celebrated for, their tolerance. Sweden recently saw 20 members of a party begun in the 1980s by white supremacists enter their parliament. France's President Nicolas Sarkozy has tried to steal the thunder from the neo-fascist nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen by introducing legislation banning Muslim headgear. And, in Austria, which has spent the last sixty years trying to convince historians that Hitler was a German and Beethoven was an Austrian, the misnamed Freedom Party recently posted sizable gains in regional elections, in part by distributing a video game called "Bye, Bye Mosque."

I understand that immigration is a different thing in Europe from what it is here in the States. The origins of the nations of Europe are dimly discerned in the mists of history, and of pre-history. There is something essentially tribal in European ideas of national identity. America's origins are discerned in the well-documented 18th century, with its combination of Lockean liberalism, civic republicanism and country whig political philosophies. America is an idea, not a tribe. That makes anti-immigrant fervor in the United States precisely un-American.

Pope Benedict, however, is not shy about pointing out that anti-immigrant fervor is also un-Christian. The Pope has been trying to recall Europe to its Christian roots, and it is easy to see how this project could

become part and parcel of an anti-Muslim movement, but Benedict sees the Christian roots of Europe issuing in a different way. The Pope offers the prayer that "hearts may open to Christian welcome and to the effort to increase in the world justice and charity, pillars on which to build an authentic and lasting peace. "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34), is the invitation that the Lord forcefully addresses to us and renews us constantly: if the Father calls us to be beloved children in his dearly beloved Son, he also calls us to recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ." The Christian belief in the common fatherhood of God is the source of our humanistic belief in the common brotherhood of man.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently said that the German attempt to build a "multicultural" nation had "failed, absolutely failed." This, too, could become an argument put to ill purposes by the anti-immigrant crowd. But, Merkel is correct. The project at building a multicultural society has failed, and it will always fail, because it is the wrong goal. The aim of a liberal education is a multicultural individual, not a multicultural society. The "melting pot" analogy grew out of favor with multiculturalists, because it involved too much blending. But, what the multiculturalists forgot was that the stew in that pot was new, it was more than the sum of its ingredients, and while it included many flavors, it was one stew. Society must be cohesive and while it must permit individual expressions that may or may not be rooted in distinct cultural and ethnic attributes, it succeeds or falls based on its ability to integrate those expressions. Integration does not mean conformity to the mores of those who got here first. It means blending the already here with newly arrived to create a new and more vibrant society.

The intellectual forebears of the Renaissance were the late medieval masters Aquinas, Maimonides and Averroes. What we are seeing in Europe today has been seen before. The results of cultural inter-mixing are not always pleasant. The Spanish Inquisition comes to mind. And it appears that among the blessings of modernity, a capacity for peaceful resolution of conflicting cultural idioms is not among them. But, the Holy Father does not offer a model for social success; he offers the only way of Christian discipleship. "One human family" is the theme the Pontiff has given to next year's World Day of Migrants celebration. Let's hope the voters of Europe "and of America" take that theme to heart.

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