Nationalism and Ethnicity

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The subject we have been given to explore, and which I have been asked to introduce, is nationalism and ethnicity in Christian perspective. These are abstract words, but they refer to the most powerful forces at work in the world today. They are new words, but they describe experiences that lie deep in the histories that define each one of us as we confront one another. Let me begin therefore with a story which may put them in perspective. It is the story of the birth of the Christian Church on the day of Pentecost, nearly 2,000 years ago.

When the day of Pentecost had come, (the apostles) were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were amazed and wondered, saying, 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabsians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.' And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' (Acts 2:1-12)

What, indeed, does it mean? Let us go straight to the point: in that event, where the Holy Spirit made every human language open to the transforming word of God, the Church, of which we all count ourselves members, was born. Because that event happened, because it has formed our community as Christians out of all the languages and nations of the world, we know that it can happen again and again. That is why we are here today. Slovaks and Czechs, Hungarians and Romanians, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Bosnians and Slovenes,
visitors from America, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, Germans and Poles, and people from the regions of the former Soviet Union, we all yearn, we all expect, to learn something new about the redeeming, the reconciling works of God in our own languages, for our own nations.

The Biblical story speaks of tongues and of languages. It is a good place to start. There is nothing wrong with a diversity of tongues. The tongue, in both the Old and New Testaments is first of all that part of the body that forms words, ideas and feelings, that praises God. It is the instrument which expresses all the variety and wealth of human life before the neighbor, creation and God. Genesis 10 speaks of the families of the sons of Noah spreading out over the earth, each with its land, its nation, and its tongue.

But a problem arises in the very next chapter. A different word is used: lip, not tongue. The whole earth had one such language with its collection of words. There was one nation, and one culture. If there were any neighbors, they were ethnic cousins, descendants of Noah like themselves. But this was not enough for the people who moved, as the story tells, onto the plain of Shinar. Even without enemies, they were afraid. "Come," they said, "Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves. lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."(Gen. 11:4) So they turned God's gift of a tongue, into a closed language, a name for themselves. They built their culture into a structure of protection, lest they be scattered. It was the first nation in Biblical history. The result was that they were scattered (not spread as in the chapter before) across the earth. Their language was confused. They no longer understood one another's speech.

The people at Pentecost knew this history. It is reflected in two words they used for language: tongue, first the tongues of fire from the Holy Spirit then the speech of the apostles; and dialect, which the crowd of hearers used to describe their own languages. These dialects, the hearers knew from sad experience, were not channels but barriers to those outside their culture. They were sources of division, not peace. These people were in Jerusalem to seek something more universal. They heard the Scriptures read in Hebrew. They spoke Greek to get along in the market place, or Latin to please the Roman authorities. And then came this event where simple Galileans, people from a limited nation like their own, spoke to each of them clearly in his or her own native language about the mighty works of God. Each dialect had become once again, a tongue. Now they could go home, each to their own nations, and in their language, with all the culture it expresses, open them to the community of all peoples in Christ.

This Pentecost agenda, I suggest, is also ours in this meeting. It is not easy. We as Christians are called to make fruitful the tension between our native language, our nation and our culture with all they mean to us, and the community of all peoples in the world. We cannot surrender either pole. How, then, can we do this together? How can we learn from
one another about the Holy Spirit's work in each of our nations despite the powers that close
us off and create enmity between us? How can we find structures of justice, reconciliation
and peace that, however imperfect and secular, bear witness to the mighty works of God
among us all? How can we make the riches of our cultures and traditions available to other
peoples than our own? How can we learn from theirs? How can we penetrate each other's
experience so as to share its suffering and joy, its fears and loyalties. How can our ethnic,
our national identities be reshaped by living with other peoples? Finally, how can the church
learn to be at one and the same time an ecumenical witness to the judge and redeemer of
all humankind, and the inspirer of each of our national souls? These are some of the
questions we face here in Kecskemé, as we respond to Pentecost. Let me suggest three levels
on which they might be asked.

First, what are the powers on which we depend, to give structure to our collective lives?
What are the powers that threaten us and how do we cope with them? How are they both
related in our faith, to the power of God?

For the people gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost the answer was clear. Rome
was the power that organized their world. Roman soldiers secured the routes by which they
travelled. Roman consuls ruled their lands. Roman law was the standard of justice which
Roman magistrates enforced. Roman authority decided disputes between nations and
religions. Many Jews did not like this. They looked back to the time when Israel was an
independent nation by the power of God and forward to the coming of a messiah who would
free them from Rome. But meanwhile they accepted Roman power. They even appealed to
it to give them religious and cultural freedom. Much more so, the Christians. The New
Testament message is clear. Roman government is one of the powers of this world. It may
magnify itself as all powers do, in place of God, and then it must be resisted. But it is
nevertheless created by God for a particular task: to enforce a relative external justice and
peace among the nations and peoples of the world. Government is by God's calling universal.
It may not serve the interests of one nation or one people against others. It is by God's calling
secular. It may not claim the total allegiance of its citizens that belongs to God alone.

This witness was, of course, severely compromised when the empire itself became
Christian, then split into Roman and Byzantine spheres. It was tested by Islam which makes
no clear distinction between the will of God and the power of the state. But the principle was
maintained even into modern times. One finds it in the teachings of Luther and Calvin and
even in modern thought, both Catholic and Protestant, about the relation of church and state.

It would seem that in our world the claims of nations to absolute sovereignty and power
have overwhelmed this principle. In early modern times imperial nations took over the
universal function of government in the areas they controlled. The map of Europe around
1870 was a relatively simple picture: The Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian and
the German Empires governed most of it, while Britain, Spain, and France built their empires overseas and a few small nations struggled to exist on the borders. Civilization in the 19th century flowed across Europe. People of different nations and cultures moved freely and lived together in its great cities, and even national cultures flowered under these imperial umbrellas. But none of these national empires, nor all of them together, could reproduce the peace of Rome. In two colossal wars they collapsed, and a host of sovereign states took their place, each with its own dominant nationality, speaking its own language, and claiming its own territory. Today that collapse continues. We are living in the midst of it.

But this is not the whole story. Already in the 18th century and from then until now, a new awareness has been growing. We call it liberal humanism. It is universal rather than national, though it is rooted in the experience of particular peoples. It is global though it is rooted in the society of Europe and North America. Its power is economic rather than political, though it cries out for some kind of governmental order. Its ideologies are secular, though they claim for the laws of economics and sociology the kind of power and authority that believers usually reserve for God.

First came the vision of human rights and freedom, expressed in the French and American revolutions. These were national events, but their message was for all peoples. The peasants who stormed the Bastille prison in Paris in 1789 were out to liberate not just a few French prisoners, but all of humanity from the tyranny of priests and kings. America saw itself in the 19th century as a beacon light of democracy and freedom to the Europe whence most of Americans had come. Nationalists throughout Europe shared this liberal vision. The philosopher-politicians, Masaryk in Czechoslovakia, Kossuth in Hungary, Mazzini in Italy, and countless more, who gave form to the nationhood of their people, all looked forward to a community of free nations living at peace with each other, and sharing the same ideals. The League of Nations after World War I was designed to be such a community. It failed but the hope still lives. Even the United Nations strives toward this goal in all the structures of international cooperation that it quietly builds up, and not least when it sends peacekeeping forces with no power but the agreement of warring parties, to stand between armies and protect safe areas.

We yearn for a government of universal peace and order. We set up symbols of it and hope they work, even while we trust only the power of our nations, and fear the power of others. Do we, who believe that human government is by God's ordination universal, that it may not serve the interests of one people against another but must seek peace and justice for all, have a message here for the governments under which we live? Can we, who know about the coming subjection of the powers of this world to the saving power of the crucified and risen Christ, turn that knowledge into policies of political reconciliation and hope? This is one thing we need to talk about.
Meanwhile we have another power to cope with, and another failed ideology whose pieces we must pick up. If we had met ten years ago in this city, or any place between the Elbe River and the China Sea, nationalism would not have been on our agenda. Instead the issue at stake would have been the world-wide competition between capitalist and socialist systems, and the ideologies that undergird them. We might have tried to modify those systems, to work out a detente between them, to make the one more just and the other more free, but we would have assumed that our first concern was with that struggle. Our national identities were secondary to our Christian witness, in one great system or the other. And as we reached out to people of other nations and cultures across the world, we found solidarity with them in the same struggle for the same human future.

Today Marxist socialism is dead, both its dream of a classless society sharing all things in common and its power to control human lives and crush human freedoms. But the other ideal, of a democratic socially responsible capitalism, is also dying. The powers of private business and finance which it has fostered are to be sure, stronger than ever. They are sweeping over eastern Europe, Russia, and the rest of the world. But they follow their own laws beyond the control of national states, and they seek their own ends not the common good. In my country most radically, but also elsewhere, social justice, care for the natural environment, concern for the poor and the public welfare are being pushed aside in the scramble for individual gain and corporate economic advantage. Who pleads the cause of the exploited and the poor in a world these powers dominate? Who calls them by name in each of our nations and works to bring them under public control? What responsibility do Christians who are stewards of God's gifts and witnesses to God's justice have in this power struggle? We should talk about this as well.

Second, who are we as persons? By what social and ethnic loyalties do we each define ourselves, and how is our Christian identity linked to these loyalties? What does God demand of us in relating our ethnic selves to other peoples than our own?

Once again the terms of the question were set at the day of Pentecost. The crowd in Jerusalem was of somewhat confused identity. They were Jews, which meant that they found their heritage in the history of Israel and in the city of Jerusalem. But they were not all ethnically Jewish; some were proselytes. They all, furthermore, identified with, and spoke the language of, the nations from which they had come. They lived in this ambivalence of ethnic and religious identity. To this condition the apostles by the Holy Spirit spoke. Their predicament became a blessing. They could once more be people of their culture because the covenant promise of God to the Jews was fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah who had come, and now embraced all the nations of the world. They became missionaries to their nations, in the language and culture of those nations.
The mission of Pentecost has continued through history. Evangelists spread out from the Roman Empire to the north and to the east to convert our ancestors to the faith even while Rome was decaying. They reduced languages to writing; they created the Christian cultures in which we still live, and which we call nations today. And they related those cultures to the great centers of the church, in Rome and in Byzantium, which to them were earthly symbols of the communion of all nations in Christ. That is one way, even today, of understanding our ethnic and our Christian identities. It did not prevent conflict among nations, but at least it limited that conflict by placing nations in the context of the universal church.

As nations grew stronger, however, this limit could not hold. All of our traditions are filled with stories of being united by church and faith under persecution and defeat, or in battle against enemies not only Turkish, or more recently Communist, but also Christian of another nation and confession. The Reformed Church, to which I belong, is beset by this enmity in Northern Ireland. In the United States, of which I am a citizen, the fear and hatred of atheistic Communism has, through most of my life, fuelled a nationalistic spirit. All of you, I am sure, could add to these examples from your experience. To keep faith in the triune God amid oppression and war is, for a person or a nation, a wonderful thing. But how can faith bear witness also there, to a God who forgives enemies, and brings the Gospel to oppressors? We should talk about this as well.

Meanwhile, today, we face a new condition: national identity that is strong and militant, which may enlist the church in its cause, but is basically a secular search for security, prosperity and power. Security and prosperity are proper concerns. God blesses them. But what is the ethnic group, what is the nation with whose security and prosperity we identify? What is the relation between this nation’s safety and welfare, and that of other peoples who are their neighbors? In most of history, and certainly in our times, there are many states that bear one nation’s name, and are dominated by its tradition, but there is none which embraces only one national culture. Every state has minority citizens. What, then, is the relation between our civic loyalty and our national cultural identity? What is the place of minority peoples from neighboring lands in our society? What role do peoples play who have no land of their own like the Roma, or those of other faiths like the Muslims or the Jews?

Christians also are each members of a people with a language and a tradition. We are called to bring forth the fruits of our culture to the glory of God. But we may not join the secular drive to define the nation in fear and conflict over against outsiders. The church is called to be the agent of God’s judging and transforming work in our cultures, opening them to other peoples of other traditions who are our neighbors. We are together with them on a pilgrimage. We are each being redefined in our separate national cultures, by the community with each other which the triune God creates, through the witness of the church, despite the powers of enmity, greed and fear.
How is this happening, where each of us lives and works? This we need to explore in the next few days?

Third, and finally, what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ in the midst of the conflicts that beset us? How can our various churches bear faithful witness to the Christ whose body we are?

This question is provocative. Some of you who heard my earlier comment that we all count ourselves members of the church which was born at Pentecost, may have winced. For many of us here do not recognize the church membership of others. The church has lived for centuries with divisions, some based in doctrine and church order, others based in conflicts of culture and tradition. And they blend with one another. The battlefields of Europe are stained with the blood of Protestants and Catholics fighting for the soul of one nation or another. On the border in central Europe between Byzantine Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism armies have fought for centuries to establish the dominance of one over the other. The legacy of these conflicts is still with us, in the anger and resentment of many national churches toward other communions who enter their sphere, and in the suspicion and fear which minority churches often feel toward the dominant churches in their nations. We need to confess these feelings and concerns in dialogue with each other. It is the first step in finding our community in Christ and our common witness.

Yet by God’s providence and grace we do come together. This meeting is one more event in the modern echo of Pentecost which is the Ecumenical Movement. We cannot leave each other alone, we cannot excommunicate each other in practice, whatever we do in theory, because we know that we need each other to understand and respond to the word of God. Modern secularism, in its liberal humanist and its Communist forms, may be a providential force that throws us together. But it is mission, not self-defense, that drives us to seek out, and learn from, one another.

Let us ask it in common: what is the mission of the church to a world beset by ethnic conflicts and how can we work at it together? How can we help each other to be the church, for and over against the nations in which we live? In that context let us share with each other what our confessions contribute to that witness. What does it mean to be Roman Catholic, and Croatian, Hungarian, or Polish? To be Orthodox and Serbian, Romanian, or Russian? Lutheran and German, Slovakian, or Hungarian? Reformed and Hungarian, Czech or American? Baptist, Methodist or Adventist in any one of these nations? What changes in our way of being church, are needed so that our witness to Christ in the nations where we are called to serve, may be more faithful? And finally, how can the ecumenical agencies of the church, in Rome, in Geneva, and in New York, how can the churches in other parts of the world, help each and all of you, as you help us, with this witness? Above all else, let us talk about this, together.