

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year

Dear Parishioners,

Wednesday 11 July was the feast of St. Benedict. In addition to being the Father of western monasticism, Benedict is also the patron saint of Europe. Pope Paul VI took some time out from his busy behind-the-scenes work at the Second Vatican Council to travel south to Monte Cassino on 24 October 1964 to re-dedicate the monastery church which had been destroyed during one of the fiercest set battles of World War II. On that occasion the Pope declared Benedict patron of Europe. Not all the bishops back in Rome were pleased with this papal decision, particularly the Slavic bishops and those from the Greek Catholic churches of the East. One of their number, elected as pope himself in 1978, redressed the balance by declaring the apostles of the Slavic nations, the Greek brothers Cyril and Methodius, joint patrons of Europe with Benedict in 1980. There was a gender balance to be redressed later in the John Paul II pontificate when three other patrons were added: Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden and Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein). Now there are six patrons of Europe but Benedict remains the *primus inter pares* – the first among equals.

It is important to stress that Benedict is not patron of the EU as such but of the whole continent. The EU is quickly constructing a secular pantheon of its own. The names of the European institution buildings, the street names in south Brussels where the EU buildings are located and the agora around which the European Parliament is constructed salutes the achievements and honours the reputation of the great founding figures of European re-construction and unification. Helmut Kohl and Simone Weil are among the most recent additions to the litany of secular canonization. Indeed, the Church is still contemplating whether or not to compete for a place in this secular pantheon by promoting the cause of Robert Schuman, even if the petition advanced by the diocese of Metz that their native son's sanctity be given consideration has been put on ice just for the moment. Benedict was declared patron saint less because of his personal extraordinary virtue than because of the monasticism he inspired and to which he supplied the Rule of life which was the matrix of Christian European culture. It was through the monastic *scriptoria* that the writings of classical antiquity found their way into the libraries of medieval Europe. It was the civilized gospel-inspired values which monks, whether as missionaries or as members of settled abbey communities, which gave the West its sense of moral identity.

The EU always prides itself on being a “community of values” and, even if it is now unfashionable to credit Christianity with the foundational values of the Union, it still remains true that they are central to that great culture which Benedictine monasticism did so much to propagate and inculcate and without which Europe as we know it today would not exist. Europe is at a cross-roads: prayers to St. Benedict are more than ever necessary.

Father Patrick