



## **Across polarization**

**As politics in America become ever more adversarial this election cycle, we can look to inspiring examples of reconciliation abroad.**

*By Catherine M. McCauliff*

We are not the first people to face contentious politics. Thoughtful Christians have for a very long time looked for ways to remember that God created each and every one of us and act on the certain and sure knowledge that we are brothers and sisters.

One very powerful example of brotherhood led to reconciliation between France and Germany after great enmity during World War II, when people were much more divided than we are today. The story of Robert Schuman (1886–1963), the French foreign minister after the war, can give us inspiration and provide a living witness to how love can work in our own political lives to express the values of peace, reconciliation and brotherhood in the face of serious disagreements. The first step is looking at those from whom we are politically divided as children of God with the same human rights we have. Schuman had that courage through prayer, the sacraments and religious commitments.

We too can provide solutions to the problems in our country today and fill the needs of our brothers and sisters, just as Schuman and his political friends did during the 1940s and 1950s, when war was still the first thing on everyone’s mind.

The Schuman Plan of May 1950, a bold start for reconciliation between France and Germany, set Europe on its long journey toward greater integration as the European Union. The plan is based on strong commitments to peace, reconciliation, brotherhood and pluralistic democracy. The history of this important founding “constitutional” document for a new Europe after devastating

wars and dysfunctional societies demonstrates the strong lay Christian impetus for peace and reconciliation.

Unlike America's Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 from a tyrannical king, Schuman sought the cooperation of different nation states to work together for the common good; however, like the American document, the Schuman declaration is based on principles of natural law.

Religion had been devalued during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and that contributed to the devastating World Wars that disfigured the face of Europe during the first half of the 20th century. Although Christians had been trying to promote peace, they were not listened to.

After the wars, religion again played an important role in the life of Europe until the 1960s. During that timeframe, roughly from 1945 to about 1965, religion was relevant, not theologically, but as an inspiration for committed believers active in politics and working together to achieve their goals of reconciliation and peace.

Among the many figures who contributed to the slow and difficult integration of Europe after World War II are Schuman and the philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973). These two figures influenced each other as well; Schuman later acknowledged Maritain's philosophy as formative in his own conception of the new Europe after the war, set forth in the Schuman Plan.

The contributions of Schuman and Maritain to this large, still fluid project involving the idea and reality of Europe were many. Schuman, a lawyer who became a legislator in France upon the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France after World War I, was a committed Christian layman who brought his notions of protection for religious freedom and local customs to the national political forum. France fell to the Nazis in June 1940, ushering in the Vichy government in northern France, which was sympathetic to the Nazis. In July 1940 Schuman determined he could not continue in that government; the Gestapo sought, found and jailed him. After the war, as French Foreign Minister, he was able to bring some measure of stability to the volatile and insecure political environment of the Fourth French Republic (1945–1958).

Maritain, like Schuman, was a committed Christian layman, French philosopher and public intellectual. After France fell, the Gestapo looked for but did not find Maritain, since he and his immediate family had reached North America some months earlier. Maritain had spoken out against totalitarianism and for Jewish human rights. During the war, Maritain gave "Free French" radio broadcasts from New York under the auspices of the United States Office of War

Information. These broadcasts uplifted morale in occupied France because Maritain's philosophy was widely appreciated in Europe before the war.

Afterward, peace and reconciliation became the bedrock for the new society both Schuman and Maritain sought to establish. Their notion of religion could play that same inspirational role in creating and maintaining a just society today.

The disastrous setbacks and devastation Europe suffered from totalitarianism opened European public opinion to a revived role, at least temporarily, for Christian politicians to participate in the reconstruction of Europe. Christian democratic values of reconciliation, brotherhood and peace, which respected the rights of each human being, played a strong role in the earliest integration of Europe.

Over the years these values, emphasizing that each person is created by God and that all people are brothers, have become subordinated to material well-being from a secular viewpoint. Christian Democrats lost their influence at the same time as European affluence emerged, and Europe today is no longer a model for civilization around the world.

The convictions of such Christian postwar politicians as Schuman, Konrad Adenauer (1876–1967; first chancellor of West Germany) and Alcide De Gasperi (1881–1954; Italian prime minister from 1945–1953) suggest that for them a unified Europe was a moral necessity, essential to the common good of humanity. These founding fathers of Europe were inspired by a profound Christian faith and have all been declared Servants of God by the Catholic Church.

People with strong values of brotherhood, or fraternity, and social justice can serve as an example for others to follow, leading to moral renewal. Today Europe is prosperous and peaceful but must work on its spiritual side to restore a sense of moral leadership in the world. That would entail at a minimum a strong commitment by many to reconciliation and acceptance of each other as Muslim, non-believer, Jew or Christian. To achieve even that, many people with such a view would have to work in society and in politics, bringing their religious convictions about the common good to the public square.

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