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## Europe Asks: Who Am I?

Europe's identity crisis as seen from its diary

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Dear Diary,

These last two years have been really hard on me. Millions of refugees streamed over my coastlines and settled in various places. At first I thought it wouldn't be that bad: This is a multicultural continent, after all. I thought I could handle it. But something was different. *They* were different; I could feel it. But what made them different, or what is it that differentiates me from them? I started questioning: *Who and what am I?*

Why are some of my people so hostile toward the refugees? Why are populists who promise to get rid of them gaining admiration? I have given them so much, so why do they sometimes attack me? Why is there a "them" and a "me" in the first place?

As these millions of refugees streamed onto this continent, I told them *emphatically* that they have to adapt to European values and culture. That was nicely said, but what does that mean in practical terms? What values and what culture should they adapt to?

This continent of about 50 countries has different ethnicities, languages, religions, cultures, laws, hopes, dreams and goals. So what values are the refugees supposed to adopt?

I came to realize that I forgot who I am. I forgot what unites my countries, and what differentiates me from other continents. As the refugee crisis hit, each nation wanted to do its own thing. As the famous saying goes, "A house divided against itself shall not stand." My nations can't stand when they are so divided. That means I must find out who I am and who my citizens are; only then can I tell the refugees what they need to adapt to. I have to learn *what it is that keeps Europe together*.

I pondered this very question some 60 years ago, and I thought I found the answer: economics. We all want to prosper, and that common desire, I thought, would drive my nations together as a unified continent. I thought that vision, above all else, would cause us to work as one body—a body that could compete with the giant powers of the West and East. I really believed that I found the aspiration that would give us the power, passion, zeal and excitement to overcome all obstacles, resist all opponents, conquer all enemies, and catapult us to greatness!

I quickly realized that this was an illusion.

Economics didn't give us the unity that I hoped it would. While some of my countries managed to get together in the 1950s and '60s, I realized that we still had too many differences. We needed common laws. The European Community was created to solve these divisions. This later grew into the European Union. Its headquarters is now in Brussels, Belgium. But the struggle between EU law and national parliaments continues. My members can't agree on the simplest terms. They are more concerned about themselves than our common goals. That became clear in the euro crisis and now even more so in the refugee crisis.

Despite all my efforts to unite my different members together, I frequently hear murmurings against my plans for unity. Some say that the EU is a headless Frankenstein monster, an apparatus that overburdens its members and yet is unable to save Europe from disasters.

But I didn't want to listen to them. I didn't give up on this vision of uniting my people. I was still convinced that it would all work out. I hoped that we would all come together and solve the problems we faced.

But then the refugee crisis made even me realize that I have to be more than just an economic union. I had to find something that holds us all together despite opposition. I closely observed how my members reacted to the crisis.

One of my strongest members, Germany, started to open its borders: taking up the challenge of letting hundreds of thousands of refugees across, hoping the nations around it would work together and do the same. That didn't happen. Other nations bluntly refused to take a certain quota of refugees. Some said, *Let's help, but they have to integrate*. Others simply rejected them altogether.

I could not see any way that an agreement could be found. So I looked at the people of the individual countries, trying to find one reaction they all share.

My members tried to find ways to assimilate the refugees with our people. Different integration policies developed. A few had some success, but most failed.

Instead of peaceful integration and cooperation, I saw many refugee homes set on fire. The migrants were despised, hated, ridiculed and mocked for what they are and where they came from. Some simply hated them for their religion. *If they would just give up Islam, they could live with us*, they reasoned. Populists who promised to treat foreigners as foreigners gained popularity.

Terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and Germany escalated the situation. On top of that, the Cologne attacks saw hundreds of women sexually assaulted and even raped.

*Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote on July 28 about [the Bavarian reaction](#) to the series of attacks in their homeland (*Trumpet* translation throughout):

A dark cloud of fear, anger and resentment moved over Bavaria. There is no need to scroll through the internet to get an impression of the current mood. It's the more casual conversations at the bakery and on the street where the hatred toward refugees, blacks and politics in general wells over. An Islamic assassination or a killing spree—nobody here holds to such fine distinctions.

A general hatred for all foreigners seems to be growing. It is not the refugees themselves who are hated; the hatred is directed against Islam. The Christian Social Union (csu), which rules more than 50 percent of the parliament in Bavaria, came out with the slogan "Germany must remain Germany."

*Tagesspiegel* commented on the csu's new agenda: "What stands out is not only the rejection of Islamism but also of Islam, as well as the summoning of the Christian culture." The csu clearly names the differences between the refugees and me. They are Islamic and I am Christian. Hence, the csu favors all immigrants who share that Christian culture.

Is that the answer to my question? Are all my members able to identify with that Christian culture? Is that the answer to what and who I am?

## The Charlemagne Prize

I am reminded of a prize given out every year to remember the great works that Charlemagne did for Europe. He was the first to unite much of Europe under one leadership—a dream I still have today. Charlemagne had even bigger challenges than I have today, and yet he found a way to bring unity. How he did this is remarkable, and I believe that I can still learn from it.

The refugee crisis seems to be the perfect disaster I needed to wake up and show me my weaknesses. By being presented with what I am not, I am starting to learn again who I am.

Charlemagne helped to affirm Europe's Christian identity. He tried to convert every nation he conquered to Catholicism. That way he knew that they would stay loyal to the Holy Roman Empire he sought to establish.

Although there were still different ethnicities and nationalities, there was one identity: Christianity. Everything else was an enemy. That is what united my countries anciently and can unite us again.

But do I have to tell these refugees that if they want to live here they have to convert to Christianity? What about the millions of other Muslims and religious entities that already live here? Do they have to change too? And what's next? Do I then try to convert the whole world, attempting to make it a better place?

I am Europe after all. I may have temporarily suffered a crisis of identity, but I am starting to remember who I am.

To learn about the identity Europe lost, read "[The Spirit of Charlemagne Is Alive in Europe](#)." ■