

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – TUESDAY, 14TH SEPTEMBER, 2021
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POPE FRANCIS MEETS HUNGARIAN PRIME MINISTER VIKTOR ORBÁN

Good morning.

Pope Francis visited Hungary last weekend, where he met with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. From the newspaper photographs, it's clear that these two Christian leaders do not exactly see eye to eye.

For Mr Orbán, the defence of Europe's Christian identity – as he sees it – is a key priority. He appealed to Pope Francis “not to let Christian Hungary perish.” This concern drives his country's anti-immigration policies, rooted in fears about the impact of Islam. Pope Francis, on the other hand, has been critical where he has seen European hostility to refugees, and has personally assisted Syrian Muslim families to settle in Rome.

Hungary has a significant Jewish community. While Prime Minister Orbán has spoken out against anti-Semitism, many have expressed concern that it's on the rise there. Addressing Christian and Jewish leaders after their meeting, Pope Francis warned of “the threat of anti-Semitism still lurking in Europe and elsewhere.” He said, “This is a fuse that must not be allowed to burn.”

Many Catholics like myself welcome the Pope's robust engagement with issues of social justice and his reforms towards a more open and inclusive Church. Others might align themselves more closely with some of the views expressed by the Hungarian leader. Writing in the Catholic weekly *The Tablet* last year, journalist Melanie McDonagh pointed out that Mr Orbán advocates increasing overseas aid to “help people to stay at home”, rather than opening up Europe's borders to refugees. Contrasting this with Pope Francis's approach, she wrote, “On this one at least, I'm with Mr Orbán.”

Rather than shying away from such disagreements, Pope Francis insists upon the need for dialogue. At the Mass he celebrated in Hungary, he spoke of the cross which, “planted in the ground, not only invites us to be well-rooted, (but) also raises and extends its arms towards everyone.” He urged his listeners to be like that: “grounded and open, rooted and considerate.”

This is the spirit which informs his understanding of dialogue, as a means by which painful differences can eventually give way to what he calls a “reconciled diversity”. This involves both sides acknowledging their fears and insecurities in mutual trust and vulnerability.

Adopting this as a process can enable us to engage creatively with the complex challenges of diversity, and to respond to the needs of displaced and marginalised people, not as a threat to our identity but as an expression of our shared humanity.