"European federalism in times of crisis"

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Abstract

European federalism was originally conceived as a way to overcome the negative legacies of European nationalism which the founding fathers of Europe saw as responsible for the three major wars on European soil in the 19th and 20th centuries: the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), and the two World Wars. These constituted the most serious crises of European history since the 16th century Reformation. After the Second World War, European integration was launched in order to ensure that no such major conflict would occur again within Europe. Underlying this there was also a 'moral' vision, based on the notion of the absolute dignity of every single human person, which it was necessary to affirm after the genocide of the Holocaust and other atrocities committed during the Second World War. This led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948 and the affirmation of democracy as a suitable political system within which to exercise these rights with the founding of the Council of Europe.

The federalism of the founding fathers of Europe - coming from very different traditions which derived from both Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment Humanism - was impregnated with this moral vision. For this reason, federalism was not simply a set of procedures for organizing a political system but also a humanistic philosophy - sometimes called 'le fédéralisme intégral' - which sought the optimal conditions for the flourishing of the human person.

The history of European integration since 1945 shows that many aspects of this vision have been realised, not least the avoidance of any major war within the territory of the European Community. However, it may be that the integration process has sometimes forgotten the humanistic vision to become simply a vast market or a technocratic and bureaucratic system to regulate this market. The 2008 financial crisis illustrates some of the consequences of such a limited vision. Today, Europe needs to return to that richer version of federalism that was held by the founding fathers albeit couched in terms relevant to today's realities.