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## **The French National Catholic Press and Turkey's bid to join the European Union**

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I was asked to briefly present to you the way the national Catholic press in France dealt with the question of Turkey's bid to join Europe. I insist on the national, because there is also a modest but lavish local Catholic press, in the dioceses and parishes, as well as a few major regional dailies whose roots are Christian.

### **A few facts and figures about the Catholic press in France**

The *National Center of the Catholic Press* – here present are Messrs Fauvel and Petit who are among the directors of the Center – regroups 24 titles published by 11 press companies, with a total circulation of 120 million copies every year. These press companies are often small or very small compared to the giants of the French press, and even more to the European press.

When speaking the Catholic press in France, the title that springs to mind is:

**La Croix**: a daily paper with an average circulation of 100,000 copies a day, through subscriptions and sales at newsstands. *La Croix* is a reference among French dailies of all political opinions for its journalistic quality and intellectual rigour. It is often quoted in the press reviews of the national radio networks. It is one of the rare dailies currently growing in France, apart from free dailies. *La Croix* has been in existence since 1883. It belongs to the Bayard press group, founded and still managed today by a religious congregation – the Augustines of the Assumption, who are also present in Turkey.

Then we have two weekly news magazines:

**La Vie** has a circulation of 200,000 copies through subscriptions and sales at newsstands. Its publisher is the Malesherbes group which belongs to the influential press group of *Le Monde*. Its readership is made up of Christians who are militant in society and in the Church. It is at the origin of an active network of associations called *Les Amis de la Vie* (*Friends of Life*) which regularly offers meetings of readers and study trips.

**Pèlerin** is another weekly news magazine published by the same group as *La Croix* – Bayard - with a circulation of 300,000 copies. In comparison to its competitor *La Vie*, its readership comes mainly from families and rural people.

We should also mention two news magazines with smaller circulations but strong personalities:

**Témoignage Chrétien**: a left-wing Catholic weekly, born from the Resistance to German occupation during WW2, which has with a militant readership.

**Famille Chrétienne**: a family-oriented Catholic weekly, created in the 1980s for a far more conservative readership than those of the weeklies mentioned before.

Finally, for this short analysis of the way the national Catholic press in France dealt with the question of Turkey's bid to join Europe, I also used some articles from **Réforme**, the reference Protestant weekly magazine; **Croire aujourd'hui**, a bi-monthly review of education and reflection on social and Church topics led by the Jesuits and included in the Bayard press group; finally, **Phosphore**, a non-religious mass magazine for highschool pupils and young students, also published by the Bayard press group.

The analysis I am going to present is based on a collection of about 60 articles published in the papers and magazines I just mentioned.

### **A few remarks on the period under study : from October 2004 to March 2007**

These 2 years and a half were marked by 5 moments on intense editorial arguing on the question of Turkey's bid for Europe. As in all information media, the news and events on the news are the obvious vectors of attention.

1) October 2004: the European Commission's recommendation to start negotiations on Turkey's entrance in the EU generated a series of articles. All papers and magazines without exceptions brought out the information and relayed the passionate debate that started in the French public opinion.

2) December 2004: the televised speech by President Jacques Chirac on the eve of the opening of the European Summit in Brussels. The debate spread and grew tense among the political world in France and blurred the traditional divisions among the political groupings. The President of the Republic's stand, which opposed the prevailing public opinion and above all the opinion of his own majority in Parliament, the UMP, as well as that of the new leader of the UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, raised new questions.

The months of October to December 2004 marked the beginning of a long period of debates which troubled France until the referendum of May 2005 on the European Constitution and contributed to the negative answer of the French people.

3) In October 2005, the official opening of the negotiations towards the entrance of Turkey in the Union generated many articles. The press and the politicians still felt the shock of the negative answer to the referendum. Many thought that the issue of Turkey's entrance influenced the French to reject a EU felt to be too uncertain and alarming, a EU adrift and dragged along by the uncontrollable consequences of an endless enlargement.

4) June to November 2006 was a period marked by reactions to aggressions against religious figures in Turkey, by Cardinal Kasper's stand in July, and above, all, in early November 2006, by the report of the European Commission on the first year of negotiations.

5) This final period began in November 2006 with Pope Benoit XVI's (Benoit the 16<sup>th</sup>'s) visit to Turkey and closed with the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. The Pope's visit had a major impact on the Christian public opinion, both because of the publicity given to the position of the Turkish Christians and their plea to their Western brethren (brothers), for their sake, not to close their doors to Turkey, and because of Pope Benoit's open attitude. This impression was confirmed by the interview given in early January by Cardinal Bertone to *La Documentation Catholique* (*the French Documentation*) and taken up by *Pèlerin* and *La Croix* on the role of Turkey as a bridge between the East and the West.

### **What can be understood from a review of the national Catholic press during this period from October 2004 to March 2007?**

The first thing we can note is that the Catholic press, just like the rest of the French press, accompanies the debate that has been raging in the French public opinion since the fall of 2004. The richest treatment in quantitative terms comes of course from *La Croix*, due to its daily issues. *La Croix* published 3 special reports that included from 4 to 10 articles each as well as a Forum dedicated to experts' opinions between October 2004 and October 2005. To these must be added the special report dedicated to the Pope Benoit's visit last November. The editor, Bruno Frappat, wrote 3 editorials in a row on the issue in October 2004, then another 3 in December 2004, which is a clear indicator of how passionate the debate was in France. In total, *La Croix* published 45 articles that dealt with Turkey's entrance in the EU, representing hundreds of thousands of signs in two years and a half.

During this period, the four Catholic weeklies (*Pèlerin*, *La Vie*, *Famille Chrétienne et Témoignage Chrétien*), *Croire aujourd'hui* and even *Phosphore*, the monthly magazine for high school pupils and young students, offered their readers thorough special reports on Europe and Turkey. The reports combined news coverage, interviews of public figures or intellectuals, analyses, chronological and political facts and figures.

*Phosphore* offered its young readers alternate portraits of a 20 year-old Turkish man and woman. The portraits were very different – from a well-off and Westernized Istanbul young

man to a young rural bride, followed by a very clear table that classified the pros and cons of Turkey's entrance in the EU.

### **What can be said about the opinions expressed in the articles?**

Generally speaking, through its choices in terms of journalistic treatment, the Catholic press endeavours (attempts) to cool and rationalize the debate. It aims at clarifying, at presenting analyses expressing different opinions, but always through rational argumentations. It refuses to simplify an issue whose complexity is obvious. Above, except maybe for *Famille Chrétienne*, it refuses to harp on the fear of Islam and to let politicians exploit the religious dimension of the issue. The argument that might lead to a refusal of Turkey's entrance in Europe cannot be its Muslim population in a EU that already includes several million Muslims. However, echoing the declarations of the Conference of the European Episcopates (COMECE), taken up by the French bishops, as well as those of the Conference of the European Churches (KEK) which includes the Anglican, Protestant, and Orthodox Churches in Europe, both the Catholic and the Protestant press insist on the key criteria of effective religious liberty and minority rights.

### **Does it mean that the Christian press is strictly neutral in the debate?**

Not completely, particularly of course in the editorials.

On October 14, 2004 Michel Cool in *Témoignage Chrétien* castigated the exploitation of the issue for political gains in a provocative and passionate style. According to him, "because it took off too fast, the debate has already left two victims behind. First the Turkish people, flabbergasted and humiliated by our arrogance, our ignorance and our stupidity. We brandish secularism, but Turkey is a secular state and Turkish women won the right to vote long before French women! We accuse it of Atlantism, but Ankara, unlike London, was not a vassal of Washington when Irak was invaded. The second victim is the European idea. Before being a geographical entity, an identity, a cultural and religious heritage, Europe is an idea. A idea that has been built one stone before the next to make a bridge between peoples that are different but stand together - not to make a fortress. This was De Gaulle's idea and then Mitterand's, who were in favour of Turkey's docking with the European ship. An idea of a Europe of the high seas, a Europe of open minds."

On the same day, in a more moderate tone, René Poujol, on the contrary, welcomed the awakening of a public opinion that showed at last an interest in Europe thanks to the Turkish issue and demanded a real debate in Parliament. He worried in advance about the impact on the future referendum on the European constitution of a stand of the President of the Republic that would go against the French public opinion.

Two months later, during the Brussels Summit, another editorial in *Pèlerin* lamented the fact that for the heads of state and government of the EU, the die was already cast in a direction contrary to their public opinions, but above all, he called for the EU to first fully realize the entrance of its 10 new members. "In doing so, we will build what geography and history demand and will make good on the debt we contracted in Yalta in 1945 when the West abandoned these countries to Stalin", Paula Boyer wrote. "This is our primary duty. We should give ourselves the means to do it successfully, before running ahead, under cover of a false generosity, towards a marriage with Turkey which nothing imposes."

The stand of *Famille Chrétienne* is even more militant, and not only in editorials or boxes written by its editor, Philippe Oswald. For example, an article dated October 15, 2005 that announced the official start of entrance negotiations, quoted *Die Welt*, according to which "the Austrian Chancellor said aloud what many Europeans think: the full integration of Turkey in Europe is absurd." "These reservations were shared by Cardinal Poupard in Rome," the

magazine adds. In July 2006, *Famille Chrétienne* did not fail to relay Cardinal Kasper's reaction following the aggression of a French priest in Turkey by an Islamist. Under the title "Turkey condemned", the introductory paragraph announced: "Cardinal Walter Kasper firmly condemned the lack of religious freedom in Turkey and thinks that the country is not ready to enter Europe."

In other articles, the magazine worried about the "European climb-down", going as far as referring to "the spirit of Munich, which never led to peace."

In November 2006, a note by Philippe Oswald concluding the special report "Seen from Brussels: the Turkish headache", enumerated all the clichés about Turkey that haunt the French collective unconscious, dating back to our school history and geography classes: "And so we think we remember that Turkey is a country of Western Asia, that its religion is Islam, and that neither secularism nor toleration are its strong points. Armenians, Greeks, and Christians generally speaking, as well as Jews, learned this to their expense, not only since the early 19th century, but at least since the capture of Constantinople." And the editorial writer went on to quote the capture of Belgrade, the two sieges of Vienna despite the West's victory in Lepante, the "long servitude of Serbs, Hungarians, and Bulgarians..." He also pointed out the rise of Islamism, noting that « the wife of the present Prime Minister wears a headscarf, probably making Atatürk turn in his grave.»

Paying more attention to the complexity of the issue, and ready, if necessary, to go against their readers' opinions, editorials from the editors of *La Croix*, Bruno Frappat and then Dominique Quinio, as well as those of Antoine Nouis in *Réforme*, endeavour to present the debate in the most rigorous manner, setting aside "the passions, even the fantasies, that divide the French public opinion", according to Bruno Frappat. "If Turkey's bid for Europe meets with reluctance, it cannot be because of a precise knowledge of the reality of the country. What do Europeans who already belong to the club know about Turkey's situation, beyond historical and tourist clichés, ideological or political prejudices, the way Turkish immigrants are perceived in countries where they are present? Preconceptions abound. Generally speaking, the candidate country is confused with the nightmares that the threat of Islamism gives democracies. Through gradual shifts, any form of Islamism, even the moderate ones, is considered as dangerous and a mortal disease for safety and prosperity. Turkey thus pays for the bad reputation of Islamism. But would it not pay an unreasonable price if Europe slammed the door in its face, now or later?"

The editorial writers of *La Croix* call for a position that is both strict and aware of the legitimacy of the French malaise in Europe, and open to the future. This position is often presented like a daring but not impossible bet.

« What sometimes makes the present debate on Turkey's bid to enter Europe puzzling is that it does not manage to include the optimistic logic of the incredible process of reconciliation which the positivist utopia and the voluntarist building of Europe represented, following up on the massive bloodshed caused by centuries of conquests and constraints. We sometimes speak of the Turks as we spoke of the Germans after the war. Mistrust endures under pretext of keeping memories alive. And yet what is at stake is not the past of Europe, nor its present, but its future. When memory brings things to a conclusion too abruptly, it may darken the future and discourage it.» (Bruno Frappat, December 2004)

"We must welcome the request while holding firm on the principles", wrote Antoine Nouis in *Réforme*. He acknowledged that the issue of the geographical limits of Europe was legitimate. "If we accept Turkey, we will have to consider the other countries of the Middle East and North Africa," he wrote, "but if it leads those Muslim countries to adopt the values of secularism, minority rights, and human rights, who could complain?" This editorial concerned with keeping an open mind was nonetheless published on the same page as a long article entitled "the Orthodox Thorn", which presented the distressing issue of the situation of

Orthodox and of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and relayed the concerns of Metropolite (?) Meliton.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole, the desire to keep the future open and hope alive, which are central preoccupations of the Christian faith, seems to counterbalance the concerned lucidity and even the puzzlement of the Christian press in front of the possibility of Turkey's entrance in the EU. The feeling seems to be that an outright and hopeless "No" cannot be the right Christian answer. "It is better to negotiate the future than to despair of it", wrote Bruno Frappat in October 2004.

Moreover, the voice of the Christians of Turkey cannot leave the Christians of Europe indifferent. Even a magazine as clearly hostile to Turkey's entrance as *Famille Chrétienne* cannot ignore the arguments of these Eastern brethren (brothers). Pope Benoit's thus visit played a key role in rolling back cut-and-dried positions. The very fact that the Pope's opinion evolved seems to have reopened the Turkish issue in a more peaceful manner in the French public opinion. In the same way as our world needs unarmed go-betweens and prophets, it needs a "bridge", to take up the word used by Cardinal Bertone – a bridge between the continents, between the cultures and the religions.