

Hungarian Abbot: Refusing Muslim refugees does not defend Christian Europe

'more about defending our affluence, comfort and security than about defending Christianity'

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, Global Pulse, 8 January 2016



Archabbot Asztrik Varszegi. Photo: [Pannonhalma Network](#)

One of Hungary's most respected Catholic prelates, Benedictine Archabbot Asztrik Varszegi, has blasted those who claim Europe must refuse entry to Muslim refugees in order to defend its Christian character.

“(This stance) is presumably more about defending our affluence, comfort and security than about defending Christianity,” said Varszegi, a former auxiliary bishop of Esztergom and head of the famous 10th century Archabbey of Pannonhalma since 1991.

“Politicians cannot justify their refusal to take in Muslim refugees on the need to defend European Christendom,” he said in an interview in the Christmas edition of the Hungarian economic magazine *HVG*.

“A Christian Europe and a Christian Hungary are utopias and illusions,” he emphasized

While Europe's traditions were indisputably Christian, he said, that was a “far cry from concluding that we are actually Christian as far as our deeds and attitudes are concerned”.

Archabbot Varszegi, who will be 70 later this month, said it was imperative to critically examine what was behind such a stance.

He said the present situation could not be reduced to the contrast between Christianity and Islam. More information, knowledge and rationality, especially more reasonable tones, were called for.

“Political influence on the Church and insufficient information on the Church's part strengthen each other mutually and provide a breeding ground for one-sided thinking,” he warned.

Asked to describe the relationship between politics and the Church in Hungary, Archabbot Varszegi said the complicated secularization process the country was going through meant that people's relationship to the Church and religion was multifaceted.

He added that it was part of the very nature of politics that politicians should want to harness everyone for their own purposes.

“But politicians here do not even know how strong or weak the Church is and, unfortunately, that also applies, vise-versa, to the Church,” the Hungarian bishop and abbot said.

“I have this fixed idea that politicians should be enrolled in a theological course on what is essential in the Church – a course which emphasizes that the Church of God is a great gift for human beings. That is its focal message, not the Church’s influence, structures or traditions,” he said.

“The Church is in dire need of genuine dialogue and must not be dependent on anyone,” Archabbot Varszegi added.

He said it took a very long time for changes to take place in the Church but he could sense a greater sensibility on the Church’s part for modern people and for the modern age.

“Churchmen are genuinely looking for the right answers and, in this respect, Pope Francis’ letter on the Jubilee of Mercy was truly groundbreaking. In it, one can immediately ascertain an incredible shift of emphasis,” Varszegi observed.

He said the aim was to lead people back to a merciful God who demonstrated His infinite love through Jesus.

“We, too, must talk about this God who uplifts, liberates and endows us human beings. I am full of hope even if I know that the Church with its cumbersome apparatus can be exceedingly sluggish”, he concluded.

The Archabbey of Pannonhalma opened its doors to refugees regardless of their religion last summer when the first big wave of migrants crossed from Hungary into Austria.

But Hungary and other eastern European countries have been extremely reluctant to take in refugees from the Middle East and usually, on principle, they accept only Christians. Many Church leaders and Catholic parishes in these countries have defended the policy, insisting that they want to protect their Christian heritage.