

A wall is a sign of weakness

Fr. Martin Schlag, born 1964 in New York but Austrian in origin, served ten years as Professor of Moral Theology and Social Ethics in Rome. Since 2017 he has been the director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought at the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul. In times of growing political tensions between the USA and Europe, we wanted to know how he felt as an Austrian in America and what the situation of church and society on the other side of the Atlantic was like. A conversation about similarities and differences between Europeans and Americans, about capitalism and the social market economy, about walls and open hearts. The questions were asked by Arnd Küppers.

Arnd Küppers (AK): *Dear Martin, you seem to be a Catholic cosmopolitan: You are an Austrian, but you were born in the USA, in New York. You studied in Vienna and Rome, you served as a professor for Moral Theology and Social Ethics at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome and as a professor for Business Ethics at the famous IESE Business School in Barcelona. In 2017, you became a professor for Catholic Social Thought and the Director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought at the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, USA. How do academic life and the exchange with students in the USA differ from what you know from Italy, Spain or Austria and Germany?*

Fr. Martin Schlag (MS): Thank you for your interest in me! I am blessed to work at the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, and to go back regularly to my alma mater in Rome, the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, where I still direct the Research Center Markets, Culture and Ethics. In my short experience in the USA, my impression is that academic life is more concentrated on the students than in Europe, where professors can be quite detached from and rather uninterested in teaching. One of the reasons for this, is that in the US colleges and universities are not free. For the academic institutions in the USA, the students are the clients who, with their tuition fees, maintain the financial viability of the institution. This requires greater dedication to the individual student, but also makes it more difficult for the professor to give bad grades or let a student fail. Having said that, the level of academic performance of students in the US varies quite significantly not only from student to student, but also from university to university. Top universities tend to have top students who excel over and above their European colleagues. However, on average, European students possess more general knowledge, especially in history and philosophy, than Americans. European university students have learnt the big picture in high-school, have been introduced to the cultural connections between peoples, have been taught more languages. US students come to college having read more books and texts of great authors, but sometimes lack the ability to connect the dots.

AK: *Otto von Habsburg, your famous fellow Austrian, once was asked when he had become a confessed European. He answered: When I lived in America. How do you feel as a European in the USA?*

MS: I am an American and an Austrian citizen by birth. I am proud of both, and very happy in the USA. I must say that it is the best nation I have ever lived in (and I have lived in several countries). I especially love my State Minnesota (despite the long winters). Forget the Coasts: the Midwest is the best! People are very friendly, and the generosity of Catholics and

Christians in general toward the Church and other social needs is quite extraordinary. There are big families, in which vocations flourish. The Europeans who came to Minnesota were mainly Scandinavian, German, Irish, Polish, Russian, Czech and immigrants from other central and northern nations. They brought social concern with them and dislike for extremism and inequality. In US culture, they found community cohesion, rule of law, the sense of civic duty. The financial and economic system of freedom that is characteristic of the USA is something I deeply appreciate, without being blind to its setbacks. I know a family that adopted several severely handicapped children. Instead of being proud of such an employee, the father's company fired him because the costs of his medical insurance were too high. This is the ugly face of the maximization of profits. It is also true that medical aid, retirement, education, and housing are much more expensive in the USA than in Europe where these services are socialized and paid for partially with tax money. However, who is ever going to pay back the public debt? In the USA, people feel the costs, and decide for themselves.

AK: *What is the current situation of Catholicism in the USA? Does the church or do church organizations and groups engage in political and social debates? What are the central themes of this engagement?*

MS: I live in the Seminary of St. Paul with over 200 vocations, all from the Midwest. The Church in America is alive. Statistically, 98% of Catholics go to mass on Sundays and practice their faith! This astonishing number derives from the fact that those Catholics who do not practice their faith do not even count as Catholics in the statistics. The Church in America is the only Church I know that has both vocations and resources, thanks to the generosity of the lay faithful. This is the case because bishops are orthodox and pious. Where Christians adore the holy Eucharist and are devoted to Mary, there are vocations. Church leaders must praise and appreciate things that only a priest can do, if they want young men to give up everything and follow Christ in a lifelong celibate service in the Church. US bishops have done this in the recent past, and have been blessed with vocations. I hope they stay on the same course also in the future.

The Church engages in multiple ways in political and social debates. In Minnesota the Minnesota Catholics' Conference, is the organization that is especially active in these questions. In other states, there are similar structures. The themes are manifold. The immigration of undocumented workers is one of them. In the Archdiocese of St. Paul – Minneapolis we are blessed by having a growing number of Latino communities in our parishes, which are a blessing because of their faith and joy. The human rights issue number one is of course the right to life, especially of the unborn. With the appointment of conservative judges to the Supreme Court by President Trump, the situation of defenders of life has been strengthened. This has resulted in a polarization between States with a Republican and those with a Democratic majority not only as regards abortion but also euthanasia. The Church hierarchy follows Pope Francis in rejecting the death penalty, but on this question, Catholics in general are divided.

AK: *Is Catholic Social Teaching known in the USA? Does it have any impact on political debates and decisions?*

MS: Catholic social teaching as such is not widely known in the USA. However, its influence is indirect because increasingly concepts that originated in Catholic social thought have become mainstream. Take solidarity as an example. In 2012, I organized a conference at The Catholic University of America (CUA) on freedom and solidarity. One side accused me of being a communist for using the word solidarity, the other side because I spoke of freedom. This has changed. In a research study, Andreas Widmer of CUA has found that concepts like human dignity, common good, and solidarity resonate very strongly with Americans. However, they are frequently not understood correctly. Also in politics, the rhetoric recurs again and again to notions taken from the Catholic social tradition.

AK: *A central concern of OS is a fair economic order in the sense of a global social market economy? Have you ever tried to explain the concept of a social market economy to your American colleagues and students? Does that work?*

MS: Yes, I have. My personal experience is that it works. The US legal and social system is closer to the European system than most Americans want to believe. Since FDR's New Deal, the social system in the US has expanded. Some States, like Minnesota, have added to the safety net, and taxes are high. The idea of a free market is deeply rooted in the tradition and identity of the American people. But so is the idea of social cohesion and community, both on the level of civil society and of government. Medicaid and Medicare supply the poor and elderly with medical aid, and the Affordable Care Act strives to extend it to all Americans. I find that the idea of combining the free market with a public social minimum and a legal framework, as envisaged by the concept of a social market economy, already is a reality in the USA, even though there remain big cultural differences between Germany and the USA.

AK: *A very controversial debate is currently taking place in the European Union as well as in the USA on refugee policy and immigration. The American government is taking a very different approach from the European Commission and many other European governments. From the perspective of Christian social ethics, what do you think are the basic lines of a responsible refugee policy and immigration policy?*

MS: A wall is a sign of weakness that the US does not need. In the past, nations have walled themselves in when they were no longer capable of integrating the immigrants or were overwhelmed by mass immigration. This is certainly not the case in the USA. Immigrants from Latin America are eager to work and to integrate into American society. Of course, immigration must be legal, and I am not in favor of an open borders policy. An open border policy that simply lets everyone into the country who wishes to come, would open the door to criminals and terrorists, the very menace that the legal immigrants and refugees are fleeing from.

In Europe, many immigrants are Muslims. The issue here is integration. In exchange for our welcoming them and Islam into our home-country, immigrants and refugees must accept their new nation as their own, cutting all political dependence on their original nation. It is unacceptable that foreign powers intervene in political decisions in European host countries. Immigrants must embrace the law of the land, and its traditions as far as they are compatible with their religion. Sharia law is incompatible with the European constitutional tradition, and must not become legally binding in Europe.

AK: *There are currently many political tensions between the US and Europe, for example over trade policy, but also over the common defence policy in NATO. Do Europeans in the USA also experience these tensions in everyday life? What do Jane and John Doe think about Europe and the transatlantic partnership?*

MS: When you live in the USA, you can easily forget that there is a world around you. Everything you need is at home: America is a very beautiful, diverse, and rich nation. This fact can lead to blindness for the beauty in other places and self-referentiality. Trips to Europe open eyes (and stomachs) for the ancient culture that is at the root of America, its history, and its food (nothing like Italy!). The USA and Europe need each other. Europe needs America because it is the world's cultural leader; and the US needs Europe because it is the cradle and root of its own culture. Without memory there is no identity. Without Europe America would lose its own self.