A Pastoral Letter to the people and clergy of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe

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Being the Feast of Harriet Bedell

Dear People of God,

During our October convention in Geneva, I could not help noticing the posters plastered everywhere that depicted a frowning woman in a chador in the foreground and minarets in the shape of missiles in the background. "Vote 'Yes' to banning minarets" said the poster. And as you know, a majority of Swiss voters agreed to do so.

Being strangers in a strange land is not unknown to many of us. Among the more than four thousand members who make up our nineteen parishes and missions are many expatriates, and not just anglophones. There are of course many people who belong to one of our congregations in their own nation.

As I reflected upon the Swiss vote to ban the construction of minarets, it occurred to me that we cannot consider ourselves to be apart from the situation in Europe, whether we are here for a short time or have always lived here. We ourselves benefit from religious freedom here, and we should expect it in our homelands.

It was not always so. For instance, St. Paul's-Within-the-Walls, Rome, could only be built after the new Republic of Italy in 1870 lifted laws banning non-Roman Catholic churches within that city. Our churches in France benefited significantly from the law of 1905 disestablishing the Catholic Church in this country. The freedom to practice one's religion is something most Westerners take for granted, forgetting at our peril how hard-fought the battles were to secure it.

For most of human history, every people had one religion, and everyone without question belonged to it. They were indistinguishable, in fact. In the ancient world, conquering a people meant destroying their gods who had failed to protect them, which explains the routine annihilation of enemies described by all ancient historians, including the first books of the Bible. This also explains the massacres and wars that followed schisms in the Church, including the Protestant Reformation. Until very recently, no one anywhere ever considered that a people could have more than one religion. Furthermore, those who deviated from the practice of the religion were considered dangers to the wellbeing and indeed, the salvation of the community.

The seventeenth century saw the terrible religious wars on this continent that decimated the population to the point that finally, salvation began to be viewed

as an individual, not communal, affair. With the birth of modern democracies began finally the freedom to worship as one chooses, although this right was not perfected until our own era.

How easily we forget! And to forget history is to repeat it. In our situation especially in the Convocation, and also for the Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe, the right to practice one's own religion remains very precious.

So, as your Bishop I say to you that we must employ all possible means to argue for maintaining this right. It is just as wrong to ban minaret-building in the twenty-first century as it was to ban church-building in the nineteenth.

Some of us who are not citizens of the countries we find ourselves in will say that this is not our affair. But it is our business, and not only because of our right to be Episcopalians in Europe. Back home, wherever home is, this right needs to be defended. Until freedom of worship is guaranteed worldwide, the tragic and bloody history of interreligious and inter-confessional warfare will continue to be repeated.

On hearing this, some may reply that the Swiss vote, like other measures taken in France or the Netherlands, is not about religious freedom but rather national identity. However, our national identities across Europe and the Americas are first of all democratic. "France is a nation, not a race," we French learn in our schools. This applies to all democratic nations: the system of government is our first identity. Americans being almost all immigrants are the best example of this, for to be an American means to hold allegiance to the country's Constitution. Europeans can learn a lesson from this, as we seek to integrate more and more immigrants into this continent. Those who immigrate to our countries must be allowed to practice their religion as freely as all other citizens. We all must work to maintain these democratic rights.

At the same time, those who wish to immigrate to Europe should also uphold the system of government that guarantees freedom of religion. While one may not agree with the interpretation of the French secular principle (*la laïcité*) that bans the wearing of "ostentatious religious symbols" in public schools, it does apply to all people. I cannot wear my purple shirt, collar and cross in an American public school, for that matter, and I cannot be invited to address the student body. One may not agree, but it is applied across the board. Can we change the laws? Of course, by participating in the democratic process. But not by flouting it.

Another example is the burka, the dress that covers a woman from her head down, including her face. It is quite clear that this dress is only a cultural tradition—the Qur'an does not require it. In fact, the Bible and the Qur'an have the same standard, namely, that women should dress "modestly," which of course is defined differently in different cultures.

A woman should be free to wear what she wants at home—a burka, a bathrobe or her "birthday suit" if she so chooses. (And yes, she has the right to choose in our countries—no one may force her to wear a burka.) The law should not forbid her to wear it on the street as well. However, the laws and customs of her new

nation apply to her as well. One does not go outside in a bathrobe or naked in Western countries—*no se fa*, as the Italians say. Among us, covering one's face is something only criminals do in the commission of a crime. In France, even nuns have to remove their habit for their identity card picture—in fact, no uniform, including a clergy collar or military dress, may be worn. So you should not expect to be well-received if you insist on wearing a burka in public.

Here is the dynamic equilibrium that each of us should strive to maintain: the need to maintain the rights of constitutional democracy and the need all citizens have to respect the law. This means that each of us should be engaged in the politics of our countries. Our congregations as well should help us learn to help maintain the equilibrium between rights and responsibilities in our constitutional democracies, for our right to worship freely is essential.

From earliest times, we Christians have been held responsible for the good order of our communities (Romans 13:7). As Jesus said, we are to be "salt and light" to those around us. In the twenty-first century, this means participation in our democracies both upholding people's rights in making and enforcing the law, and living ourselves responsibly under the law.

Let each of us be diligent in our duty.