



Our regular contributor on contemporary issues reflects on sifting the good and evil in traditions. **KEVIN HARGADEN** works as theological advisor in the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice.

NON-TRADITIONAL VALUES OF THE CHURCH



Participants in the Charlottesville to DC march on September 6, 2017. Photo: Rena Schild/ Shutterstock

Many will have been shocked to see the footage at the end of the summer of an openly fascist, neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. White men marched with torches, chanting racist slogans and making Hitler salutes. The ghosts of the 1930s and 1940s suddenly seemed to come

alive, in the very country that fought so valiantly against the Nazis. The really alarming thing, however, is how normal such scenes are becoming. The governments of Hungary and Poland both seem to actively flirt with similar stances. Anti-immigrant politics is a growing force in France,

the Netherlands, and in the UK.

All the new ultra-right-wing movements speak of 'traditional values'. In the UK, the more aggressive politicians hark back to 'traditional British values'. In America the slogan is 'Make America great again'. In Hungary the movement is tied to 'saving Christian Europe'. These terms disguise violent and fear-filled politics with language that can tempt ordinary people. We can easily be sucked in because, don't we all value our traditions?

That is what the Church is: twenty centuries of tradition being passed on from parent to child. It is how we received the Bible; the New Testament is the written record of the eye-witnesses of Jesus' ministry, put into words by the first generation who received it. Before Paul explains the Eucharist to the Churches in Corinth, he directly says that this is the tradition: 'For what I received from the Lord, I also passed on to you.' (1 Cor.11:23).

Christians are people who live out of the traditions of the Church and the Scriptures. We need, therefore, to listen carefully when people talk about 'traditional values'. Before the Nazis rose to power, they seduced otherwise decent people by speaking of a return to traditional German values. In what was a time of tumult and economic hardship, many German Christians were not able to tell the difference between the 'German' values of the Nazis and true Christian values. The tradition that Paul hands on in 1 Corinthians 11 can be a radical one. It is not a message that

the people of 'Make America Great Again' or 'Britain First' could agree with. Paul calls Christians to sacrificial generosity, so that the poor are helped by the rich and the rich are befriended by the poor. Paul teaches, 'whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor.11:26). The *traditional values* of the Church blossom out of the Communion table, where Christians gather to remember that the life we live springs from the sacrifice of God.

The traditional values of the Church have no time for violence, or fear of the foreigner. Jesus was non-violent in the face of the Roman empire. Jesus did not hesitate to bring good news to us foreign Gentiles.

If we encounter people who speak against foreigners, who argue that we should put Ireland first, who encourage us to live in fear, we must turn to the *traditional values* of the Church – hospitality, generosity and most deeply of all, gratitude.

God is love, and God casts out all fear. Therefore the Church has no space for fear – least of all fear of the foreigner, with whom we identify most – but rather lists amongst its traditional values those characteristics in common with the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We ought to approach our politics with a spirit of gratitude for all that God has given us. In the context of a culture of fear, violence, and death, these are *revolutionary non-traditional values*. 