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Only 60 years overdue

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Why did it take more than six decades to recognize how good European unification has been for Europe? This year's Nobel Peace Prize comes at an auspicious moment: precisely when Europe seems to be reduced to Euro crises and when European integration has descended to squabbles over finances. It is a wake-up call to Europe's citizens and politicians to scratch their heads and ponder why unification ever took place.

Many of us Europeans, especially the younger generation, are even ignorant of the fact that Europe was a constant battlefield before the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950. Others have forgotten that in the years after World War II, Europe was in ruins, Communism threatened to overrun Western Europe and World War III loomed. Others see unification as a logical effect of the Marshall Plan offered by the US if Europe were to organize itself and coordinate its economies. But we all take European integration and the ensuing peace and security for granted. We have become complacent in our prosperity.

Crises can be therapeutic – even a crisis over a Nobel Peace Prize! Crises throw a sharp light on the need for change and for rediscovering one's roots. Admittedly, the European Union is so vast and diverse and all-embracing that curing its ills is a huge challenge.

But the first step is to consider that its existence is based on a common European spiritual and cultural heritage. All European countries form one big family.

On September 11 I defended my doctoral thesis at Leiden University in The Netherlands. My work has given me an insight into the way the European unification was envisioned by its founding father Robert Schuman, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs in the years after World War II.

My research showed why Schuman must be regarded as the main architect of European unification – not the French economist and diplomat Jean Monnet as is commonly written in textbooks on European unification. The Schuman archives show that he was the main architect, a judgement supported by his personality, his life as a devout Catholic, and his origins in Alsace-Lorraine.

According to Schuman, a common European spiritual and cultural heritage is the *raison d'être* of European unification, inspiring effective solidarity across frontiers. He turned the raw materials of war – coal and steel – into tools of peace by launching the Schuman Plan. This proposed a common market in coal and steel for France and what was then called West Germany. The two nations had been arch-enemies for more than a thousand years – since the Treaty of Verdun in 843.

Other countries were eligible to join and that's what Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg did. It was a clear first step of solidarity, a solidarity of concrete deeds. France stretched its hand out towards Germany, to not just to forgive past misdeeds, but to work together for peace! This is not the first thought that springs to mind after fighting a war that has killed millions!

Schuman's aim in life was to be a faithful instrument in the hands of God and he saw it as his task to procure peace for Europe. His aim for unification was peace and security. This would be achieved by political unification through economic integration at the service of the human person, which is in accordance with a moral order based on Christianity.

According to Schuman, integration should proceed by small steps so that the *l'Europe d'esprit* that is at its base could be internalized by its citizens and would be consistent with the human psyche. Unification would take several generations, he thought. National interests needed to be safeguarded as much as possible, unless they went against common European interests.

In this he followed the principle of subsidiarity which he had drawn from the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. This states that what can be done locally should be done locally; what can be done by the state should be done by the state; and what is too big for the state should be done by Europe (ie, Brussels). Common interests provided a broader radius of action for the nation states, even as they made them stronger, more prosperous and safer in their inter-dependence.

Schumann's vision suggests that the pace of integration over the last few decades has often been too fast. This explains the phenomenon of Euro-scepticism and the Euro crisis in countries of southern Europe. The Euro, for instance, should have been introduced only *after* national economies were sound and were able to participate in a common economic European policy that was backed and controlled supra-nationally – beyond national interests.

An important fact which we often overlook, but which the founding fathers, Schuman, Monnet, West Germany's Konrad Adenauer, and Italy's Alcide De Gasperi, had very clear, is that economic integration and growth are a means and not the aim of European unification.

Schuman's Europe is a Europe of the citizen. His guiding vision was that "We are all instruments, however imperfect, of a Providence who uses them to accomplish grand designs which surpass us... such a spirit is thus needed, which means that we need to be aware of our specifically European common patrimony and we need to have the will to safeguard and develop it." These timeless guidelines should be a reference point for today's Europe.

Hopefully, the Nobel Prize will help shed light on the path ahead for the Euro crisis. The current president, **Herman van Rompuy**, of Belgium, has indicated that he wishes to follow in Schuman's footsteps. I hope that all the member states of the European Union will be stirred by this award to return to the vision and courage of the EU's founding fathers!

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Margriet Krijtenburg studied Spanish philology at the University of Utrecht and wrote her doctoral thesis in Salamanca about the Spanish philosopher and writer Unamuno. To understand his thoughts... [More by Margriet Krijtenburg](#)

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