

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – TUESDAY, 1<sup>ST</sup> OCTOBER, 2024  
PROFESSOR TINA BEATTIE – writer and Catholic theologian

Good morning.

Austria's Freedom Party has just won a significant victory in parliamentary elections, the first far-right party to do so in that country since the Second World War. Like many such political movements gaining traction across the western democracies, the party campaigned by responding to fears about inflation and immigration. I think these fears are often rooted in people's concerns that their sense of identity and belonging are being obliterated by a modernising disregard for history and tradition. Growing economic pressures exacerbate these insecurities. Some politicians exploit these anxieties. One newspaper headline read, "Austria goes back to the future".

These issues are relevant to Catholic Church leaders and representatives gathering in Rome this week for a Synod. This is the culmination of a three year consultation during which Pope Francis has sought to transform the relationship between the Catholic Church and wider society through a worldwide process of dialogue and prayerful reflection.

Some progressive Catholics are campaigning for urgent and radical modernisation and reform, while others call for a return to an era when doctrinal absolutism and strict moral rules created a sense of the Church united against the world. How the Church's bishops guide this process is of vital significance. It calls for a wise balance between fidelity to the past and openness to the future as they seek to engage with many different voices, including those calling for greater inclusion and participation of women at all levels of the Church's life.

This means resisting the lure of two extremes. One is the conformity imposed by dictators and tyrants, religious or political, which can offer the illusion of security in exchange for unquestioning obedience. Often this is rooted in a rigid clinging to history and tradition, so that all change is perceived as destructive. This has on occasion in the past drawn the Catholic Church towards the politics of the Far Right. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a wilful ignorance of or even contempt for historical narratives and their claims upon us, which can result in the headlong pursuit of progress for its own sake without discernment or critical judgement.

Holocaust survivor and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Elie Wiesel said, "Just as man cannot live without dreams, he cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope summons the future." If we would summon a better future for the world and its traditions of belonging and believing, perhaps we might begin by changing not just the ways in which we dream about the past, but the ways in which we remember and learn from its nightmares. Then, we might go back to the future with hope.