



# The Holy See

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## APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO POLAND

### HOLY MASS AT THE CONCENTRATION CAMP

#### ***HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II***

*Auschwitz-Birkenau, 7 June 1979*

1. "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (1 Jn 5:4).

These words from the Letter of Saint John come to my mind and enter my heart as I find myself in this place in which a special victory was won through faith; through the faith that gives rise to love of God and of one's neighbour, the unique love, the supreme love that is ready to "lay down (one's) life for (one's) friends" (Jn 15:13; cf. 10:11). A victory, therefore, through love enlivened by faith to the extreme point of the final definitive witness.

This victory through faith and love was won in this place by a man whose first name is Maximilian Mary. Surname: Kolbe. Profession (as registered in the books of the concentration camp): Catholic priest. Vocation: a son of Saint Francis. Birth: a son of simple, hardworking devout parents, who were weavers near Łódź. By God's grace and the Church's judgment: Blessed.

The victory through faith and love was won by him in this place, which was built for the negation of faith—faith in God and faith in man—and to trample radically not only on love but on all signs of human dignity, of humanity. A place built on hatred and on contempt for man in the name of a crazed ideology. A place built on cruelty. On the entrance gate which still exists, is placed the inscription "Arbeit macht frei", which has a sardonic sound, since its meaning was radically contradicted by what took place within.

In this site of the terrible slaughter that brought death to four million people of different nations, Father Maximilian voluntarily offered himself for death in the starvation bunker for a brother, and

so won a spiritual victory like that of Christ himself. This brother still lives today in the land of Poland and is here with us.

But was Father Maximilian Kolbe the only one? Certainly he won a victory that was immediately felt by his companions in captivity and is still felt today by the Church and the world. However, there is no doubt that many other similar victories were won. I am thinking, for example, of the death in the gas chamber of the concentration camp of the Carmelite Sister Benedicta of the Cross, whose name in the world was Edith Stein, who was an illustrious pupil of Husserl and became one of the glories of contemporary German philosophy, and who was a descendant of a Jewish family living in Wroclaw.

I do not want to stay only with those two names, when I ask myself, was it only he or she alone...? How many similar victories were here? These victories were made by people of different faiths, different ideologies, certainly not just believers.

We want to embrace with a feeling of deepest reverence each of these victories, every manifestation of humanity. They were the negation of a system of systematic negation of humanity.

In the place of terrible devastation of humanity and human dignity – there is victory of humanity!

Can it still be a surprise to anyone that the Pope born and brought up in this land, the Pope who came to the see of Saint Peter from the diocese in whose territory is situated the camp of Auschwitz, should have begun his first Encyclical with the words "[Redemptor Hominis](#)" and should have dedicated it as a whole to the cause of man, to the dignity of man, to the threats to him, and finally to his inalienable rights that can so easily be trampled on and annihilated by his fellowmen? Is it enough to put man in a different uniform, arm him with the apparatus of violence? Is it enough to impose on him an ideology in which human rights are subjected to the demands of the system, completely subjected to them, so as in practice not to exist at all?

2. I am here today as a pilgrim. It is well known that I have been here many times. So many times! And many times I have gone down to Maximilian Kolbe's death cell and kneeled in front of the execution wall and passed among the ruins of the cremation furnaces of Birkenau. It was impossible for me not to come here as Pope.

I have come then to this special shrine, the birthplace, I can say, of the patron of our difficult century, just as nine centuries ago Skalka was the place of the birth under the sword of Saint Stanislaus, Patron of the Poles.

I come not only to honour the patron of our century, I come with the aim together with you, independent of what your faith is, once again to take care of the human being.

I have come to pray with all of you who have come here today and with the whole of Poland and the whole of Europe. Christ wishes that I who have become the Successor of Peter should give witness before the world to what constitutes the greatness and the misery of contemporary man, to what is his defeat and his victory.

I have come and I kneel on this Golgotha of the modern world, on these tombs, largely nameless like the great tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I kneel before all the inscriptions that come one after another bearing the memory of the victims of Birkenau in languages: Polish, English, Bulgarian, Romany, Czech, Danish, French, Greek, Hebrew, Yiddish, Spanish, Flemish, Serbo-Croat, German, Norwegian, Russian, Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian.

In particular I pause with you, dear participants in this encounter, before the inscription in Hebrew. This inscription awakens the memory of the People whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination. This People draws its origin from Abraham, our father in faith (cf. Rom 4:12), as was expressed by Paul of Tarsus. The very people that received from God the commandment "Thou shalt not kill", itself experienced in a special measure what is meant by killing. It is not permissible for anyone to pass by this inscription with indifference.

And one inscription more, a chosen one, the plaque in the Russian language. I don't add any comment. We know which nation the inscription is about. We know about their participation in the last terrible war for the freedom of peoples. Also this inscription we should not pass with indifference.

Finally, the last inscription: that in Polish. Six million Poles lost their lives during the second world war: a fifth of the nation. Yet another stage in the centuries-old fight of this nation, my nation, for its fundamental rights among the peoples of Europe. Yet another loud cry for the right to a place of its own on the map of Europe. Yet another painful reckoning with the conscience of mankind.

I chose three plaques. A stop should be made at all three and we will do so.

3. Auschwitz is such a reckoning through these plaques which remind us of the sacrifices the nations suffered. It is impossible merely to visit it. It is necessary on this occasion to think with fear of how far hatred can go.

Auschwitz is a testimony of war. War brings with it a disproportionate growth of hatred, destruction and cruelty. It cannot be denied that it also manifests new capabilities of human courage, heroism and patriotism, but the fact remains that it is the reckoning of the losses that prevails. That reckoning prevails more and more, since each day sees an increase in the destructive capacity of the weapons invented by modern technology. Not only those who directly bring about wars are responsible for them, but also those who fail to do all they can to prevent them.

Therefore I would like to repeat in this place the words that Paul VI pronounced before the United Nations Organizations:

"It is enough to remember that the blood of millions of men, numberless and unprecedented sufferings, useless slaughter and frightful ruin, are the sanction of the covenant which unites you in a solemn pledge which must change the future history of the world: No more war, war never again. It is peace, peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of all mankind" (AAS 57, 1965, p. 881).

If however Auschwitz's great call and the cry of man tortured here is to bear fruit for Europe and for the world also, the Declaration of Human Rights must have all its just consequences drawn from it, as John XXIII urged in the encyclical "Pacem in Terris". For the Declaration is a solemn recognition of the personal dignity of every human being; an assertion of everyone's right to be free to seek out the truth, to follow moral principles, discharge the duties imposed by justice, and lead a fully human life. (John XXIII, "Pacem in Terris", IV – AAS 55, 1963, pp. 295-296). These rights are universal, inviolable and inalienable.

There must be a return to the wisdom of the old teacher Paweł Włodkowic, Rector of the Jagellonian University at Krakow in the 15th century, and the rights of nations must be ensured: their right to existence, to freedom, to independence, to their own culture, and to honourable development.

Włodkowic wrote: "Where power is more at work than love, people seek their own interests and not those of Jesus Christ, and accordingly they easily depart from the rule of God's law... All the kinds of law are against those who threaten people wishing to live in peace: against them is the civil law... the canon law... the natural law, expressed in the principle 'Do to others what you would have done to you'. Against them is the divine law, in that... the commandment 'Thou shalt not steal' forbids all robbery, and the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' forbids all violence (Paweł Włodkowic, "Saevientibus" [1415], Tract. II, Solutio quaest. 4a; cf. L. Ehrlich, "Pisma wybrane Pawła Włodkowica", Warszawa 1968, t. 1, p. 61; pp. 58-59).

But it is not only in terms of rights, but also and above all it is about love: that love of neighbour which expresses and gives a voice to the love of God, the love which Christ proclaimed in his commandment and that every man has written in his heart - the commandment which God the Creator carved in the heart.

This commandment is concretized in respect for the other, respect for his personality, his conscience; is concretized in dialogue with others, in the ability to search and acknowledge what can be good and positive also in someone who represents ideas different from ours, even in someone whose good will errs.

Never one at the other's expense, at the cost of the enslavement of the other, at the cost of conquest, outrage, exploitation and death! He who is speaking these words is the unworthy successor of John XXIII and Paul VI. But he is also the son of a nation that in its history has suffered many afflictions from others.

Allow me however not to mention those others by name, let me not mention... We stand in this place where we want to think that every nation and every person is a brother. And if in what I said was bitter - my dear brothers and sisters – I did not say that to accuse anyone. I said it in order to remember.

I speak not only because of those who died, the four million victims of this vast field, I say it in the name of all the nations whose rights are being violated and forgotten. I speak, because it obliges me, obliges all of us – to the truth. I speak, because it obliges me, it obliges all of us, to care for humanity.

And because of this, I ask all who hear me, that you focus, that you focus all your powers for the care of the human being. But those who listen to me with faith in Jesus Christ, I ask you, to focus in prayer for peace and reconciliation.

My dear brothers and sisters, I have nothing more to say.

I call to mind the words of the supplication:

Holy is God! Holy and strong! Holy Immortal One! From plague, from famine, from fire and from war

... and from war,

deliver us, Lord.

Amen.