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Pope Francis' first address in Poland: recalling St. John Paul II's dream of European humanism

The memory of St. John Paul II and his dream of a new European humanism, of a Europe that breathes with both lungs, and with a common civilisation that sinks its roots in Christianity, introduced the first discourse pronounced by Pope Francis on Polish soil, before the president of the Republic and representatives of the political and cultural spheres, in Wawel, one of Poland's most significant places. The Pope also underlined the importance of memory – of the “good” memory that favours awareness of and respect for one's own identity and that of others, which the Polish people have demonstrated in their recent history, and he invited the nation to look with hope to the future and to the issues that need to be faced, such as enabling the return of emigrants who wish to repatriate, and willingness to welcome those who flee from war and hunger.

“This is my first visit to central-eastern Europe and I am happy to begin with Poland, the homeland of the unforgettable St. John Paul II, originator and promoter of the World Youth Days. Pope John Paul liked to speak of a Europe that breathes with two lungs. The ideal of a new European humanism is inspired by the creative and coordinated breathing of these two lungs, together with the shared civilization that has its deepest roots in Christianity”.

“Memory is the hallmark of the Polish people. I was always impressed by Pope John Paul's vivid sense of history. Whenever he spoke about a people, he started from its history, in order to bring out its wealth of humanity and spirituality. A consciousness of one's own identity, free of any pretensions to superiority, is indispensable for establishing a national community on the foundation of its human, social, political, economic and religious heritage, and thus inspiring social life and culture in a spirit of constant fidelity to tradition and, at the same time, openness to renewal and the future. In this sense, you recently celebrated the 1,050th anniversary of the Baptism of Poland. That was indeed a powerful moment of national unity, which reaffirmed that harmony, even amid a diversity of opinions, is the sure path to achieving the common good of the entire Polish people”.

“Similarly, fruitful cooperation in the international sphere and mutual esteem grow through awareness of, and respect for, one's own identity and that of others. Dialogue cannot exist unless each party starts out from its own identity”, he remarked. “In the daily life of each individual and society, though, there are two kinds of memory: good and bad, positive and negative. Good memory is what the Bible shows us in the Magnificat, the canticle of Mary, who praises the Lord and His saving works. Negative memory, on the other hand, keeps the mind and

heart obsessively fixed on evil, especially the wrongs committed by others. Looking at your recent history, I thank God that you have been able to let good memory have the upper hand, for example, by celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the forgiveness mutually offered and accepted between the Polish and German episcopates, following the Second World War. That initiative, which initially involved the ecclesial communities, also sparked an irreversible social, political, cultural and religious process that changed the history of relationships between the two peoples. Here too we can think of the Joint Declaration between the Catholic Church in Poland and the Orthodox Church of Moscow: an act that inaugurated a process of rapprochement and fraternity not only between the two Churches, but also between the two peoples”.

“The noble Polish nation has thus shown how one can nurture good memory while leaving the bad behind. This requires a solid hope and trust in the One who guides the destinies of peoples, opens closed doors, turns problems into opportunities and creates new scenarios from situations that appeared hopeless. This is evident from Poland’s own historical experience. After the storms and dark times, your people, having regained its dignity, could say, like the Jews returning from Babylon, ‘We were like those who dream... our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy’. An awareness of the progress made and joy at goals achieved, become in turn a source of strength and serenity for facing present challenges. These call for the courage of truth and constant ethical commitment, to ensure that decisions and actions, as well as human relationships, will always be respectful of the dignity of the person. In this, every sphere of action is involved, including the economy, environmental concerns and the handling of the complex phenomenon of migration”.

“This last area calls for great wisdom and compassion, in order to overcome fear and to achieve the greater good”, the Holy Father observed. “There is a need to seek out the reasons for emigration from Poland and to facilitate the return of all those wishing to repatriate. Also needed is a spirit of readiness to welcome those fleeing from wars and hunger, and solidarity with those deprived of their fundamental rights, including the right to profess one’s faith in freedom and safety. At the same time, new forms of exchange and cooperation need to be developed on the international level in order to resolve the conflicts and wars that force so many people to leave their homes and their native lands. This means doing everything possible to alleviate the suffering while tirelessly working with wisdom and constancy for justice and peace, bearing witness in practice to human and Christian values”.

In the light of its thousand-year history, the Pope invited the Polish nation to look with hope to the future and the issues before it. “Such an approach will favour a climate of respect between all elements of society and constructive debate on differing positions. It will also create the best conditions for civil, economic and even demographic growth, fostering the hope of providing a good life for coming generations. The young should not simply have to deal with problems, but rather be able to enjoy the beauty of creation, the benefits we can provide and the hope we can offer. Social policies in support of the family, the primary and fundamental cell of society, assisting underprivileged and poor families, and helping responsibly to welcome life, will thus prove even more effective. Life must always be welcomed and protected. These two things go together – welcome and protection, from conception to natural death. All of us are called to respect life and care for it. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the State, the Church and society to accompany and concretely help all those who find themselves in serious difficulty, so that a child will never be seen as a burden but as a gift, and those who are most vulnerable and poor will not be abandoned”.

“Mr President”, he concluded, “As throughout its long history, Poland can count on the cooperation of the Catholic Church, so that, in the light of the foundational Christian principles that forged Poland’s history and identity, the nation may, in changed historical conditions, move forward in fidelity to its finest traditions and with trust and hope, even in times of difficulty. In expressing once again my gratitude, I offer heartfelt good wishes to you and all present, for a serene and fruitful service of the common good. May Our Lady of Czestochowa bless and protect Poland.”
