



ARTYKUŁ

## Pope Benedict XVI in Auschwitz-Birkenau

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In the last day of his pilgrimage to Poland, on May 28th, 2006, pope Benedict XVI visited the former Nazi German concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. In his speech in front of the International Monument to the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp, he said: "I am here as the successor of John Paul II and as a son of the German nation."

After coming to the area of the camp, the pope walked through the gate with the infamous slogan "Arbeit macht Frei", and then he went to the Wall of Death by bloc no. 11. At the square of bloc 11, Benedict XVI met with 32 former prisoners of KL Auschwitz, including director Józef Szajna and artist Marian Kołodziej. He

proceeded to pray in silence in the cell of St. Maksymilian Kolbe, and then out loud in Latin:

“St. Maksymilian Kolbe, pray for us, all saint martyrs, pray for us.”

Benedict XVI also visited the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer, where he met with sisters Carmelites. He then rode to Birkenau. There, he walked along the 22 plaques placed in front of the Monument to the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp. He stopped in front of the first one to pray. Heavy rain began falling and a rainbow appeared above the camp, which was widely received as a mystical sign.

The service in Birkenau began with the singing of Psalm 22. Then, prayer intentions were raised in various languages one by one: in Romani by the president of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma; in Russian by archbishop Szymon, the Orthodox archbishop of Łódź and Poznań; in Polish by Metropolitan of Poznań, archbishop Stanisław Gądecki. The intention raised in Hebrew was accompanied by Kaddish, a Jewish prayer for the dead. The president of the board of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland, Piotr Kadłcik, and the Supreme Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, said the prayer. The latter gave a short speech. As he said: “With our prayer, we honour all the Jews murdered here in Auschwitz-Birkenau and in all of Europe occupied by the Nazi Germans.”. He recalled the then threat of genocide in Darfur and emphasised: “we are mourning all the victims of the Nazi tyranny.” He also mentioned the Righteous Among Nations of the World “of whom so many were Poles, who risked their lives and the lives of their families to save Jews and Europe’s soul. (...) May their deeds be remembered forever”, appealed rabbi Schudrich. The bishop of the Warsaw diocese of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, Mieczysław Cieślak, prayed in English.

Benedict XVI said a prayer in German:

“God of peace, You yourself are peace, which no man eager to argue or fight can fathom. Let those who live in agreement remain in peace, and those who are quarrelling come back to the path of reconciliation. Through Christ, our Lord.”

Next, the Pope gave a speech in Italian:

To speak in this place of horror, in this place where unprecedented mass crimes were committed against God and man, is almost impossible - and it is particularly difficult and troubling for a Christian, for a Pope from Germany. In a place like this, words fail; in the end, there can only be a dread silence - a silence

which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this? In silence, then, we bow our heads before the endless line of those who suffered and were put to death here; yet our silence becomes in turn a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation, a plea to the living God never to let this happen again.

Twenty-seven years ago, on 7 June 1979, Pope John Paul II stood in this place. He said: "I come here today as a pilgrim. As you know, I have been here many times. So many times! And many times I have gone down to Maximilian Kolbe's death cell, paused before the wall of death, and walked amid the ruins of the Birkenau ovens. It was impossible for me not to come here as Pope." Pope John Paul came here as a son of that people which, along with the Jewish people, suffered most in this place and, in general, throughout the war. "Six million Poles lost their lives during the Second World War: a fifth of the nation", he reminded us. Here too he solemnly called for respect for human rights and the rights of nations, as his predecessors John XXIII and Paul VI had done before him, and added: "The one who speaks these words is ... the son of a nation which in its history has suffered greatly from others. He says this, not to accuse, but to remember. He speaks in the name of all those nations whose rights are being violated and disregarded ...".

Pope John Paul II came here as a son of the Polish people. I come here today as a son of the German people. For this very reason, I can and must echo his words: I could not fail to come here. I had to come. It is a duty before the truth and the just due of all who suffered here, a duty before God, for me to come here as the successor of Pope John Paul II and as a son of the German people - a son of that people over which a ring of criminals rose to power by false promises of future greatness and the recovery of the nation's honour, prominence and prosperity, but also through terror and intimidation, with the result that our people was used and abused as an instrument of their thirst for destruction and power. Yes, I could not fail to come here. On 7 June 1979 I came as the Archbishop of Munich-Freising, along with many other Bishops who accompanied the Pope, listened to his words and joined in his prayer. In 1980 I came back to this dreadful place with a delegation of German Bishops, appalled by its evil, yet grateful for the fact that above its dark clouds the star of reconciliation had emerged. This is the same reason why I have come here today: to implore the grace of reconciliation - first of all from God, who alone can open and purify our hearts, from the men and women who suffered here, and finally the grace of reconciliation for all those who, at this hour of our history, are suffering in new ways from the power of hatred and the violence which hatred spawns.

How many questions arise in this place! Constantly the question comes up: Where was God in those days? Why was he silent? How could he permit this endless slaughter, this triumph of evil? The words of Psalm 44 come to mind, Israel's lament for its woes: "You have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness ... because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!" (Ps 44:19, 22-26). This cry of anguish, which Israel raised to God in its suffering, at moments of deep distress, is also the cry for help raised by all those who in every age - yesterday, today and tomorrow - suffer for the love of God, for the love of truth and goodness. How many they are, even in our own day!

We cannot peer into God's mysterious plan - we see only piecemeal, and we would be wrong to set ourselves up as judges of God and history. Then we would not be defending man, but only contributing to his downfall. No - when all is said and done, we must continue to cry out humbly yet insistently to God: Rouse yourself! Do not forget mankind, your creature! And our cry to God must also be a cry that pierces our very heart, a cry that awakens within us God's hidden presence - so that his power, the power he has planted in our hearts, will not be buried or choked within us by the mire of selfishness, pusillanimity, indifference or opportunism. Let us cry out to God, with all our hearts, at the present hour, when new misfortunes befall us, when all the forces of darkness seem to issue anew from human hearts: whether it is the abuse of God's name as a means of justifying senseless violence against innocent persons, or the cynicism which refuses to acknowledge God and ridicules faith in him. Let us cry out to God, that he may draw men and women to conversion and help them to see that violence does not bring peace, but only generates more violence - a morass of devastation in which everyone is ultimately the loser. The God in whom we believe is a God of reason - a reason, to be sure, which is not a kind of cold mathematics of the universe, but is one with love and with goodness. We make our prayer to God and we appeal to humanity, that this reason, the logic of love and the recognition of the power of reconciliation and peace, may prevail over the threats arising from irrationalism or from a spurious and godless reason.

The place where we are standing is a place of memory, it is the place of the Shoah. The past is never simply the past. It always has something to say to us; it tells us the paths to take and the paths not to take. Like John Paul II, I have walked alongside the inscriptions in various languages erected in memory of those who died here: inscriptions in Belarusian, Czech, German, French, Greek, Hebrew, Croatian, Italian, Yiddish, Hungarian, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, Romani, Romanian, Slovak, Serbian, Ukrainian, Judaeo-Spanish and English. All these inscriptions speak of human grief, they give us a glimpse of the cynicism of that regime which treated men and women as material objects, and failed to see them as persons embodying the image of God. Some inscriptions are pointed reminders. There is one in Hebrew. The rulers of the Third Reich wanted to crush the entire Jewish people, to cancel it from the register of the peoples of the earth. Thus the words of the Psalm: "We are being killed, accounted as sheep for the slaughter" were fulfilled in a terrifying way. Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid. If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone - to those men, who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world. By destroying Israel, by the Shoah, they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention: faith in the rule of man, the rule of the powerful.

Then there is the inscription in Polish. First and foremost they wanted to eliminate the cultural elite, thus erasing the Polish people as an autonomous historical subject and reducing it, to the extent that it continued to exist, to slavery. Another inscription offering a pointed reminder is the one written in the language of the Sinti and Roma people. Here too, the plan was to wipe out a whole people which lives by migrating among other peoples. They were seen as part of the refuse of world history, in an ideology which valued only the empirically useful; everything else, according to this view, was to be written off as *lebensunwertes Leben* - life unworthy of being lived. There is also the inscription in Russian, which

commemorates the tremendous loss of life endured by the Russian soldiers who combated the Nazi reign of terror; but this inscription also reminds us that their mission had a tragic twofold effect: they set the peoples free from one dictatorship, but the same peoples were thereby subjected to a new one, that of Stalin and the Communist system.

The other inscriptions, written in Europe's many languages, also speak to us of the sufferings of men and women from the whole continent. They would stir our hearts profoundly if we remembered the victims not merely in general, but rather saw the faces of the individual persons who ended up here in this abyss of terror. I felt a deep urge to pause in a particular way before the inscription in German. It evokes the face of Edith Stein, Theresia Benedicta a Cruce: a woman, Jewish and German, who disappeared along with her sister into the black night of the Nazi-German concentration camp; as a Christian and a Jew, she accepted death with her people and for them. The Germans who had been brought to Auschwitz-Birkenau and met their death here were considered as *Abschaum der Nation* - the refuse of the nation. Today we gratefully hail them as witnesses to the truth and goodness which even among our people were not eclipsed. We are grateful to them, because they did not submit to the power of evil, and now they stand before us like lights shining in a dark night. With profound respect and gratitude, then, let us bow our heads before all those who, like the three young men in Babylon facing death in the fiery furnace, could respond: "Only our God can deliver us. But even if he does not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up" (cf. Dan 3:17ff.).

Yes, behind these inscriptions is hidden the fate of countless human beings. They jar our memory, they touch our hearts. They have no desire to instil hatred in us: instead, they show us the terrifying effect of hatred. Their desire is to help our reason to see evil as evil and to reject it; their desire is to enkindle in us the courage to do good and to resist evil. They want to make us feel the sentiments expressed in the words that Sophocles placed on the lips of Antigone, as she contemplated the horror all around her: my nature is not to join in hate but to join in love.

By God's grace, together with the purification of memory demanded by this place of horror, a number of initiatives have sprung up with the aim of imposing a limit upon evil and confirming goodness. Just now I was able to bless the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer. In the immediate neighbourhood the Carmelite nuns carry on their life of hiddenness, knowing that they are united in a special way to the mystery of Christ's Cross and reminding us of the faith of Christians, which declares that God himself descended into the hell of suffering and suffers with us. In Oświęcim is the Centre of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, and the International Centre for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust. There is also the International House for Meetings of Young people. Near one of the old Prayer Houses is the Jewish Centre. Finally the Academy for Human Rights is presently being established. So there is hope that this place of horror will gradually become a place for constructive thinking, and that remembrance will foster resistance to evil and the triumph of love.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau humanity walked through a "valley of darkness". And so, here in this place, I would like to end with a prayer of trust - with one of the Psalms of Israel which is also a prayer of Christians: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me ... I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long" (Ps 23:1-4, 6).

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