



The Holy See

DISCORSO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II

AL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA POLACCA

S.E. IL SIGNOR LECH WAŁĘSA* *Martedì, 5 febbraio 1991* Honourable Mister President, 1. I cordially welcome you, the President of the Third Republic of Poland, my fellow countryman, to the papal residence. I also greet your wife, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and all those individuals accompanying you. Even if I were to speak at length, I would not be able to express at this time what I feel and what I would like to say to you, Mister President, and through you to my entire Nation. It is my earnest desire, therefore, that this talk have as a background all that I have said to and about Poland during my twelve year pontificate, in addition to what I have said or written as a priest and bishop before I was called to the Roman See of St Peter. I also wish that what the Apostolic See has said or done for centuries, what the Church in Poland has said or done, may serve as background for this talk. It is certainly not a matter of rhetoric but of the existence of a Nation that enjoyed periods of grandeur as well as periods when its neighbours condemned it to death, at times through its own fault; it is a question of the existence of a Nation which, thanks to its faith in Christ and awareness of its own dignity and identity, not only endured but also has a permanent place in the formation of the culture and civilization of the contemporary world. 2. Mister President, this is a historic moment. This visit is historic as was your visit to the Vatican in January 1981 when I greeted you as the President of the Independent and Autonomous Union 'Solidarity', which then led the working people and those who valued their own dignity, the dignity of the person and that of the Nation and also of freedom and the sovereignty of our homeland. That courage, that determination, that desire and, we can plainly say, that prayer achieved results. Today you are visiting the Vatican as the President of the new Republic of Poland. It is fitting to remember all those who, in various places and circumstances fought for this cause, who suffered and died for it. May Christ receive them and may the living not forget the blood they shed nor their sacrifices. 3. As the representative of 38 million countrymen, elected for the first time – after a long interval – in a free and democratic election, you chose to direct your first steps «beyond the borders» to the tomb of St Peter and to his Successor. It is, as it were, the pilgrimage of the President of a Christian Nation to the beginning of its history. Let me add that today's visit, coming as it does at the beginning of the mission entrusted to you by the Nation, is also the first visit of a President of Poland since it regained independence in 1918. Thus we find ourselves in the wake of the most profound processes that formed our Nation and were present at the foundation of its history. Today's historic day is an answer to the entire logic of Poland's history from the dawn of its beginnings up to our times. The facts are known and recorded in many documents and books. Above all, though, they live and bear fruit in the contemporary person and in contemporary society. Our generation is not only a witness but, above all, the subject of its own history. 4. From its very beginnings Poland was closely associated with the See of St Peter. Prince Mieszko I, having decided in 966 to have the Nation baptized, inserted our history into the stream of salvation history and bonded the country of the Polans with western Christian culture, at the same time making it a member of the great community of the Catholic Church. More than 10 years later this sovereign

entrusted his people and his lands, together with the capital in Gniezno and its environs, to the care of St Peter. The mysterious document *Dagome iudex* informs us of this fact. The sovereign of Poland did this because he perceived that Christian values would guarantee the birth of the State and the future destiny of our homeland. This bond with the Apostolic See, which became the advocate of the royal crown of the Piast dynasty, was our Nation's irreplaceable moral support in the midst of changing conditions. From the dawn of history Poland sought the light of the Gospel in Rome and soon began evangelizing others and became the defender of Christianity and of Europe and its culture from the invasion of alien peoples, which earned it the honourable title of «bulwark of Christianity», «antemurale christianitatis». Against this background we are not surprised at the prophetic gesture of King John Casimir who, when entrusting our Nation and its people to the patronage of Our Lady, proclaimed her the Queen of Poland. His example and intuition of faith have had specific results in our times. Our ancestors often abused the freedom which degenerated into licence and brought bondage. That is how the partition of Poland came about. But even then the relics of St Stanislaus in the Cathedral of Wawel spoke of unity, of Poland. It was due to them that we did not forget our past, that we did not cease yearning for an honourable future. Let us also not forget that Poland regained its independence in November 1918 and that as early as March the Holy Father sent his representative to Poland. In this context it is worth noting that there was already a permanent representative of the Holy See in Poland in 1555 and that the Nunciature in Poland is among the oldest in Europe. I shall also recall the sufferings and the tragedy of World War II and its consequences. Our country was devastated and attempts were made to destroy our Nation, to deprive it of its spirit, of its faith, of its identity, to reduce it to slavery. This tragedy showed, however, how unparalleled was the determination of the millions of citizens of the Republic in the struggle for their own dignity and freedom, for the famous «your liberty and ours». In the letter to the Polish Bishops' Conference on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, I wrote: «This determination to defend the independence of the State accompanied the sons and daughters of our Nation not only in the occupied country, but throughout the world, wherever Poles struggle for their own freedom and that of others... Throughout the war, the Polish people fulfilled completely, even extravagantly, its obligations as an ally and paid the highest price for 'our liberty and yours'» (n. 2). Poland never betrayed Europe: It felt responsible for the European community of nations. From it Poland expected help but also knew how to die for it.⁵ After this terrible tragedy came another – and this was to be the basis for the order of postwar – the decision of the Yalta Conference which can be rightly termed the «destruction of victory». Poland and other countries experienced great pain at the decisions of this Conference, our Nation never agreed to them and did not succumb to the ideology and totalitarianism imposed on it. Pope Pius XII expressed his sorrow on this account in the famous radio speech: «The inevitable consequence of this state of affairs is the breaking up of humanity into powerful and opposed groups whose superior right to life and action is the basic and insurmountable distrust that at the same time became the tragic paradox and curse of our times.... «By this same fact arises a gigantic wall that baffles all efforts to return the blessings of true peace to a shaken humanity» (1947 Christmas Eve message). In these circumstances our Nation defended its dignity and rights with enormous hardship and at the cost of great sacrifice which, against the background of the war sacrifices, took on still more formidable dimensions. We recall here the sacrifices and tears of Polish men and women, those who fought for a free Poland: labourers, people of culture, priests, men and women religious, those who nourish and defend everyone. Their symbol will always remain Polish «Solidarity», Father Jerzy the crosses in Gdansk and you too, Mister President. May the world not forget that it was really the workers who played the principal role in overthrowing the system which was supposed to defend them and identify with their interests. Everything was achieved in the spirit of the Gospel, without violence and force, without a war and revolution, in mutual dialogue and with a sense of responsibility. The face of the new Europe, the common European home, began to be formed in Poland, through «Solidarity» and no event can conceal this fact. At the

present time a new order is being formed in our homeland. It is being formed, not without difficulties and tensions, prejudice and differences of opinion. Our countrymen face the difficult task of reconstructing what has been destroyed and rebuilding on what is noble and valuable. All Poles ought to unite now in a common thrust around that «day that our Lord prepared for them» (cf. Ps 117/118:24), forget that which could divide and seek that which unites. Today our homeland needs, as it did in other dramatic moments, a particular unity and co operation a sense of responsibility and of creative dialogue. These are the words of an inspired poet: «Let everyone give his talents to the homeland, like an offering in a money box, secretly, without saying how much he deposited. The time will come when the money box will be full and God will write down how much each one offered» (A. Mickiewicz: Books of the Polish Nation and its Pilgrimage). Today Poland also needs understanding and effective co operation from wealthy nations. The problem of the external debt should also be treated in the spirit of international solidarity and in the light of the Church's social teaching, all the more so because after the war Poland was not able to benefit from the aid which the majority of Western societies enjoyed.

6. Honourable Mister President, The way of the Church is always the person, «man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being.... This man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: He is the primary and fundamental way for the Church» (Redemptor Hominis, n. 14). That is why the Church is very concerned that human rights be respected in each country and society, including the right to life from the moment of conception to natural death, and the right to growth in accord with human dignity. The Church and State meet in the person so that, by harmonious co-operation, they may help people attain their temporal and transcendent goal. This co-operation may take on the character of spontaneous contacts, but it can also be regulated only through juridical acts determined by both parties. The Church in Poland has already proved many times in recent years and months that the affairs of the Nation are its most important concern. She suffered with the Nation and was the guardian of the greatest moral values. She proclaimed the Gospel, defended people and upheld the Nation's traditions. She brought the optimism of faith into everyday life and was concerned about mankind and its future. This availability of the Church always remains the same. She continues to want to eliminate by means of joint strength, the negative consequences of the defeated system; she desires to support and promote all that is true, good and beautiful in Polish society to strengthen human solidarity and imbue everyday life with the Gospel. In the struggle with the difficulties and with what remains from the past, the Church desires to co-operate with all people of good will.

7. Mister President, You have the enormous and difficult task of leading the Nation in these demanding times, together with the Parliament, Government, its institutions and all the citizens of Poland. In your New Year's speech you said that scarcely a few days of assuming the presidency sufficed to make you feel the weight of the tasks but you added that «we have enough strength, enough faith and potential to transform Poland. Together we will build a new economic order.... We are capable of accomplishing much.... May God bless our struggles». The difficult task of rebuilding Poland fell to you – together with the entire Nation – and this under various aspects, because the crisis has touched morality, economics and politics, in Short, it has touched man. Today we see clearly that each generation must resolve with courage and wisdom the problems of its own times, that it may not burden future generations with them. The problems of Poland weigh heavily on my heart in these crucial times, and especially as my fourth apostolic pilgrimage to Poland approaches – to a new and democratic Poland. I express this at every occasion, and particularly during the Wednesday audiences when I address my compatriots, praying with them and for them, and reminding them of the Gospel tenets by which everyone ought to be governed in order to assure prosperity to our homeland. It is in this spirit that I express through you, Mr. President, my good wishes to all the women and men of Poland irrespective of their creed or their world outlook. May fidelity to God and to the best traditions and love of our homeland be the light and guide in all their decisions. May concern for its welfare foster wise initiatives, may the necessary unity develop nobly in pluralism. We know that these belong to the good

traditions of the past. The words of King Zygmund August continue to be true: «I am not the lord of your consciences», as do the contents of the inscription in one of the rooms of the Jagiellonian University: «Plus ratio quam vis». It would be a great offense if some person or group were to seek its own interests, especially now when the organism of the Republic is so weak. In their actions may concern for the common good serve as a light to all Poles, the common good which all ought to pursue in a spirit of sincerity, openness, with moral and political courage, to the benefit of our homeland and the entire human family. You as President, called to this position by the Nation, personify all these things in a special way. You will certainly do everything you can to be the President of all the Polish people. It is also necessary for Poland to do everything possible to show that it is a homeland to its sons and daughters who, either for many years or in the last few years, have lived beyond its borders. May God help you, Mister President. May God help you and all my

countrymen.

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