*POLAND, HOPE FOR EUROPE*

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May it please Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Prime Minister Wiktor Orban, His Eminence Gerhard Cardinal Muller and other distinguished guests; it is a privilege to participate in this conference celebrating the 100th anniversary of Poland’s independence and the 40th anniversary of the election of St. John Paul II to the See of Peter.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer reflections on the theme, “Poland, Hope for Europe” in the context of the re-evangelization of Europe. And thank you for the initiative of this conference, in this place.

In 2005, after consultation with St. John Paul II, the Knights of Columbus began activities in Poland not only because many Polish-Americans are active in the Knights of Columbus, but because of the importance Poland has in the renewal of Christianity in our time.

In coming to Poland our reference point has been St John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa.* This document, perhaps more than any other, sets out clear principles for ways to reverse what St. John Paul II described as Europe’s “silent apostasy” (no. 9).

It remains a sure roadmap for the re-evangelization of Europe.

In preparing what I would say to today, I read again what St. John Paul II said to Polish-Americans in 1987. He spoke of the task facing “Polonia” within the “diversity of peoples, races and cultures” that make up America. He told Polish-Americans that their contribution to American society would be best served by the way in which they preserved their own Polish identity. He spoke of the need for further “growth in awareness and maturity in Polonia itself.”

He offered this advice: “the more you are aware of your identity, your spirituality, your history, and the Christian culture out of which … you have grown, the more you will be able to serve your country (and) the more capable will you be of contributing to the common good” (Sept. 19, 1987).

St. John Paul II refused to accept the proposition that integration into society should be bought at the price of surrender of one’s identity.

He took up a similar theme at the United Nations in 1995.

There, he spoke about nationalism and “the essential difference between an unhealthy form of nationalism, which teaches contempt for other nations or cultures, and patriotism, which is a proper love of one’s country.”

But just as there are limits on nationalism, there are also limits he said on nations acting in community.

“No one—neither a State nor another nation, nor an international organization,” he insisted, “is ever justified in asserting that an individual nation is not worthy of existence.”

“Every nation,” he said, “enjoys the right to its own … culture, through which a people expresses and promotes … its fundamental spiritual ‘sovereignty’.”

And every nation has the right “to shape its life according to its own traditions.”

Today, his 1995 address to the United Nations is remembered most of all for his suggestion that the organization rise above simply being an administrative institution” and instead become a “family of nations.”

But what is not as well remembered is the condition, which he said is necessary for this transformation to occur. He said there must be “a moral center” reflecting mutual trust, support and respect. And that it must respect the “spiritual dimension of the human experience”—to ignore that would harm the cause of freedom.

If we apply St. John Paul II’s criteria to the situation of Europe today, do we not find similar challenges?

In what way would we say there is a “moral center” in Europe today? And in what way would we say Europe safeguards the “spiritual dimension of the human experience?”

As we celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the election of St. John Paul II, we are sure to recall words from his first homily: “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ alone knows ‘what is in man’. He alone knows it” (Oct. 22, 1978).

Many of us who heard these words on that day looked to the East. We hoped that the new pope was speaking directly to *and for* those living behind the Iron Curtain.

A decade earlier, at the Fifth Congress of the Polish United Workers’ Party, Leonid Brezhnev had announced that challenges to Soviet hegemony within the Warsaw Pact would not be tolerated—and, if necessary, would be met with force as the Soviets had done that year during the Prague Spring.

With the United States focused on the deteriorating war in Vietnam it seemed as though the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine would stand unchallenged.

Yet, only three years after the election of John Paul II, the doctrine *was* challenged during the Polish crisis of 1980-1981 and finally overturned in 1989 as Solidarity defeated the same Polish United Workers’ Party that Brezhnev had addressed 20 years earlier.

From the perspective of four decades, we could say that St. John Paul II had on the very first day of his pontificate announced a new “doctrine” of his own.

As Brezhnev had sought to close doors to outside influences, John Paul II sought to open them to the Gospel—thus ushering in a new era of missionary discipleship—an era that he would personally lead in 104 trips to countries throughout the world.

In 1978, no one could have expected the Miracle of 1989 and what would follow.

Today, his words challenge us to look west.

Seventy years ago, the British historian Christopher Dawson wrote, “We are faced with a spiritual conflict of the most acute kind, a sort of social schizophrenia which divides the soul of society (where) religious faith (has) no power to influence human life. There must be,” he urged, “a return to unity—a spiritual integration of culture—if mankind is to survive” (Religion and Culture, p. 217).

He warned that when, “the existing synthesis of religion and culture is discredited, the dynamic forces of religion are … seen as a dead weight of empty forms and superstitions which crushes down the human spirit” (*ibid.*).

In some countries in Europe this process is nearly complete.

In others, it continues by what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

He described the intellectual forefathers of Europe’s secular culture: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the “Masters of Suspicion” for the way they put Christianity on trial (*Freud and Philosophy*, p. 32).

If religion and especially Christianity is seen as the opium of the people as described by Marx or the product of a slave mentality as asserted by Nietzsche or as resulting from mental illness according to Freud, then Christianity becomes something more than just “a dead weight of empty forms.”

Christianity becomes something much more dangerous—it threatens the exercise of freedom, the pursuit of happiness and human flourishing.

This *inner dynamic* of contemporary atheism seeks not only to limit the role of Christianity in society, but to marginalize Christianity until it ultimately disappears.

The “social schizophrenia” of which Dawson wrote is already being resolved throughout much of Europe by a rejection of Christianity.

The question for Poland is whether there will remain room in Europe for Poland’s “spiritual sovereignty” and religious tradition.

In his 1979 homily during the Mass in Victory Square, St. John Paul II said that, “It is … impossible without Christ to understand the history of the Polish nation.”

But will the same be said of Poland’s future?

Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that Christianity grows not by imposition, but by attraction. Those whose lives have been changed by faith live differently—and people should be able to see the difference.

For two millennia this has been the attractiveness of Christianity.

In 1882, Frederick Nietzsche wrote his famous phrase, “God is dead.”

The same year a young parish priest in the United States founded the Knights of Columbus in the basement of his church.

I have often thought how appropriate it was for a parish priest to answer Nietzsche in this way. He did not write a book. Instead, he opened a way for millions of men to demonstrate that Christianity has made a difference in their lives by expressing the Christian virtues of charity, unity and fraternity.

Poland can offer new hope for Europe, if Poland remains determined to defend its own spiritual sovereignty. In the past, this sovereignty has been maintained at enormous cost.

In *Forefathers’ Eve,* Adam Mickiewicz writes, “For half a century now, Poland has been the scene of such ceaseless unflagging, inexorable cruelty at the hands of the tyrants who oppress Her, and such illimitable devotion and endurance on the part of Her suffering peoples as the world has not seen since the days of the persecuted Christians” (p.171).

What so impressed me about this passage is that while it could have been written about any number of situations in Poland during the twentieth century, it was written by Mickiewicz in *1832.*

Addressing the question of the future of the Church, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote, ”What we really need are people who are inwardly seized by Christianity.” (*Salt of the Earth,* p. 269).

We might say that the history of Poland is the history of a nation “inwardly seized by Christianity.”

In his address to Polish-Americans, St. John Paul II quoted Stanislaw Wyspianski, “There are so many strengths in the nation…. Make us feel the strength” (*Liberation*).

The strengths by which men and women live their lives cannot be imposed from outside, but they can be destroyed from outside.

Next month we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of modern Poland’s independence. May it also be a time to celebrate a renewed dedication to Poland’s spiritual sovereignty.

If we do, then we may well see the future of Europe shaped more and more by the Poland of the future.

Then with St. John Paul II we may say, “Make us feel the strength.”

Thank you.