



# Encounters "On the Way Toward the One Who Is Coming" 9th Day of Judaism in the Church in Poland

31.05.2006 | Reder, Violetta

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[Violetta Reder](#)

The Day of Judaism in the Church in Poland is a pioneer initiative of the Polish Episcopacy, initiated in the context of the Jubilee Year in 1998. A similar one has been taken up by the Churches in Italy and Austria. In Poland, the feast falls on January 17<sup>th</sup> – a day before the start of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This is "time devoted to special prayer and reflection on the mystery of the bonds between Christianity and Judaism" (Abp S. G?decki, 2003). In accordance with the spirit of the contemporary teaching of the Catholic Church, its aim is for the Christians to get knowledge of the People of God's First Election, whose members were Jesus and His Mother, the Apostles and the primeval Church.

## Closer and Closer to Celebrating the Day of Judaism in Parishes

### Diocesan Celebrations

This year, the Day had the motto: "On the Way toward the One Who is Coming" (Card. Joseph Ratzinger). The main celebration in Kielce (14-20 January, 2006) was accompanied by local events – in Pozna?, Wroc?aw, Lublin, Kraków (with local bishops presiding over the prayer), P?ock or Pi?czów. The programme variety of the Kielce event consisted of a Mass with prayer for Jews, biblical service with Jews and Christians of different denominations, Jewish evening prayer, Maariv, a dialogue of Jewish and Christian voices on various religious topics, witness of the famous Holocaust survivor – Rev. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel (cf the film *The Cross Inscribed in the Star of David*), promotions of books, photo exhibitions and Klezmer music concerts, March of Remembrance and Prayer, and the main guests meeting with young people at secondary schools. Among the guests of the main celebrations in Kielce, there were the representatives of the local government and of the Israeli Embassy in Warsaw, among the speakers there were both sides of the dialogue in Poland: Abp Stanis?aw G?decki, President of the Polish Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, and Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of the Polish Republic, and both Presidents of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews – Rev. Micha? Czajkowski and Stanis?aw Krajewski.

The Poznań programme (10-18 January, 2006), on the one hand, offered a theological symposium entitled "Drawing on the Root of the Good Olive", with an eminent Polish theologian, Rev. Prof. Tomasz Węcowski lecturing, and on the other hand, it was abounding with theatre spectacles, workshops devoted to Jewish dance and to Jewish cuisine. A famous Jewish writer, Hanna Krall, was the guest of the Day of Judaism in the Lublin Archdiocese, which, as usual, took place in the theological seminary. The local bishop, Abp Józef Zyciński, addressed a pastoral letter to the faithful on this occasion. The offer of the Day in Wrocław included: prayer in dialogue, including a dialogue of choirs – the local synagogue choir and a Dominican schola – and a lecture on Jewish roots of the Christian liturgy by Rev. Prof. Michał Czajkowski.

#### **Pińczów – celebrating the Day of Judaism in a parish**

It is an exhilarating news that the Day was also celebrated in a parish Church of the small Pińczów, a town famous for a relatively big Jewish population before the WW II ("as many Jews as in Pińczów..." – 60 % of the general population). On Sunday, January 15, after each Mass in the Parish of St John the Evangelist in Pińczów, the first Reading from the Hebrew Bible was commented by a Jewish lawyer from Chicago and Warsaw, Michael Traison, author of the project of awarding Polish people who save the memory of Jews. This testifies to the fact that the parish priest has a remarkable sense of the Day of Judaism, which in its presuppositions should be as much local and universal in character as possible – and not only the feast, but the very relations with our Elder Brethren in faith, whose religion is not some outer reality, but something very much at the heart of Christianity (cf John Paul II, Major Synagogue in Rome, 13 April, 1986).

### **In Kraków – Prayer and Talks about the Cooperation of Christians and Jews**

#### **John Paul II – the Pope of Christians and Jews**

In the Church of Kraków, the Day of Judaism was organized by the Ecumenical Department of the Kraków Archdiocese acting through the Interfaculty Institute of Dialogue and Ecumenism at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków. The celebrations covered two days: on Sunday, January 15, a traditional trip following the traces of Judaism in the Jewish district of Kazimierz took place, guided by the director of the "Old Synagogue" Historical Museum of Kraków, Eugeniusz Duda. On Tuesday, January 17, the Kraków Metropolitan, Abp Stanisław Dziwisz, presided over a biblical service and prayer for Jews in the Franciscan Basilica. The service was joined by many representatives of the local Jewish community. In his homily, the new Archbishop of Kraków mentioned the merits of John Paul II for the Christian-Jewish dialogue and the continuation of this line by Benedict XVI. He prayed that the 700 years' old community of Krakow Jews "might live in peace and find strength and means to keep the tradition which was many centuries old and always vivid". It was a long and warm welcome that the Bishop of Kraków gave to the president of the Jewish community in Kraków, Tadeusz Jakubowicz, who in his short speech emphasized: "John Paul II was our pope", ie, also the pope of Jews.

#### **The Rabbi of Kraków: without mutual dialogue our communities cannot develop**

After the service, the participants met at the Pontifical Academy of Theology, where they were addressed by the rabbi of the Jewish community in Kraków.

Awram Flaks, 38, came to Kraków three months before. He had been brought up in the land of Tolstoy, but had been living in Israel for 14 years, where he attained philosophical and sociological education at the Hebrew University and rabbinical education at the Jerusalem jeshivas. He is open and warm in contact, appreciated by all who deal with him. In his short speech, rabbi Flaks said he had no doubts that without Jewish-Christian dialogue neither Jews nor Christians could exist or develop normally. True dialogue does not evade difficult issues associated with the history of mutual relations. It is based on mutual respect and it enriches both religions. The rabbi denied the

stereotype which holds that it is easier for non-believers to meet each other. Quite the contrary, faith in God who created the world and manages it forms a broad basis of the Jewish-Christian dialogue just as the basic commandment to help all people irrespective of their confession, which is common for both the religions, does. There is always an occasion for such activity, and it makes both communities contribute not only into the development of the country, but also the whole mankind.

#### **What are we doing together? Voices of the witnesses of the dialogue**

The aim of the meeting at the Pontifical Academy was a panel discussion on the cooperation of Christians and Jews. The meeting was conducted by Janusz Poniewierski, a known journalist of the „Znak” monthly, which is much merited for the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

#### ***Dorota – an activist of the Polish Union of Jewish Students***

Dorota Szymborska-Dyrda, a member of the progressive Jewish community in Warsaw and of the Polish Union of Jewish Students, showed herself to the public with her two years' old son, Janek. She shared her concern for her son to grow up in a tolerant environment. This is why she participates in the workshops on Judaism and Holocaust, organized by PUJS at secondary schools all over Poland. During their summer camps, when they put Jewish cemeteries in order in small Polish localities, the members also meet with the local population. PUJZ consists not only of Jewish youth, but also friends of the organization. According to Dorota, the Days of Judaism in the Church of Poland play an important role in both communities getting closer to each other. She thinks that Jews should be active in answering the challenges of the dialogue and, eg, organize a workshop on Christianity.

#### ***Katarzyna – a secondary school teacher***

Katarzyna Bober, a teacher of the Nicolas Copernicus Secondary School (No 9) in Lublin, came to the panel discussion with a schoolgirl. At the meeting, she read out a moving letter of their school director, Zofia Bielecka. They have participated in a school exchange with two cities in Israel for several years. This results from the changes in the programme of the yearly school trips to the places of the Holocaust – now their meaning goes beyond just an encounter with the martyrdom and enormous cemetery of their forefathers: the aim is also for the Israeli visitors to meet with the Polish youth. The desire to show respect and love makes both follow the sensitivity of the partner: in order to honour their Israeli guests, the Lublin school prepared an exhibition on the Holy Land which did not emphasize the Christian character of the place but what was common for Jews and Christians. The guests were surprised by the youth from Lublin singing the prayer for peace: *Hawenu szalom alechem*. The delegation from the Israeli school behaved in a similar way: they brought an album about Christian holy sites as a present for the Polish youth, and when in Israel, they took them to all places connected with Jesus. They always try to show as much love to each other as possible. The conviction of the guests coming to Poland from Israel is that Jews died in the Holocaust because of Polish anti-Semitism. By accompanying the Israeli youth in their trip to death camps, the Polish could experience that empathy melted the hearts of those who had had distrust before.

#### ***Maria – a schoolgirl***

She chose that school following the footsteps of her elder sister as she wanted to take part in the cooperation with the Israeli schools. Maria <sup>Opina</sup> has experienced that God can deduce good out of evil, that the past not only divides, but it can also unite people. Did not the forefathers of both Israeli and Polish youth die in Auschwitz, including also Maria's grandfather?! At the meeting, she said: “both the youth groups were prepared for a nasty atmosphere, that the other side would be a little hostile and distrustful or talk only about their murdered families, or discuss religious issues –

none of them expected that the atmosphere would be so wonderful, that they would deal with normal young people". "In the course of several years, we managed to break a lot of stereotypes and animosities, and to build really strong foundations for a common house, which we wish to continue building", wrote Zofia Bielecka.

***Agnieszka – a theologian and a specialist in religious studies***

Agnieszka Piskozub-Piwosz, theology undergraduate of the Pontifical Academy of Theology and undergraduate in religious studies of the Jagellonian University, presented the story of her spiritual itinerary, which she called conversion to interreligious relations. Formerly, she did not believe that theology could combine with openness to other religions. While studying she came to the conclusion that theology made sense only when possible to reconcile with life. Owing to her Scripture reading, she became interested in Judaism: "you cannot be a Christian without referring to Israel". She took part in two international Christian-Jewish seminars, inspired and wonderfully guided by rabbi Michael Signer. One of them, entitled *Building toward the Future*, was organized at the Pontifical Academy in Kraków, and the other, *Memory and Reconciliation*, took place in Nuremburg.

It was a stark experience to see that all the ethnical groups participating – Jews, Poles and Germans – had deep sores as a result of the World War II. These meetings falsified the current notion of dialogue: they meant rather talking on difficult issues than some kind of diplomacy. To be true, "documents will not make up for anything" – but even the revolutionary documents of Vatican concerning the Christian-Jewish relations are not known to theologians. Although they have been published since the Vatican Council II, Agnieszka could not hear about Jews in all her religious education. As a catechist-to-be, she would like to "transpose these studies and these meetings with Jews into life and teaching".

***Manfred – a German priest in Oświęcim (Auschwitz)***

Rev. Manfred Deselaers, a German lecturer at the Pontifical Academy of Theology, is a famous employee and *spiritus movens* of the Centre of Dialogue and Prayer in Oświęcim (Auschwitz), laureate of the award granted by the Polish Council of Christians and Jews as Man of Reconciliation 2000. For the first time, he visited Auschwitz with the German movement *Sign of Penance*, when he was preparing for work in Israel as a substitute for his military service in Germany. At that time, he experienced a shock of being a German... This experience was enhanced in Israel, where he met people with very difficult stories. Hope against hope became the subject-matter of his life. He decided to be a theologian and took up studies at the University in Tübingen. His repeated contacts with Poland had also impact on his further life. In the Poland of the 1980's Manfred was impressed by the courage of the Polish people confronting the Soviet threat, and by their non-violent transformation of the political system. When the Centre of Dialogue and Prayer in Auschwitz came into existence, he started organizing meetings of theologians and rabbis who wanted to learn to listen to one another. This group gave rise to an initiative called *At the Verge of Auschwitz*, workshops attended by theologians and rabbis from the USA, Germany, Israel and Poland together with their students. They discovered what united them all, ie, the faith – which Christianity has from Judaism – in the good and invincible Creator Who is shaping His creatures with love. One must witness to this faith, especially "at the verge of Auschwitz", where the evil was not able to conquer either God or human dignity that comes from God. It is Fr Manfred's dream to build up a milieu of people who live by that truth and by that faith – so that the world may learn about it.

**Dialogue and everyday life**

Stefan Wilkanowicz, the eminent Polish Catholic journalist, editor-in-chief of the *Znak* monthly in 1978-1994, emphasized the importance of using the knowledge of what is tragic in history – the

importance of the memory of Auschwitz – for the benefit of the contemporary people. He gave an example of the initiative of the Arab priest, Emil Shoufani, who, in 2003, brought 500 Jews and Palestinians to the camp in Birkenau from the Holy Land torn by conflicts. While passing the camp, the Jews and the Palestinians by turn read out the names of the victims murdered at that place. At present, the interreligious dialogue, and especially the triologue of Abrahamic religions, is not a home affair of the religions involved, but a critical need of the whole humanity, which is undergoing a crisis, emphasized Mr Wilkanowicz.

Simplicity and immediacy of the testimonies, the speakers being common people and their representing several generations, together with the strong emotional load of the issues touched made the atmosphere very moving to the participants of the Day of Judaism in Kraków, who over the years got used to professional academic lectures at this place on this occasion. This passing from the newness of the beginnings to the newness of the fruit was summed up by the host: "I have an impression that I find myself in a nursery-wood, and I can watch the wood growing". Referring to the motto of the Day, Janusz Poniewierski reminded the audience of the Jewish conviction: the Messiah will come if the Covenant is fulfilled by all Jews, ie, if they take care of the foreigner, orphan and widow. At the same time, the Gospel says: if the Messiah comes, He will ask if we took care of the hungry, thirsty, sick or imprisoned. Preparing the way for the One Who is coming takes place in everyday reality – and the work that there is to be done is within a hand's reach, said Janusz Poniewierski.

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