Polish Catholic Bishops - Pastoral Letter

30.01.1991 | Polish Catholic Bishops

It was read in all Catholic churches January 1991, deals with the relationship of Polish Jews and Catholics.

Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops in Poland

In January 1991 the Catholic Bishops in Poland wrote this pastoral letter on Jewish-Christian relations, to be read out in every church in the country. Many Jews still have dark memories of Poland and the document is both courageous and very significant. It reflects a moving development in Catholic-Jewish relations, particularly in Warsaw, where there has been great progress.

We Poles have had particular ties with the Jewish people from the first centuries of our history. Poland became for many Jews a second fatherland. The majority of Jews living in the world today are by origin from the territories of the previous and current Polish Commonwealth. Tragically, in our century this particular land became the grave for millions of Jews. Not by our wish, and not by our hands. Here is what Our Holy Father said recently, on 26 September of this year, about our common history. "There is still one other nation, one particular people: the people of the Patriarchs, of Moses, and the Prophets, the inheritors of the faith of Abraham... This people lived side by side with us for generations, on the same land, which became, as it were, a new fatherland of their diaspora. This people underwent the terrible death of millions of their sons and daughters. At first they were stigmatised in a particular way. Later, they were pushed into the ghetto in separate neighbourhoods. Then they were taken to the gas-chambers, and put to death -- simply because they were children of this people. Murderers did this on our land -perhaps in order to dishonour it. One cannot dishonour a land by the death of innocent victims. Through such death a land becomes a sacred relic." (To Polish pilgrims during General Audience, 26 September 1990).

During his historic meeting in 1987 with the few Jews living in Poland, in Warsaw, the Holy Father said, "Be assured, dear brothers, that the Poles, this Church in Poland, who saw at

close range the ignoble reality of the ruthless annihilation of your people, planned and carried out, commiserated in a spirit of deep solidarity with you. Your danger was our danger. Our danger did not reach the same extent, there was not time for it to reach the same extent. That awful sacrifice of destruction you bore, one might say, you bore it for others, who were also slated for annihilation".

Many Poles saved Jews during the last war. Hundreds, if not thousands paid for this with their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. For each of the Jews there was a whole chain of hearts of people of good will and helping hands. The express testimony of that help to Jews in the years of the Hitler occupation are many trees dedicated to Poles in the Place of national memory, Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem

with the honoured title, "Righteous Gentiles" given to many Poles. But in spite of so many heroic examples of help on the part of Polish Christians, there were also people who remained indifferent to this incomprehensible tragedy. We are especially disheartened by those among the Catholics who in some way were the cause of death of Jews.

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They will forever gnaw at our conscience on the social plane. If only one Christian could have helped and did not stretch out a helping hand to a Jew during the time of danger or caused his death, we must ask for forgiveness of our Jewish brothers and sisters. We are aware that many of our compatriots still remember the injustices and injuries committed by the post-war Communist authorities, in which people of Jewish origin also took part. We must acknowledge, however, that the source of inspiration of their activity was clearly neither their origin nor religion but the Communist ideology, from which the Jews themselves, in fact, suffered many injustices.

Regret and sorrow

We express our sincere regret for all the incidents of anti-Semitism which were committed at any time or by anyone on Polish soil. We do this with the deep conviction that all incidents of anti-Semitism are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and -- as Pope John Paul II recently emphasised -- "remain opposed to the Christian vision of human dignity" John Paul II, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the war).

In expressing our sorrow for all the injustices and harm done to Jews, we cannot forget that we consider untrue and deeply harmful the use by many of the concept of what is called Polish anti-Semitism, as an especially threatening form of that anti-Semitism; and in addition, frequently connecting the concentration camps not with those who were actually involved with them but with Poles in a Poland occupied by the Germans. Speaking of the unprecedented extermination of Jews, one cannot forget and even less pass over in silence the fact that the Poles as a nation were one of the first victims of the same criminal racist ideology of Hitler"s Nazism.

The same land, which for centuries was the common fatherland of Poles and Jews, of blood spilled together, the sea of horrific suffering and of injuries shared, should not divide us but unite us. For this commonality cries out to us, especially the places of execution and, in many cases, common graves.

United

We, Christians and Jews, are also united in our belief in one God, the Creator and Lord of the entire universe, who created man in His image and likeness. We are united by the commonly accepted ethical principles included in the Ten Commandments, crowned by the love of God and neighbour. We are united in our respect for the biblical books of the Old Testament as the Word of God and by common traditions of prayer. Lastly, we are united in the common hope of the final coming of the Reign of God. Together we await the Messiah, the saviour, although we, believing that he is Jesus Christ of Nazareth, await not his first but his final coming, no more in the poverty of the manger in Bethlehem, but in power and glory.

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