



'Religions and Ideologies, Polish Perspectives and beyond.'

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Lecture by Rev. Dr. Manfred Deselaers
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Center for Dialogue and Prayer

After Auschwitz a culture of listening

We are in Oświęcim, not in Auschwitz. Oświęcim is a Polish city but from 1939 to 1945 it was occupied and incorporated into the German Reich and called Auschwitz. In that city the concentration camp system and the mass murder was organised. Auschwitz therefore was in Germany, not in Poland.

There is no Auschwitz any more, thanks be to God. Nobody gets terrorised, dehumanised, killed here anymore. There is only Oświęcim in Poland and it is becoming more and more a real city of peace.

The memory of Auschwitz however is here, and it is very alive. It is not a closed chapter of past history which has nothing to do with us anymore. It touches us still today very deeply. This is why most people come to Auschwitz, not to Oświęcim.

Listen to the voice of this soil. KNOWLEDGE

We need to know the facts. What was Auschwitz and what are we to remember? It is not easy to comprehend. The essentials are not visible. We see ruins, remnants after the victims, traces of an enormous organisation... but we don't see the victims terrorised, dehumanised, suffering, in despair, dying. We don't see the hope and the inner power some had. All this we have to imagine. In Polish you say "listen to the voice of this soil" (słuchać głosu ziemi oświęcimskiej). I like this expression because there is a personal dimension in it: this soil wants to speak; the victims have something to say to us. So we should listen, look and open our hearts wide. If we want to take the victims seriously, we should try to know what happened. There is so much we should know, what we need to learn. Those who come to encounter the memory of Auschwitz seek and search contact with the memorial places, with the so called museum, with the archives and with survivors. We can gather a

lot of information, there is a good infrastructure for learning about Auschwitz developing all the time – and we will never come to an end.

But even if we know a lot, we will never really understand. The most important is what is invisible. We don't see even graves. We don't see what is missing. What does it mean that more than a million people disappeared, mostly without a trace?

Once I asked Rabbi Sacha Pečarič, what Auschwitz means to him. And he began to talk to our group about what Judaism means: That God spoke to us, that His words had been written down, that we should read to one another or even better sing the words of the bible, that we should discuss the meaning of these words similar to what happens in the Jewish schools. There were more Yeshivot in Poland than anywhere else in the world, there was so much of God's melody in the air here, more than anywhere else in the world. Auschwitz means that this is gone. It's like the coat of his children's dead grandfather, still hanging in their apartment and reminding them of the love that is missing. How much is missing here?!

Listen to the voice of our own heart. REFLECTION

All this touches us. The memory of the past hurts us today. It's not just a past history. The memory of Auschwitz is like an **open wound**. This wound is in our identities and in our relationships. The memory of the painful, horrible past touches our identity, especially if there are family memories directly involved. Who am I in consequence of what has happened, of what has been destroyed?

The wound in our identity is for all of us. Where would I have been at that time? On which side? How would I have behaved? Would I have had the strength not to despair, to resist, to show solidarity? Would I still believe in God, in the good of human beings? What does this all mean to me today? What are my values today? What should I do today? The memory of Auschwitz touches or causes a wound, uneasiness in us.

We need to listen to the voice of our heart, we need reflection.

Listen to one another. DIALOGUE

This has to do also with our relationships. Who am I in relationship to the others, what do the others think of me? Trust is damaged. Relationships are wounded or destroyed. Auschwitz is not just about the killing of people. It is first of all about the killing of relationship. The Nazis said, Poles are like domestic animals, like slaves to the German people, and if they don't want this, they have to die. Jews didn't even have this choice; they were treated like a disease, just to be destroyed. It was forbidden for the SS to have human feelings towards the prisoners.

So healing is about the healing of relationships. I don't believe we can heal ourselves alone, Jews alone, Germans alone, Poles alone and so on. Healing is about building trust. This needs encounter. But to encounter we already need trust.

What does dialogue mean in this context? When we don't understand ourselves in the context of Auschwitz, we should confess that we understand the others even less. I'm German; I'll never feel Auschwitz like a Catholic from Poland or a Jew from Israel. So dialogue begins with silence and

listening. Listening to one another: what does the memory of Auschwitz mean to you? When you ask me, I will try to answer, what it means to me.

When we touch an open wound, we are often not able to think and to discuss quietly our issues. We cry or shout. It is sometimes better not to touch the wound directly, but to empower the life around it. It is sometimes better to be silent than to talk. But we should know that there is a wound, and we should not run away. Dialogue in the context of Auschwitz is a dialogue of wounded people.

Therefore the antechamber of dialogue is so important. Before we enter the living room of dialogue we must get the motivation to enter. We need to have places where everybody feels welcome, from different backgrounds, with his or her wounds. Places, where a basic respect for the other and for the otherness of the other is ensured. This is the most important answer to Auschwitz. Across the road from here was a place of contempt and destruction of the other. We need an environment of respect for all, where trust through face to face encounter can grow again.

My dream is that people, who visit the memorial places of Auschwitz, also experience in Oświęcim another reality, a reality of respect and work for peace, reconciliation and solidarity. My dream is that not Hitler, not the power of evil has the last word about Auschwitz, but the power of goodness and love.

Listen to the voice of God. PRAYER

Many ask: where was God? Why did he allow this to happen? But maybe He asks: Where were you? Why did you allow this to happen? Prayer is not easy at the edge of Auschwitz. We need silence, we need to listen to the voice of this soil, of our hearts, of one another, of the bible. We encounter not only testimonies of loss of faith, but also testimonies of faith, even out of the gas chambers.

Most of you will know Elie Wiesel's "Night":

"Never will I forget the flames that consumed my faith forever.
Never will I forget the silence in the night,
that took my lust for life away for all eternity.
Never will I forget the moment that killed my God, and my soul, and my dreams
which took on the face of the deprived.
Never will I forget even if I am sentenced to live as long as God:
Never"

The last sentence says: "even if I am sentenced to live as long as God: Never". This means God lives. It is like a hidden confession of faith. Broken is the tradition of faith, the old images, and something essentially changed: Not God will ask first, Elie where are you? First Elie Wiesel will ask Him: where have you been when my sister, my mother, my people were killed here? There is no prayer any more without the disturbing memory of Auschwitz.

The question is not only if we believe or not, but also what and how we believe. Nazism was a worldview, a kind of faith, and the tradition of Christian Anti-Judaism also stands in the background of Auschwitz. Prayer here demands an examination of conscience.

However my experience is that Christians and Jews have much in common fundamentally, and this commonality is a help rather than a cause of separation. God created the human being in His image, and this heavenly dignity we have in common, it separates us from animals and makes us all brothers and sisters of the same heavenly parent.

During the visit of Pope Benedict XVI 2006 in Auschwitz-Birkenau there was a storm and rain and following this a rainbow appeared and stayed during the prayer of different religious representatives, Christian and Jewish. Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the chief rabbi of Poland, said later: "The most important rainbow was when Benedict XVI visited Auschwitz. It came when God saw that His children are together."

Where was God in Auschwitz? He was in his children; He was their dignity and waited to be loved. He should not have been killed in them, with them. Today He again is waiting for us in the other. This is the religious background for our engagement towards a civilization of Love.