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The Address of Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz on the Christian-Jewish Relations

Kard. Stanisław Dziwisz

Rabbi Rosen,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are the children of one Father

It is with great joy that I have accepted the invitation to speak during this conference which has seen so many people come to Krakow from various corners of the world – people committed to the dialogue, which began at the Second Vatican Council greatly changing the mutual relationships between Christians and Jews. I have come here to thank you for your continuing and courageous following the hard path of dialogue. It is also to assure you how much I personally share your desire that the relations between Christians and Jews become increasingly fruitful as befits the children of One Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Glitters of common history

Today I am coming here as the Bishop of Krakow, a special city: city of kings and poets, city of learned rabbis and Catholic saints, city of Copernicus and Pope John Paul II. It was not by pure chance that a Polish Pope, the Pope from Krakow has done so much for the cause of rapprochement and reconciliation between Christians and Jews. It is the place where he matured for this mission.

Here the most important threads of almost a thousand-year old history of Polish Jews interweave. The Krakow region has been the place of many of the events which Jews and Poles may remember with pride. But this land was also a silent witness of the most tragic moments in the history of the Jewish people and in the history of humanity, these which still evoke dread, pain and shame in our hearts.

On the one hand, Krakow is the town of King Casimir the Great who, at the time when other monarchs of Europe condemned Jewish people to exile, opened wide the borders of the Polish Kingdom for them. It was because of him and the members of the Jagiellonian dynasty ruling at the Wawel Castle for the next two centuries, that multi-cultural and tolerant Poland became a kind of second homeland to scattered Jews.

The Jewish town founded by King Casimir – Krakow's Kazimierz – a mere several centuries later has become one of the most important religious and cultural centres of the Jewish Diaspora, second only to Prague. Here was born, worked and died, one of the greatest rabbis, Moses ben Israel Isserles, also known as Remu, the Rector of the Krakow's *yeshiva*, a school famous across Europe.

The 17th century which witnessed the high point of the development of Krakow's Kazimierz and of other centres of Jewish life in Poland, is referred to as the Golden Age, in Jewish and Polish historiography alike. It was for the atmosphere of religious tolerance, so exceptional in these times, that Poland earned the label of „Jewish paradise“ (*Paradis Judeorum*).

Definitely, no state, Poland included, was then the „paradise“ to Jews, because they were „exiled people“, always not fully at home anywhere, longingly looking in the direction of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, till the fall of the sovereign Commonwealth of Poland, the Jewish community in Poland has enjoyed freedom of religious practices and the political autonomy, symbolised by the Jewish parliament, unprecedented in other countries.

This fine page in the history of Polish Jews is proudly remembered by us Poles and wanted it to be its only page. Alas, the next chapters were written in increasingly darker colours.

Jagiellonian tradition of Polish identity

The end of free Poland through partition marked the beginning of tensions based on ethnic grounds, which were provoked by partitioning powers, via conscious and diverse efforts perpetuated throughout the whole 19th century. Poles themselves ceased to be masters of their fate, and faced the real threat of losing their national identity. Under these harsh conditions, the broad and multicultural understanding of the Polish iden-

tity, an earlier title to pride, has been gradually replaced by the feeling of strictly ethnic identity helping the conquered nation to consolidate in the struggle for freedom.

Yet the Jagiellonian tradition of Polish identity, friendly towards peoples of other faith and origin, has been always living on. It was his tradition which affected the way of thinking of John Paul II, as testified in his book *Memory and Identity*, published in the last year of his life. Recalling the 1930s, just before the outbreak of World War II, he wrote:

A further element of great importance in the ethnic composition of Poland was the presence of Jews. I remember that at least a third of my classmates at elementary school in Wadowice were Jews. At secondary school they were fewer. With some I was on very friendly terms. And what struck me about some of them was their Polish patriotism. Fundamental to the Polish spirit, then, is multiplicity and pluralism, not limitation and closure. It seems, though, that the „Jagiellonian“ dimension of the Polish spirit, mentioned above, has sadly ceased to be an evident feature of our time (p. 87).

Ten years earlier, in the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II stated:

In the course of its millennial history, Poland has been a state of many nationalities, many religions – mostly Christian, but not only Christian. This tradition has been and still is the source of a positive aspect of Polish culture, namely its tolerance and openness toward people who think differently, who speak other languages, or who believe, pray, or celebrate the same mysteries of faith in a different way (p. 145).

Today, when Poland fully regained independence and is able to shape its fate, we are convinced of the correctness and currency of this vision of Polish identity referred to by the Holy Father. A Polish identity not fearful of pluralism and appreciative of diversity, affirming human rights and the solving of conflicts through dialogue from a perspective of Christian humanism. This open and magnanimous vision of the Polish identity does not only allow Poland to be a country where Polish Jews feel fully at home, but also enables the history of Polish Jews to be seen as an integral part of the history of Poland to which Jews contributed for centuries. This Jagiellonian vision of social life, so Polish at its roots, remains in harmony with the new understanding of

relations between the Church and the State, which is found in the Council's *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. As it is known, Archbishop Karol Wojtyla was deeply involved in drafting this Constitution. Today, this Jagiellonian vision is still much needed in Poland, Europe, and whole world which, in this time of crisis, is threatened once more by a return national egoisms.

Immeasuarable evil

It was a national egoism brought to the extreme in the form of German national socialism which wrote the darkest page in the Jewish history, leading to an attempt to erase entire Jewish people from the surface of the Earth.

Young Karol Wojtyla was then a forced labourer in German-occupied Krakow, only ten miles away from the most horrifying site of mass murder ever erected by human hands, the 'death camp' Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Hitler designated Polish soil to be the place of his genocide. This land which Poles and Jews inhabited together, for better and for worse, during almost one thousand years, became a grave for millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis.

In 1990, just after the fall of Communism we were reminded by John Paul II of this irreversible loss, of which the Communist-block textbooks of history were silent for half a century. He did it at this particular time as if he wanted to remind us that it was a subject which we had to re-address in free Poland. As he put it:

This people lived arm in arm with us for generations on that same land which became a kind of new homeland during the Diaspora. This people was afflicted by the terrible deaths of millions of its sons and daughters. First they were marked with special signs, then they were shoved into ghettos, into isolated quarters. Then they were carried off to the gas chambers, put to death – simply because they were the sons and daughters of this people. The assassins did all this on our land, perhaps to cloak it in infamy. However, one cannot cloak a land in infamy by the death of innocent victims. By such deaths the land becomes a sacred relic. The people who lived with us for many generations has remained with us after the terrible death of millions of its sons and daughters. Together we await the Day of Judgment and Resurrection" (September 26, 1990).

The right to exterminate a whole people was an endeavour so barbaric that the leaders of the allied states notified about it by Polish couriers, could not believe its reality for a long time, as did even the leaders of the Jewish Diaspora in the United States. John Paul II recalls this terrible moral collapse of the human-kind that enhanced his sensitivity to the inalienable dignity of every human person, irrespective of his or her origin and outlook on life:

I have had personal experience of ideologies of evil. It remains indelibly fixed in my memory. First there was not season. While we could see in those years was terrible enough. Yet many aspects of Nazism were still hidden at that stage. The full extent of the evil that was raging through Europe was not seen by everyone, not even by those of us situated at the epicenter. We were totally swallowed up in a great corruption of evil, and only gradually did we begin to realize its true nature (*Memory and Identity*, p. 13).

Guardians of memory

Today, however we do know the whole dimension of unfathomable evil which happened then. Today, it must not be diminished by anyone. For this reason we join, in full solidarity, with our Holy Father Benedict XVI who, in presence of the representatives of Jewish organisations, has recently prayed that „memory of this appalling crime will strengthen our determination to heal the wounds that for too long have sullied relations between Christians and Jews” (February 26, 2009).

Being sons and daughters of our Polish land, we are aware that this papal call to remember concerns us in a particular way. We should be and want to be the guardians of remembrance for the Jewish world murdered by German Nazis, the world which has existed for centuries in our home towns, townships and villages. We are aware of the obligation which is upon us, to eternally mourn our Jewish neighbours whose innocent blood soaked our soil. We want to surround with respect the Jewish cemeteries, synagogues and houses of prayers often left in ruins by war. But more than anything else, we want to remember the Shoah of our Jewish sisters and brothers in order to think with respect about Jews living today. Above all, the voices of victims of the Holocaust remind us that despite differences we are brothers

and sisters. We desire to open our conscience to allow in the voice of these innocent victims reminding us that all of us human beings are mutually responsible for the fate of our brother and sister, our neighbour.

We want to remember the Holocaust in order to built brotherly relations between Christians and Jews. That is why fully I agree with the words of the Polish Bishops' Letter of 30 November 1995 to mark the 25th anniversary of Vatican II Council's Declaration **Nostra Aetate** which opened a new era in relations between the Church and the Jewish people. There we read:

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.

In this memorable letter which has lost nothing of its relevance, the Polish bishops express their pain resulting from the fact that although many Polish Christians saved Jews at the time of the Holocaust, and hundreds, if not thousands, paid for this with their own lives, there were also people who remained indifferent to this incomprehensible tragedy.

We are especially disheartened – write the Polish Bishops – by those among Catholics who in some way were the cause of the death of Jews. 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.

In the letter, the Polish bishops also express their „sincere regret for all the incidents of anti-Semitism which were committed at any time or by anyone on Polish soil“.

Dialogue: a new name of love

In the centre of the biblical vision of religious life, common to Jews and Christians, there is the rejection of evil and the choice of good, repentance and atonement. For a Christian, the examination of conscience, discovering one's sinfulness, returning from

the wrong path, and the change of attitude towards another human being is a joyful experience, experience of liberation. Therefore, a Christian has no reason to run away from even the saddest truth of treading the wrong path in the past, contrary to the will of God. In the spirit of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, John Paul II encouraged the whole Church to courageously confess all its misdeeds and to open a new chapter, also in the relations between the Church and the Jews, our brothers and sisters.

Today, the Church, also the Church in Poland wants to follow the example of John Paul II and courageously uncover and reject everything which makes our life depart from the Gospel. The answer to the question which is sometimes asked: What do the Polish Catholics need the Catholic-Jewish dialogue in the country where so few Jews are living today? – the answer is straightforward: our attitude toward people of different faith is a yardstick of the quality of our Christianity. The Christianity contaminated with hatred and contempt to another human being is the defective Christianity. We were called by God to build bridges and create the atmosphere of communion across the world and not to create divisions and stir up hatred.

Pope Paul VI called dialogue „a new name of love“. That is why treating another human in the spirit of dialogue rather than of enmity or distrust is simply practising the love of your neighbour. And the love of your neighbour is the very heart of Christianity. Where the hatred or contempt to another people prevail, there is no love of your neighbour, where is no love, there is no Christianity.

We Christians, may not forget the radical dimension of the teachings of Jesus Christ on the love of your neighbour. Christ rejects the practice of limiting love only to your own kind: „If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?“ (Mathew 5.46). The best example of evangelical love is the good Samaritan who have assistance to a Jew wounded by robbers, a Jew with whom he did not share common religion or origin.

The Christianity devoid of the love of neighbour loses its power and runs a risk of becoming a „salt that has lost its taste“ (Mathew 5.13) and becomes useless. Christianity without a love that disregards painful scars and occasional baseless or exaggerated accusations ceases to show Jesus whose only response to his suffering was the prayer: „Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing“ (Luke 23.34).

Brothers who have found each other after a long time

In our time, where we particularly value the authenticity of attitudes and convictions, we want to be faithful to Christ's call to show magnanimous attitude to all fellow humans irrespective of their origin or creed. For this reason, we note with shame that despite the unambiguous teachings of recent Popes on the appropriate attitudes of Catholics to Jews, many among us have not been able to overcome prejudices, inveterate resentments and harmful stereotypes. Out of concern for the integrity of the Church's teachings with respect to the Jews, and also aware of our responsibility for the image of the Church in the eyes of young generation, we must continue to oppose all manifestations of anti-Semitism which John Paul II has not hesitated to brand as sin. Quite recently I have assured my Jewish brothers and sisters of this when praying with them at the end of the Sabbath in the Tempel Synagogue in Krakow's Kazimierz.

The direction in which we are to go, the course towards full reconciliation and friendship between our communities has been clearly marked by the declarations of the Second Vatican Council and the binding statements of the Magisterium of the Church. There is no retreat back from this path indicated by the Council and unambiguously endorsed by successive Popes, and wholeheartedly supported recently by the Holy Father Benedict XVI.

During his numerous meetings with the representatives of the Jewish community, the Holy Father John Paul II often repeated that we are only at the beginning of our path to common aspiration to full reconciliation. The first disciples of Jesus Christ, as well as His Mother were Jews who also after His death prayed together with their Jewish compatriots in the Jerusalem Temple and in synagogues. Later, for almost two thousand years, we have done a great deal to drift apart. It is only the span of time of two generations since we started deliberate and strong efforts to come nearer each other. During his memorable 1986 visit to the Rome synagogue, John Paul II told the Chief Rabbi of Rome when they embraced each other: „We are like brothers who have found each other after a very long time“. It is the situation in which we are today, owing to the magnanimity of God. Since we have found each other only recently, we know too little

about each other, we trust each other too little. We do not always feel like being together, as would be befitting for brothers.

Since the fall of Communism a solid foundation has been laid toward the goal of brotherhood of Christians and Jews that is accepted universally and with joy, like a gift. Because we are indeed a blessing to each other, a gift of the One who is faithful to his „promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham, and to his descendents for ever“ (Luke 1.55).

Transformation of minds and hearts

The turnabout in the Christian-Jewish relations which occurred after the last Council was partly a response to shock that humanity was going through in the 20th century, becoming aware of the vast extent of suffering which can be brought about by prejudices and hatred to other people. Aware of this, the Church wants more profound transformation of minds and hearts of its sons and daughters with regard to their attitude toward Jews – the transformation at the level of theology and religious instruction, at local Churches, and in each parish. We are still at the beginning of the road, aware of special responsibility of the Church for the formation of attitudes of the faithful, particularly in the country with such a predominance of Christian faith: thus the essential role for the Polish Bishops' Commission for the Dialogue with Judaism.

We appreciate how important is the formation of new generations of priests and religious teachers in the spirit of the post-conciliar teachings of the Church. We do not evade this challenge. One example is the participation over the past few years of successive groups of Polish priests who are professors of Polish seminaries in several-week long courses organised by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem, providing them a more profound insight into the Jewish sensitivity when it concerns the issue of the Shoah.

In order that the brothers just found could come closer they must come to know each other better. In this area more is being done year after year. For more than a decade the Day of Judaism has been observed in the Catholic Church in Poland. On this day Catholics discover the close ties of their own religion with Judaism, and – wherever possible – meet with the members of

the Jewish religious community and pray for each other, as it is every year done in Krakow.

In these centres where larger Jewish religious communities reside, we witness increasingly close cooperation between Christians and Jews, often within certain organisational frameworks. In Warsaw, the Polish Council of Christians and Jews is now active more than 20 years. Recently, the Club of Christians and Jews has been established in Krakow, whose Board I had a pleasure to welcome to my residence. In Oświęcim, on the threshold of the Nazi Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, the Centre of Dialogue and Prayer operates and provides a facility for spiritual reflection and conversation, signifying the concern of the Krakow Church for respectful attitude of the faithful toward the site of such atrocious crime.

At some Polish universities, including Catholic universities, there exist centres of Jewish studies, studies on Christian-Jewish relations, as well as on Holocaust-related issues. New centres for inter-religious dialogue are emerging, as well as many organizations working toward reconciliation.

I also gladly welcome the new initiative which is Father Stanislaw Musial Award to be given annually to persons and institutions that have made special contributions to Christian-Jewish and Polish-Jewish reconciliation.

The most encouraging are numerous grassroots community initiatives organised in small localities such as Town of Chmielnik which receives today the Father Musial Award. In these localities where there are no representatives of the Jewish community at all and where only Jewish graves and memory, sometimes difficult memory survive, there is particular need of people of good will who support others in the difficult work of the decontamination of memory. In such places, all efforts to oppose old prejudices and to create good, are especially praiseworthy, in accordance with the encouragement given by John Paul II: „You must demand of yourselves, even when others do not demand of you” (June 18, 1983).

The various fruits borne by these initiatives undertaken in the last two decades testify to the fact that in both social and ecclesiastical dimensions there has been no evasion of these difficult questions. One of the clearest examples of this has been the work of the late Professor Jan Błoński, today's awardee. Also the representatives of the Church, including bishops and

priests, have not avoided participation in the most difficult national debates of recent years, such as the one concerning the tragic events in Jedwabne.

Safeguarding the good

In all these efforts undertaken in hope for full reconciliation we feel a strong need for support from the Jewish side. Keeping in mind the enormous numerical disproportion between our communities, Polish Christians, and Polish Jews, we hope even more on the commitment to the dialogue by the representatives of Jewish communities from Israel and the United States. We endorse the idea, postulated by representatives of both sides from quite some time, for frequent meetings between Jewish and Polish youth. We understand that the Jewish youth come to Poland principally in order to make pilgrimage to the sites of martyrdom of their people. At the same time we are aware that it is only authentic meetings between young members of our communities that trigger the process of healing old wounds, removing unnecessary barriers, enhancing our mutual trust and deepening our brotherhood.

During his 1991 pilgrimage to Poland, John Paul II speaking to the Jewish community in Warsaw of the new task which await us in free Poland, said:

Today it seems to be a thing of great importance that, on both sides, we try to perceive, salvage, and renew the good things that occurred in our mutual relations (and, after all, a lot of good things happened over the centuries). We should also try to find unity and friendship despite the evil, because there was also much evil in our mutual history (June 9, 1991).

As the dialogue obligates us to be completely honest, we may not overlook that we still face the breaking of the vicious cycle of mutual dislike which poisons our relations. For certain, uprooting mutual prejudices is one of the prerequisites of full reconciliation. We need great courage, determination and wisdom not to be slowed down in creating this new brotherhood by breaches committed by individuals or groups on both sides who, despite efforts, have not been yet won over to share the new visions of relations between Christianity and Judaism.

Maintaining a persistent effort towards the reconciliation between Christians and Jews, we express an invincible hope that our dialogue will advance and that efforts made by both sides will be met with kind reception and reciprocity. We count on understanding among the partners in the dialogue which may bring to the fore not only the examples of activities which undercut the process of reconciliation, but rather the commitment of the many people of good will who do a lot for the cause of rapprochement, people who are often feel themselves hurt by declarations or actions of some of their fellow-believers.

Era of reconciliation and peace

To many Christian and Jews and for me personally, one of the most moving moment of the long pontificate of John Paul II was his visit in the Tent of Remembrance, in Jerusalem, where at the ashes collected from the places where Jewish people were murdered, an eternal flame burns. There, in his welcoming speech, the Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, said there:

Your Holiness ... A 2,000-year-old historical cycle is returning here to its beginning, bearing the weight of remembrance – its richness and pain, its light and shadows, its song and laments. The wounds of time will not be healed in a day, but the path which brought you here leads to a new horizon. This hour will go down in history as a propitious hour, a moment of truth, the victory of justice and hope (March 23, 2000).

During the same pilgrimage, John Paul II visiting the President of Israel, said:

We must work for a new era of reconciliation and peace between Jews and Christians. My visit is a pledge that the Catholic Church will do everything possible to ensure that this is not just a dream but a reality (March 23, 2000).

I wanted these two voices, full of hope and determination to be the source of inspiration to us in our efforts towards reconciliation. Let them ring in our ears whenever any temptation of discouragement and leaving the path of dialogue arises.

On my part, here in Krakow, at the bottom of the Wawel Hill on which the royal castle of the Casimir the Great is built, as well

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as the bishop's cathedral church of Karol Wojtyla, I would like to assure all of you and make a promise that the Catholic Church in Poland, in unity with the Pope Benedict XVI, wants to do everything possible to near closer to this new horizon of a full development of this brotherhood of Christians and Jews recently found anew.

Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz
Archbishop of Krakow