



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY  
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO POLAND (MAY 31-JUNE 10, 1997)  
**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II**  
**TO THE POLISH BISHOPS**

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopal ministry!*

1. I am pleased to avail myself of the opportunity offered by the great religious events taking place in Poland and involving the universal Church, to extend my fraternal greeting and convey a special word to you. In this way I wish to express my love for Christ's Church in our homeland, which the whole Polish Episcopal Conference, and each Bishop, cares for in a spirit of collegial responsibility.

My pilgrimage began in Wrocław with my participation in the 46th International Eucharistic Congress. The meeting with Christ in his Mystery of infinite love and of unity, entrusted to the Church and to humanity in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, speaks to us with profound eloquence: it does so to Catholics as well as to all our Christian brothers and sisters, especially those present at the Congress. The whole Church in Poland had the opportunity to study and contemplate the mystery of the Eucharistic presence of Emmanuel - God with us (cf. Mt 1:23). For all of us it was a special experience of the truth about Christ who "is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8). We can all draw from this life-giving source the strength and hope to continue to build on Polish soil a community of faith, a community of all who believe in Christ.

Since this community is a unity in charity, it is always the fruit of sacrifice, of renouncing something for the sake of others, and the fruit of concern for the common good. We have the duty to recognize this good in the unity of the universal Church, in the unity of each particular Church, as indeed in all the forms of collegial activity, among which, following the Second Vatican Council, the Episcopal Conferences have a particular role. It is also the Church's task to lay the moral foundations on which the various communities which people form can grow and bear fruit,

beginning with marriage and the family, and embracing the national and State community, as well as the various forms of international coexistence and cooperation. Just as, by God's design, harmony and order are maintained in a family by observing the norms arising from natural ties of kinship and from divine law, so too in the Church community harmony depends on responding to the gift of faith, hope and love, and on hierarchical subordination practiced according to the principle of subsidiarity, *cum Petro et sub Petro*, in every office received, especially the Episcopal office, and in every role or ministry exercised. The minimum requirement of this subordination is defined by ecclesiastical legislation, but must be constantly completed by the imperative of the heart which springs from love of the truth present in the Church.

The divine Truth, whose authentic revelation we find in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, is also expressed through the voice of the Church's Magisterium, especially in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. To follow this teaching correctly it is necessary to draw on the knowledge of experts in the various ecclesiastical and secular disciplines, deepening our knowledge of it, especially at the level of the Episcopal Conference, in order to transmit it then to the priests and faithful in a complete and understandable form so that everyone can find in it the answer to the personal and social problems of everyday life.

The unity of the Church demands that the Bishops' concern should extend to all those who transmit the Gospel gift of truth both in Catholic schools and universities, and through the Catholic media. The Episcopal Conference, while respecting the authority of the diocesan Bishops, is responsible for everything connected with the transmission of the faith in its territory, regardless of whether those transmitting it belong to the diocesan clergy, religious communities or the lay faithful. The Church must be present in the communications media. Through them she engages in dialogue with the world, and with their help she can form people's consciences. We must reach out to the world with the best the Church has to offer, with respect for the dignity of the human person and making all aware of their responsibilities before God.

2. The second stage of my pilgrimage was ancient Gniezno - cradle of Poland and of the Church in Poland. A thousand years after Saint Adalbert's death by martyrdom, I had the opportunity to venerate the holy relics of Poland's patron. Adalbert, in obedience to Christ's command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19), fortified by the power of the Gospel, went to the land of the Prussians. His witness was not welcomed, but when he confirmed it by his death, that witness began to yield its harvest and has continued to do so in abundance down to our day. Is not this the model for Pastors in our country too, where we see a disturbing disintegration of Gospel values and even hostility towards Christ and his Church? Polish society needs a profound, new evangelization. No one should be considered lost, because Christ died for all, opening the way to eternal life for every individual. Renewed faith is needed in the power of Christ's Cross.

We are faced with the great challenges that mark our times. I pointed this out in my address to the

Polish Episcopal Conference during my 1991 pilgrimage. At the time I said: "Man is the way of the Church.... In a certain sense the Episcopate and the Church in Poland must translate this task into a language of concrete tasks, using the Council's vision of the Church as the People of God and our analogy of the 'signs of the times'. Our Polish 'signs of the times' clearly underwent a change, with the collapse of the Marxist totalitarian system which had conditioned the consciousness and attitudes of our country's people. In the previous system ... the Church created as it were a space where the individual and the nation could defend their rights.... Now ... man must find a space in the Church in order to defend himself, in a certain sense, from himself: from the misuse of his freedom, from the squandering of a great historic opportunity for the nation. While the former situation led to widespread recognition of the Church's action (even on the part of 'lay' people and circles), in the current situation there are many cases in which we cannot count on such recognition. We have to deal with criticism, and perhaps something even worse. So discernment must be exercised: on the one hand, accepting whatever is correct in this criticism; on the other, not forgetting that Christ will always be a 'sign of contradiction' (cf. Lk 2:34). For the Church this 'contradiction' is also a confirmation of her identity, the confirmation of being in the truth. It may also be a coefficient of the Gospel mission and of pastoral service" (*Warsaw*, 9 June 1991).

Among the concrete problems and tasks to be addressed, I would like to stress the need for lay people to assume the responsibility which is theirs in the Church. This involves those areas of life in which the laity should, in their own name but as faithful members of the Church, advance political thought, economic life and culture, in harmony with the principles of the Gospel. They certainly must be helped in this task, but no one should take their place. The Church must be free to proclaim the Gospel and all the truths and guidelines it contains. She desires this freedom, she strives for this freedom and it is enough for her. She does not seek or desire special privileges.

When I spoke to the Polish Bishops during their 1993 "ad Limina" visit, I called their attention to the possibility of using the Plenary Synod in order to revitalize the laity's participation in Church life. It appears that this opportunity still exists, and everything should be done to make the most of it. Catholic organizations, including Catholic Action, add a new dimension to the Church's activity. In Poland there have been no opportunities of this sort since the '40s. To tell the truth, it is not easy to awaken society to functioning as a community, but this is the right direction for pastoral work in Poland and it should not be easily given up.

Young people are a very serious concern of the Church, for the future depends on them. The Church in Poland has had marvellous experiences in the field of parish catechesis. Today religion is taught in the schools. This has created new challenges, which stem, among other things, from the changes that have occurred in Polish society in recent years. We must bring to the children and young people of our time the same Gospel, but proclaimed in a new way and adapted to today's mentality and to the conditions in which we live. This demands serious effort, not only to create new tools for communicating with children and young people, but also to find suitable ways of reaching out to them.

3. The third stage of my visit was Kraków and the 600th anniversary of the foundation in Poland of the first scholarly and educational centre of theological thought, namely, the Theology Faculty of the Kraków Academy, which later became the Jagiellonian University. It was established thanks to Queen Hedwig of Anjou, whom I solemnly canonized in Kraków's Blonie Park and who was thus enrolled among the Saints of the universal Church. I thank Almighty God for this great grace. It is a happy coincidence that during this Apostolic Visit to Poland we can see, centuries later, the results of the far-sighted efforts of Saint Adalbert, Bishop and Martyr, and of Queen Saint Hedwig, both of whom wished, in their own way, to strengthen the Christian faith in our homeland. What Saint Adalbert proclaimed and sowed with his death by martyrdom, Queen Saint Hedwig determined to extend and bequeath to many generations by making the wealth of Christian Europe's learning and science widely accessible in Poland. Six hundred years later we know it was a providential step. Just as Saint Adalbert can be considered the patron of the ecclesiastical organization of Poland, so we can rightly call Saint Hedwig the patroness of Poland's access to European Christian thought.

How eloquent for us today are both these examples when, after years of isolation, we are returning to the world of Western culture, a culture quite familiar to us, because for centuries we made our own rich contribution to it. Today we cannot refrain from following the path we have been shown. The Church in Poland can offer Europe, as it grows in unity, her attachment to the faith, her tradition inspired by religious devotion, the pastoral efforts of her Bishops and priests, and certainly many other values on the basis of which Europe can become a reality endowed not only with high economic standards but also with a profound spiritual life.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I have touched on only a few problems. I submit them today for your pastoral reflection and especially for your fervent prayers. We will certainly have to return to them again at our meeting in Rome at the beginning of next year, to which I cordially invite you today. I cordially thank you all for your prayers throughout my visit. I commend you, the Church entrusted to you and our whole nation to the intercession of the saints and beati raised to the altars during my pilgrimage. I bless you from my heart.

*8 June 1997*