



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
ON THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION  
OF THE PRISONERS OF THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU DEATH CAMP**

Sixty years have passed since the liberation of the prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. This anniversary calls us to ponder once again the drama which took place there, the final, tragic outcome of a programme of hatred. In these days we must remember the millions of persons who, through no fault of their own, were forced to endure inhuman suffering and extermination in the gas chambers and ovens. I bow my head before all those who experienced this manifestation of the *mysterium iniquitatis*.

When, as Pope, I visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in 1979, I halted before the monuments dedicated to the victims. There were inscriptions in many languages: Polish, English, Bulgarian, Romani, Czech, Danish, French, Greek, Hebrew, Yiddish, Spanish, Flemish, Serbo-Croat, German, Norwegian, Russian, Romanian, Hungarian and Italian. All these languages spoke of the victims of Auschwitz: real, yet in many cases completely anonymous men, women and children. I stood somewhat longer before the inscription written in Hebrew. I said: "This inscription invites us to remember the people whose sons and daughters were doomed to total extermination. This people has its origin in Abraham, our father in faith (cf. *Rom 4:11-12*), as Paul of Tarsus has said. This, the very people that received from God the commandment, 'You shall not kill,' itself experienced in a special measure what killing means. No one is permitted to pass by this inscription with indifference."

Today I repeat those words. No one is permitted to pass by the tragedy of the Shoah. That attempt at the systematic destruction of an entire people falls like a shadow on the history of Europe and the whole world; it is a crime which will for ever darken the history of humanity. May it serve, today and for the future, as a warning: there must be no yielding to ideologies which justify contempt for human dignity on the basis of race, colour, language or religion. I make this appeal to everyone, and particularly to those who would resort, in the name of religion, to acts of oppression and terrorism.

These reflections have remained with me, especially when, during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Church celebrated the solemn penitential liturgy in Saint Peter's, and I journeyed as a pilgrim to the Holy Places and went up to Jerusalem. In *Yad Vashem* – the memorial to the Shoah – and at the foot of the Western Wall of the Temple I prayed in silence, begging forgiveness and the conversion of hearts.

That day in 1979 I also remember stopping to reflect before two other inscriptions, written in Russian and in Romani. The history of the Soviet Union's role in that war was complex, yet it must not be forgotten that in it the Russians had the highest number of those who tragically lost their lives. The Roma were also doomed to total extermination in Hitler's plan. One cannot underestimate the sacrifice of life which was imposed on these, our brothers and sisters in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. For this reason, I insist once more that no one is permitted to pass by those inscriptions with indifference.

Finally I halted before the inscription written in Polish. There I recalled that the experience of Auschwitz represented "yet another stage in the centuries-old struggle of this nation, my nation, for its fundamental rights among the peoples of Europe. Yet another loud cry for the right to have a place of its own on the map of Europe. Yet another painful reckoning with the conscience of humanity". The statement of this truth was nothing more or less than a call for historical justice for this nation, which had made such great sacrifices in the cause of Europe's liberation from the infamous Nazi ideology, and which had been sold into slavery to another destructive ideology: that of Soviet Communism. Today I return to those words – without retracting them – in order to thank God that, through the persevering efforts of my countrymen, Poland has taken its proper place on the map of Europe. It is my hope that this tragic historical experience will prove to be a source of mutual spiritual enrichment for all Europeans.

During my visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, I also said that one should halt before every one of the inscriptions. I myself did so, passing in prayerful meditation from one to the next, and commending to the Divine Mercy all the victims from all those nations which experienced the atrocities of the war. I also prayed that, through their intercession, the gift of peace would be granted to our world. I continue to pray unceasingly, trusting that everywhere, in the end, there will prevail respect for the dignity of the human person and for the right of every man and woman to seek the truth in freedom, to follow the moral law, to discharge the duties imposed by justice and to lead a fully human life (Cf. JOHN XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*: AAS 55 [1963], 295-296).

In speaking of the victims of Auschwitz, I cannot fail to recall that, in the midst of that unspeakable concentration of evil, there were also heroic examples of commitment to good. Certainly there were many persons who were willing, in spiritual freedom, to endure suffering and to show love, not only for their fellow prisoners, but also for their tormentors. Many did so out of love for God and for man; others in the name of the highest spiritual values. Their attitude bore clear witness to a truth which is often expressed in the Bible: even though man is capable of evil, and at times

boundless evil, evil itself will never have the last word. In the very abyss of suffering, love can triumph. The witness to this love shown in Auschwitz must never be forgotten. It must never cease to rouse consciences, to resolve conflicts, to inspire the building of peace.

Such, then, is the deepest meaning of this anniversary celebration. We remember the tragic sufferings of the victims not for the sake of reopening painful wounds or of stirring up sentiments of hatred and revenge, but rather in order to honour the dead, to acknowledge historical reality and above all to ensure that those terrible events will serve as a summons for the men and women of today to ever greater responsibility for our common history. Never again, in any part of the world, must others experience what was experienced by these men and women whom we have mourned for sixty years!

To those taking part in the anniversary celebrations I send my greetings, and upon all I invoke the blessings of Almighty God.

*From the Vatican, 15 January 2005*

**JOHN PAUL II**

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