



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE POLISH CEMETERY OF MONTE CASSINO

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Monte Cassino, Italy

Friday, 18 May 1979

1. "Come, let us go up to the mountain..." (Is 2:3; cf. Mic 4:2).

Let us listen today to this invitation of the Prophet and let us re-read it as an interior imperative: the imperative of conscience and the imperative of the heart. The day of 18 May morally obliges us to come up to this mountain; to stop, with prayer on our lips, before the graves of the soldiers who fell here; to look at the walls of the monastery which was then—thirty-five years ago—reduced to rubble; to remember those events; and to try, once more, to draw a lesson from them for the future.

We are walking here on the traces of a great battle, one of those that struck the decisive blow at the last war in Europe, the second great World War. In the years 1939-1945, this war involved nearly all the nations and states of our continent. It drew into its orbit also the extra-European powers. It showed the peaks of heroism of the soldiers, but it also revealed the dangerous face of human cruelty. It left behind it the traces of extermination camps, it took the lives of millions of human beings, it destroyed the fruits of the labour of many generations. It is difficult to enumerate all the calamities that fell upon man, manifesting to him—at its end—also the possibility, through the means of the most modern technique of armaments, of a possible mass annihilation of the future, before which the destruction of the past pales.

2. Who waged this war? Who carried out the work of destruction? Men and nations. This was a war of the *European nations*, bound to one another though they were by the traditions of a great culture: science and art deeply rooted in the past of Christian Europe. Men and nations: this was their war; and, just as victory and defeat were theirs, so also the effects of this conflict belong to

them.

Why did they fight against one another, men and nations? It was certainly not the truths of the Gospel and the traditions of the great Christian culture that drove them to this terrible fratricidal slaughter. They were *involved in war by the force* of a system which, contrary to the Gospel and to Christian traditions, had been imposed on some peoples with ruthless violence as a programme, forcing the others, at the same time, to put up a resistance with arms in hand. In gigantic struggles, that system was defeated definitively. The day of 18 May was one of the decisive stages in that defeat.

Finding ourselves at Monte Cassino on the thirty-fifth anniversary of that day, we wish, through the eloquent memory of that day, *to understand before God* and history, the meaning of all the terrible experience of the second World War. That is not easy; in fact, in a way it becomes impossible to express in a few words what has been, and will certainly continue to be for a long time to come, the object of so many researches, studies, and monographs. *All of our generation* are survivors of this war which weighed upon their maturation and development, but they continue to live still in the orbit of the consequences of such a conflict. It is not easy, therefore, to speak of a problem which has such a deep dimension in the lives of us all; a problem that is still alive and connected in a certain sense with the blood and grief of so many hearts and so many nations.

3. However, if we endeavour to understand this problem before God and history, then what is more important than any settlement of accounts with the past, *are the lessons for the future*. The latter force themselves upon us, since history is not only the great polygon of events, but also, and above all, an open book of those lessons themselves; it is the source of wisdom of life for men and nations.

What we re-read in this book, so painfully open before us, leads us to ardent prayer, to a fervent cry for reconciliation and peace. We have come here, above all, to pray for this, and to cry in this way to God and to men. But since peace on earth depends on the goodwill of men, it is difficult not to reflect; at least briefly, on what direction all the efforts of persons of goodwill—as all should be—must take if we wish to secure this great boon of peace and reconciliation for us and for future generations.

The Gospel of today contrasts *two programmes*: one based on the principle of hatred, vengeance, and struggle; another on the law of love. Christ says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). It is a great demand. Those who survived the war, like us, who came up against the occupation, cruelty, the most brutal violation of all human rights, know how serious and difficult this demand is. Yet after such terrible experiences as the last war; we become even more aware that *it is not possible to construct peace and reconciliation* among men and nations on the principle that says: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Mt 5:38); on the principle of hatred, vengeance and struggle; it can be constructed only on the principle of justice and mutual love. And this, therefore, was the conclusion drawn from the experiences of the second world war by the Organization of the United Nations, proclaiming "the Charter of human rights". Only on the basis of

full respect for the rights of men and the rights of nations—full respect!—can the peace and reconciliation of Europe and the world in future be constructed

4. Let us pray, therefore, on this place of a great battle, for freedom and justice, in order that the words of today's liturgy may become incarnate in life.

Let us pray to God who is the Father of men and of peoples, just as the Prophet prays today: "that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths... *He shall judge between the nations / and shall decide for many peoples / and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, / and their spears into pruning hooks; / nation shall not lift up sword against nation, / neither shall they learn war any more...*" (Is 2:34).

Let us pray in this way, keeping in mind that it is no longer a question of swords or spears, but of nuclear arms; of means of destruction which are able to reduce to nothing the land inhabited by men.

— Let us also remember that at Monte Cassino, in 1964, during the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI proclaimed St Benedict Patron Saint of Europe, referring to the millenary Benedictine traditions of work, prayer and culture, the fruit of peace and reconciliation.

— Let us remember, finally, that the place on which we stand has been made fertile by the blood of so many heroes: in front of their death for the great cause of freedom and peace, we have come to bow, once more, our heads.

The Pope here continued in Polish:

5. Beloved Fellow-countrymen!

This is a special moment in which I can take part with you in the present great anniversary. Thirty-five years ago the battle for Monte Cassino ended—one of the decisive battles of the last war. For us who in that period had to bear the horrible oppression of the occupation, for Poland which found itself on the eve of the insurrection of Warsaw, that battle was a further confirmation of the inflexible will to live, of the Fatherland's aspiration to independence, virtues which never for a moment abandoned us. At Monte Cassino the Polish soldier fought, here he fell, here he shed his blood, thinking of his country, of that country which is for us a beloved Mother precisely because love for her demands sacrifice and hardship.

It is not for me to dwell on the significance of this battle itself, on what the Polish soldier achieved on these rocky slopes. The inhabitants of this lovely country of Italy remember that the Polish soldier brought liberation to their country. They remember it with esteem and love. We know that this soldier at the same time went by a long and tortuous route "from the land of Italy to Poland", as on a former occasion the legions of Dabrowski.

They were guided by the consciousness of a just cause, since a just cause was and shall never

cease to be the right of a nation to existence and to independent existence, to social life in the spirit of its own national and religious convictions and traditions, and to the sovereignty of its own territory.

This right of the people, violated for more than a hundred years by partition, was again threatened in September 1939. And thus, for all that period from 1 September until Monte Cassino, the Polish soldier travelled by many roads, looking to Divine Providence and to the justice of the times with his eyes on the image of Our Lady of Jasna Gora. He went again to do battle like the previous generations for "our liberty and yours".

6. Here, at Monte Cassino today, I wish to be the servant and the mouthpiece of this order of the social and international life of man which is constructed on justice and on love, according to the evangelical counsels of Christ.

It is precisely for this that I relive with you, but especially with you who fought here, the moral value of this battle. I relive it with you, Beloved Fellow-countrymen, and at the same time with all those who rest here, your companions in arms—with all, beginning with the Commander-in-Chief and the Military Ordinary—with all, down to the youngest simple soldier.

Many times have I walked in this cemetery. I have read the inscriptions on the stones giving for each one the date and place of birth. These inscriptions brought before my mind's eye the features of my Fatherland, of the country in which I was born. These inscriptions from so many places of the land of Poland, from all parts from the East to the West, from the South to the North, do not cease to cry out here in the heart of Europe, at the foot of the monastery which recalls the times of St Benedict, they do not cease to cry out as did the hearts of the soldiers who fought here.

O God, who protected Poland for so many centuries...

We bow our heads before the heroes.

Let us recommend their souls to God.

Let us recommend to God the Fatherland, Poland, Europe, the World.

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