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On John-Paul II and Europe

First of all, thank you for the invitation to speak, and apologies for my not being able to deliver this talk in Polish, but in an English of sorts.

1. I was asked to give some thoughts on Europe, in the spirit, *ad mentem*, as the Latin idiom has it, of the former pope saint John-Paul the Second. One may ask, and some people do ask: Why the heck should we bother about the teachings on Europe of a Pope? Other competences might be more apposite: we should learn from historians, sociologists, political scientists, rather than from a cleric. If the latter has anything to tell us as such, and if we are ready to listen to him, isn't he expected to teach on theological questions?

2. Now, generally meaning, and in the teeth of all appearances, Popes are in a position which enables them to make meaningful comments on the world at large, and especially on European affairs. The fact that the Catholic Church has spread all over the world, and, as a consequence, that popes have to receive bishops from each and every country gives them a better knowledge of present issues than many press agencies. Furthermore, their very lack of material interests and political power enables them to climb to a neutral vantage-point.

As for Europe, their situation compels them to keep a balance between Europe and the rest of the world. For obvious reasons, the Holy See is located in Rome, hence in Europe. By this token, popes are likely to pay special attention to the problems which beset the region which lies nearest to them. On the other hand, they must reduce the problems which Europe has to cope with down to their real scale, i.e. a part of the West, which is itself a part of a far larger whole. They see Europe on the backdrop of the whole show.

3. John-Paul the Second had special reasons to emphasize the relevance of European problems. His hailing from Poland enhanced in him a sensitivity to the fragile character of what is European, and to the decisive part played by culture in the life of a people. His native country is at the brim of Europe, next to a country like Russia which saddles Europe and Asia, so that, for its intellectuals, in which one to pigeonhole their country has been a living issue for centuries. Being European is something that French, Italian or German people take for granted. For a Pole, being European is the result of a conscious and voluntary choice.

Poland was divided into three parts for one century and a half. During this long period, the unity of the people was kept by the common language, the common catholic faith, the common keeping of many traditions belonging to the so-called folklore. Between the two partitions, the Commission of National Education, despite the short time-span during which it could function, laid the basis for Polish higher learning. Interestingly, this board, peopled by bishops, acted very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment. It gave thereby evidence of the existence of a Catholic Enlightenment, which was to be found elsewhere, too: in Bavaria, Bohemia, Austria, or Tuscany¹. Conversely, it gave the lie to the received wisdom of a radical Enlightenment being directed against Christianity—the first step towards secularization.

Pope John-Paul had a clear knowledge of the fact that he put forward in his speech of 1980 at the Unesco: he hailed from a nation which survived thanks to culture (§14). Little wonder that he should lay the stress on cultural issues and conceived of Christianity as being, among other things, a wellspring of culture.

¹ See the works of the German-American theologian and historian Ulrich L. Lehner, especially his synthesis: *The Catholic Enlightenment. The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016).

4. Europe and Christianity are tied together by a strong bond. But this bond is not an identity. Christianity is older and broader than Europe. It began far from Europe, on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. It defined its dogma in Egypt, Anatolia and Greece.

Whereas Europe never produced Christianity, on the other hand, Christianity produced Europe and fostered its development out of the Mediterranean Basin, first towards the North and the East, converting Celtic, Slavic, Baltic and Fino-Ugric peoples, letting them enter the European concert. This was made possible by their sharing some basic principles, which are Christian in origin. An important feature of this admittance was that newcomers were allowed to keep their language and mores. They were not compelled to enter the Roman Empire and could build independent kingdoms, that were to evolve to nation-states. This was the case for Poland, and later for Hungary and Bohemia.

Europe sort of repaid its debt to Christianity by spreading it in the rest of the world, thanks to missionary activity. Let me here correct a common misunderstanding: Christian mission and European colonization were not accomplices. To be sure, the presence of Christian priests in countries in which Christian faith was only tolerated and submitted to all kind of humiliations was made possible by Western control. Yet, colonization had economic and political aims and never aimed at spreading Christianity, far from that. If I may choose the example of my native France, political and military authorities strongly objected to attempts of Christian missionaries at converting local populations, especially in North Africa.

5. John-Paul II's diagnosis of the present spiritual crisis of Europe is still highly actual, even forty odd years after his Compostella speech in 1982. Among the diseases which he called by name, some were pinpointed by earlier thinkers: individualism, f.i., was brilliantly analyzed by Tocqueville². As for cultural issues, he observed some sort of collective amnesia, loss of cultural memory. In particular, ignorance of the true Christian dogma is especially rampant. It is even as if some people boasted about their not having an inkling of the Christian message, although they would blush in confessing their ignorance of Buddhism or Islam.

Besides those rather common observations, John-Paul shed more light on the present crisis when he coined the felicitous albeit ominous phrase “culture of death” in the early nineties and gave it a powerful orchestration in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* of 1995 (§12). The phrase has a broader compass than the so-called bio-ethical problems and captures the whole spectrum of social oppression of the weaker by the more powerful.

The disease was identified by saint John-Paul. So was the cure: a new evangelization, giving new hope to people tempted by despair, getting back a Christian mindset, what he called, perhaps by a rather awkward term, “mentality”.

John-Paul's emphasis on culture strikes an original note, not to say a surprising one in the present-day concert of experts, who all give pride of place to economic and/or social questions, supposed to be the infrastructure on which everything rests. They bear witness to the lasting influence of Marxist schemes of thought, which crushes so many brains, even among people who hardly understand themselves as disciples of the German thinker.

For John-Paul II, a culture is the crystallized result of what he called an “anthropology”. He meant thereby, not the scholarly discipline which plumes itself with that name, but, more simply and in fact more deeply, an all-encompassing certain view of what the human being is all about. Now, Europe is singled out by a definite conception of Man, which strikes its roots in the Hebrew Bible and in classical Greek thought and came to a head in the New Testament. Pope John-Paul fleshed it out: each and every human being, from its inception to his or her natural death, is a full-fledged person, whose both soul and body deserve a boundless respect. This person is not the temporary incarnation of an eternal essence, but the subject of an adventure in which his or her destiny is at stake.

2 A. de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, II, ii, 2, in: *Œuvres*, ed. A. Jardin et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 612-614.

6. Now, pope John-Paul II already belongs not only to the canon, but to history. Yet, this doesn't mean that his thoughts should be wrapped up in a purple shroud and solemnly buried. To the contrary, his teachings still possess a thriving actuality. This is the case for his thoughts on Europe. To repeat: He saw Europe not as a geographical concept only, but as a culture, culture itself lying on the ground of a vision of man, Christian in origin.

Pope John-Paul died fifteen years ago. What happened since? Did things change? Basically, not very much. But some dimensions of our present predicament received a new emphasis.

Most concretely, two popes came after him. Both had significant utterances on Europe, be they positive or negative in nature. The first one, now emeritus, was Joseph Ratzinger, a German who was among the closest collaborators of the Polish pope. He had far-reaching thoughts on what European culture is all about, very much in the wake of his predecessor and personal friend. The second one, Jorge Bergoglio, still in office, doesn't hail from Europe, but from a country which was by and large peopled by European immigrants. He put his finger on Europe's sore point: an aging and sterile continent whose administrations uphold policies of a so-called "public health" which foster the slow disappearance of their own citizenry.

7. Let me mention two points. Each will somehow correspond to one of the two popes who came after John-Paul, in the chronological order.

First, there is what I will call the Benedict point: We perceive in an ever clearer way that our view of man is not self-evident. Now, agnostics of all ilk and even card-carrying atheists, in the West, and especially in Europe, live on the capital of Christian anthropology. No matter whether they know this origin, are unaware of it, or do as if they ignored it.

People who come clear about the origin of the values we live upon may not be Christians. They are at least what I called "Christianists", i.e. people who believe in the positive influence of Christianity on human culture, and especially Western culture, without their believing in the basic tenets of Christian faith, i.e. Jesus of Nazareth being the only-begotten Son of the heavenly Father, his having been risen from the dead, etc. They agree to what they call the « Christian values », but are reluctant to look for their roots in faith, let alone personally to have faith in Christ. Such a phenomenon is relatively new, so that John-Paul II could scarcely engage the dialogue with it. This is what was done by his immediate successor Pope Benedict, who, still as Cardinal Ratzinger, had disputations at a very high level with leading figures of this stance like Marcello Pera in Italy and Jürgen Habermas in Germany³.

Those people deserve our sympathy, not because they are « objective allies », to put it in communist parlance, but simply because they tell the truth when they say that Christianity's contribution to civilization was positive in nature, moreover that the culture which Christianity made possible, i.e. Europe, deserves to be defended.

The trouble is that this capital doesn't renew itself automatically; it requires maintenance. It crumbles down when it loses its underpinnings in a lived faith. Do we live up to this faith?

8. My second and last point — the Francis one — is the following: We may and must now ask the question, not only about the essence of Europe, but about its very existence. Both aspects should be thought of together. As a notion belonging to physical geography, Europe is not endangered in its existence. It has been there for millions of years, and, barring unpredictable and unlikely geological upheavals, it will last for quite a long period of time still. Yet, what we commonly mean when we mention Europe is a cultural reality. Now, cultures are not eternal. The Church has received from her divine Head a promise according to which she will withstand the onslaughts of the Evil One, the "Gates of Hell". But Europe, as a definite form of culture, never received the promises of eternal life. History is the cemetery of dead civilizations.

³ M. Pera & J. Ratzinger, *Senza radici. Europa, relativismo, cristianesimo, islam* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004); J. Habermas & J. Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 2005).

In Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, one of the three brothers, Ivan, the intellectual, already saw Europe as a cemetery. A very lovable cemetery, he adds, the most lovable of all cemeteries whatsoever, to be sure, but a cemetery all the same⁴.

Let me add as a rider, quite a naive observation: People who lie buried in cemeteries died, for the most part, unwillingly. A tiny minority only committed suicide. Cultures, on the other hand, can't die unless people who live in them and through them want them to be done away with or, at least, if they don't mind about their being swept away by the winds of history.

The British historian Arnold Toynbee observed that a civilization crumbles down if, and only if two factors pull in the same direction, external as well as internal: external powers are always present in a plural game, and they aim at asserting themselves over against each other. But they can produce their destructive effects only if inner factors are at work. Among them, on the side of people who take advantage of the civilization, a lack of confidence in its very value⁵. The nagging question arises: Is defending our way of life really worth while? Supposed we had to give up a part of the commodities we enjoy in order to save it, shall we accept the sacrifice?

On those two points, reality has given the insights of pope John-Paul a new depth. May his thoughts go on helping Europe and the world at large out of the predicament they are in.

4 Dostojewsky, Bratya Karamazowy, II, v, 3 (Moscow: ACT, 2006), 234.

5 A. J. Toynbee, A Study of History. Abridgment by D. C. Somervell, IV, xiii (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 245.