



The Holy See

EXCHANGE OF THE INSTRUMENTS OF RATIFICATION FOR THE CONCORDAT BETWEEN THE HOLY SEE AND THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND

*ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE JOHN PAUL II**

Wednesday, 25 March 1998

A few moments ago, the documents of ratification were exchanged in the Apostolic Palace. I offer my cordial greetings to the Cardinal Primate, the President of the Council of Ministers, the representatives of the supreme authorities of the Polish Republic and the delegation of the Polish Episcopate who have come to the Vatican for this occasion. I also greet the Apostolic Nuncio in Poland and the Ambassador of the Polish Republic to the Holy See. I thank them for their addresses.

The process of ratifying the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland, which had been signed on 28 July 1993, was concluded today. I would like to recall that the content of this important document is the fruit of many years' work, begun some time ago by a special Commission consisting of representatives of the Episcopate and the Polish authorities at the time. Later, in our country's new sociopolitical situation, the negotiations were conducted by delegations of the Holy See and the Government of the Polish Republic. I therefore express my thanks to all those who worked successfully in preparing the text of this Concordat. Their efforts, competence and persevering commitment have enabled the idea of this international agreement to mature gradually and take concrete shape. I also thank those who were directly involved in composing and formulating the final version of the Concordat. I cannot fail to mention here the difficulties connected with the ratification, and the many efforts and interventions made to bring the work to a conclusion once it had been started. Now we have this process behind us, for which we give thanks to God and men.

Today begins a new stage, which I would describe as normal, in the mutual relations between the Holy See and the Polish Republic: from now on they will be regulated by this Concordat. We have had to wait 54 years for this. In this context, we cannot forget the totalitarian system of government imposed on Poland when our nation was subjected to many humiliations, injustices and the restriction of its freedom. There was an effort to eliminate the Church from social life

and to impede her activity by subjecting her to systematic persecution. All the painful experiences associated with those years form part of our postwar history.

During the signing ceremony for the Concordat in July 1993, Prof. Krzysztof Skubiszewski, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, said among other things: "The Apostolic See, which has existed for two millenniums, and the 1,000-year-old Polish State are once again united in this time-tested juridical form which is the Concordat. It is a return, because we are joining what had been separated. But first and foremost it indicates a path we will follow". These words show that the Concordat is a challenge for all who have Poland's future at heart and feel responsible for her destiny. It is a great opportunity and a great task for present and future generations.

The year 1989 brought substantial social and political changes to Central Europe. Poland, together with the other countries of this region, embarked on the path of pluralism, becoming once again a democratic State. However, this process is not over yet, since the wounds left in human hearts, minds and consciences do not heal so quickly. The destruction is enormous, especially in the area of ethics. Polish society needs moral renewal, a well-planned programme for rebuilding the State in the spirit of solidarity and respect for the dignity of the human person. I spoke of this in my address to the Polish Bishops during their visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. We are facing new dangers and new challenges, the result of the changes in the sociopolitical situation. We therefore need the collaboration of all people of goodwill, of all who care deeply about the destiny of our country; the Church's help is also necessary. She, I would say, is indispensable in this process of building the future, of laying the foundations for a democratic State in which each feels secure and at ease, where the fundamental human and Christian values are safeguarded and where concern for the common good is a priority.

I would like to draw particular attention to a statement in the Concordat which says very clearly that "the State guarantees to the Catholic Church, without respect to rites, the free and public fulfilment of her mission" (art. 5). Here it is not a question of giving a privilege or distinction to the Church in some way, but only of correctly understanding her mission and her role in public life. The Church has always been on the nation's side and has never been indifferent to its destiny. She has constantly and perseveringly deepened our nation's self-knowledge, imbuing it with supernatural strength. The Church has remained in the nation without interruption for 10 centuries - no one and nothing has succeeded in separating her from it or in destroying this spiritual bond: neither invaders, nor the horrors of the last war, nor Marxist ideology. The Church has always fulfilled her task of uniting and integrating Poles in the name of the Cross of Christ and the Gospel. She has strengthened social bonding and created spiritual unity.

The Church's presence is also expressed in co-operation with the State. The Second Vatican Council says in the Constitution *Gaudium et spes* that the political community and the Church "are devoted to the personal vocation of man, though under different titles. This service will redound the more effectively to the welfare of all in so far as both institutions practise better co-operation"

(n. 76). The basic reason for the collaboration of Church and State is the good of the human person. Such co-operation must safeguard and guarantee human rights. A Church which enjoys freedom wants to be the State's ally "in working together for human advancement and for the common good", as art. 1 of the Concordat states. The Church has always preached and still preaches that man is the most important value on earth. He is the first way on which the Church must walk in fulfilling her mission. This way was marked out by Christ himself; I have said this on various occasions. The Concordat juridically defines the Church's specific role. It also indicates that "development of a free and democratic society is based on respect for the dignity of the human person and his rights" (Preamble). It thus recalls the fundamental principles by which a democratic State and its future development should be guided. In *Redemptor hominis* I wrote: "The rights of power can only be understood on the basis of respect for the objective and inviolable rights of man. The common good that authority in the State serves is brought to full realization only when all the citizens are sure of their rights.... Thus the principle of human rights is of profound concern to the area of social justice and is the measure by which it can be tested in the life of political bodies" (n. 17). In this context, we note the Concordat's clear and undeniable contribution to the transformations which our country is currently undergoing and the specific role this agreement must play in the future.

I hope that the Concordat will be of the greatest service to good and fruitful relations between the Holy See and the Polish Republic and, consequently, between the State and the Catholic Church in Poland. May it help strengthen unity and social bonding, and the spiritual and material development of society based on the principle of mutual respect, solidarity and co-operation. May it deepen mutual responsibility for the destiny of the country, which is our common home.

In this spirit I cordially bless my compatriots.

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