

The Reconciliation between Germany and Poland

The Vision of Europe Seen from the Perspectives of John Paul II and Benedict XVI

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Executive Summary

Communism would not have collapsed in Europe had it not been for *Solidarnosc* (solidarity), Lech Walesa, and, not to forget, the Polish pope. For Europe, the 21st century began at the Gdansk Lenin Shipyard; for Germany, the present began when the Wall came down at the Brandenburg Gate.

When Pope John Paul II stepped through this gate in 1996, it was not an easy step to take. Peace and reconciliation require strength and self-denial, especially where Poland and Germany are concerned. However, the way is paved, and it is no longer possible to miss the goal: In June, the German-Polish treaty of friendship celebrates its 15th anniversary. In 2007, the German-Polish-Danish corps will assume the leadership of the ISAF in Afghanistan. The German-Polish Youth Organization has logged almost 1.5 million participants in exchange programmes. Germany is Poland's most important trade partner; Poland, in turn, ranks tenth on the importance scale in Germany. In a few days, the German Pope will visit Warsaw, even before he goes to Berlin.

After Hitler, Auschwitz, and the expulsion of millions of Poles and Germans from their homes, a reconciliation seemed impossible for a long time. However, there were those who hoped against all hope. According to Cardinal Karl Lehmann, Christians especially became the 'avant-garde of reconciliation', who made 'belonging to the same church' their watchword: In 1957, the Berlin head of the Caritas, Prelate Zinke, and Bishop Boleslaw Kominek exchanged their first letters. Stanislaw Stomma, the Nestor of the German-Polish reconciliation, visited the Federal Republic in 1958, and Bishop Döpfner spoke out in favour of reconciliation between Germans and Poles in 1960. In 1964, members of the German section of Pax Christi travelled to Auschwitz to do penance, and at the second Vaticanum, Polish and German bishops shook hands as a sign of reconciliation – a step which resulted in spiteful aspersions being cast on the Polish initiators in their communist-ruled homeland.

Relations assumed a definite form. German and Polish bishops paid each other visits, Tadeusz Mazowiecki delivered a speech at the 1974 'Katholikentag' in Mönchengladbach, and the Maximilian Kolbe Organization came into being – a contribution to the reconciliation between the two nations, which was supported by Bishop Wojtyła.

When the Kraków bishop was elected pope, a Pole ascended the Chair of Peter who, despite having lived through the Hitler era, felt attached to the Germans. As early as September 1978, Wojtyła said in Cologne: 'We want to open up a new perspective on the history of our nations and their proximity ordained by divine providence.' To instil courage in his audience, he said in his inauguration address: 'Open, yes open wide the gates for Christ! Open your national borders, your economic and political systems, and the wide field of culture, civilization, and progress to his saving power. Do not fear!'

At a time when others had reconciled themselves to the division of Europe, the Pope promoted the unity of the continent and the return to European history. He drew attention to the peoples east of the Wall and the fences of barbed wire by proclaiming the Slav Apostles Cyril and Methodius co-patrons of Europe. Long before the fall of the Soviet Union, his image of Europe had clear contours: To him, Europe was the ‚shared home‘ of all European nations, a continent which would have to breathe with ‚both lobes of the lung‘, eastern as well as western. Not even twelve years later, the Polish Pope congratulated the peoples of Central and East Europe: ‚You have conquered your fear!‘ Europe’s borders were open.

Moreover, the reconciliation between Poland and Germany has gone far, and it is still advancing: In November 1989, Archbishop Nossol celebrated a reconciliation mass at Kreisau, at which Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Helmut Kohl made a gesture of reconciliation. The German-Polish border problem was settled once and for all in the Two-Plus-Four Treaty. In 1994, Roman Herzog delivered a speech on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw uprising, and Władysław Bartoszewski, speaking before the German Bundestag, bemoaned the fate of all those innocent Germans who lost their homes after the war.

Right from the beginning, German-Polish reconciliation had an eye on the future. After 1989, Germany had vehemently spoken out in favour of Poland’s early accession to the EU. On May 1, 2004, that time had come: People in the new member states enthusiastically celebrated the end of Europe’s division; Germans and Poles embraced one another on the Oder as well as the Neisse. Pope John Paul II contributed to the process of enlargement to the very end, although his vision of a free and united Europe included more than that. From 1987 onwards, he spoke again and again of common values and Europe’s obligation to become aware of its cultural, historical, and religious heritage once again. He always avowed the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order, but also emphasized the authority of the church in cases where the moral order of the continent was concerned.

The German Pope, who gave himself the name of the continent’s first patron, also believes that Europe will only endure if it not only understands itself as an economic community but also remembers its Christian roots. Benedict XVI calls for a Europe based on shared values – on human dignity and on human rights which take precedence over any state legislation, on marriage and family as the basis of the social structure, and on reverence for what is sacred – for God. It is moving that a Polish pope should be succeeded by a German pope. And it is moving that both nations should have jointly accepted their role of promoting freedom in Europe. Indeed, extraordinary things have happened. Nevertheless, a just order on the continent will only become reality once freedom and democracy strike roots in Poland’s eastern neighbours and in the Balkan countries.