



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER

JOHN PAUL II

FOR THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF MONTE CASSINO 1. Monte Cassino... *What does this word say to all of you, present here today in this cemetery? It says a great deal: it speaks of the victory won there; it also speaks of the price Poles paid for it, fighting as the allies of other nations. This alliance was the consequence of events that began on September 1939. The Polish Republic was then seeking allies in the West, aware that it would be unable to face the invasion of Hitler's Germany alone. But perhaps this was not the only reason. Poles were aware of the fact that the conflict they were forced to face was not only demanded by patriotism, to defend the independence of the State they had so recently regained, but also had broader implications for the whole of Europe. Europe had to defend itself from the same threat as Poland. The national socialist system was opposed - if this can be said - to the "European spirit". And this problem could not be dealt with by endless attempts at apparent solutions. These attempts resulted in further victims with the invasion of Czechoslovakia. It was clear that other similar consequences would have occurred had Europe not decided to take a firm stand in the military sense as well. The decision taken by the Polish Republic in 1939 was therefore right. Indeed, it clearly appeared that Europe could not be defended without deciding on a defensive war, whose first phase was precisely Poland in 1939. Poles fought for their country's independence*2. *The victory of Monte Cassino took place five years later on 18 May 1944. The end of the terrible World War was now not far off. Not only had it raged through almost all of Europe, but it had also drawn non-European States into its vortex, the United States first, into the ranks of the Allies, and then Japan, into those of the so-called Axis. To understand what happened in Monte Cassino, it is necessary again to reflect on another date of the past: 17 September 1939, when Poland, desperately defending herself against invasion from the West, was attacked from the East. And this jeopardized the course of events in that Polish September, leading to a double occupation, with Hitler's concentration camps in the West and those of the Soviets in the East. The tragedy of Katyn, still today a unique testimony of the struggle undertaken at the time, took place in the East. In order to understand the events that occurred at Monte Cassino, we also need to have this Eastern chapter of our history before our eyes, because the army commanded by General Wladyslaw Anders, which played such an important role in the battle of Monte Cassino, consisted largely of Poles deported to the Soviet Union. In addition, there were soldiers and officers who, from occupied Poland, had secretly reached the West through Hungary, with the intention of continuing the fight there for the independence of their homeland. Monte Cassino was an important milestone in this struggle. The soldiers involved in that battle were convinced that by helping to solve the problems concerning the whole of Europe, they were on the way to an independent Poland*3. Those of you who fought here treasure in your hearts the memory of all your fellow soldiers. You have come here to visit the Polish military cemetery at Monte Cassino, where General Wladyslaw Anders and Archbishop Józef Gawlina, the faithful chaplain to the Polish army on the battlefield, also repose. Many of your companions rest here: soldiers and officers with names that are not only Polish but also Ukrainian,

Belarusian and Jewish. They all fought in the battle for the same great cause, as the *cemeteries* attest: those of Monte Cassino, Loreto, Bologna and Casamassima. Our thoughts and prayers are addressed to those who fell, who, departing life, were thinking of their loved ones in Poland. Their death was a witness to the readiness that marked all society at the time: *to give one's life for the holy cause of one's homeland*. We cannot forget that a few months later, in that same year of 1944, the *Warsaw Uprising* took place, an episode which corresponded to the battle of Monte Cassino. The Poles in their homeland felt that they had to fight this battle, in order to stress the fact that *Poland had been fighting from the first day to the last, not only to defend her own freedom, but for the future of Europe and the world*. They were convinced that the Soviet army, already close to Warsaw, together with the Polish battalions from the territory of the Soviet Union, would contribute decisively to the success of the Warsaw Uprising. But unfortunately this was not the case. We know that Poland paid very dearly for the Warsaw Uprising: not only with the death of so many thousands of Polish men and women of my contemporaries' generation, but even with the almost total destruction of the capital. ***New life has risen from the ruins***⁴. While we have the image of 50 years ago before our eyes, we must once more repeat the word Monte Cassino, a name that has a far older meaning than the one attributed to it in 1944. We must go back 15 centuries *to the time of St Benedict*. Precisely at Monte Cassino one of those Benedictine abbeys that was to *initiate the formation of Europe* arose. Historians show that on the basis of the Benedictine principle "ora et labora", after the decline of the Roman Empire of the West and after the migrations of peoples, this Europe began to emerge, whose civil and cultural foundations have been preserved to this day. This is *Christian Europe*. It was St Benedict in the West, like Saints Cyril and Methodius in the East, who contributed to the Christianization of Europe in the first millennium. Moreover, the European nations are indebted to them for the very beginnings of their own culture and of this Western civilization, which has continued to develop over the centuries and has also spread to other continents. From this standpoint, what does the battle of Monte Cassino represent? It was the *clashing of two "projects"*: one, both in the East and in the West, aiming at *uprooting Europe from its Christian past* linked to her Patrons, and in particular to St Benedict, and the other, *striving to defend the Christian tradition of Europe and the "European spirit"*. The fact that the Abbey of Monte Cassino was destroyed has a symbolic value. Christ said: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12:24). Evidently, the ancient Abbey of Monte Cassino had to be destroyed *so that a new life for all of Europe could rise from its ruins*. And in a certain sense, this is what happened. On the ruins of the Second World War, a united Europe began to be built, and those who were its first builders staunchly clung to the Christian roots of European culture.⁵ We Poles were unable to participate directly in the rebuilding of Christian Europe undertaken in the West. We were left with the ruins of our capital. Although we had been allies in the victorious coalition, we found ourselves *in the situation of the defeated*, upon whom the domination of the East, within the Soviet Bloc, was imposed for more than 40 years. Hence for us the struggle did not end in 1945; we were forced to take it up all over again. Furthermore, the same thing happened for our neighbours. Commemorating the Monte Cassino victory, it is therefore essential today to add *the truth about all Polish men and women, who in an apparently independent State, became the victims of a totalitarian system*. In their homeland, they gave their lives for the very cause for which Poles had died in 1939, then throughout the occupation and finally at Monte Cassino and in the Warsaw Uprising. We must also remember how many were killed at the hand of the Polish institutions and security services that served the system imposed by the East. They must at least be remembered before God and before history, *in order not to veil the truth about our past* at this decisive moment in history. The Church commemorates her martyrs in martyrologies. We cannot allow that in Poland, especially Poland today, the martyrology of the Polish nation should not be recomposed. ***We pray for a good use of freedom***⁶. This is the price we paid for our current independence. If after the First World War it was necessary to fight to put Poland back on the map of Europe, after the Second World War no one could harbour any

doubts on this score. The Polish nation had paid such a high price, had claimed its right to exist as a State with such tremendous efforts and suffering, that even our enemies - let us say, the dubious "friends" of the East and the West - could not question this right. This too must be said today, on the occasion of the great anniversary of the battle of Monte Cassino, because it has fundamental significance for our Polish and European present. *If it is impossible to detach the "today" from the past*, from all our history and especially from the past 50 years, it is impossible to forget that *every human "today" is the introduction to a human future*. What will the future of Poland and Europe be like? There are many promising elements for this future. Apparently Europe has detached herself from the dangerous systems that have prevailed in the 20th century, and the desire for peaceful co-existence among nations is rather general. Is this also the desire to build our own future in the spirit of Monte Cassino? Monte Cassino represents a symbol proven by the experience of history. But should we not *fear that we might be unable to draw the right conclusions from this experience*, letting ourselves be misled by other "spirits" that have little in common with Monte Cassino, or are even opposed to it, perhaps to the point of being responsible for its systematic destruction? Thus we cannot conclude our meditation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the victory of Monte Cassino without adding a similar *warning for the future* and together beseeching God to remain with us and we with him. We must pray that we may be able to *make good use of the freedom* purchased at such a high price: because *we are returning to the heritage of St Benedict and of Sts Cyril and Methodius*, co-patrons of Europe in the West and in the East. At the end of the second millennium and on the eve of the third, I recommend all those present and the whole of our country to them, as well as to all the patrons of our nation, especially to the one who is the symbol of our century, the martyr saint of Auschwitz, Maximilian Maria Kolbe, as well as to Our Lady of Jasna Góra, Queen of Poland. May almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, bless you.