



The Holy See

VIAGGIO APOSTOLICO IN POLONIA

***DISCORSO DI GIOVANNI PAOLO II
ALLE AUTORITÀ DELLO STATO POLACCO****

Castello reale di Varsavia - Sabato, 8 giugno 1991

Dear Mr President! Members of Government and Parliament! Ladies and Gentlemen!

1. Let me begin with a long quotation: "We recognized that the fortunes of all of us depend solely on the improvement and consolidation of our national constitution. We have experienced the longstanding flaws of our Government and wish to benefit from the situation in which Europe finds itself and from the present, transitory period which has restored us to ourselves. We wish to be free from the shameful violence of foreign rule; to value above life and personal happiness the political existence, external independence, and internal freedom of the Nation whose fate is in our hands. We hope to be deserving of the blessing and gratitude of present and future generations, despite the obstacles raised by passions which can hold sway over us. For the common good, in order to consolidate freedom, and to save our homeland and its borders, we have resolved upon the present Constitution which we pronounce holy and inviolable. It will so remain until the Nation has freely recognized the need – within a legally defined period of time – to amend it"

2. This quotation comes from the Government Regulation, otherwise known as the Constitution, passed by the Polish Parliament on 3 May 1791, 200 years ago. This Constitution justly and proudly can claim precedence on the European continent. It was preceded only by the Constitution of the United States of America, which has remained in force in that great power to this very day.

«Constitution met with a different fate. It is more fitting to describe it as the last word of the First Republic, which was a multinational state. It was also the last expression of its citizens' wisdom and political responsibility, which unfortunately surfaced here too late to halt the decline and prevent the collapse of that enormous organism, a body that was then both vulnerable to extreme

threat from abroad and consumed from within by a grave illness.

Nevertheless, that magnificent Constitution marked a new beginning, for it brought home to all and sundry what kind of a state the modern Poland should have been. This new awareness later permeated all those who, during the period of this country's partitions and foreign domination, fought for an independent Republic; those who spared no sacrifice and braved deadly hazards to toil subsequently for Poland over a period of several generations, both abroad and on foreign-dominated native soil. It would be in order for us to pay tribute to those people today. As a son of the Polish nation, I wish to do so now together with you, dear ladies and gentlemen, and with all my fellow countrymen along the route of my present pilgrimage to my homeland.

3. One can say without exaggerating that the 3 May Constitution adopted in 1791 became the foundation of the new Polish State in 1918, when military defeat of all three belligerent partitioning powers paved the way for the independence of the Second Republic.

However, even now, after the watershed of 1989, that same historical document deserves to become a key point of reference for a new Constitution on which the entire political life of the Third Republic will hinge.

When we probe with our minds the excerpt of the text cited earlier, we are struck by meaningful analogies. Is it not time today to «benefit from the situation in which Europe finds itself' at the close of this century – a century which has been burdened with memories of two great World Wars and even more so with the memory of the totalitarian systems, which, after the collapse of one of them, continued to yield the fruit of the political decisions of Yalta? Can we not say today that the developments of this century «have restored us to ourselves», as was expressed by the authors of the Constitution 200 years ago?

Yes, we have been «restored to ourselves». Instrumental in this regard was the course of historical developments to which the Polish people made an active contribution. In the First World War that active contribution took the form, though not exclusively, of armed struggle, which continued all the way to the Battle of Warsaw in 1920. In the post-Yalta period, that active participation above all made its mark as a movement in defence of national sovereignty which was destroyed by a totalitarian system. That movement reached its climax in 1980 in the form of Polish Solidarity, which never ceased to strive for that goal, not even following the banning of the union under martial law.

Please allow me to quote one contemporary Polish philosopher who points to yet another dimension of historical processes. He says: «Today's humanity is a tangle of nations, interlocked firmly with one another by all manner of bonds. Each nation and each individual has its own vocation to fulfil which is not rigidly defined and admits a number of variations. The world can be understood only as being in dialogue with God who exhorts man and puts right what he despoils,

continually giving us new opportunities» (Andrzej Grzegorzczak, «Solidarity, Ethos or Resignation to Fate?», in *Ethos*, n. 11/12, 1990, p. 114).

4. The two centuries which have passed since the adoption of the 3 May Constitution have also been the time of such dialogue with God. That dialogue has not taken place solely in the deepest recesses of human hearts and consciences. Committed to paper, it has become the recorded essence of a unique period in Polish culture, in Polish literature first and foremost. That record now lives in the new generations and it must live on, for it was an exceptional commentary to the 3 May Constitution. It pointed, and indeed it continues to point the way to our Polish identity in Europe, to the identity of Poles both as a society and as a political community.

This is important when, standing on the threshold of the Third Republic, «restored to ourselves», we are still searching for a road «to our own selves», for a political and economic form for our subjective sovereignty, which is a fact of life. Please allow me now to quote another contemporary thinker, an Italian this time, who offers an exceptionally incisive insight into the Polish national character. «The Poles», he says, «can either join consumerist society, taking last place in it if they succeed, before that society definitely closes its doors to the new arrivals, or they can help rediscover the great, deep, genuine tradition of Europe, at once offering to our continent an alliance of free trade and solidarity» (Rocco Buttiglione, «John Paul II and the Polish Road to Freedom», *Ethos* n. 1 1/12, 1990, p.49).

Solidarity has now moved beyond the borders of Poland and has become an intellectual constituent and moral requirement for the contemporary world and not just for Europe. I spoke about that four years ago on the Baltic, and then the theme reappeared in a more elaborate form in the Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, and also in *Centesimus annus*.

Let us trust then that while ushering in the free market, the Poles will not cease deepening and perpetuating in themselves the «solidarity» perspective. A very important element of this perspective is a concern for human rights, starting with the most important of these, the right to life. These rights should not only be claimed for oneself, solidarity also means striving for respect for the rights of all those who are weak and who have been wronged, especially of those who cannot defend themselves. True solidarity must be integrated. Therefore, unborn children cannot be excluded from it. They too, just like all other human beings, have the right to life.

«In the name of God, One in the Holy Trinity». The 3 May 1791 Constitution starts with an invocation of God. As a son of the Polish nation and a Successor to St Peter in the See of the Bishops of Rome, I too invoke the Most Holy Name in the presence of you who represent the authorities of the Republic at the outset of a new period in its history.

Today as before, the «external independence and internal freedom of the Nation,» and its fate, «(are) in your hands». Like the Fathers of the 3 May Constitution, stay on your guard «to deserve

the blessings and gratitude of the present and future generations... despite the obstacles raised by passions...» of different kinds, like those experienced by the generations past. Despite everything, freedom is always a challenge to freedom, and so is power. Power can be exercised only in service of freedom!

Therefore, I wish you well and I continue fervently to pray that you may exercise the power entrusted to you «for the common good and to consolidate freedom», remembering that freedom can be strengthened only by the truth. Christ said, «the truth shall make you free» (Jn. 8:32).

**L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English n.25 p.6.*

© Copyright 1991 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana