

Joint Message to the Nations of Poland and Russia

**from the Chairman of the Bishops' Conference of Poland
Archbishop Józef Michalik, Metropolitan of Przemyśl,
and the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church,
Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Cyril**

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone's faults against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5: 19)

In the spirit of responsibility for the present and the future of our Churches and peoples, urged by pastoral concern, on behalf of the Catholic Church in Poland and of the Russian Orthodox Church we address this message of reconciliation to the faithful of our Churches, to our nations and all people of good will.

Proclaiming the truth that *Jesus Christ is our peace and reconciliation* (cf. Eph 2: 14; Rom 5:11), aware of the call entrusted to us in the spirit of Christ's Gospel, we wish to make our contribution to the work of rapprochement between our Churches and reconciliation between our nations.

1. Dialogue and reconciliation

Our brotherly nations have been tied together not only by long centuries as neighbours, but also by the extensive Christian legacy of East and West. Aware of this long and shared history and tradition, which has its roots in the Gospel of Christ and has exerted a decisive impact on the identity, spirituality and culture of our peoples and all of Europe, we enter upon path of honest dialogue in the hope that it will heal the wounds of the past, facilitate our

overcoming mutual prejudice and misunderstanding and strengthen us in our pursuit of reconciliation.

Sin, which is the principal source of all divisions, human frailty, individual and collective egoism as well as political pressure led to mutual alienation, overt hostility and even a struggle between our nations. Similar circumstances had earlier led to the dissolution of the original Christian unity. Division and schism, alien to Christ's will, were a major scandal; therefore we redouble our efforts to bring our Churches and nations closer to each other and to become more credible witnesses to the Gospel in the contemporary world.

After the Second World War and the painful experience of atheism, which was imposed upon our nations, we may now walk a path of spiritual and material renewal. If this renewal is to be longstanding, a renewal of the human being must first take place, and through the human being the renewal of the relations between our Churches and nations.

Fraternal dialogue is the way towards such renewal. It may facilitate a better understanding of each other and a reconstruction of mutual trust, and thus lead to reconciliation. Reconciliation, in turn, presupposes a readiness to forgive the wrongs and injustices of the past. We are obliged to do this by the prayer: *Our Father (...) forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those, who trespass against us.*

We call on our faithful to ask for the forgiveness of the wrongs, injustices and all the evil we have inflicted on each other. We are confident that this is the first and foremost step to rebuild mutual trust, a precondition for a sustainable human community and complete reconciliation.

Naturally, to forgive does not mean to forget; memory is a significant part of our identity. We owe this memory also to the victims of the past, those tortured to death who laid down their lives for their faith in God and their homeland on this earth. To forgive, however, means to forgo revenge and hatred and to participate in the construction of concord and brotherhood between people, our nations and countries, which is the foundation of a peaceful future.

2. The past in the perspective of the future

The tragic events of the 20th century were experienced to a greater or lesser degree by all the countries and nations of Europe. Our countries, nations and Churches were painfully afflicted. The Polish and Russian people

share the experience of the Second World War and the period of repressions imposed by totalitarian regimes. These regimes, with their atheist ideology, fought against all forms of religious life and waged an especially atrocious war on Christianity and our Churches. Millions of innocent people fell victim to this war, of which we are reminded by numerous places of murder and graves on both Polish and Russian soil.

Sometimes the events of our often difficult and tragic past give rise to mutual resentments and accusations, which prevent the healing of old wounds.

An objective recognition of facts and an account of the magnitude of the tragedies and dramas of the past is an urgent task for historians and specialists. We appreciate the action taken by competent commissions and teams of experts in our respective countries. We express a conviction that their efforts will allow us to learn the unadulterated historical truth, help account for doubts and effectively overcome negative stereotypes. We express a conviction that sustainable reconciliation as the foundation of a peaceful future may take place exclusively on the basis of the complete truth about our shared past.

We call upon all those who pursue good, sustainable peace and a happy future: politicians, social activists, people of science, culture and the arts, those who believe in God and those who do not and representatives of the Churches – do not falter in your efforts to foster dialogue, support all that facilitates the reconstruction of mutual trust and brings people closer to one another and all that allows us to build a peaceful future for our countries and nations, a future free from violence and wars.

3. Together in the face of new challenges

As a result of political and social transformations, at the close of the 20th century our Churches were finally able to fulfil their mission of evangelisation, and therefore to help our societies develop on the basis of traditional Christian values. Throughout history, Christianity contributed immensely to the formation of the spirituality and culture of our nations. Today, in an era of religious indifference and widespread secularisation, we make every effort so that the social life and culture of our nations should not be stripped of principal moral values, the cornerstone of a viable peaceful future.

The essential task of the Church until the end of time is the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. All Christians, not only the clergy, but also the lay

faithful are called to preach the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and to proclaim the Good News with their words and through the witness of their lives, in an individual, familial and social context.

We recognise the autonomy of secular and ecclesiastical authority, but at the same time call for cooperation with respect to care for the family, education, social order and other questions which are vital for the good of the general public. We want to uphold tolerance and first and foremost defend fundamental freedoms, primarily religious freedom, as well as to guard the right of the presence of religion in public life.

Today our nations are faced with yet new challenges. Fundamental moral principles based on the Ten Commandments are questioned under the pretence of retaining the principle of secularism or the protection of freedom. We are faced with the promotion of abortion, euthanasia and same-sex relations, persistently shown as a form of marriage; a consumerist lifestyle is endorsed, traditional values rejected, while religious symbols are removed from public places.

Quite often we encounter signs of hostility towards Christ, His Gospel and Cross; attempts are made to exclude the Church from public life. A misinterpreted secularism assumes a form of fundamentalism and in reality is a form of atheism.

We call on everyone to respect the inalienable dignity of each human being, created *in God's image and likeness* (Gen 1: 27). In the name of the future of our nations we call for the respect and protection of the life of each and every human being from the moment of conception until natural death. We believe not only terrorism and armed conflict, but also abortion and euthanasia to be grave sins against life and a disgrace to contemporary civilisation.

The family, a permanent relation between man and woman, is the sound foundation of all societies. As an institution founded by God (cf. Gen 1: 28; 2:23–24), the family warrants respect and protection as it is the cradle of life, a wholesome place of development, a guarantee of social stability, and a sign of hope for society. The family is a place conducive to the development of the human being who is responsible for himself, other people and the society he is part of.

We look with sincere concern, hope and love to young people, whom we wish to protect from demoralisation and to educate in the spirit of the Gospel. We want to teach young people how to love God, their fellow human beings and the earthly homeland as well as to foster in them a spirit of Christian culture, which will bear fruit with respect, tolerance and justice.

We are certain that the Risen Christ offers hope not only for our Churches and nations, but also for Europe and the entire world. May He grant His grace so that each Pole can see each Russian and each Russian can see each Pole as a friend and brother.

Both Poles and Russians have profound respect for the Holy Virgin Mary. Having trust in the intercession of the Mother of God, we entrust to Her care the great work of the reconciliation and rapprochement between our Churches and nations. Recalling the words of Paul the Apostle: *Christ's peace must reign in your hearts* (Col 3:15), we confer on all our blessing, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

+ Józef
Archbishop Michalik
Chairman of Polish Bishops'
Conference

+ Cyril
Patriarch of Moscow
and All Russia

Warsaw, 17.08.2012