**Pope Benedict XVI “In This Place of Horror”**

To speak in this place of horror, in this place where unprecedented mass crimes were committed against God and man, is almost impossible - and it is particularly difficult and troubling for a Christian, for a Pope from Germany. In a place like this, words fail; in the end, there can only be a dread silence - a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this? In silence, then, we bow our heads before the endless line of those who suffered and were put to death here; yet our silence becomes in turn a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation, a plea to the living God never to let this happen again.

Twenty-seven years ago, on June 7, 1979, Pope John Paul II stood in this place. He said: “I come here today as a pilgrim. As you know, I have been here many times. So many times! And many times I have gone down to Maximilian Kolbe’s death cell, paused before the execution wall, and walked amid the ruins of the Birkenau ovens. It was impossible for me not to come here as Pope.” Pope John Paul came here as a son of that people which, along with the Jewish people, suffered most in this place and, in general, throughout the war. “Six million Poles lost their lives during the Second World War: a fifth of the nation,” he reminded us.

Pope John Paul II came here as a son of the Polish people. I come here today as a son of the German people. For this very reason, I can and must echo his words: I could not fail to come here. I had to come. It is a duty before the truth and the just due of all who suffered here, a duty before God, for me to come here as the successor of Pope John Paul II and as a son of the German people - a son of that people over which a ring of criminals rose to power by false promises of future greatness and the recovery of the nation’s honor, prominence and prosperity, but also through terror and intimidation, with the result that our people was used and abused as an instrument of their thirst for destruction and power. Yes, I could not fail to come here.

How many questions arise in this place! Where was God in those days? Why was he silent? How could he permit this endless slaughter, this triumph of evil? The words of Psalm 44 come to mind, Israel’s lament for its woes: “You have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness ... because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!”

We cannot peer into God’s mysterious plan - we see only piecemeal, and we would be wrong to set ourselves up as judges of God and history. Then we would not be defending man, but only contributing to his downfall. No - when all is said and done, we must continue to cry out humbly yet insistently to God: Rouse yourself! Do not forget mankind, your creature! We make our prayer to God and we appeal to humanity, that this reason, the logic of love and the recognition of the power of reconciliation and peace, may prevail over the threats arising from irrationalism or from a spurious and godless reason.

The place where we are standing is a place of memory, it is the place of the Shoah. The past is never simply the past. It always has something to say to us; it tells us the paths to take and the paths not to take. Like John Paul II, I have walked alongside the inscriptions in various languages erected in memory of those who died here: inscriptions in Belarusian, Czech, German, French, Greek, Hebrew, Croatian, Italian, Yiddish, Hungarian, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, Romani, Romanian, Slovak, Serbian, Ukrainian, Judaeo-Spanish and English. All these inscriptions speak of human grief, they give us a glimpse of the cynicism of that regime which treated men and women as material objects, and failed to see them as persons embodying the image of God. Some inscriptions are pointed reminders. There is one in Hebrew. The rulers of the Third Reich wanted to crush the entire Jewish people, to cancel it from the register of the peoples of the earth.

Then there is the inscription in Polish. First and foremost they wanted to eliminate the cultural elite, thus erasing the Polish people as an autonomous historical subject and reducing it, to the extent that it continued to exist, to slavery. Another inscription offering a pointed reminder is the one written in the language of the Sinti and Roma people. They were seen as part of the refuse of world history, in an ideology which valued only the empirically useful; everything else, according to this view, was to be written off as lebensunwertes Leben - life unworthy of being lived. The other inscriptions, written in Europe’s many languages, also speak to us of the sufferings of men and women from the whole continent. Yes, behind these inscriptions is hidden the fate of countless human beings. They jar our memory, they touch our hearts. They have no desire to instill hatred in us: instead, they show us the terrifying effect of hatred.

By God’s grace, together with the purification of memory demanded by this place of horror, a number of initiatives have sprung up with the aim of imposing a limit upon evil and confirming goodness. Just now I was able to bless the Center for Dialogue and Prayer. In Oswiecim is the Center of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, and the International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust. There is also the International House for Meetings of Young people. So there is hope that this place of horror will gradually become a place for constructive thinking, and that remembrance will foster resistance to evil and the triumph of love.