

Polish Requiem.

Westminster Cathedral Thursday 29 April 2010.

Introduction: I welcome you all this evening to the Cathedral to this Requiem Mass for all who died in the air disaster at Smolensk. I welcome all our distinguished guests: The Earl Peel, representing Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh; Sir Michael Pakenham, representing His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall. I welcome the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Sainz Munos and Archbishop Wesoly and Bishop Polak from the Bishops' Conference of Poland. I welcome most warmly Her Excellency the Ambassador of Poland, Ms Erecinska and Councillor Jan Predergast, the Deputy Lord Mayor of the City of Westminster. You are all most welcome

This Cathedral is full of the memories and resonances of Poland: the Mass celebrated in 1980 by Pope John Paul II; the Mass for General Anders in 2007. The great gathering for the Mass celebrated here by Cardinal Glemp in 2008 to mark the 90th anniversary of Polish independence. There are chapels and memorials to Poland here. Here, tonight, we share your sorrow and we share your faith. We thank you for the contribution you make to our country, to our faith, to the one Church of which we are all part. And we assure you of our love and prayers.

HOMILY

This evening the words of the Polish National Anthem will be powerfully present in the hearts of many of you: 'Poland has not perished whilst we are still alive.'

Indeed you are alive. Indeed Poland has not perished.

This is your strong assertion as you gather, in such numbers, to celebrate this Mass for all who died in the dreadful crash at Smolensk on the fateful morning of 10 April this year.

At times it might have felt as if Poland had perished. So much was lost in that disaster, so many who embodied the struggle, the journey, of Poland from the oppression of the years following 1945 through to the independence you enjoy today. They include your beloved President Lech Kaczynski and his wife Maria, a First Lady who supported so many charitable and cultural initiatives. So many other leaders were lost, from different aspects of Polish society, so many who sought to re-build Poland, and of course, Richard Kaczarowski the last President of Poland in exile, here in London. It was he who in 1990 passed the Polish presidential insignia to Lech Walesa, thus ending those long years of exile.

Poland has not perished, for you are alive.

You are alive, but sorrowful. We mourn for all who have died, but this community has a very special place in its heart for Fr Bronislaw Gostomski, priest of the Polish parish of St Andrew Bobola here in Shepherd's Bush. Like other Polish parishes, St Andrew's is a vibrant, growing community which Fr Bronek served with fervour and dedication. Many of you weep for him this evening. But you are alive and you will continue his work in all the groups and initiatives in the parish which he started and supported.

St Andrew's is a special parish for it contains a chapel in which the 23,000 Polish officers and civilians killed at Katyn by the Soviets 70 years ago are commemorated. Oh the poignancy of that final journey of all who died in that disaster! They were all going to Katyn on a journey of immense importance: a journey of remembrance and of reconciliation. Those who lost their lives, died on duty: on duty to their country, on duty to their history, on duty to their future.

But perhaps, most importantly of all, they were on duty to the truth. President Kaczynski had prepared his speech for the celebrations in Katyn. In it he reflected on the depth of the wounds in Polish history inflicted by that massacre and hoped for a rebuilding of relationships between Russia and Poland. He was to speak of the need for partnership, for dialogue between equal partners, for priority to be given to the values shared by all: democracy, freedom and pluralism. But most of all he called for truth. His words were:

'We Christians know it well: truth, however painful it might be, sets us free. It connects us. It brings justice with it. Truth guides us on the road to reconciliation. Let the wound of Katyn heal at last.'

Poland has not perished, for you are alive; you are alive to the truth; you are alive in the truth. And this evening in our prayer, in our singing, in our celebration of these Most Sacred Mysteries, we proclaim that this truth is no other than Jesus Christ.

If you are alive in him, then Poland is not lost, none of us is lost, not even those so cruelly taken from this life are ever lost. In the Gospel this evening Jesus says to us: 'Now the will of him who sent me is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me, but that I shall raise it up on the last day.'

This is the source of our hope, even in the midst of this suffering and confusion of meaning. We hear His words. We reach out and cling to them. We make room in our hearts for His promise, His presence, His power. Then, and only then, can we serve the truth, the truth of our past, the truth of our present and the truth of our future.

It is the reading from the Book of Revelation which, this evening, can capture our minds and imagination. In these words, our sadness can slowly give way to hope – not a superficial, naive optimism that everything will work out OK, but a profound and enduring hope which overcomes all obstacles in its search for truth and for peace because it is rooted in God, founded on Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Listen again:

‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth’ -Yes, a new earth, a new creation! Not a peace at the last, but a new earth, a new reality, a kingdom of justice and of peace which now we only glimpse.

‘Look, here God lives among his people. God will make his home among them; they will be his people and he will be their God.’ - Yes, that is what our hearts long for: a strong and enduring presence of God, in our hearts, in our families, in our society, who brings all things to completion.

‘God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone.’ - Yes, this indeed in our hope, even today amidst the tears of Smolensk and the burden of Katyn and the sadness of the harm we do to each other.

‘Then, the One sitting on the throne said: ‘Look, I am making all things new.’ - Yes this the work to which we wish to contribute, in which we wish to play our part: in this troubled world to make all things new. This work has one central actor, one central action: Jesus, our Lord, and his death on the cross. There, in that moment, he is making all things new! And it is that action, that moment, which comes to us now, in this celebration of the Mass.

This is the source of the inspiration – the Holy Spirit - which each of us needs so that we go from this Mass renewed in faith and in our commitment to each other, to our countries, to the work of making all things new. And this evening, as we all pray for Poland, spare a prayer for this country too, that our choice of political leadership will be guided by wisdom and prayer.

‘Lord Jesus: attend to our sadness. Wipe away our tears. Give new life to those who have died. Build up your people. Through your death make us new. For Poland has not perished, not ever, whilst we are alive in you.’ Amen.