

Alphons HORTEN

THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN IN A DEMOCRACY

Reverend Fathers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I begin with words of the deepest, heartfelt thanks that on this day, the birthday of our Holy Father, in this room I can, as a German, speak about the future of Europe. Above all, I thank you, Your Magnificence, as our host, and my friend, Fr. Tadeusz Styczeń, whose idea this was.

This hall is permeated with the spirit of Karol Wojtyła and Stefan Wyszyński. In a quite special way it heightens our awareness of the significance of the pontificate of John Paul II. No other pope has so decisively influenced world history through his personal engagement as he has done – with a clear perception of political reality, with courageous determination and tireless activity, above all, with boundless trust in God. In the judgement of leading Europeans, Americans and Russians, the fall of the Soviet empire and its philosophy of life would not have happened so quickly or so peacefully without his admirable activity in Poland and in many other areas.

In accord with the “basic law of our Church,” as Edith Stein says, “the unfathomable secret of the cross,” this wonderful turning point was only possible because, in the foregoing decades, together with many other confessors and sufferers, great martyr-cardinals had, as real leaders of their peoples, bravely stood up for freedom against violence and suppression:

- Stepinač in Croatia
- Mindszenty in Hungary
- Beran and Tomašek in Prague
- Wyszyński in Poland.

To these names we should add Korec in Slovakia and Todea in Romania, who are still alive today.

The fall and disintegration of communism provide a commentary on Christian truth, serious and unique in world history. Marx and Lenin were uncompromising atheists. They had a false perception of mankind and consequently succumbed to the temptation of the snake in the garden of Eden: “You shall be as God.” The terrible devastation of the state, of society, of the economy and of nature, the deliberate destruction of the highest human and spiritual values that came about under communist rule show where man ends when, in presumptuous pride, he believes he can behave like God. New facts come to

light daily, showing the previously unimagined extent of the general destruction, most of it the visible result of transgression against the Christian moral code as foretold by Dostoyevsky in the previous century.

The free world has lost its most dangerous enemy. Yet it finds itself in a serious, life-threatening crisis. To quote Robert Spaemann, "banal nihilism" is now the dominant philosophy. Prevailing public opinion has lost its relationship to the supernatural. The relevance of human activity is considered to be limited to this life. Present day ideas usually replace the expectation of divine, immortal life with hopes of better conditions of life on earth. Everything that should be of a serious nature to man is regarded as illusory. This "banal nihilism" was characterised by Nietzsche a century ago in the chapter on the "last man" in his *Zarathustra*: "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? asks the last man, and blinks. The earth has become small and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. A little poison from time to time gives pleasant dreams; at the end much poison provides a pleasant death. One still works, for work is entertaining, but one takes care that the entertainment does not become a burden. Who wishes to rule or to obey? Both are too troublesome. No shepherd and no sheep. Everybody wants the same things. Everybody is equal. There are pleasures for the day and pleasures for the night. But health is valued. «We have found happiness», say the last men, and blink."

The past few decades show with frightening clarity that the free world is approaching the state foretold by Nietzsche with worrying speed. If the Church in Europe is to demonstrate its decisive strength, as the Holy Father wishes, we are confronted with enormous tasks.

The limited extent of this speech compels me to choose from the many-faceted theme of religious renewal in Europe a single but important aspect, namely the tasks and duties of a Christian as citizen of a democracy. If Christianity regards itself as a formative principle of European culture, then it must pay close attention to the field of politics.

Per me reges regnant (kings rule through me). These words taken from the *Book of Wisdom*, are inscribed on the imperial crown of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, as statement of the divine right of kings. In relation to an authority which, according to these words, is based on and thus legitimised by the supernatural, the ordinary citizen appears as a subject, obliged to obey and therefore with limited responsibility for the common good.

After a thousand years of development and tradition under this order, the Catholic Church has only very slowly come round to an understanding of the phenomenon of democracy, a form of government in which there is no single ruler, but in which the free citizens are "the sovereign," as they are called in Switzerland.

The full significance of this change for the relationship between church and democracy is only slowly becoming clear. The last Vatican Council generally

welcomed “the development of political structures that give all citizens a greater possibility to participate freely and actively in laying the legislative foundations of their political community, in directing political events, in determining the fields of activity and purposes of different institutions and in electing their governments.”

However, the importance of this statement and its implications for the democratically ruled states are still not sufficiently understood and evaluated.

Neither does the new Universal Catechism go beyond the statement of the Council, but is limited to generalised formulations, without clearly indicating the serious duty of each and every Christian to do his or her best for the common good in the immediate community and in the state as a whole.

The fact that, together with the right to free expression of opinion, democracy also legitimises open opposition to the government, naturally makes governing more difficult. Therefore, democracy only functions well if its citizens show tolerance, civil courage and a sense of responsibility for society as a whole. Thus it is not enough for a Christian to limit his activity to doing his duty as voter and taxpayer, but otherwise to regard politics from the standpoint of a more or less interested onlooker. On the contrary, to the best of his ability, he has a duty to shoulder the burden of co-responsibility for political events; if necessary, he must bravely oppose recognisable abuse of the law and possible endangering of state order.

Under these conditions it is a prime duty of Christians in a democracy to ask themselves constantly how they can carry out their task as citizens and thus discharge their co-responsibility for the common good. Democracy lives from the consent and joint activity of its citizens. It is therefore not enough for the citizen merely to complain about a particular abuse or state of affairs. He must also feel a responsibility to participate, as far as he is able, in rectifying them. He must understand that the often unexciting daily life of a democracy also offers the possibility that each citizen in his place and in the forms open to him, can collaborate with the government and so help to correct negative developments and guide matters to a better conclusion. There are many ways of doing this:

- Information among friends and fellow citizens of topical questions of politics, as seen from the Christian point of view.
- Reader’s letters to the press and television institutes, with reasoned protest against incorrect depiction and accounts.
- Influencing one’s own parliamentary representative so that he knows the standpoint of a convinced Christian, and takes account of it.
- Active cooperation as member of a political party, in order to present the Christian standpoint when discussing and preparing important decisions.
- Participation in public or written discussions.

- In important cases, the institution of legal proceedings to clarify or amend incorrect conditions.
- Finally, acting as a deputy in communal, regional and national parliaments.

Educated and experienced Christians bear a special responsibility in this many-sided representation and defence of the Christian standpoint, but individual engagement is indispensable in today's mass democracy. Otherwise there is a grave risk that it could change into "onlooker democracy," that is, a growing section of the electorate could lose its sense of personal responsibility, and all too readily make superficial judgements without any attempt at more thorough examination and evaluation of the available alternatives.

For the sake of the common good, Christians with a sense of responsibility must do their utmost to prevent such dangerous tendencies; they must search their consciences for that which can be personally undertaken to counteract "the good man's resignation" frequently lamented by Pius XII. This is a state of mind that leads to the non-use and loss of important opportunities for positive development. The great mediaeval theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas in *De regimine principum*, defined the duties of the Christian ruler in great detail. Similarly, present day moral theologians have the important task of defining, exactly and comprehensively, the Christian's duties as citizens of a democracy. This is particularly important in states which, after many years of communist rule, must now build up a new, sound, democratic order. What is needed is the personal commitment of the individual, something that usually involves much additional effort, not least for the family as well.

We daily face the fact that we live in a post-Christian society, in a world that has largely lost its order and sense of proportion, a world in which principles and basic values diverge increasingly and evermore significantly from those that are fundamental for our faith and life. But precisely because, as Christian realists, we entertain no illusions, we also recognise that strong, positive healing forces can radiate from our own position and attitude: a sick organism can recover its health if it receives a certain medicament in very small amounts. In this way, even in the post-Christian world of today, the Christian world-view can make a decisive contribution to the healing of society and the state. There are many encouraging examples of this. Thus, after World War II the Italian *comitati civici*, a non-partisan movement initiated by Pius XII, averted the imminent Communist majority. Even today minorities of Christians, aware of their responsibility could change or at least favorably influence the political climate of their country with possibly significant consequences.

At this point it is with particular pleasure that I thank Rocco Buttiglione most heartily for the example he has set by his endeavours in the political life. His effort to regenerate a party with Christian principles is no easy task. We

hope it will have a lasting effect on the political and moral recovery of his country. Thomas Aquinas says in Dante's *Divine Comedy* that wisdom in action surpasses contemplative wisdom. The highest form of human activity is the exercise of government, and that, in our democratic world, involves active cooperation in politics and society. Thus the philosopher Buttiglione has, as a leader in politics, attained the higher rank of an active wise man.

In conclusion, let me add a few words on the relationship between Poland and Germany in view of the new Europe that is to come. In 1962 Romano Guardini said:

The new Europe is not yet a reality; it presupposes, above all, a new attitude. Each European nation must re-think its history in terms of the great new European form of life that is to come. This vision calls for a high degree of self-conquest and profound thought.

After the dark decades of their relations in this century, Poles and Germans must recognise their conjoined destiny on the road to a peaceful Europe that embraces all its peoples, and can concentrate its still splintered and conflicting forces on the accomplishment of great, common tasks.

All this can only be achieved on the basis of our western Christian culture. Our future can only be assured on this foundation, not on mounting national gross product, technical progress, greater welfare.

At the time of the great change, the Poles and Germans may consider it a grace that a Polish pope is actively influencing spiritual developments. In addition to Benedict of Nursia, the elevation of Cyril and Methodius to patron saints of Europe is an illuminating sign that Europe is unthinkable without the Slavic nations. It is only jointly with the Slavs that Europe can attain the rich abundance of its creative strength.

John Paul II has repeatedly called on us to preserve our great historical inheritance and to make it visible in our public and private life. Thus, on his last visit to Germany, in front of the cathedral of Speyer he said:

Europe's rich human and spiritual heritage is a warning message for Europeans of today and tomorrow. Only if we recognise the lasting value of our Christian history and develop it for our present tasks, is it possible, as a spiritually united Europe, to herald a liberating message to the world, proclaiming a future worth striving for, encouraging the nations to make it worthy of mankind and helping them to overcome their trials and problems.

In Strasbourg in 1988, John Paul II, very seriously but with great confidence, challenged Europeans to use today's unique chances for a united Europe, but simultaneously to resist the prevalent spirit of hedonism and materialism and to bear in mind the fundamental truths. He closed with the words: "Europe, return to your highest values; Europe, retrieve your lost soul."