



POLISH LEAGUE AGAINST DEFAMATION

The Good Name Redoubt – Polish League Against Defamation
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His Holiness Pope Francis

**By hand of
His Excellency
Salvatore Pennacchio
Apostolic Nuncio
Al. Jana Chrystiana Szucha 12
00-582 Warszawa**

Your Holiness,

As most of my compatriots certainly did, I followed with great interest the accounts of Your Holiness's recent visit to Lithuania, a country which is particularly close to Poles, because of our shared history.

Our shared history had its roots in the Christianisation of Lithuania, which occurred in 1386, and was a landmark event for that country. It was closely connected with the marriage between the pagan Lithuanian ruler, Władysław Jagiełło, and Poland's Christian monarch, Saint Jadwiga. It was thus by the hand of Poland that Lithuania adopted Christ's teachings, and became part of the Christian civilisation. It was this marriage which bound the two nations into a personal union, based on the same ruler. In 1569 the nations decided to create a real union by establishing a common state – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (formally the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), reflecting both a political and a spiritual relationship. This tie was broken by the end of the 18th Century as a result of partitions imposed by the aggressive and absolutist neighbouring countries – Russia, Prussia and Austria. This, in fact, put an end on

the existence of the common state of Poles and Lithuanians, as well as other nations (Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews for whom its land provided shelter) – a state of “Noble’s Democracy.”

Due to the political conditions prevailing in 1918, the Commonwealth did not manage to recover after 120 years of captivity. While Poland was reborn, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania remained divided, most of its parts being controlled by Soviet Russia, the western regions being joined to Poland, and the remaining areas forming the autonomous State of Lithuania. This division was extremely painful, causing much distress to Jerzy Matulewicz, Blessed Bishop of Vilnius, a Lithuanian, a restorer of the Polish Congregation of Marian Fathers, and a zealous patriot, both Lithuanian and Polish.

The Polish-Lithuanian relationship has been shaped by several hundred years of shared history, coupled with scientific and cultural achievements. The two nations were also in a joint struggle against the most outrageous totalitarian systems of the 20th Century, i.e. German Nazism and Soviet Communism.

Bearing this in mind, the statement made by Your Holiness on 26 September 2018, while returning from Your visit to Lithuania, were much to my surprise and disbelief. When addressing Lithuanians, Your Holiness spoke about what they had suffered from the East and the West, stating as follows: *“when speaking about your difficult history, we think about the East, but some of your tragic fate also came from the West, the German, the Polish, and mostly from Nazism.”*

These words are deeply hurtful to the Polish people whose ancestors co-owned the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which now belongs to Lithuania, together with Lithuanians, Belarusians and Jews, succeeded in building good relations, and, despite the emerging differences, in acting for the common good, with mutual respect. These words are also hurtful to those Poles whose ancestors popularised education and science, and also cultivated Christianity, imploring the Lady of the Gate of Dawn for intercession. Finally, they are hugely unjust to those whose relatives were brutally murdered by the German and Soviet occupiers.

Unfortunately, our shared history has also seen such cases as the massacre in Ponary (close to Vilnius) where German troops, supported by *Ypatingasis būrys*, murdered over 100,000 people, including around 80,000 Jews, and nearly 20,000 Poles. The latter group included members of the Polish intelligentsia residing in Lithuania, among whom were outstanding professors at Stefan Batory University. My own aunt miraculously avoided death there.

Nowadays, being mindful of the shared past, sometimes with underlying animosities, we need to rebuild good relations. However, we must do it in the spirit and on the foundations of truth, given especially the challenging geopolitical situation and the numerous threats posed by cultural revolution.

The words which allege that the Poles were jointly responsible for the tragic fate of Lithuania, and put us on a par with Germans and their outrageous crimes, are far from the truth, and seem to mark an attempt at equating the roles of perpetrators and victims. They also seem consistent with an extremely dangerous trend represented by certain environments which are hostile to Poland and which are spreading misinformation, e.g. by making the Poles responsible for someone else's crimes, with a view to obtaining financial or political benefits.

Counting on your understanding, I would kindly ask you to redress this undoubted harm to the perception of both Poland and the Poles by issuing an appropriate statement. This harm appears even greater, as Your Holiness spoke these words in times of increased unjust attacks on the Catholic Church, while the Polish Nation has for centuries remained faithful to the Holy See.

Maciej Świrski
President of the Good Name Redoubt
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