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1984

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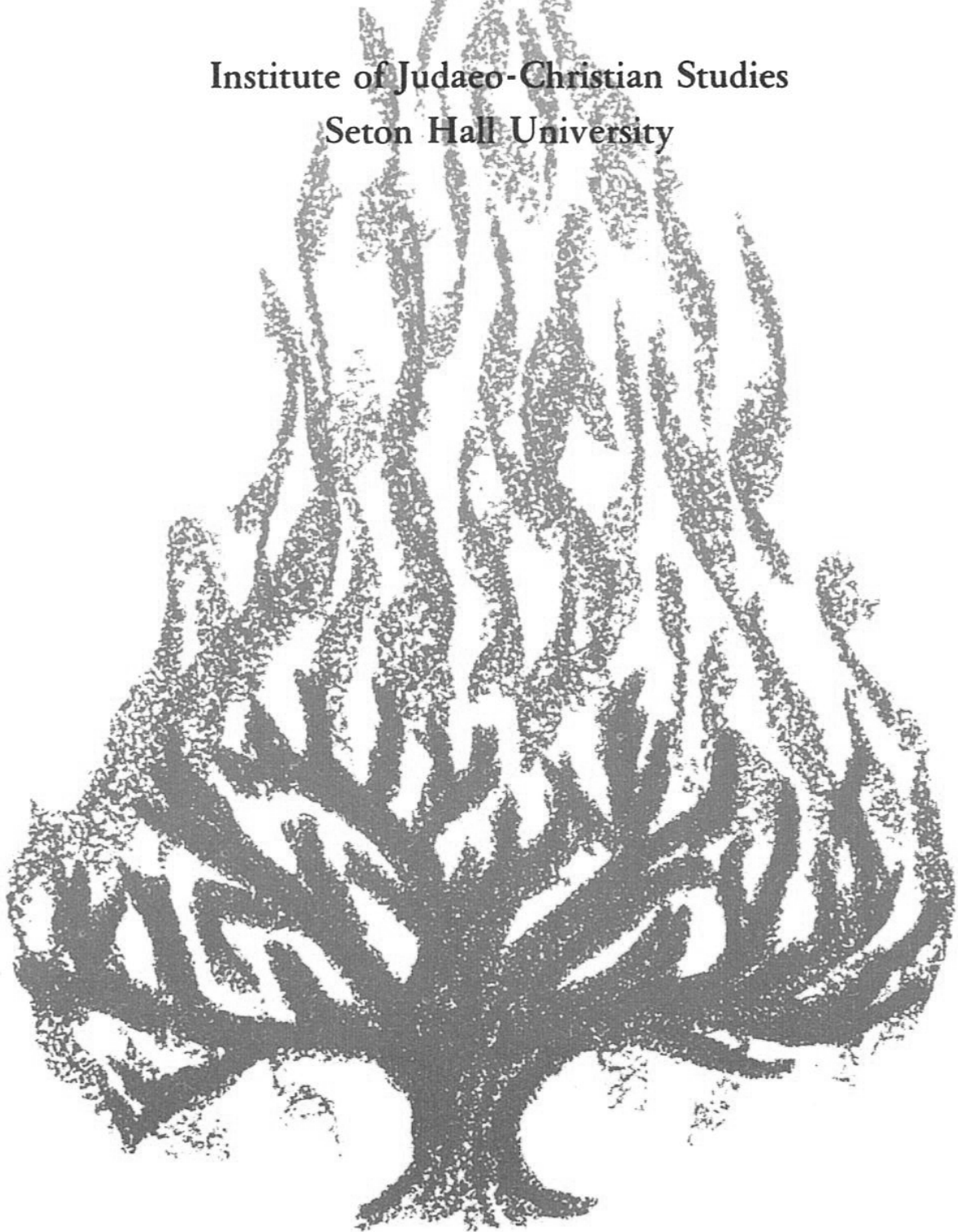
Oesterreicher, John M., "Martyrs of the Decalogue" (1984). *Selected Works of John M. Oesterreicher*. 17.
<https://scholarship.shu.edu/oesterreicher/17>

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MARTYRS OF THE DECALOGUE

Reflections on Pope John Paul's Pilgrimage to Auschwitz

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Scripture tells that one day, while tending his father-in-law's flock, Moses came to Mount Horeb. There, an amazing sight arrested his eye: a bush, though aflame, was not consumed; the fire raged, yet the bush remained whole. From the heart of the blazing shrub a Voice – the Voice of the Lord – commissioned him to free his slaving kin. He was to take them out of the country of oppression, privation, and idolatry into a land of freedom, food, and faith. Wishing to assure his wretched kin that his mission was legitimate, he asked for the name of the One who had chosen him. The enigmatic answer was: Ehyeh esher ehyeh, which is often rendered: I AM WHO I AM, but should really read: I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. In other words, I will be with you in your travel as your Helper and Deliverer. I am your ever-present Champion. The Burning Bush is thus a symbol of the divine Presence even in the fire of human affliction.

John M. Oesterreicher

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WHEN POPE JOHN PAUL II visited Auschwitz on June 7, 1979, he knelt at the stark Wall of Death. The Wall is one of the locations the Nazi leaders had selected for the murder of Polish intellectuals and priests: the Nazis saw in them – quite rightly – spiritual resisters and potential rebels. In fact, they looked upon Poles, indeed all Slavs, as an inferior race – not as despicable as Jews, but despicable just the same. The Wall still speaks of the horror it witnessed, and so does the ground. Having felt men and women, God's images, trampled on; having sucked the blood and tears of four million victims, the earth of Auschwitz continues to tremble.

Torment and Triumph

The Pope knelt and prayed. After a while he rose, flew by helicopter to Birkenau – an extension of the Auschwitz camp, about one and a half miles from the latter – in order to celebrate the Eucharist with bishops and priests who had themselves been kept in one of the Nazi concentration camps. At the time of the sermon, the Pope turned to his fellow-worshippers with the news of victory.

“The power that conquers the world (of evil) is our faith,” were the Pope's very first words. How could he speak of conquest, of triumph? Had he forgotten that the ground from which he addressed his companions and his world-wide audience had seen unspeakable suffering? Had he forgotten that in the days of Hitler's rule Auschwitz was the chosen site for the defeat of human life, honor, virtue, even decency? By no means. He himself called Auschwitz a “place where human dignity was appallingly trampled underfoot.”

Pope John Paul spoke with great feeling, like one who had experienced the torments Hitler's victims had had to endure, who felt their pain as his own. “People know that I have been here often – and how often! How many times have I gone down to the death cell of Maximilian Kolbe; how often have I stood at the Wall of Death, how often have I walked among the ruins of the crematoria of Birkenau!”

Auschwitz, the Pope exclaimed, was “built on hatred of, and contempt for, humanity – in the name of a crazed ideology. It was built on cruelty.” Yet, he chose not to confine himself to decrying the torments the inmates of the death camp had suffered, or to denouncing the shame the brutal murder of millions had brought on all human beings. He went on to praise the victory some of the victims had won through their faith and love, not merely in their own name but in the name of all humanity.

The Pope singled out two prisoners, a man and a woman, a priest and a nun, the one by birth a Pole, the other a Jew. The former, Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar, gave his life for a fellow prisoner; voluntarily, he took the place of a family man on whom the camp “authorities” had imposed the grim penalties of solitary confinement and death by starvation.

The other prisoner recalled by the Pope was Edith Stein, philosopher and Carmelite nun. A Jewish survivor reports that at the "holding camp" of Westerbork, Holland, while awaiting deportation to "the East," she walked among the women of the camp, "comforting, helping, bringing peace, like an angel." She also "washed, combed, and fed small children of the camp." Later at Auschwitz, she entered the gas chamber, side by side with her Jewish brethren.

Of Father Kolbe the Pope said with deep conviction that he "won his victory through faith and love, on the very site established under the evil banner of faith-denied and love-sneered at, of every trace of human dignity and mutual concern mocked.... On this place of atrocious butchery, ...Father Maximilian prevailed, gaining a victory not unlike that of Christ." Of Edith Stein, the Pope spoke in a similar vein: "On this site on which (the Nazis) rode roughshod over human dignity — lo, the victory of a human being through loving faith and faithful love."

I have no doubt, it was the tortured — those without power — and not the torturers — those seeming to have all the power there was — who were the true representatives of humanity. Moreover, whenever a Jew professed: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One!" or a Christian cried out: "Father, into your hands I recommend my spirit," the reign of evil shook at its foundation and God's reign drew near.

Similarly, whenever one of the innocent sufferers of the death camps looked up to heaven, longing for the invisible God, in a silent plea for grace, comfort, or endurance, Hitler's malice was, if only for an instant, brought to naught. Thus Pope John Paul confidently says that, in obedience to Christ's will, he "bears testimony to humanity's grandeur in our days and, at the same time, to its misery, to its defeat and to its victory."

Poland and all Humanity

Pope John Paul II is very much a man of this age, alive to its needs, open to its opportunities, alert to its perils. No less is he a man of tradition, aware of the continuity of history. He is mindful of being the spiritual heir of John XXIII and Paul VI. By the same token, he speaks as a son of the Polish people, the defender of Poland's rights as well as spokesman for all humanity.

Auschwitz is "a memorial of the war." It reminds the Pope that six million of his kinsmen — one fifth of the Polish nation — lost their lives in that war. As long as Auschwitz stands, "it will remind us of the war with its singular rise of hatred, cruelty, and destruction." The war's glamour is fast disappearing. The arms modern technology has invented make the power of destruction grow, day by day. In our time, then, "the responsibility for a given war rests not only with those who plot that war, but also with those who do not do everything in their power to prevent it."

Having thus warned us, Pope John Paul II recalls the speech of Paul VI to the United Nations. He had reminded the delegates that “the blood of millions – in fact, 56 millions – the countless and unheard-of sufferings, the senseless carnage, the terrible ruins brought the nations of the world together in a pact that now unites them.” All this should be ever before their eyes. Were they to pledge to each other, “No more war! No more war! this vow would change the future of the world. Peace, only peace must determine the destinies of peoples and of all humankind.”

If the stern lesson of Auschwitz is to be learned, the Pope continues, if the cries of its tortured are to be heard and bear fruit for Europe and the world, we will have to let the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights work to the fullest, as Pope John XXIII stressed in his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. Men and women everywhere must be free “to search for truth, to do what is good and right, and to live their lives consistent with human dignity.” Nations, too, are entitled to existence, freedom, independence, culture and genuine development.

Pope John Paul urges people everywhere to come to Auschwitz – the world’s conscience, its never-resting memory – so as to learn fear. Here they will see, “how far hatred can go, how far the destruction of human beings by other human beings, and how far cruelty.” In the name of his native country, “so often wronged by other nations,” in the name of all wronged nations and people, Pope John Paul ends his sermon with this prayer: “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One! Deliver us from plague, hunger, fire, and war! Yes, Lord, deliver us from war!”

The Murderous Kingdom

Of the tyrannical kingdom that was Auschwitz but the shell remains: watchtowers, bunkers, camp huts, barbed wire, gallows, and relics of gas chambers. The place of Satanic triumph is empty now, the prisoners of yesteryear gone. Memorial tablets – bearing names in several different languages – keep alive their memory. The prisoners were Jews and Christians, believers and non-believers, people of various backgrounds and persuasions. Their names are written in Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, English, Flemish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Romany – the language of Gypsies – Rumanian, Russian, Yiddish, and other languages.

The Pope paused at the Polish and Russian inscriptions, meditating aloud on the suffering they bespeak. Looking at the Hebrew names, he exclaimed:

This inscription awakens in us the memory of the people whose sons and daughters were intended for total annihilation. This people traces its ancestry to Abraham, the “father of our faith,” to quote Paul of Tarsus (Rm 4:12). The very people that received from God the Commandment “You must not kill!” experienced in its own flesh to the highest degree what killing really means. No one may pass by this inscription with indifference.

The Holocaust is not merely an event of the past; it continually challenges us to respond and do our utmost in preventing these or similar horrors from ever again taking place.

The time Pope John Paul devoted to the recalling of the murder of Jews was quite short – perhaps one minute out of fifteen. But his words were determined and powerful. In referring to Hitler's scheme of destroying the Jewish people, root and branch; in pointing to Israel's theological significance, the Pope wished to do more than to tell what had happened visibly in Auschwitz. He would never have spoken of murder matter-of-factly, for every murder is like Cain's slaying of his brother Abel. Of every murder God says: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Gn. 4:11). Every murder is fratricide, even attempted deicide. As Scripture says, whenever human blood is shed it is more likely than not that another human being will shed the murderer's blood. This is said to remind Israel and us that all human life is sacred and inviolate – God's trust,

For in His image

God made (every) human being. (Gn 9:6)

Am I too bold in assuming that thoughts like these were in Pope John Paul's mind?

Martrys of the Decalogue

To take this view a step further, did Pope John Paul wish to point to, or unwittingly touch on, one of the secret sources of Hitler's hatred of Jews? With the instinct of Cain, Hitler seems to have seen all living Jews as contemporaries of those who were delivered from the bondage of Egypt and led through the desert on the way to the Promised Land. He saw them as part of that generation which stood at Sinai and heard the words "You shall," "You shall not," words that are like thunder to Man's rebellious ears.

It is perplexing – is it not? – to think that Hitler's evil plot against the Jews should be based on a perception running parallel to the Jewish tradition that he could scarcely have known. Yes, it is alarming to think that Hitler detested the Jews because he recoiled from the mystery of their existence, as proclaimed by the Passover Haggadah:

In every generation, every Jew must consider himself or herself as one who came out of Egypt.... The Holy One blessed be He did redeem, not only our ancestors but also us with them, as it is said: "And He brought us out from there to bring us to the land He had promised to our ancestors." (Dt 6:23)

My thesis on the origin of Hitler's contempt for the Jewish people is based on his life as a whole, on the sum total of his words and works; yet it is expressly supported by several of his "pronouncements." His table talks from the years 1932 to 1934, in the presence of one of Danzig's major office bearers, Hermann Rauschnig, are a veritable storehouse of the *Fuehrer's* opinions on a variety of

topics, particularly on faith, worship, Judaism, and Christianity. Here are some of his dicta which prove his awareness of, and inveterate repugnance to, the theological significance of the Jewish people:

We are now at the end of the Age of Reason.

The intellect...has become a disease of life.

Our revolution is not merely political or social; we are at the outset of a tremendous overthrow of moral ideas and of Man's spiritual orientation....

The tablets of Mount Sinai have lost their validity.

Conscience is a Jewish invention; like circumcision, it mutilates Man....

There is no such thing as truth....

One must distrust mind and conscience; one must place one's trust in one's instincts.

Since all tenets rejected in this "proclamation" are associated with Jews and Judaism, indeed derive from them, Hitler had to see in the Jews his archenemies.

Whether the lives of individual Jews conform to the Commandments or not, Jews in their totality, that is, as covenanted people, stand for God's claim on all humanity, each person and the whole community. True, Hitler was no theologian, but one of the forces that give him insight into the theological reality of the Jews as the People of the Law, the People of Conscience, was the *ressentiment* of one who again and again thought himself cheated by "fate." Hence he sensed in them — quite apart from anything they might say or do — a reproach.

The Jews were an invisible phalanx, standing in the way of the amoral society he wished to build, a society based, not on the distinction between good and evil, but on the "Aryan instinct" or the drive of Nietzsche's "Blond Beast." Their very being spoiled his dream of becoming the architect of that new world, the creator of a society in which biblical values — the Ten Commandments, first of all — were "outlawed." As spoilers of his scheme, they had to be done away with. Even their memory was to be eradicated.

Thus the Jews who died as Hitler's victims unwittingly bore testimony to the Ten Commandments. They are and will be for all times "Martyrs of the Decalogue." Though Pope John Paul himself did not use this title of honor, it is, I am certain, in keeping with the content as well as the tone of his plea and warning.

God's Image and Likeness

At Auschwitz, the site of Jewish martyrdom, the Pope brought to a climax what he had begun elsewhere. From the beginning of his pontificate, and long before, he has championed the dignity of all human beings — a dignity that cannot be acquired by toil or won by the sword. It is neither an honor accorded to a few in recognition of a heroic deed nor a title conferred on a privileged class of people.

It is a rank bestowed on all human beings, men and women, believers and unbelievers, the noble and the common, the lettered and the unlettered, the rich and the poor, on people of every color and every origin. It is God's gift to all, given them "in their sleep" (Ps 127:2), that is, in their mother's womb.

Because Adam's sons and daughters are all made in the Lord's image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27), each one is a person unlike any other. Each can think and speak, will and act — in freedom, not only by instinct — feel and love as well as create, but not "out of nothing." As creatures resembling their Maker, men and women are God's representatives, His deputies, or ambassadors on earth. These insights do not come from Greece or India, Egypt or China or other great cultures of the past, rather are they part of God's revelation to the people of Israel, part of the Hebrew Bible and thus of the teaching of the Church.

Hitler loathed the biblical message of the dignity of everyone bearing a human face. Instead he followed Nietzsche who, in Hitler's opinion, realized that Man had to be surpassed but was not quite sure of the mode. According to Hitler, the humanity of the future will be divided into *Herrenmenschen*, lordly individuals, people born to rule and *Herdenmenschen*, slavish people, mass men, born followers. Like the master race, "Master man" — fearless and formidable — is meant to dominate, while the "herd man" is one whose existence has been stunted. According to the biblical vision, every human being is called to represent God, to shape the world in pursuance of His will, to write His signature on all His works. The "master man" of Hitler's vision, however, seeks to imprint on the world his own imperious will. In fact, Hitler's vision is of "Man as God in the making" or "Man becoming God."

There cannot be two visions further apart. Human dignity as proclaimed by Scripture, and thus by Jews and Christians, rests on inalienable rights *and* on indispensable duties. To be truly human is to be spoken to, to be addressed, to be called by God. A human being who has never heard God's demanding voice, who shuts out all divine imperatives, is spiritually naked. In giving us the Ten Commandments, God has covered our nakedness, checked our savage inclinations. More than that, His imperatives are far from being cold orders, paragraphs of a soulless book; they are invitations to respond lovingly to His love. Men and women are called to be responsible, and thus to be made free. Blessed are those who live by the Ten Commandments; blessed, even more those who died for them, died bearing witness to them and their Lord.

My sources for the Pope's words and actions were several foreign language periodicals. I tried to verify my translation by comparing it with the text given in Pilgrim to Poland, (Boston, St. Paul's Edition, 1979) pp. 207-216.

*This essay was written weeks after the Pope's pilgrimage in 1977 but never published.
It is published now in 1984 on the occasion of my 80th birthday, as a Gift to my friends.
Program and cover design by Patricia Hynes.*