



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE POLISH
SOLIDARNOSC (SOLIDARITY) UNION**

Tuesday, 11 November 2003

I offer a cordial welcome to everyone present. I greet in particular President Lech Wa³esa, President of the Union. I greet Archbishop Tadeusz Go³clowski, episcopal representative responsible for pastoral ministry in the world of work. I am glad once again to offer hospitality at the Vatican to representatives of "Solidarnosc".

It is not the first time that we have met on 11 November, a special day for Poland. I remember that such an Audience also took place in 1996. I said then: *"In the depths of my heart I bear your problems, aspirations, worries and joys, and the fatigue that goes with your work, and I commend them to God in my daily prayer"* (11 November 1996, n. 1; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 4 December 1996, p. 7).

Recalling the date of 11 November cannot fail to remind me of the national freedom the Republic of Poland regained that day after years of strife which cost our Nation so much deprivation and so many sacrifices. This external freedom was short lived, but we have always been able to appeal to it in the fight to preserve our inner, spiritual freedom. I know how dear this day was to all those who, in the Communist period, sought to oppose the systematic suppression of the freedom of human beings, the humiliation of their dignity and the denial of their fundamental rights. Later, that opposition gave birth to the movement that you, its artisans, are continuing. This movement was also linked to 11 November, to the freedom that found external political expression in 1918. It developed from the inner freedom of the individual citizens of the divided Republic of Poland and from the spiritual freedom of the whole Nation.

Although after the end of the Second World War and the Yalta Agreements this spiritual freedom was repressed, it survived and became the leaven of the peaceful transformations in our country,

and later throughout Europe, which also occurred thanks to the "Solidarnosc" Union. I thank God for the year 1979. In that year the sense of unity for good and the common desire for prosperity of the oppressed Nation overcame hatred and the desire for revenge and became the seed of a democratic State. Yes, there were attempts to destroy this work. We all remember 13 December 1981. We managed to survive those trials. I thank God, for on 19 April 1989, I was able to say the following words: Mary, "I commend to your motherly care "Solidarnosc' which today, following the new legalization of 17 April, can resume its activity. I recommend to you the process connected with this event, which aims at moulding the life of the Nation according to the laws of the sovereign society. I pray to you, Our Lady of Jasna Góra, that in line with this process all may continue to show the indispensable courage, wisdom and deliberation to serve the common good" (*ORE*, 3 May 1989, p. 12).

I am recalling these events because they are particularly significant in our country's history. And it seems that they are being forgotten. The younger generations have not experienced them first-hand.

Consequently, one might well wonder whether they properly appreciate the freedom they possess if they are unaware of the price that was paid for it. "Solidarnosc" cannot neglect to pay attention to this history, both so near and yet so distant. We cannot abstain from remembering the post-war history of how our freedom was recovered. We must constantly refer to this heritage so that freedom will not degenerate into anarchy, but take the form of joint responsibility for Poland's future and that of every one of its citizens.

On 15 January 1981, I said to the representatives of "Solidarnosc": "I think, Ladies and Gentlemen, that you are fully aware of the duties that are in store for you.... These are duties of enormous importance. They are connected with the need for a full guarantee of the dignity and efficacy of human work, by means of respect for all the personal, family and social rights of every man, who is a subject of work. In this sense these duties have a fundamental significance for the life of the whole of society, of the entire Nation, for its common good. In fact, the common good of society is reduced, when all is said and done, to the question: who makes up society; who is every man; how does he live and work? Therefore, your autonomous activity has, and must always have, a clear reference to the whole of social morality. First of all, to the morality connected with the field of work, to relations between the worker and the employer" (*Address to Delegation of Independent Polish Trade Unions*, 15 January, 1981, n. 5; *ORE*, 9 February 1981, p. 21).

It seems that today this exhortation to guarantee the dignity and efficacy of human work has lost none of its importance. I know how these two aspects of work are threatened today. Alongside the development of the market economy, new problems are emerging that painfully affect the workers. I have spoken several times recently about the problem of unemployment that is acquiring dangerous proportions in many parts of Poland. Apparently, it seems that the trade unions do not exercise influence on it. However, we should ask ourselves whether they can influence the

engagement of new employees - since they appear to be hired more and more frequently on a temporary basis - or the method of dismissal, as they are fired with total disregard for the fate of the individuals and their families. Yes, "Solidarnosc" is clearly more active in the large firms, especially those that are State-owned. Yet we might well ask if the trade union pays enough attention to the fate of employees in small private firms, supermarkets, schools, hospitals or other institutions subject to the market economy, whose manpower cannot compare with those working in the mines or steel plants. Your union must openly side with the workers whose employers deny them their right to speak or to oppose phenomena that violate their fundamental rights.

I know that in our country it can happen that workers do not receive their wages. A short time ago, referring to the letter which the Polish Bishops published on this topic, I said that blocking payment owed for work is a sin that cries to heaven for revenge. "To take away a neighbour's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood" (Sir 34: 22). This abuse is the cause of the tragic plight of many working people and their families. The Trade Union "Solidarnosc" cannot remain indifferent to this heartrending phenomenon.

Another problem is the treatment of workers solely as "manpower". It happens that employers in Poland deny their employees the right to rest, to medical assistance and even to maternity leave.

Isn't this a curtailment of the freedom that "Solidarnosc" fought for? Much still remains to be done here. This duty is not only incumbent on the State authorities and the juridical institutions, but also on "Solidarnosc", in which the working world has placed such great hopes. They cannot be disappointed.

In 1981, during the state of emergency, I said to the representatives of the Trade Union "Solidarnosc": "The activity of the trade unions does not have a political character; it must not be an instrument of the action of anyone, of any political party, in order to be able to concentrate, in an exclusive and fully autonomous way, on the great social good of human work and of working people" (*ibid.* 15 January 1981, n. 6). It seems that it was the politicization of the trade union - probably a historical necessity - that led to its weakening. As I wrote in the Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, the State's authority is an indirect employer whose interests do not usually correspond to the employee's needs. It seems that "Solidarnosc", at a certain stage in history, on entering directly into the world of politics and assuming responsibility for governing the country, had no option but to give up defending the interests of workers in many economic and public sectors. May I say that today, if "Solidarnosc" truly desires to serve the Nation, it should return to its roots, to the ideals that illuminated it as a trade union. Power passes from hand to hand, and workers, farmers, teachers, health-care workers and all other workers, independently of the authority in power in the country, are expecting help with defending their rights. "Solidarnosc" cannot overlook this.

Your task is difficult and demanding. Every day, therefore, I keep all your efforts in my prayer. By defending workers' rights you are working for a just cause, so you can count on the Church's help.

I believe that this action will be effective and will lead to an improvement in the future of working people in our country. With God's help, may you continue to carry out the work we began together so long ago. Take my greeting to the entire "Solidarnosc" syndicate.

Take my greeting to the world of work.

Take my greeting to your families.

God bless all of you!