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Christian Identity in Pluralistic Europe

1. Foreword

- **To-day’s Europe is pluralistic.** Although it is **striving for** economic and political integration, its historically determined cultural diversity and that of national traditions persist. In political and social life, pluralism appears in the activity of different political parties and other organizations which are inspired by different philosophies and ideologies. Such a pluralism manifests itself in the European as well as in the national space. Within these two frameworks there is also a pluralism of religion, which can be seen not only through the existence of different Christian Churches, still dominating in Europe, but also through the presence of non-Christian religions on our continent.
- **Catholic Church recognizes pluralism in all of the above aspects.** However, taking into account its evangelic mission, it is important to note that the Church takes a clear stand on the pluralism of religion, both in the European as well as in the universal dimension. In the relations with Christian Churches this stand has an ecumenical character and its goal consists in rebuilding Christian unity. As far as non-Christian communities are concerned, the Catholic Church is carrying on an inter-religious dialog, considering it as *a method to get to know each other and as a mutual enrichment.*¹
- **The Church recognizes also the socio-political pluralism** and that attitude was expressed by John Paul II in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* by the following words: *The Church has no models to present; models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic, political and cultural aspects, as these interact with one another.*²

¹ Encyclical „*Redemptoris Missio*”, 55.

² *Centesimus Annus* 43. See more: f. M. Zięba, *Demokracja i antyewangelizacja (Democracy and Anti-evangelization)*, „W Drodze”, Poznań 1997, at 46.

2. Threats to Christian identity in contemporary Europe

Within the pluralistic European environment the efforts of states, organizations and communities to grant all people suitable freedom are visible. However, these highly desirable endeavours, also undertaken to a large extent by the Church, are not efficient enough, as they do not prevent all threats to freedom, including freedom of religion. These are the feelings of many European Christians, as Christianity faces in our times unjustified criticism and even hostile attitudes, adopted by some political, scientific and cultural circles, inspired by liberalism. This anti-evangelic tendency was described by the pope John Paul II in his book *“Crossing the Threshold of Hope”* as follows: *Against the spirit of the world, the Church takes up anew each day a struggle that is none other than the struggle for the world’s soul. If in fact, on the one hand, the Gospel and evangelization are present in this world, on the other, there is also present a powerful anti-evangelization which is well organized and has the means to vigorously oppose the Gospel and evangelization. The struggle for the soul of the contemporary world is at its height where the spirit of this world seems strongest. In this sense the encyclical Redemptoris Missio speaks of modern Areopagi. Today these Areopagi are the worlds of science, culture, and media; these are the worlds of writers and artists, the worlds where the intellectual elite are formed.*

a) Threats arising from politics

- In the field of political life threats to Christianity arise from specific interpretation of the principle of separation of the State and the Church, universally adopted by the European countries.³ This principle is used to justify axiological neutrality of the State and to throw religion out from the public life into the private one. This tendency is characterized by the Polish philosopher father Zięba as follows: *In the considerable part of the Western culture, a hostility towards religion is growing. The modern state more and more often abandons the concept of tolerance conceived as granting a peaceful coexistence of different groups of citizens, in favour of active elimination of the axiology from the social life, changing tolerance into ideology according to which ethic and religion are nothing but an issue of private convictions.*⁴
- An example of such a tendency could be the socialist policy of the current Spanish government, whose Prime Minister clearly declared the project of ideological and cultural transformation, which leads to the elimination of the Church from public life.⁵ In the European dimension the anti-Christian tendency appears in some political acts of the European Union. It was described by the American philosopher and theologian G. Weigel as follows: *EU bureaucracy and the European Parliament seem to tend to impose secularism as an official ideology of the EU. In other words: they want to establish secularism as the European “religion”.*⁶

³ Ex. art. 25.3 of the Polish Constitution and the French Act on Secularization of 1905.

⁴ f. Zięba, *Democracy...*, at 109-110

⁵ The opinion expressed by E. Hertfeldera de Aldecoa in the interview for the Polish daily *“Rzeczpospolita”* of the 26-27 January 2008.

⁶ Quoted foll. W. Łysiak, *Salon II*, Publ. Wydawnictwo Nobilis, at 525.

- A significant example of an anti-Christian policy led by the EU bureaucracy, was the omission of *Invocatio Dei* and the absence of any other reference to Christianity, as a source of European identity, in the Constitutional Treaty and then in the Lisbon Treaty (called the Reforming Treaty). This policy met with firm opposition from the Church as well as from many Christians. Moreover, it was also criticized by some agnostics. This attitude could be illustrated by the following opinion of a well-known Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski: *The fact that the Treaty establishing the Constitution for Europe or the current Lisbon Treaty do not mention the substantial contribution of Christianity to the European history, to the process of shaping European culture and European institutions, is in my opinion absurd.(...) It can be considered as historically unquestionable that Christianity is part of the foundation of our culture. The European history is also a history of Christianity. It has to be said aloud.*⁷
- The case of Rocco Buttiglione, an Italian philosopher and minister, is also significant. The European Parliament opposed his candidature for the position of European Commissioner because he expressed his opinion on homosexuality according to the Church's teaching. The position of the European Parliament, discriminating Christians, was imposed by those of its political parties which are inspired by cultural liberalism and relativism. Thus, Buttiglione was right saying that: *Anti-Christian forces are nowadays stronger as never before, and everybody who believes in God and does not mock religion is suspicious.*

b) threats arising from cultural liberalism

- The most serious threats for Christianity in Europe are nowadays stemming from growing cultural liberalism which rejects transcendental and personal dimension of human dignity, as well as an ultimate truth, being a foundation of the Christian anthropology.⁸ Influential political circles consider liberalism conceived this way as the only suitable philosophy for the democratic system. This attitude was pointed out by the Pope John Paul II in the encyclical "*Centessimus Annus*": *Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and sceptical relativism is the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends.*⁹ The present Pope Benedict XVI also deplored this tendency in the European culture saying openly that: *In Europe has expanded a culture aiming to evict the God from the conscience of the community. And he added: The secularism, spreading on West, is something deeply alien to the world cultures. These cultures are based on the conviction that the World without God has no future.*¹⁰

⁷ L. Kołakowski, *Wiera fundamentem istnienia* (The Faith a Foundation of Existence), „Europa”, Number 12(207), 2008.

⁸ See more: F. Zięba in: M. Novak, A. Rausher SJ, M. Zięba OP, *Chrześcijaństwo, demokracja, kapitalizm* (Christianity, Democracy, Capitalism), at. 125 and foll.

⁹ *Centessimus Annus*, 46

¹⁰ See: Card. J. Ratzinger, *Europa. I suoi fondamenti oggi e domani*, cyt. za the Polish edition published by Wydawnictwo Jedność , Kielce 2005, at 32.

- The daily life brings a number of examples of a growing anti-Christian tendency in Europe, although disguised in the slogan of the state's religious neutrality. The most significant are the acts aiming at evicting the cross and religious symbols from schools, including Christmas crib. Furthermore, some artists and writers take liberties to blaspheme against Christian symbols and even against Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin (ex. Dan Brown's book *Da Vinci Code*). And all of this happens in the name of *political correctness* or of the principle of equality and freedom, which means that we should not offend confessors of non-Christian religions living in European countries. This tendency was once accurately characterized by Card. J. Ratzinger: *Thank God, in Europe, an insult to Israel's faith, to its image of God, as well as to the great leaders of this religion is subject to penalty. A man who insults Koran and Islamic religion is also liable to penalty. But as far as Christ is concerned and everything that is sacred for Christians, the freedom of opinion is promoted as the highest good, the limitation of which could threaten and even destroy tolerance and freedom at all. Yet, the freedom of opinion has its limits exactly in this that one may not violate the honour and dignity of another man.*¹¹
- c) threats arising from mass media**
- Considering threats for Christianity, we can not neglect mass media whose attitude often undermines efforts of the Church in favour of evangelization and in particular in favour of the presence of religion in the public life. *The majority of contemporary mass media disseminate the opinion that even a public expression of Christian point of view is an act of intolerance which interferes with privacy and destroys the freedom of conscience.*¹² This attitude could be illustrated by following examples. Many of British media made fun of former British Prime Minister for his religious beliefs. Recently one of the Polish leftist daily papers has refused a certain Polish politician and intellectual the right to participate in the debate on the issue of *in vitro* fertilization only because Christian faith and ethics are the source of his opinions.¹³
 - But even if the secular mass media inform about the Church's teaching they often do it in an unreliable and ignorant way, with a marketing approach. This tendency was characterized by late cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger: *Neither moral reflection of the Church, nor problems confronted by every human conscience or struggles for the defence of human dignity – nothing of this becomes a subject of information (...) except for an obsession about the birth control, the women's role in the Church, abortion and priests' celibacy.*¹⁴ In this year's proclamation addressed to mass media the Pope Benedict XVI criticized them for manipulating consciences and for *imposing distorted models of personal life*; for being vulgar and showing violence. He also appealed for the mass media not to be used for ideological

¹¹ See: Card. J. Ratzinger, *Europa...*, at 31.

¹² f. Zięba, *Democracy...*, at 110.

¹³ See: E. K. Czaczkowska, *Kościół ma prawo mówić (The Church Has the Right to Speak)*, Polish daily paper „Rzeczpospolita” Number 117(8018) 2008.

¹⁴ f. Zięba, *Democracy...* at 26-27.

purposes. Instead, the mass media should to be an instrument in service of greater justice and solidarity, they should defend men and respect human dignity.¹⁵

d) impact of other religions

- We should pay particular attention to threats for Christianity in Europe stemming from non-Christian religions. It is not about the very presence of other religions on our continent which has historical roots, but about a growing number of their believers and about problems related to their integration with the countries of settlement. It concerns particularly the unfriendly attitudes manifested towards Christians by some Islamic circles in Europe, inspired by their radical religious leaders. Indeed, the readiness of Muslims to have a dialogue with Christians, based on good will and esteem for Christianity, to cooperate with them in order to oppose secularization in Europe is very rare. At the same time, one can see in some European countries a particular sensibility of authorities to the demands of Muslims, as well as to their growing political influence.
- We also have to mention difficulties confronted by Catholics and Greek-Catholics in Eastern Europe in their relations with Orthodox Churches dominating in that part of the continent. It seems that one of the important reasons for this lamentable situation is the abuse of accusations of proselytism addressed to the Catholic Church in particular by the Russian Orthodox Church.

e) aggressiveness of secular circles

It is impossible not to notice a growing aggressiveness of some secular circles in Europe towards Christians and in particular towards the Catholic Church. This attitude could be illustrated for example by demonstrations against the pilgrimage of John Paul II to France and Germany in 1996. And quite recently, Catholics and many other open-minded people have been shocked by a letter of a group of professors and students from the University *La Sapienza* in Rome against the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to this school. The argument of the opponents was a presumed Pope's intention *to curb the science* and to reduce it *to pseudo-rational religious dogmas*. It is significant that they also mentioned that the visit could provoke violent reactions of the Muslim world. The last argument was quite rightly considered as a proof that the real reason of the protest against the Pope's visit to the University was of ideological character.¹⁶

- It's obvious that all of these acts of hostility and contempt for Christianity, demonstrated by secular circles, are the signs of their fight with the Church for *the soul of the World*, as it was said by the Pope John Paul II. And at the same time it has to be underlined that all of these acts do not meet an adequate reaction of the public opinion, particularly the Christian one. The father Zięba rightly points out that: *even if a hint of such aggressiveness and contempt was demonstrated for Islam or Judaism, the same politicians, mass media and public opinion would be*

¹⁵ Quoted foll. Polish daily „Polska Dziennik Łódzki” of 25.01.2008.

¹⁶ See: G. Israel, *Kiedy kard. Ratzinger bronił Galileusza na Uniwersytecie La Sapienza (When Cardinal Ratzinger Defended Galileo At the Sapienza University)*, „L'Osservatore Romano” nr 3(301)2008, at 18 (Polish edition).

*united in a groundswell of protests, demanding together an exemplary punishment for the sowers of religious hate.*¹⁷

3. Christians' activity for preserving their religious identity

Facing the above threats to Christian identity in Europe, the Church counteracts by stressing that human dignity and human rights, existing by their own power and not granted by legislators, should be considered as basic factors of European identity, together with democracy and the rule of law.¹⁸ However, the Church's struggle has to be supported by the lay Catholics. Their activity heading in this direction could take different forms. It seems, however, that particularly important are: personal testimony of faith, strengthening of the presence of Christian culture in the public environments and close cooperation with the institutional Church.

a) personal testimony of faith

Christians have to take up a challenge which is nowadays issued to them and to a religious vision of the world in general by the contemporary world. Although the Christian identity is engrafted into us by the sacrament of baptism, it has to be constantly nourished by our religious practices, by cooperation with the Divine Grace and by our personal testimony of Christianity in our daily life. This testimony has always had and still has a particular significance, as through this lay Christians carry out their evangelical mission. It was underlined by the Pope John Paul II in his Exhortation "*Ecclesia in Europa*": *Our contemporaries "listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. (...) It is not enough that truth and grace are offered through the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments; they need to be accepted and experienced in every practical situation, in the way Christians and ecclesial communities lead their lives. This is one of the greatest challenges set before the Church in Europe at the beginning of the new millennium.*¹⁹

- It's also worth to quote an opinion of a German sociologist F. X. Kaufmann: *One should recommend to Christians worried about the state of faith, a conscious practice of the content of the Old Testament's psalms, deep understanding of Jesus' sermons from the Gospel according to St John and the letters from St Paul. Then those testimonies of faith will convince them that Judeo-Christian faith was always persecuted and nobody presumed that once it would conquer the whole World. Inflexibility of the faith among sufferings of the World is to the same degree its feature as the hope it preaches that God always attends upon a man.*²⁰
- Family is a particularly important place of evangelization through our personal testimony of faith. Family is our natural community in which we live everyday and which is the easiest place to practice the Christ's commandment of mutual love.

¹⁷ f. Zięba, *Democracy...*, at 110.

¹⁸ See: Card. J. Ratzinger, *Europa...*, at. 28-29.

¹⁹ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, 49.

²⁰ F.X. Kaufmann, *Czy chrześcijaństwo przetrwa? (Wie überlebt das Christentum?)*, Publ. WAM, Kraków 2004, at 159.

Lay Catholics should add to this efforts to strengthen family as a fundamental social structure, which is threatened today by aggressive communities of homosexuals.

b) building Christian culture in the public space

- Lay Christians should implement Christian principles and values in the public life, especially if they actively participate therein. For it was rightly noted that: *today the main line of confrontation within our civilization goes through editorial offices, courts, schools and universities. And not only an image of mass media, a shape of law or education is at stake, but the future of Christianity.*²¹ The cardinal Paul Poupard appealed to all Christians for active participation in this struggle, during the Congress of Christian Culture in Lublin in the year 2000: *I call all of you – poets and writers, philosophers and theologians, filmmakers and artists, architects and musicians, researchers and statesmen – to translate Christian anthropology into the language of modernity and to implement it by your genius of creativeness (...). For the religious vision of the World is connected with life and history, ethics and aesthetics, with literature and science, with art and liturgy, for overabundance which it brings, for symbols which proposes, for a point which gives to fleetness of passing time the fullness of an eternity in a moment.*²²
- The important role of Christian culture in the struggle against contemporary tendency to secularization is underlined not only by shepherds of the Church but also by researchers. It is shown by the following opinion of an English historian C. Dawson: *If a Renaissance and revival of the Christian culture – a social life of the Christian community – will not come, the contemporary civilization will become secular in more aggressive and active way than today. And in that godless civilization the life will be much more difficult, as well as a religious practice for a single believer. There will not be a protection for family threatened by the state and mass culture.*²³
- The Church teaches us that propagation of Christian culture under conditions of contemporary pluralism is possible. Such a teaching was addressed to us through the following words of cardinal J. Ratzinger: *The pluralism manifests itself in the respect for what is sacred for others; however, we can adopt such an attitude only when sanctity, God, are not unknown for ourselves. Of course, we may and we should derive knowledge from what is sacred for others, but it is when facing the others and for the sake of their good that our duty becomes to cultivate in ourselves the respect for what is sacred and to show the image of God which we saw – the God full of mercy for the poor and the weak, for widows and orphans and for newcomers; the God who is so human that he himself became a man.*²⁴

²¹ G. Górny, *Kto zdobędzie nowożytne areopagi?* (*Who will Conquer Modern Areopagus?*), Polish daily „Rzeczpospolita” Number 109 (8010) 2008.

²² See also an Austrian report by J. Höchtl, *Do parts of Europe need a new wave of missionaries to achieve a Christian Renaissance?* (text distributed by www.).

²³ f. Zięba, *Democracy...*, at 109.

²⁴ See: Card. J. Ratzinger, *Europa...*, at 32.

- New attitudes towards Christianity and the religious vision of the World which can be noted in the opinions of some philosophers and politicians are conducive to the efforts undertaken in order to strengthen Christian culture in the public space. It is worth noting, first of all, that the opinion of sociologists according to which the religious faith is disappearing, has turned out to be false. We can also see a renaissance of religion as an issue in the contemporary debates on culture. The opinion of L. Kołakowski is significant in this respect: *I totally do not believe in the death of religious faith and of the Church. I'm convinced that faith belongs to the foundations of our existence. Religion can not perish. It can, of course, evolve and transform itself. The return to some forms of religiousness in Christianity is impossible, but it doesn't mean that Christianity is dying. The question is, however, how to find this Christian word which will be convincing for people and at the same time consistent with the spirit and tradition of Christianity.*²⁵ It is also worth quoting the archbishop Życiński from Lublin who said in his book: *There are well-founded reasons to assert that within the present cultural pluralism, Christianity will carry out its cultural mission, proclaiming the Good News in secularized environment. This situation is similar to the situation of the Church during the apostolic times, when cultural patterns of Imperium Romanum as well as the hierarchy of values adopted in Judaism were diverging from radical evangelical patterns. As it was then, Christianity should seek new forms of preaching the Gospel, avoiding to consider as absolute the means which were efficient on an earlier stage.*²⁶
- We can also note opinions rejecting traditional liberal-leftist secularity, understood as a rejection of any kind of religion, in favour of secularity understood as peaceful coexistence of all religions. According to Catholic thinkers, this evolution is due to the pontificate of John Paul II.²⁷ Indeed, the language of some politicians is changing while defining from the beginning the notion of secularity. An opinion expressed by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy during the audience with the Holy Father Benedict XVI on 20th December 2007 is characteristic. The President said: *France needs professed Catholics who are not afraid to say who they are and what they believe in. Secularity cannot separate France from its Christian roots. The nation which ignores its historical, ethical, spiritual and religious heritage commits a crime against its own culture.*²⁸ The reaction of the French public opinion to the President's statement differed. It has to be noted, however, that there is an attempt to build positive secularity on what the French President said. It is reflected in the following opinion: *La laïcité positive dont parle Nicolas Sarkozy considère les courants religieux non plus comme un danger mais comme un atout pour la République, reconnaissant leur rôle sur le plan associatif, moral et humanitaire, les intégrant dans le débat public.*²⁹

²⁵ Kołakowski, *The Faith...*, op. cit.

²⁶ abp J. Życiński, *Chrześcijaństwo wobec nowych wyzwań kulturowych*, (in) *Sacrum i kultura. Chrześcijańskie korzenie przyszłości* (Christianity in Face of New Challenges (in) Sacrum and Culture), Publ. Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 2000, at 12.

²⁷ Cf. o. Zięba, *Demokracja...*, s. 111.

²⁸ Quoted foll. Polish daily "Rzeczpospolita" of 14 stycznia 2008.

²⁹ See : Ph. Verdín, *La République, les religions, l'espérance*, Cerf 2004.

- Another example of the above tendency are the words of Tony Blair who once said that *in the rich world, 'without spiritual values, there is an emptiness that cannot be filled by material goods and wealth'. He understands that faith is what gives meaning to the lives of billions, and he passionately believes that the world would be a better place if people of faith harnessed their talents together in aid of the common good.*³⁰
 - It is also worth quoting an opinion of a Jewish politician and intellectualist Szewach Weiss, who said: *Christianity, as it was interpreted by John Paul II, can be a very important element of the European constitutionalism ; it's an educational source of tolerance, morality and solidarity. It could be even a bridge between Europe and the rest of the World.*³¹
 - These new signs from secular world coincide with the clear position of the Church that Christian faith and the secular rationality, representing two great factors of the Western culture, should correlate. Thus, people representing these two factors should *be ready to listen to each other and also correlate with other cultures.*³²
- c) cooperation with the Church in the defence of the faith**
- Facing all the above threats, Christians should actively cooperate with the Church which is constantly struggling in the defence of Christianity, fulfilling its evangelical mission. The voice of the Church was particularly resounding when it spoke in the defence of Christian identity in the Declaration "***Dominus Iesus***" of the **Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith**. It says: *In treating the question of the true religion, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught: "We believe that this one true religion continues to exist in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus entrusted the task of spreading it among all people. Thus, he said to the Apostles: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt 28: 19-20). Especially in those things that concern God and his Church, all persons are required to seek the truth, and when they come to know it, to embrace it and hold fast to it.*
 - Acting together with the Church in favor of our Christian and also European identity, we have to remember an appeal of the Pope John Paul II addressed to Europe and to Christians in Europe: *Europe needs to make a qualitative leap in becoming conscious of its spiritual heritage. The impetus for this can only come from hearing anew the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the responsibility of all Christians to commit themselves to satisfying this hunger and thirst for life. Consequently "the Church feels it her duty to repeat vigourously the message of hope entrusted to her by God" and says again to Europe: " 'The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty Saviour!' (Zeph 3:17). Her invitation to hope is not based on a utopian ideology; on the contrary, it is the timeless message of salvation*

³⁰ See: M. Elliot, *Tony Blair's Leap of Faith*, „Time” of June 9. 2008.

³¹ See: S. Weiss, *W dialogu europejskim jest miejsce dla Izraela (In the European Dialog there is a Place for Israel)*, Polish daily "Rzeczpospolita" Number 58(7959)2008.

³² See: Card. J. Ratzinger, *Europa...*, at 78-79

*proclaimed by Christ (cf. Mk 1:15). With the authority she has received from her Lord, the Church repeats to today's Europe: Europe of the third millennium, "let not your hands grow weak! (Zeph 3:16); do not give in to discouragement, do not resign yourself to ways of thinking and living that have no future because they are not based on the solid certainty of God's Word!"*³³

³³ *Ecclesia in Europa*, 120.