

Prayer and Message at the
Jewish Memorial, Auschwitz
August 19, 1986

BERNARD CARDINAL LAW

It is a distinct privilege to contribute to this Jubilee Festschrift in honor of a great Churchman whom I am privileged to call a dear friend. I remember clearly, and no one who was there will have easily forgotten, Cardinal O'Connor's Mass of Installation as the Archbishop of New York. He literally hit the road running, and he has not stopped since. As a matter of fact, he has given energy a new meaning. What drives this indomitable disciple of Christ is a sure faith, an unwavering hope, and a boundless love for God and for every human being from the first moment of conception to the last moment of natural death. Jesus came that we may have life and have it more abundantly. Cardinal O'Connor understands that truth with a clarity that has illumined the path for

many of us. May the Lord grant him many years in service to the Church and to all humanity.

My brothers and sisters, fellow pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Boston. Words fail. What can be said here at this place? What is that in our hearts and in our minds that seeks expression but does not find it, cannot find it. It is at once a numbness and a silent scream. A numbness that is a silent scream.

It is first a scream of fear. Fear that the earth will open up again here and we might fall into hell. Fear of the fury of hell. Fear of the fury of hell that can destroy the human heart and replace it with . . . with what? What do we call that monstrosity?

Then it is a scream of protest and determination. Never again! Never, ever again! Millions died here. But here, whatever one might believe, wherever one comes from, here every man and woman becomes Jewish or ceases to be human. Here the human cry becomes the Jewish cry or one has died spiritually. Never again! Never again!

Then comes the scream that is a prayer. However we express it. *Miserere Mei, Domine. Kyrie Eleison. Hannenu Adonai.* Lord, have mercy. And so the human capacity for evil becomes a cry for God, a cry to God. To the silent God. To the God hidden. Hidden from those of his chosen people who come here, who remember or who discover, who imagine or rediscover. Hidden even from those who believe that the Word became flesh, human flesh, Jewish flesh, hidden even from those who believe in the Incarnate Word and have seen His glory. A cry to Him. A thirst for Him. A need for Him.

The twentieth century is coming to an end. It has been said to be the century of humankind come of age. Whoever says this does not know Auschwitz. The twenty-first century will

begin soon. Another chance? For what? Whoever does not think of it with trepidation does not know Auschwitz.

Then the silent scream becomes a cry of forgiveness from our elder brothers and sisters as children of the God of Abraham. It becomes a plea: Never let us forget. Never again.

For those of us who believe in Him, the Son of a Jewish mother like the ones exterminated here, our cry joins the tears of Peter when Jesus looked at him who had betrayed him as he was condemned to death for us, for our sins, for the sin of the world, the sin of the world in which Auschwitz is possible.

Finally, we must dare say it, yes we must, for those who died here — our cry becomes a reaffirmation. Not just that we must not tolerate it ever again, but that this immense vestibule of hatred and death was also the place where love and life triumphed. We who are Christians, we who claim redemption has taken place, have to deal with Auschwitz. We must say it right here in what Pope John Paul II called the Calvary of modern man: Lord Jesus, you did not die in vain. Men and women are not evil. God created the world and saw that it was good. The last word of the world may be death, but the last word for the world is not death, but life. God is the God of the living.

Here, where evil and faith clashed throughout the 2,000 days in which Oswiecim was called Auschwitz, we must take a stand for faith and life.

The clash between evil and faith continues, and here we must take our stand.

That clash was acted out before an eighteen-year old girl named Magda in 1944, on a summer afternoon like today. One hundred elderly rabbis had arrived one day at the camp. Packed together under the blazing sun, these anguished men of faith were ordered to dance. Driven by whips, they formed a large circle and began to move unsteadily over the rough ground, their eyes and arms lifted toward heaven. Then they were

ordered to sing. Together they began the *Kol Nidrei*, a chant traditionally associated with Jewish martyrdom. From the infirmary, Magda clearly heard its haunting melody. As the rabbis were driven to the gas chambers, they intoned the *Shema*, the profession of faith which pious Jews hope to recite at the hour of death. The rabbis' prayer seemed to proclaim defiance of their tormentors. Even after the gates of the chambers had been locked, they cried out, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, The Lord alone."

Magda heard and ran to the door of the infirmary. Other inmates restrained her and asked where she was going. "Outside by myself to tell these people that they're going to the gas chambers, just like the rabbis," she shouted. The women restraining her answered sadly, "But those people won't believe your words."

"But those people won't believe your words." How could prisoners have denied their own vulnerability to the evil which reigned here? The desire to survive and a reluctance to believe that humans are creative in their evil led many prisoners to deny reality. The evil of Auschwitz touched all its victims: Gypsies, Russians, Germans, and Poles — including 300 who were killed in the earliest experiment with cyanide gas. They must never be forgotten. But Auschwitz was the scene of a novel horror: the systematic effort to exterminate a whole people. Christians who suffered and died in this factory of death were victims of epidemic evil. The determination to kill all Jews because of their Jewishness was an unprecedented form of evil. We must *never* forget this. It seemed unbelievable, not only to those who were sheltered by distance, but also to those whom Magda wanted to warn.

Despite the perpetual reminder of Auschwitz, our generation finds it difficult to admit the human capacity for evil. How often has the creator of this and the other extermination camps been labeled as "mad." Why do we refuse to

believe that human beings like us can resolve, "Evil be thou my good," and act on their resolution with cool efficiency? Two formidable obstacles keep us from accepting this reminder. We must face them before we can hope to overcome them.

First is our desire to deny responsibility for good and evil. All of us crave ease of soul. Insofar as the past assaults our complacency, it offends us. The greater its assault, the harder we try to forget it. We corrupt language and thereby stunt our moral imagination. The perpetrators of the evil that reigned here created a euphemistic jargon to describe their murderous acts. "Special Treatment 14 f 13" was prescribed for "non-Aryans" before the first gas chamber was built at Auschwitz. Thousands were killed. The "Final Solution of the Jewish Question," itself a euphemism, was originally termed "an evacuation in view of the possibilities in the East." Those responsible for Auschwitz invented such euphemisms to mask their evil doing. We oblige them when we casually label their malice as madness and acquiesce in a stunted idea of the human capacity for evil, one which will not assault our ease of soul.

The second obstacle to accepting the perpetual reminder of Auschwitz is confidence in the unaided moral progress of the human race. To a remarkable extent so many times we fail to recognize the hollowness of this fantasy. Standing here, how can we ever believe that humanity by its independent efforts can steadily improve, not merely in technology, but in virtue? Yet we want to cling to the fantasy that humanity can get better on its own in every way, if not every day. We want to believe that applying techniques of rational calculation and control to people can subdue, or at least confine, our capacity for evil. So tenacious is this illusion of moral self-reliance that we try to evade the evidence of our inhumanity. Confronted with the devastation wrought in this place by human malice, we seek to minimize crimes and to diffuse blame. Monstrous

evil is portrayed as essentially banal. Victimiziers are treated as victims, and victims as accessories. The persistence of the human capacity for evil, demonstrated here, must eliminate the fantasy which inspires these evasions.

Only then will we be prepared to take a stand for faith and for life. While the reign of death prevailed here, its very existence seemed an indictment of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, who is also the God of Jesus. One of the inmates restraining Magda was amazed that pious Jews could maintain their faith "in the light of the bestiality" of this place. Many still share her amazement. To them the faith professed by 100 elderly rabbis as they were martyred seems a delusion.

The *Shema* which the rabbis intoned on the way to the gas chambers explains why Auschwitz is a perpetual reminder of our need for God. Their profession of faith supports the moral heritage shared by Jews and Christians. It contains what Jesus declared to be "the greatest and first commandment": "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind." This commandment is at once God's promise of His love for us and His appeal to us to respond with love for Him and for one another.

Such love is a light which searches the life of every man and woman. It illuminates all evil, whether ordinary or bestial. Far from being deluded, those who have known God's love and tried to return it can admit the human capacity for evil without flinching. Their own half-heartedness and failure warn them against any complacent ease of soul or illusion of moral self-reliance.

Even more; those who have known God's love and tried to return it understand that the human capacity for evil will finally be vanquished. Countless men and women gave this witness here in Auschwitz, as those 100 rabbis did, as did St. Maximilian Kolbe, as did Edith Stein. Like the psalmist and Jesus at Golgotha, they may experience the anguish of an

apparent abandonment by God, but they are convinced that God's reign of love is glorious and eternal, stronger than the greatest evil, stronger than the reign of death. Like the psalmist and the faithful of every age, they must proclaim, even at Aušchwitz: "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; all the families of the nations shall bow down before Him. For dominion is the Lord's and He rules the nations. To Him alone shall bow down all who sleep in the earth; before Him shall bend all who go down into the dust." Never again, but with God's grace — and only with God's grace. Amen.

