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3. THE LIMIT IMPOSED UPON EVIL IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

Evil sometimes seems omnipotent, it seems to exercise absolute dominion over the world. In your view, Holy Father, does there exist a threshold that evil is unable to cross?

I have had personal experience of ideologies of evil. It remains indelibly fixed in my memory. First there was nazism. What we could see in those years was terrible enough. Yet many aspects of nazism were still hidden at that stage. The full extent of the evil that was raging through Europe was not seen by everyone, not even by those of us situated at the epicenter. We were totally swallowed up in a great eruption of evil and only gradually did we begin to realize its true nature. Those responsible took great pains to conceal their misdeeds from the eyes of the world. Both the Nazis during the war and, later, the Communists in Eastern Europe tried to hide what they were doing from public opinion. For a long time, the West was unwilling to believe in the extermination of the Jews. Only later did this come fully to light. Not even in Poland did we know all that the Nazis had done and were

still doing to the Poles, nor what the Soviets had done to the Polish officials in Katyń; and the appalling tragedy of the deportations was still known only in part.

Later, when the war was over, I thought to myself: the Lord God allowed nazism twelve years of existence, and after twelve years the system collapsed. Evidently this was the limit imposed by Divine Providence upon that sort of folly. In truth, it was worse than folly—it was “bestiality,” as Konstanty Michalski wrote.² Yet the fact is that Divine Providence allowed that bestial fury to be unleashed for only those twelve years. If communism had survived for longer and if it still had the prospect of further development to come, I thought to myself at the time, there had to be meaning in all this.

In 1945, at the end of the war, communism seemed very solid and extremely dangerous—much more so than before. In 1920 we had had the distinct impression that the Communists would conquer Poland and advance farther into Western Europe, poised for world domination. In fact, of course, it never came to that. “The miracle on the Vistula,” that is, the triumph of Piłsudski in the battle against the Red Army, muted those Soviet ambitions. After the victory over nazism in 1945, though, the Communists felt reinvigorated and they shamelessly set out to conquer the world, or at least Europe. At first, this led to the repartition of the Continent into different spheres of influence, according to the agreement reached at Yalta in February 1945. The Communists merely paid lip service to this agreement; in reality, they violated it in various ways, above all through their ideological invasion and political propaganda both in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Even then I knew at once that Communist domination would last much longer than the Nazi occupation had done. For how long?

It was hard to predict. There was a sense that this evil was in some way necessary for the world and for mankind. It can happen, in fact, that in certain concrete situations, evil is revealed as somehow useful, inasmuch as it creates opportunities for good. Did not Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describe the devil as "*ein Teil von jener Kraft / die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft*"? Saint Paul, for his part, has this to say: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). That, after all, is the way to bring about a greater good in response to evil.

If I have wanted to underline the limit imposed upon evil in European history, I must conclude that the limit is constituted by good—the divine good and the human good that have been revealed in that history, over the course of the last century and of entire millennia. Yet it is hard to forget the evil that has been personally experienced: one can only forgive. And what does it mean to forgive, if not to appeal to a good that is greater than any evil? This good, after all, has its foundation in God alone. Only God is this good. The limit imposed upon evil by divine good has entered human history, especially the history of Europe, through the work of Christ. So it is impossible to separate Christ from human history. This is exactly what I said during my first visit to Poland, in Victory Square, Warsaw. I stated then that it was impossible to separate Christ from my country's history. Is it possible to separate him from any other country's history? Is it possible to separate him from the history of Europe? Only in him, in fact, can all nations and all humanity "cross the threshold of hope"!