

## Universities as Builders of Reconciliation

This November marked 60 years since the famous "Letter of the Polish Bishops to Their German Brothers in the Pastoral Office of Christ," and today marks the same 60 years since the response given by the German bishops. This correspondence – despite all the hostility it faced on both sides of the border at the time – initiated, albeit slowly, a dialogue between two nations so geographically close and yet so spiritually distant. The years of the partitions, the First World War, the uprisings that shaped our shared borders, and finally the Second World War all left a deep imprint on those who centuries earlier had helped lay the foundations of a common Europe. How much courage and God's love it must have taken, after the devastation of war that ravaged Poland and much of Europe, and additionally under the communist dictatorship, to write these words:


We extend to you (...) our hands and we grant forgiveness and ask for it.

Today, when both our nations enjoy unrestrained freedom, when together we seek to build the future of a Europe strong in its economy and secure in its defense within the framework of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance that guarantees the inviolability of state borders – today, words similar to those spoken 60 years ago are very hard to utter. It seems that what the Polish bishops began to build with their letter, and what the German bishops – despite the skeptical reception in Poland – tried to respond to in their letter of December 5, 1965, is now worryingly crumbling. The words that laid the foundation for another profoundly important gesture of reconciliation – one made 24 years later in Krzyżowa, where both sides were joined by Holy Mass and the heartfelt embrace of Prime Ministers Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Helmut Kohl – are slowly being obscured by a fog of forgetfulness and indifference.

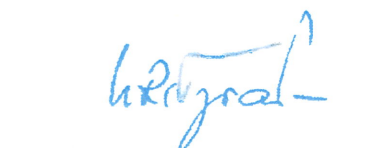
Today we do not need further noble gestures of reconciliation on the scale of those from 1965 or 1989. Today we need to fill those gestures with deeper substance – and that substance, we note with great sadness, is lacking. There is also a shortage – on both sides of the border – of people capable of taking up the task of building spaces of dialogue and understanding, of inspiring joint projects, of being the first to build bridges in place of the walls that are re-emerging.

Perhaps this is the moment when the academic community should begin to set the tone for our mutual relations. Perhaps it should be us, the representatives of Polish and German universities, who set the example of how to build reconciliation suited to our times, suited to the extremely difficult challenges these times bring. Russia's full-scale invasion, which has given rise to a war in Ukraine now lasting nearly four years, should serve as a constant red warning light – its glow intensifying the more we search for what divides our Polish and German nations. We do not wish today to repeat the words "let us try to forget" from the bishops' 1965 letter – though we understand well what they were meant to express. Instead, we say: "let us remember what unites us," "let us remember what happens when we stand on opposing sides." Let us follow the words of the joint statement issued by the chairmen of the Bishops' Conferences of Poland and Germany several days ago: "Germans and Poles today bear a common responsibility for Europe and for the world."


We – rectors of Polish Catholic and church universities – commit ourselves to even deeper cooperation with our colleagues across the Oder. We commit ourselves to seeking in our relations and contacts those elements that may become a broader social bond. Let academic debate with the participation of young people, and joint cross-border scholarly projects, be the bridges extended across our shared border river.



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