



# SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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## **In Auschwitz-Birkenau: Francis visits in silence and writes in the Book of Honour, “Lord, forgiveness for so much cruelty”**

This morning, after celebrating Mass privately in the chapel of the archbishopric of Krakow, Pope Francis transferred by car to the city of Oswiecim, whose history is marked principally by the tragic events of the Second World War. In Oswiecim the Nazis built the largest extermination camp in the history of humanity: Auschwitz-Birkenau, where between 1940 and 1945 more than 1,100,000 people were murdered. Today, with more than 45,000 residents, Oswiecim is the centre of many peace initiatives, a meeting-place for people of different nationalities and religions. In 1998 it received from the secretary-general of the United Nations the title of “Peace Advocate”.

During the period in which the camp was active, the Nazis sent to Auschwitz Polish political prisoners in particular, mostly representatives of the country’s cultural élite, a total of 150,000. As time passed they also began to sent prisoners of other nationalities and in spring 1942, there began the mass extermination of Jews. More than one million European Jews and 23,000 Sinti and Roma, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and tens of thousands of citizens of other nationalities lost their lives there. The martyrs of Auschwitz include the Polish priest St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe (1894-1941), the Carmelite nun of Jewish origin St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, better known as Edith Stein.

The date of the liberation of Auschwitz, 27 January, was designated International Holocaust Remembrance Day by the United Nations in 2005. After the liberation of the country, on 2 July 1947, the Polish parliament approved the conservation of the site of the concentration camp, instituting the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In 1979, upon request by Poland, it was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Upon arrival the Pope was received by Bishop Román Pindel of Bielsko-Zywiec, and by the mayor of the city. He travelled by car to the entrance of the Museum, where he was awaited by its director. Francis entered the camp on foot through arch at the entrance, and proceeded by electric car to Block 11, possibly the most symbolic place in Auschwitz, which includes the “Death Wall” where the Nazis shot prisoners before moving their bodies to the crematorium. In the autumn of 1943, when the shootings were transferred to the crematorium of Birkenau, the wall of executions was dismantled, but in 1946 the former prisoners of the camp rebuilt it.

Francis paused to pray in silence in Roll Call Square, where prisoners were hanged and where St. Maximilian Kolbe offered his life in exchange for that of another prisoner. At the entrance to Block 11, he was received by the prime minister of Poland, Beata Maria Szydlo, and went on to meet, one by one, ten of the camp's survivors, the last of whom gave him a candle which he used to light the lamp he had taken as a personal gift to the camp.

After being received at the doors of the "hunger cell", the location of the martyrdom of St. Maximilian Kolbe, by the Superior General and Provincial of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor Conventual, he entered alone into cell 18 of the underground part of Block 11, where the Polish priest died. Hunger was one of the many forms of death penalty that existed in Auschwitz. The prisoners, chosen from the block or working group from which a prisoner had escaped, were condemned to a slow death in the camp's hunger cells. There is now a commemorative plaque and a candle, given by St. John Paul II, in the cell of St. Maximilian Kolbe. Upon leaving, the Pope signed the Book of Honour with the following words: *"Lord, have mercy on your people, Lord, forgiveness for so much cruelty" Franciscus, 29.7.2016.*

At 10.30 Francis arrived at the camp of Birkenau, the largest camp in the complex situated in Oswiecim. The Nazis began its construction in autumn 1941, ousting the inhabitants of the village of Brzezinka and destroying their houses. In Birkenau the majority of the extermination structures were built: four crematoria with gas chambers, two provisional gas chambers, and around three hundred barracks to house the prisoners destined for work or condemned to a slow death. There were around 100,000 prisoners in 1944.

The Pope travelled alongside the railway by electric car, up to the Monument to the Victims of Nations, inaugurated in 1967 between Crematoria II and III. The monument is a high platform on various levels and the shape of its component elements recalls tombs and gravestones, while the highest symbolises the chimney of the crematorium. Before the monument there is a series of commemorative slabs with a phrase in the 23 languages used by the prisoners, which reads, "For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women and children, mainly Jews, from various countries of Europe. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940-1945".

Upon arrival at the Monument, the Pope was received by the Polish Prime Minister and the museum's director, in the presence of a thousand people, and walked alongside the commemorative plaques, after which he prayed in silence and set down a lighted candle. At the end he met 25 Righteous Among the Nations, non-Jews who saved Jews from Nazi persecution. Finally, a rabbi recited Psalm 130 in Hebrew, which was then read in Polish by one of the survivors. At the end of his visit to Birkenau, the Holy Father returned to Krakow.

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