

Record of Conversation of M.S. Gorbachev and John Paul II

Vatican, December 1, 1989

For the first several minutes the conversation was one-on-one (without interpreters).

Gorbachev: I would like to say that I appreciate your words at the beginning of the conversation regarding the fact that this is a meeting of two Slavic people, among other things. I don't mean to appear as a pan-Slavist, but I believe in the mission of Slavic people to strengthen the understanding of human values of life, peace, and goodness everywhere.

John Paul II: Yes, this is so. Peace and goodness.

Gorbachev: We welcome your mission on this high altar, we are sure that it will leave a great footprint in history. I am familiar with your addresses to the world, with your reflection upon its problems. I even noted that we often use similar expressions. This means that there is agreement at the source—in our thoughts. I do not know why, but I was sure that this meeting would take place. Not only because it is in the interest of humanity, although this is important as we are contemporaries. But first and foremost it is because we have a great deal of unifying thoughts and concerns.

I thank you for the invitation to visit the Vatican, and in the name of the vast country that I represent I would like to express respect for your peace-making efforts.

John Paul II: We are trying.

From my side I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for your last message, which I read several times and kept coming back to. It is a very important message, full of content where I saw many thoughts similar to my own.

Gorbachev: For my part, I thought about your message for a long time before responding to it.

John Paul II: Naturally, the main problem that interests all of humanity is the question of war and peace. We are grateful to God that lately the danger of war has decreased and the tension in relations between the East and the West has gone down. We know and value highly your work for the sake of world peace and wish it a good continuation.

Gorbachev: I thank you for that.

John Paul II: We all need peace and solidarity among nations. It is especially important to have movement forward in relations between the great powers on different fronts, including on the problems of developing countries. The situation in the Third World is one of the issues I am concerned about the most. I wrote about this in my encyclical "On Social Concerns."

I would like to speak about the elements related to the word “*perestroika*,” which has deeply touched all aspects of life for the Soviet people, and not only them. This process allows us together to look for a way to enter a new dimension of people’s common existence, which would reflect to a greater degree the requirements of the human spirit, of different nations, of the rights of individuals and nations. The efforts you are making are not only of a great interest to us. We share them.

Naturally, one of the fundamental human rights is the freedom of conscience, from which stems religious freedom. For obvious reasons this aspect is of the greatest interest to me, the Church, and the Holy See. After all, our mission is religious. In order to have the opportunity to carry out our mission in different countries with various political systems, it is necessary for us to be sure that freedom of conscience is observed in those countries.

In relation to this I will say that we are waiting anxiously and with great hope for your country to accept a law to uphold freedom of conscience. We hope that the introduction of such a law would broaden the possibility for religious life for all Soviet citizens. A person becomes a believer through free choice; it is impossible to make someone believe. In the Soviet Union, especially in Russia, as well as in several neighboring countries, the majority of believers are Orthodox Christians. Of course we hope that our Orthodox brethren attain more freedom. Moreover, we have started on the path of an ecumenical dialogue, which is actively developing with Orthodox churches, especially with the Russian Orthodox Church. We share a great deal in common.

Additionally, there are many other creeds in the USSR, including Catholics of the Latin and Byzantine, or Eastern, Churches. Catholics of the Eastern Church recognize the Pope as the Bishop of Rome and their pastor. As their pastor he is responsible for their religious life in the highest and fullest sense of the word. In some countries, the Latin Catholic Church is prevalent. This includes most of the population of Lithuania, a part of the population of Latvia, as well as the territories that in the past centuries belonged to the Republic of nations—the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

I am aware that although the majority of believers in Belorussia and Ukraine are Orthodox, there is also a good number of Catholics of the Latin and Byzantine denominations. The situation of the latter group is of particular concern both for me and for the Holy See: for over 40 years that have passed since the end of the war they have been denied the fundamental right of religious freedom, they have been practically put outside the law. We hope that the new law for the freedom of conscience will create for them, as for all believers, the opportunity to openly practice their religion and have their own church structures.

Of course, freedom of conscience has to extend to Baptists, Protestants, Jews, as well as Muslims.

Gorbachev: Yes, the Muslims are a real factor for us.

John Paul II: There is a point in your message, Mr. President, about appointing representatives from both sides. This idea was discussed at your meeting with Archbishop Sodano. I would like to say that I agree with this idea completely. It would be very important for us to have such a representative. We have been missing this since the war. We did not have any way to discuss the Catholics' situation with the leadership. I have to say that recently the first steps have been taken on this issue, first and foremost in Lithuania. The appointment of a bishop to Belorussia is an important step, even though he cannot fully carry out his Episcopal mission yet. We have hope that the situation will change.

The institutionalization of our ties—although we still have to define the status of our representatives—will allow us to maintain contact on human rights issues as well as on other problems, and we will be able to exchange our mutual concerns. The Holy See has relations with over 100 nations, including many Muslim countries. As we understand, establishing such relations with the Soviet Union would be highly beneficial for the issues that have long awaited resolution from your country's political powers and the individual republics' local powers. If possible, I would like to have more certainty in this question.

Gorbachev: I have listened to your words very carefully and from my side would like to speak about three concerns: peace, our *perestroika*, and in connection to it the freedom of conscience and religion.

I assure you that our path, the one we call the new thinking, is not just a fashion trend or an attempt to get attention. It is the result of deep consideration of the situation in our country, in Europe, and the world. I have to say, once we accepted the new thinking, it became easier for us to breathe. This was followed by concrete proposals and thoughts on how to build new relations and live together in a new way.

When we first announced these ideas, some people declared them to be only illusions and fantasies. And now there are definite political results. The Helsinki process is going farther and becoming stronger. Europe has to play its historical role in renewing peace. It has vast historical experience, traditions, culture, and intellectual potential which enable us to talk about Europe's historic peacemaking mission.

The Vatican can bring a great contribution to the common cause both as a nation and as the expression of an immense movement. I think so not only because the Vatican's signature stands on the Helsinki Final Act, but also because I know what you have done recently to enrich this process.

We already have an agreement to eliminate one type of nuclear weapons. There is a real chance of reducing strategic weapons by 50 percent. I will discuss this with President Bush. The Hungarian talks are in progress. Even the generals have started meetings with each other. In a word, the world is changing.

I have to say, Your Holiness, that I am astonished by the people's reaction to our proposals and our thoughts. We are not so ambitious as to consider ourselves the vessels of some higher saving mission. Our new European "credo" is to invite others to think together how to build a better world. One must not claim to have the absolute truth and to try to impose it on others. For example, our Western partners, including the US administration, declare that they support *perestroika*. It is true that the majority of regular people and politicians support it. But someone is already saying that Europe should be renewed only on the basis of Western values and anything that differs from them should be cut off. This is no way to treat nations, their history, traditions, and identities.

In the past, the Soviet Union was accused of exporting revolution. Now some people are trying to export other values. This is not the path we should be taking. It reminds me of the religious wars of the past. We must have learned something since then.

As for religious problems, we treat them within the framework of our general understanding of universal human values. In this matter as in others, the people are the highest authority. Everything depends on the choice of the people. It is up to the person what philosophy and religion to practice. I think we have reached the point when we can build relations between nations and between people on the basis of respect.

At one point President Reagan tried to teach me how to conduct matters in our country. I told him that we would not be able to have a conversation like that. A conversation can only happen on the basis of realism and mutual respect. I told him: you are not a teacher and I am not a student. You are not a prosecutor and I am not a defendant. So if we want to talk about politics, about how to change the world for the better, then we have to do it as equals. He understood this and we were able to do what we did.

I know that you welcomed the results of that dialogue, and I value your support highly. We plan to work with the current administration on the same principles. Let each side remain itself while respecting the traditions of the other side. Universal human values should become the primary goal, while the choice of this or that political system should be left up to the people.

Today we are facing the acute problem of survival. This includes the threat of nuclear weapons, the issues of ecology, natural resources, the information aspect, and the Scientific-Technical Revolution, which together with progress brings many complications. All of these are global, universal problems. We must see them, they cannot be ignored. We have to understand them, to change our way of thinking, and consequentially our policies. We have to shift from confrontation to collaboration. This will be a long and difficult road but I do not agree with our country's pessimists.

John Paul II: Neither do I.

Gorbachev: Our planet is overloaded with many cares. However, if we join forces we have great opportunities to move in the right direction to build a new world on the basis of universal values.

You mentioned problems of the Third World. I also wanted to talk about them. We cannot be content while millions of people are living in conditions of appalling poverty, hunger, and destitution. I am familiar with your speeches on this subject. Our views coincide.

Overall, there are many issues on which we could work together and continue to regularly exchange opinions. Each in his own way we could make our original contributions to the resolution of universal problems.

Now about *perestroika*. Right now it is going through the most intense point of a critical period. The most difficult aspect is *perestroika* of thought. Old notions are hard to get rid of. Great difficulties arise because the changes influence some people's vital interests. Some are trying to take advantage of the confusion in people's minds that is caused by the deep changes. We have to see this.

I would also like to say that the problems of your homeland—Poland—are very close to me. In the recent years I have done and will continue to do everything I can to ensure good relations between Poland, Russia and the Soviet Union.

John Paul II: I thank you on behalf of my homeland.

Gorbachev: I recently met with Mr. Mazowiecki, and he said many good things about you.

There are major changes in other countries as well. In relation to this I would like to document one more point. Western politicians should take a responsible approach to these changes. They are too important to be treated otherwise. If they succeed, the world will change. Right now there is an option of starting upon the path of good development, even though it might be a difficult one. I think the majority of politicians seriously understand this.

At the beginning of the talk you said that you are praying for *perestroika* and its success. I would like to say that we appreciate your support.

We are undergoing major changes in the spiritual sphere. We would like to achieve our goals by democratic means. However, considering the events of the past years I see that democratic measures alone are not sufficient. We also need ethics. Democracy can bring evil as well as good. It is what it is. It is very important to us to establish a moral society with such eternal universal human truths as goodness, charity, and mutual help. In light of the changes taking place we believe that it is necessary to respect the internal world of our religious citizens. We especially feel this way about our Orthodox population because so much has been destroyed.

The majority of believers in our country—including the Orthodox, Muslims, and Catholics—support *perestroika*. In the near future the USSR Supreme Soviet will pass the freedom of conscience law. We are interested in having different religions contribute to the renewal and humanization of our society. But considering the specific character and uniqueness of the situation it is necessary that matters do not become politicized. Believers in our country are allowed to participate in the political process, now there are even some deputies who come from the clergy. It is important that all questions be resolved normally and humanely.

I understand your ideas about how to relieve the problems of Catholics, we all understand them. We are looking at the future law as a means to settle all problems. After we pass the law, it will be time for practical steps that will put everything in its place.

History has put its imprint on the Uniate Eastern Catholics. It is important that things fall into place calmly, in the first place in relations between the different religions. We welcome the establishment of a relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. Not only the believers but the entire country highly regarded the fact that representatives of the Vatican headed by Cardinal Casaroli participated in the millennial celebration of the Baptism of Russia.

We would hope that from your side there will be incentives to keep the ongoing processes from escalating to remove the existing complications. We would also ask you to see that the structure of the Catholic Church in our country corresponds to state limits. I do not intend to give advice here and will rely on your experience and wisdom.

The entire country heard it when you said that politicization should be avoided in serious issues. I have to say in connection to well known events the leadership in some places is finding itself in a tight spot. In Lvov the situation became so acute that the leadership did not know what to do to normalize it. At that point we turned to both sides of the conflict, to the Ukrainian leadership, asking them to get the situation under control peacefully.

When the law is passed we will have the opportunity to normalize the situation legally. But I have to say frankly that many practical issues, in our opinion, have to be resolved through agreements among the religious leaders themselves. This does not mean that we, to use a famous phrase, are washing our hands. I will put it this way: we will accept any agreement that you reach with the Orthodox Church. We need the passions to die down in order to regulate the situation.

When I met with Archbishop Sodano he said that you need to have two archbishops on the territory of the USSR—for the Catholics in the European and Asian parts of the country. Well, let us consider it. I think this is natural.

I heard with interest your thoughts about appointing permanent representatives, who could travel on assignment from the leadership to exchange opinions. In this way our relations would assume a normal, natural character. We approve such an approach and are ready for it.

Your representative could establish contact with our government organs that deal with religious issues.

However, we do not want to rush with this matter. Rushing with such delicate, fine questions could be downright dangerous.

I hope that after this meeting our relations will gain new momentum and I assume that at some point in the future you could visit the USSR.

John Paul II: If this were allowed, I would be very glad to.

Gorbachev: We should consider the date for such a trip calmly and without rushing. I will say outright: the next year promises to be a hot one for us. We should pick a time when it would be interesting for you and the when visit would do the most good.

John Paul II: Very well.

Gorbachev: I want to express my great pleasure that we were able to have such a broad discussion in such a composed atmosphere. We touched upon the important questions which trouble all of us as well as upon more concrete issues.

John Paul II: I am grateful to you for talking about your thoughts on international issues. Naturally, we primarily touched upon European and to some extent North American problems. But there are other parts of the world where the situation is troubling.

I am particularly concerned about the situation in Lebanon and in general the Middle East; also to some degree in Indo-China and Central America. Overall there are quite a few places in the world with difficulties. Perhaps we could act together on this front. In these matters the Church and the Pope can only represent the moral aspect. It would be good to help these nations by political means to overcome the tragic situations in which they find themselves.

I am thankful to you for your discussion of *perestroika*. We are watching it from outside. You, Mr. President, carry it inside you, in your heart and in your deeds. I think we understood correctly that the strength of *perestroika* is in its soul. You are right when you say that changes should not come too fast. We also agree that not only structures need to be changed, but the thinking as well.

It would be wrong for someone to claim that changes in Europe and the world should follow the Western model. This goes against my deep convictions. Europe, as a participant in world history, should breathe with two lungs.

Gorbachev: This is a very appropriate image.

John Paul II: I thought about this relatively early, already in 1980, when I declared the patrons of Europe to be, besides Saint Benedict of the Latin tradition, Cyril and Methodius

representing the Eastern Byzantine, Greek, Slavic, and Russian traditions. This is my European credo.

I am deeply grateful to you for the invitation. I would be glad to have the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union, Russia, to meet with Catholics and not only them, to visit holy places that are for us, Christians, a source of inspiration. Thank you for the invitation. I can well appreciate its weight and importance.

Finally, I thank you very much for your confirmation in relation to exchanging representatives between the Soviet leadership and the Holy See. I hope that this will aid in resolving issues in religious affairs. We should do this calmly, even very calmly, by no means allowing these issues to become politicized.

In conclusion I would once again thank you for the invitation. I hope that the time will come for my visit. After all, I know Eastern Europe poorly. I am a Western Slav. I did not know the towns that were in Poland before the war and are now in the Soviet Union. These are Lvov and Vilnius. But most of all I want to meet and feel what I call “the Eastern genius.”

Gorbachev: I thank you for the atmosphere and content of today’s conversation. I will count on this dialogue to continue.

[Translated by Anna Melyakova for the National Security Archive.]

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