

Reconciliation carried on

Warsaw, 17 Juni 2010 – „When emotions, and that means bad experiences, abuses and hatred, block the political process, no impulse from outside can move what is basically immovable. The memorandum, and the letter, the Polish bishops sent out, marked a step of Christian thinking into politics”, wrote Peter Bender in a collection of studies called „Rec-



onciliation and politics: Polish-German reconciliation initiatives in the 1960s and the policy of détente” edited by Friedhelm Boll, Wiesław Wysocki and Klaus Ziemer. While scholarly studies of the German-Polish rapprochement in the 1960s to date have been limited mostly to analysing the political domain, this book presents a description of the shared contribution of civil and political actors. This important book appeared now also in Polish in June.

This was occasion enough for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the German Historical Institute in Warsaw, and the Cardinal Wyszyński Universität, all of which supported financially the publication of the book, to invite participants to a panel discussion at the Conference of Polish Bishops seat in Warsaw. Time witnesses and scholars discussed the relationship between civil social reconciliation initiatives and the policy of detente of the 1960s.

„This event is meeting at a place which is owned by the Church. This strikes the right

tune”, said Jarosław Mrówczyński, the deputy Secretary-General of the Conference of Polish Bishops, in his welcome address. „The dynamics, as the initiative itself, for the reconciliation idea originated with the bishops.”



Archbishop professor Henryk Muszyński still has good memories of the time. As a young priest he lived at the time of the Second Vatican Council in Rome when Poland's Catholic bishops published their pastoral letter of 1965 with the famous concluding formula „We forgive, and we beg forgiveness”. „Hardly anyone believed the letter would bring about anything. It was intended to defuse the atmosphere between the German and Polish



bishops attending the Second Vatican Council. Nobody could have anticipated the consequences though”.

The significance of that first step, said Klaus Ziemer, political science professor with Trier University and with Warsaw's Kardinal Wyszyński Universität. In the 1960s, Poland just did not exist in the awareness of the Germans. The German cul-

pability to Poland was never a topic, and the former German territories in the east were not recognised as Polish state territory. „The dialogue the Churches prompted a change of mind in society to make it favourably disposed towards reconciliation”, said Ziemer. As Willy Brandt once put it, „The people ventured more than their politicians did”. The Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste (ASF), or Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (ARSP), a German peace and volunteer service organization founded by Lothar Kreyszig in 1958 is a case in point. With its mission of taking responsibility for the sufferings inflicted by the Nazi regime the ASF is sending volunteers to countries that suffered particularly badly during the second world war. Friedrich Magirius, theologian and leader in 1974 to 1982 of the Action Reconciliation Service in the GDR, writes of the reception the initiative got in Poland: „Right from the start we were taken very seriously in the neighbouring country, and we found open doors there. The Poles from the beginning realised how powerful the drive to reconciliation was and how to get



it going to take shape through meetings of young people and the dialogue of generations, cultures and religions."

The reconciliation brought about then is a source of strength we can draw upon even today, said Irena Lipowicz, head of Stiftung für Deutsch-Polnische Zusammenarbeit, a Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation. Many examples can be quoted of city partnerships or German-Polish associations or foundations which betoken the empathy between Germans and Poles today. She said though that further steps are needed and she feels more often than not the process was no longer being actively pushed forward. Klaus Ziemer also confirmed it was very important for the German-Polish dialogue to be continued. The fact that differences of interests occasionally appear in the process should not be overrated. Openness and mutual talks are good ways to get the parties together and help them find new ideas in resolving difficult issues.

„Take this book out to the general public because the reconciliation process deserves to be a subject of public debate“, called Knut Dethlefsen in his concluding address on participants. „Poland and Germany have managed to overcome the bottom point of their mutual history and to develop good relations. This can be an example of how to overcome other conflicts. We still need people who have the guts to venture into new undertakings and to take risks, the way the Churches and Willy Brandt did in their time.“