

Laudatory speech for Zenel Drangu

On the occasion of the presentation of the Maximilian Kolbe Werks Award

Ladies and gentlemen, dear Mr Drangu,

I am delighted that we have the opportunity today to honour a special man – Mr Zenel Drangu. A warm welcome to you. We are very pleased to have had such a reliable friend in you for many years.

Before I discuss Mr Drangu's work and explain why we have decided to honour him, allow me to once again outline the principles behind the Maximilian Kolbe Werks Award.

With the Maximilian Kolbe Werks Award, which has been presented every two years since 2023 by the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation and the Maximilian Kolbe Werk, we want to highlight individuals or initiatives that have made a special contribution to dealing with Europe's violent past and promoting reconciliation. We pay particular attention to initiatives and persons who work closely with former prisoners and victims.

One of the central experiences of the German-Polish reconciliation process is that the survivors of violence have a special role to play. The willingness to overcome violence can be measured by the practical relationship with them. This has been and continues to be the logic behind the Maximilian Kolbe Werk, which has rendered outstanding services to German-Polish reconciliation since 1973. Since the eyewitnesses of the Nazi occupation will no longer be with us in the foreseeable future, bringing an important chapter in the history of German-Polish reconciliation to a close, we established the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation in 2007 to build on the experiences of this organisation and the German-Polish reconciliation process in a European association for reconciliation in Europe. With the Kolbe Werks Award, we want to keep this fruitful tradition alive in an inspiring way and address current issues relating to how to deal with Europe's violent past.

It is therefore not surprising that we have also been working with our Albanian partners since 2011.

Albania is undoubtedly the country in Europe that suffered longest under a brutal Stalinist dictatorship. One of the distinctive features of this dictatorship was that all religious activity had been strictly prohibited since 1967. For religious communities, this meant numerous martyrdoms and a life in hiding. Due to its international connections,

the Catholic Church was a particular focus of the Albanian state security services. Communist repression led to the establishment of numerous labour camps, prisons and deportation zones. The fates of those who fell into the clutches of communist violence tell of inhumanity and humiliation. It was not only the prisoners who were affected, but also their families. They were now considered enemies of the people. Even release from the camp did not change this. Anyone who fell into the claws of communist violence in Albania was forever an outcast.

Fortunately, the communist regime in Albania came to an end in 1990/91. However, the starting point for those who had previously been repressed was anything but favourable as they travelled the difficult path to democracy and the establishment of a market economy. After an initial period of transition, during which the former rulers lost control, old networks gradually reasserted themselves in a new form. The fate of the formerly oppressed and their families increasingly faded into the background. For many, critical memories of the communist era were a burden. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the struggle for memory is a struggle for justice, healing and democracy. A democracy that does not face up to the wounds in society quickly becomes infected with the virus of authoritarianism. The first sign of this infection is indifference towards those who have been hurt.

In this context, meeting people like Zenel Drangu is a great sign of hope and a powerful source of encouragement. Zenel Drangu has never resigned himself to social indifference and has been the chairman of the Association of Politically Persecuted and their Families in Shkodër for many years. It is thanks to his perseverance, wisdom and creativity that those affected by communist violence in Albania have a reliable voice. What particularly impresses us about Mr Drangu is that he has never given in to hatred and the desire for revenge. Instead, with great calm and prudence, he has sought and found ways to effectively highlight the issues of truth and justice in dealing with the history of communism. This testimony is all the more valuable given that he himself was sentenced to 25 years in prison in 1972 in a dramatic show trial in which the manipulated crowd demanded the death penalty. The crime for which he – then aged 24 – was accused was attempting to flee Albania in order to live a free life in the West. He spent 15 years of his prison sentence in the notorious Spac labour camp. In this camp, located near a copper mine in the Albanian mountains, he worked as a forced labourer under inhumane conditions. He was released from the camp in 1989 following various amnesties. In the years that followed, Zenel Drangu never ceased to campaign for the truth about the communist regime. When, in 2012, a number of groups, including the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation and Renovabis, decided to turn the former Spac camp into a dignified memorial site, Zenel Drangu was one of those who actively

promoted this process in the years that followed. His eyewitness testimony, which he shares with visitors to Spac, school classes and international workshops, is an encouraging sign that violence and hatred do not have the last word. Rather, he stands for social reconciliation that takes the wounds of the past seriously and responds to them constructively and in solidarity.

Dealing with the toxic heritage of communism is not just an Albanian problem. No, it is an European challenge. Affected in different ways by this contempt for human life, we are nevertheless united in our efforts not to simply move on to the agenda of the day.

Overcoming the consequences of violence requires people with integrity and unwavering compassion. Zenel Drangu is such a person.

He is a shining beacon of hope for us. Thank you for your encouraging testimony, and I wish you God's rich blessings for your future work.

Bishop Dr. Bertram Meier
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