

Ladies and Gentlemen,

"You have opened my eyes" is a slogan promoted by the "School Of Dialogue".

Yes, you have opened my eyes, particularly last year when students of Mikołaj Kopernik High School were my guides in Radom; when, thanks to them, I could learn about the city's rich Jewish heritage. It was on the 19th of April, the Holocaust Remembrance Day.

You opened my eyes as I watched the brilliant hip-hop video clip "Oni przeżyli w pamięci" ["They have survived in our memory"] by students of the Automotive Vocational School Complex in Włocławek, and my eyes filled up with tears.

The fruits of your work can be seen in many Polish cities I visit under the programme Regional Meetings of the Commissioner for Human Rights, managed by Director Barbara Imiołczyk. They bear testimony to the power of the Forum for Dialogue.

Last week I was honoured to meet Archbishop Alfons Nossol, a legendary figure of Śląsk and Opole Region, who said: *"Dialogue is the mother tongue of humankind. It changes an enemy into an opponent, and an opponent into a friend"*. However, if dialogue is to be possible, we need to embrace otherness – we should understand that it can enrich us, strengthen our inner life and open us to other people.

This is what you do. You revive those feelings in young people. Thanks to you, students awake to the surrounding world, the difficult issues of the past, the complicated history and multicultural nature of our society. As a result, they understand more and learn to tame the unknown.

In recent times that I would call "the times of turbulence, storm and stress", our problem has been the quality of dialogue. Authority figures are being questioned. Doubts are being cast on established scientific knowledge. Historical facts are being twisted. The meanings of words are being manipulated. Language is becoming more and more brutal. There is no will to listen to others. Conversation is replaced by screams, easy slogans and strong language.

All of this impacts society. Hate speech is spreading. Hate turns into contempt that deprives other humans of fundamental dignity and respect. Some are looking down on others. They maintain they are better, more predisposed to honours and have greater right not only to fully participate in public life, but also to decide for others.

It is difficult to build mutual trust and understanding in such an atmosphere. Actions taken against prevailing trends should be all the more appreciated, especially as in some places, they have become acts of civil courage.

Your activity may be compared to a boat somewhere in the middle of a great river. The current is extremely strong, the bottom cannot be seen and the water is silty. You feel that somewhere in the distance a huge waterfall lurks. Yet you keep rowing against the current and you do not give up. You believe this is the way to save yourselves. And to save humanity.

What you do, deserves great respect and I would like to thank you with all my heart for it. I would also like to thank students who, through their active participation in the “School Of Dialogue”, through their creativity, empathy and involvement, show their peers how to be an active, thoughtful and open-minded citizen of the Republic of Poland.

*Adam Bodnar,
Commissioner for Human Rights*