

Pope's new book looks at 20th century

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John Thavis/CNS

VATICAN CITY — At his first general audience in October, Pope John Paul II struggled to pronounce even a few lines of his prepared text.

The same day, his press spokesman was in Germany unveiling the pope's latest book — a 200-page reflection on the ideological struggles of the 20th century and their significance to all believers.

As the 84-year-old pontiff's verbal powers of communication have shrunk, his written production seems to be increasing. Due out in Italy in early 2005, *Memory and Identity: Conversations Between Millenniums* will be his third book in the space of two years.

Memory and Identity: Conversations Between Millenniums was announced by Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The Italian publisher, Rizzoli, describes it as "a historical and philosophical reflection on the use of freedom and its limits, on the concepts of homeland and nation, and on the Christian roots of Europe."

Those are big topics, and the book will not be light reading. But to make

them more easily digestible, the book adopts a kind of Socratic question-and-answer approach.

The idea for the book jelled in 1993, when the late Father Jozef Tischner, a fellow Pole and a philosopher in the pope's former Archdiocese of Krakow, proposed a series of conversations on the tumultuous events of the closing century — including the rise and fall of Nazism, fascism and European communism.

The pope was happy to oblige, and the two were joined by another philosopher friend, Krzysztof Michalski. Their many hours of conversation were tape-recorded; afterward, the transcripts sat in a drawer. Apparently, the pope felt it was better to let the century end before drawing definitive judgments.

Ten years later, the pontiff picked up the transcripts and set to work editing and correcting. According to excerpts released by Rizzoli, the pope sees the 20th century as a stage where good and evil did sharp battle.

The pope calls Nazism a form of "bestiality" whose true dimensions became known only after World War II.

"What we could see in those years was terrible enough. Yet many as-

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pects of Nazism were still hidden at that stage," he said.

"The full extent of the evil that was raging through Europe was not seen by everyone, not even by those of us who were living at the epicenter," he said.

The comment undoubtedly alludes to the fact that the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz was only 30 miles from Krakow, where the future pope was studying for the priesthood in a clandestine seminary.

"For a long time, the West did not want to believe in the extermination of the Jews. ... Not even in Poland did we know all that the Nazis had done," he said.

Here and in other places the pope tries to reconcile this obvious and horrendous evil with God's plan for humanity.

"Later, when the war was over, I thought to myself: The Lord God allowed Nazism 12 years of existence, and after 12 years the system collapsed. Evidently this was the limit imposed by divine providence upon

that sort of folly," he said.

If communism had a longer run, there was meaning in that, too, he said.

"To me it was quite clear that communism would last much longer than Nazism had done. For how long? It was hard to predict. There was a sense that this evil was in some way necessary for the world and for mankind," he said.

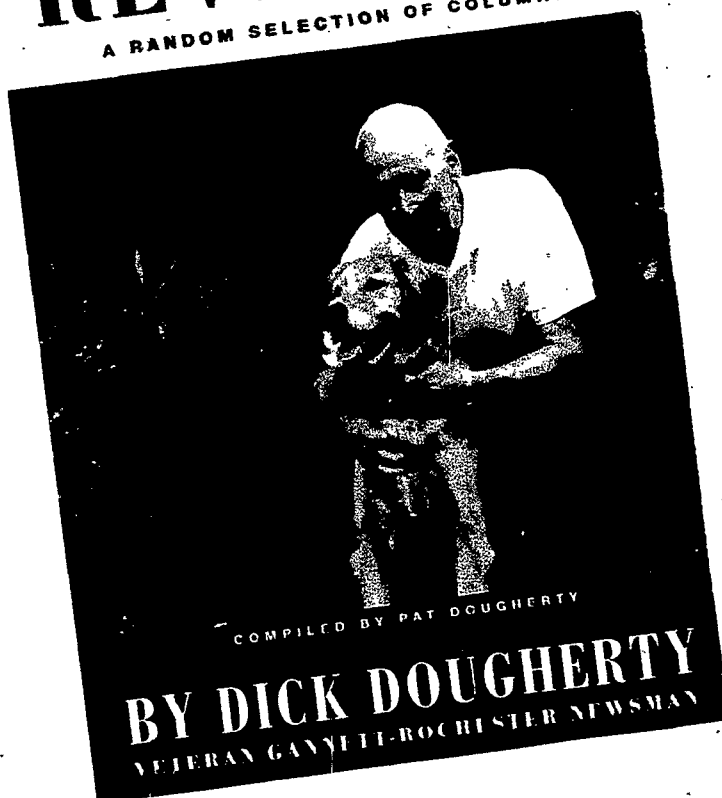
Then he quotes from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German poet and dramatist, and St. Paul, to make the point that sometimes evil is useful because it creates opportunities for good.

In a chapter on human freedom, the pope emphasizes that there is no freedom without truth. His explanation draws on sources ranging from Greek philosophy to modern social teaching; for example, he draws a direct line from Aristotle's system of virtues to the sacrificial witness of 20th-century Christian martyrs.

In his book, the pope is clearly reaching beyond the borders of his own church toward a wider audience. Rizzoli will try to make sure that can happen, as it seeks partner publishers in various languages around the world.

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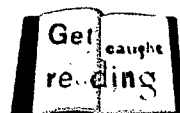
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