

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE DURING THE COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland was the main force capable to oppose the communist dictatorship. Although the state was officially “socialist” the condition of ordinary people, including workers in industry and agriculture, was deplorable. Communist regime totally neglected the principles of social justice, creating and using against society the whole apparatus of repression. The Church was only force in the society which created “space of liberty”, provided instruction in the principles of Catholic social teaching and moral strength to the fighting for peoples’ rights. In the absence of any organisation truly representing the world of work, the Roman Catholic Church often played the role of intermediation between the civil authorities and the society. All this led in many ways to the martyrdom of Church leaders and other Church representatives. Suffering with the nation and sharing its fate allowed the Church building up a unique authority, what is still fruiting nowadays when the society tries to shake off the rests of communism now disguised in the suit of liberalism.

Keywords: Roman Catholic Church in Poland, solidarity, martyrdom, communist regime, Cardinal Wyszyński, Jerzy Popiełuszko, Bishop Kaczmarek

It is obvious to say that communist regime in Poland has never been established as a result of democratic processes of transmitting the power, such as we know nowadays. World War II finished for Poland with the change of occupant form Nazi Germany to Soviet Union. 300-400 thousands¹ of Red Army troops stayed in Poland after the war and secured the introduction and stabilization of communist government. The achievement of power of communist authorities was disguised in the suit of democracy. Nothing however was left to hazard. The first

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¹ Cf. *22 lata temu Polskę opuściły wojska radzieckie*, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/Artykul/934270,22-lata-temu-Polske-opuscily-wojska-radzieckie> (2.11.2017).

post-war referendum of 1946 and then the elections to the Parliament in 1947 were heavily rigged. Thus the communist commando parachuted to Poland from USSR gained its formal legitimization. After the liquidation of the rests of Armia Krajowa – Polish underground army – by means of new Polish People’s Army and of NKVD troops, after the imprisonment of thousands of Polish patriots, the time has come to deal with the Roman Catholic Church, perceived by Moscow dependent new authorities as a main obstacle on the road to the full implementation of communist regime. It was because the Roman Catholic Church in Poland was rightly perceived as the main force capable of opposition against the communist dictatorship. Although the state was officially “socialist” the condition of ordinary people, including workers in industry and agriculture, was deplorable. Communist regime totally neglected the principles of social justice, creating and using the whole apparatus of repression against society.

1. Cardinal Wyszyński–Primate of Poland

The monumental figure of this time is surely Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński², the Primate of Poland. Wyszyński begun his primatial ministry in 1948, nearly at the same time as the communist terror started with its full strength. Before the Second World War Fr. Wyszyński became an expert in Church social teaching, by defending his doctoral dissertation in this matter. As the bishop of Lublin, from 1946 he personally lectured the Church social teaching at the Catholic University of Lublin. The subject of social justice and other subjects of the social teaching of the Church were constantly present in his sermons, also when he became archbishop of Warsaw in 1948 and then cardinal. It was counted, that he preached roughly 600 sermons a year, and 75% of them were consecrated to social matters³. This was the consequence of evident necessity to oppose the anti-human communist system introduced in Poland against the will of the nation.

From the very beginning Cardinal Wyszyński became the main opponent of the communist regime. In the absence of any form of representation of the civil society, this Church leader became the voice not only of the Catholic Church, but of the whole nation submitted to unwanted *junta* installed by soviet occupant. In 1950 cardinal Wyszyński, as head of the Polish Catholic Church, signed an agreement with the communist regime. In exchange for the accord to continue teaching Catholic religion in schools and safeguard the work of the

² Cf. A. Micewski, *Cardinal Wyszyński: a biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

³ Cf. J. Zabłocki, *Nauczanie społeczne Prymasa Tysiąclecia*, http://www.nowezycie.archidiecezja.wroc.pl/stara_strona/numery/102001/03.html (3.11.2017).

Catholic University of Lublin the Cardinal agreed to recognize the new western Polish border and disapproved the continuation of fighting by last troops of underground partisan army⁴.

The agreement did not last long. On 25th September 1953 the Cardinal was arrested and put in a place of isolation without any trial, consecutively in Rywałd Królewski, Stoczek Warmiński, Prudnik Śląski nad Komańcza. In this last place cardinal Wyszyński wrote the program of moral renewal of Polish nation, the first act of which was the renovation of famous vows of king John-Casimirus from the time of Swedish invasion (so called "deluge") in 17th century. According to the same program cardinal Wyszyński led the Great Novena preparing the Church and nation for the celebration of the millennium of Christianity in Poland in 1966. Rightly diagnosing the deprivation of human being by communist ideology the Cardinal in his program of moral renewal pointed at the sins of drunkenness, adultery, abortion, social injustice, laziness and wastage. The vows contained promises of pursuit of holy life, of social justice and human dignity of every person⁵.

Once again the Primate and the Church in Poland became the object of vigorous attacks from the side of communist regime on the occasion of the initiative of Polish-German reconciliation, which has been taken by Polish bishops. It was only 12 years from the end of the Second World War and the relations between two episcopates: Polish and German, likewise between the clergy and laity, were deeply cold. Enough to remind, that Polish clergy shared the fate of Poles submitted to genocide performed by Nazi-Germans during the war.

On the 18th of November 1965 Polish bishops issued an address to their German brothers. The text of this letter has been prepared by three eminent Polish bishops: archbishop Bolesław Kominek from Wrocław (Breslaw)⁶, Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Krakow and future pope, and Jerzy Stroba, then auxiliary bishop of Gorzów Wielkopolski. The context for this address was the forthcoming celebration of the millennium of Christianity in Poland in 1966.

Major part of the address was consecrated to the description of difficult events in the common history of neighbouring nations. Recalling the memory of past events aimed to explain the complexity of situation in which the Poles understandingly felt mistrust towards their German neighbours. In the address there has also been introduced the reference to the new Polish-German border

⁴ Cf. *Życiorys Sługi Bożego Stefana Kardynała Wyszyńskiego*, http://www.kul.pl/zyciorys-slugi-bozego-stefana-kardynala-wyszynskiego,art_11957.html (2.11.2017).

⁵ Cf. *Tekst Jasnogórskich Ślubów Narodu Polskiego*, <http://www.wyszynski.psur.pl/sluby.php> (2.11.2017).

⁶ Cf. W. Kucharski, and G. Strauchold, *Wokół Orędzia: kardynał Bolesław Kominek, prekursor pojednania polsko-niemieckiego* (Wrocław: Ośrodek "Pamięć i Przyszłość", 2009).

on Oder and Neisse, as a bitter for Germans fruit of last war resulting in massive murders, destruction of our country and the suffering of its population. But there has also been introduced a reference to the sufferings of those Germans, who were voluntary refugees and who were expelled from their homes in the consequence of resettlement decided by victorious powers in Potsdam Conference. The most important words are in the last part of the address, which has been issued in the frame of the Second Vatican Council coming to its end:

“In this the most Christian and the very human spirit, we extend our hands to you, sitting here on the benches of concluding Council and we offer our forgiveness as well as we ask for it. And if you, German bishops and Council Fathers, fraternally take our extended hands, then we will be able to celebrate our millennium in the very Christian way”⁷.

“Traitor of the nation and political idiot⁸” – in these words the first secretary of the Communist Party, Władysław Gomułka, addressed the primate Wyszyński. The offer of forgiveness presented to the Germans by Polish Catholic Episcopate went far beyond what Polish communist authorities could expect and accept in those times. Asking for forgiveness from the German part has been immediately classified as treason. However, many of Poles – not without influence of strong official propaganda – were also still restraint to the concept of reconciliation with the oppressor. All what is described here took part on the ecclesial ground, but had a strong influence on civil society. Polish communist authorities strongly disapproved the gesture of Polish Episcopate accusing the bishops even of treason. But in fact they played double-game on the nation’s feelings. The communists counted too much for the sentiment of revenge in the society and for the possible divorce between Polish public opinion and the voice of the Church. They however underestimated the power of religious message of Christian forgiveness.

Shortly before his death in 1981 cardinal Wyszyński once again stood hand by hand with the nation during the strikes of 1980. Contrary to the desires of communist junta cardinal tried to calm the tense relations between the government and “Solidarity” and served as intermediary in negotiations. Cardinal died in quasi free Poland of 1981, before the state of war imposed by communist junta in December of the same year.

⁷ *Orędzie Biskupów Polskich do ich Niemieckich Braci w Chrystusowym urzędzie pasterskim*, <http://www.cdim.pl/en/edukacja/zasoby-edukacyjne/teksty/52-oficjalne-teksty-kocioa-katolickiego/49-1965-11-18-ordzie-biskupow-polskich-do-niemieckich> (21.12.2013).

⁸ Cf. J. Żaryn, *Gomułka umiejętnie wykorzystywał antyniemieckie nastroje Polaków*, <http://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/prof-jan-zaryn-gomulka-umiejtnie-wykorzystywal-antyniemieckie-nastroje-polakow> (21.12.2013).

2. Martyrdom of Bishops and Priests

The communist regime rightly defined the Catholic Church as his principal opponent and the main obstacle in extending its powers to the whole society. During the 45 years of communist rule many bishops and priests paid for their engagement in the fight for social justice the price of imprisonment or even of their lives. The care for social justice for all people led in many ways to the martyrdom of Church leaders and other Church representatives. Two distinctive personalities can serve as examples of adamant but peaceful attitude towards communist dictatorship. One is the Bishop of Kielce, Czesław Kaczmarek. Second – Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko.

The tragic fate of bishop Czesław Kaczmarek⁹ is not known outside Poland. This brave pastor, who first defended his flock against Germans during the Nazi occupation of the country, was then in Stalinist times falsely accused of collaboration with the occupant and of spying for Vatican, as well as for the CIA. Bishop Kaczmarek, who received PhD title in political and social sciences from Lille University (1927), become Bishop of Kielce in 1938, shortly before World War II.

“In the 19th and 20th centuries the politics monopolized everything – said bishop Świrski during the funeral of Czesław Kaczmarek in 1963 – the youth, the worker and the peasant and the whole social action and said, that the priests are not allowed in these areas. Young and fervent social activist could not agree and had to oppose it vigorously. Neither the youth, nor the large masses of people could he leave to the politicians, especially to those who exclaimed: away with God, away with the Church”¹⁰.

Arrested in 1951, after two years of trial full of physical and psychological torture, including drugging, the bishop was sentenced in 1953 for 12 years of prison, of which he served 4 years before coming back to his diocese, where he continued his steadfast fight for dignity of every human person, this dignity so strongly undermined by anti-human system of oppression falsely called “socialism”. The trial of bishop Kaczmarek was a case study for communist authorities, who wanted to intimidate other bishops and present to the public opinion the highest hierarchs of the Catholic Church as traitors of the nation.

⁹ Cf. A. Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism. A Cold War History* (Cambridge: University Press 2008), 48.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Śledzianowski, *Przeszedł czyścić na ziemi - 50 rocz. śmierci bp. Czesława Kaczmarka*, <http://www.diecezja.kielce.pl/przeszedl-czysciec-na-ziemi-50-rocz-smierci-bp-czeslaw-kaczmarka> (3.11.2017).

Three decades later, during the state of war in Poland in the first half of the 80-ties, the world got to know a humble priest from Warsaw, Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko¹¹. Although never officially nominated, Fr. Popiełuszko became chaplain to the world of workers, who then created the largest pro-freedom movement in Europe – the “Solidarity”¹². Today’s blessed by the Catholic Church, Fr. Popiełuszko became a martyr, being killed after torture by Communist Secret Police on October 19th 1984. Why this simple priest became so dangerous for communist *junta*, equipped with the whole apparatus of repression? In the so called “Masses for the Fatherland” in the Warsaw’s parish of St. Stanisław Kostka participated dozens of thousands of people. All what Fr. Popiełuszko did was the persistent and systematic teaching of the Gospel values. He preached about human dignity of ordinary people, about the right to the truth, about love which overcomes hatred. His main motto was the sentence derived from St. Paul Apostle: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”¹³. The idea that in response to this teaching the people of work could show a peaceful resistance, that they could seek social justice without hatred but with determination, that they could not be any more afraid, was absolutely unsupportable for communist dictatorship. Popiełuszko was a prophet. Often the destiny of a prophet is to die for truth.

Many other priest were liquidated in secret by so called “unknown perpetrators”, who after years were proven to be secret communist police agents. We know some names of these priests. Fathers: Michał Pilipec (murdered in 1946), Stanisław Domański (+1946), Michał Rapacz (+1946), Stanisław Ziółkowski (+1946), Lucjan Niedzielak (+1947), Rudolf Marszałek (+1948), Jan Szczepański (+1948), Roch Łaski (+1949), Władysław Gurgacz (+1949), Boguchwał Tuora (+1950), Zygmunt Kaczyński (+1953), Roman Kotlarz (+1976), Leon Błaszczak (+1982), Honoriusz Kowalczyk (+1983), Stefan Niedzielak (+1989), Stanisław Suchowolec (+1989), Sylwester Zych (+1989)¹⁴ were brutally murdered for their uncompromised moral fight for just and peaceful society.

¹¹ Cf. G. Sikorska, *A Martyr for the Truth: Jerzy Popiełuszko* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985).

¹² Cf. L. Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland* (Oxford: University Press 1991).

¹³ Cf. *Błogosławiony ks. Jerzy Popiełuszko*, <http://popieluszko.net.pl/bl-ks-jerzy-popieluszko/> (3.11.2017).

¹⁴ Cf. G. Kuczyński, Tomasz Bieszczad, *Zamordowani, zamęczeni, zastrzeleni, straceni...*, <http://www.solidarni2010.pl/32605-zamordowani-zameczeni-zastrzeleni-straceni.html> (3.11.2017).

3. The Church as a “space of liberty” and intermediary role of the Church

During the communist dictatorship the Catholic Church in Poland was the only force in the society which created a unique space for cultural, artistic and even scholar life free of the omnipresent censorship. This “space of liberty” allowed quasi official, quasi unofficial distribution of films regarding the religious, social and moral problems. Not only the films were displayed in the churches, but many artists were given shelter and performed in the Church premises, while the State censorship banned them from the stages of State operas, theatres and concert halls.

Talks of invited Catholic scholars and social activists provided instruction in the principles of Catholic social teaching and gave the nation moral strength of fighting for peoples’ rights. With the years a unique form of massive instructions comprising talks and even artistic performances has been elaborated. The so called “weeks of Christian culture”¹⁵ spread around the country. Such kind of activity of churchmen and laity was of course strongly disliked by communist authorities. Nevertheless, the same authorities rarely intervened in what was being happening behind the Church walls. The Poles, Catholics, of other faith or even non believers, gladly profited of these “spaces of liberty”. Not only instruction in faith, in social and moral matters was important. In the times when the official life was leached of ideas – as in communist propaganda nobody believed, even the communist party officials – this semi-underground life gave to the people the sense of existence, arguments for worthiness of moral life in the society and something very precious: the hope for better life and future.

In the absence in the civil society of any organisation truly representing the world of work, the Roman Catholic Church often played the role of intermediation between the civil authorities and the society. The bishops often – especially in the situations of great social tension – held informal talks with the authorities. In the same time the authority of the Church allowed to cool down the tempers so that humiliated society didn’t go on suicide fight with the state, which although marionette, was sustained by Red Army troops largely deployed in Poland.

Nevertheless, when the anger and determination of workers reached the summit, like in 1956 in Poznań, in 1968 in Warsaw, in 1970 in Gdańsk, in 1976 in Radom or again in 1980 in Gdańsk and in the whole country, the Church did not abandon revolting people. The priest went to the factories and other places of strikes to provide pastoral care, to bring comfort and to show solidarity with the

¹⁵ Cf. *Christian Life in Poland*, Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX 1989.

oppressed. This was also common during the state of war, declared by communist junta in December of 1981. Thousands of “Solidarity” activists were arrested and imprisoned. The Church sent priests to the prisons and camps of internment, organized material and spiritual help for the families of the detained. Many top “Solidarity” activists were never caught only because they found secret shelter in the Church establishments. The Church officials offered also in great secret financial help in underground activity. The famous case of hiding the funds of Low Silesia region of “Solidarity” in the residence of the archbishop of Wrocław can be here the best example¹⁶.

4. Conclusion

Martyrdom of bishops and priest joined the martyrdom of thousands of lay Christians, who did not agree to renounce Christ in everyday life. Lay Christians, especially members of Church movements and organizations, were also heavily persecuted, sometimes up to the point of giving their lives or being imprisoned. Every day or “soft” persecutions of lay Christians however comprised the loss of work, inability to get promotion in professional life, but often a one-way ticket to emigrate from Poland. The Church suffered in all Her body: head and members. And the entire Church: pastors and the flock longed for just social life, for freedom of conscience and cult.

In the collective consciousness of the people in Western Europe the political break through to freedom of the nations of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, subjected to soviet domination or occupation, is connected with the fall of the Berlin Wall the 9th of November 1989. However this would not happen, or at least not so soon, if the “Solidarity” movement in Poland had not fought from 1980, closely supported by the Catholic Church. This unique symbiosis of the world of work with the Church’s social teaching brought blessed fruits of freedom and rebuilding the society. Thus the realisation of the postulates of social justice had nothing in common with degenerated and bankrupt communist ideology, but was a pure realization of Gospel teaching. Suffering with the nation and sharing its fate allowed the Catholic Church in Poland building up a unique authority, what is still fruiting nowadays when the society tries to shake off the rests of communism now disguised in the suit of liberalism.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Antczak, *80 milionów Solidarności. Rozmowa z Katarzyną Kaczorowską*, <http://www.gazeta-wroclawska.pl/artykul/471110,80-milionow-solidarnosci-rozmowa-z-katarzyna-kaczorowska,id,t.html> (3.11.2017).

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