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The Primate of the Polish Millennium – Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński as the Icon of the Peaceful Struggle for Polish Freedom

Introduction

This work attempts to explore the remarkable life of Primate Stefan Wyszyński (1901-1981) and his significant role in the peaceful fight for Polish freedom. However, the word *fight* is not the most fortunate here, because Stefan Wyszyński believed in changes based on a peaceful process rooted in trust in God and families strong in faith.

Primate Stefan Wyszyński was born as the second child on 3rd August 1901 into a family of six children, two of whom died. His parents Julianna and Stanislaw brought him up in a pious and patriotic environment. When he was born, this part of Poland was occupied by Tsar Russia and Polish history and geography were forbidden at school. Therefore, his father took charge of Stanislaw's patriotic schooling. He lost his mother at the age of nine, and he later wrote:

My mother had been dying for almost a month. We children, sitting in school, listened anxiously for the church bells to ring. For us, that would have been a sign that my mother was already dead¹.

His early life and education played a significant role in shaping his commitment to the struggle for Polish independence and religious freedom. From a young age, he displayed a strong sense of patriotism and devotion to the Catholic Church, laying the foundation for his future leadership in the peaceful struggle for Polish freedom (Łatka, 2024, p. 221 & 222).

¹ https://powiatostrowmaz.pl/cms/3772/zyciorys_ks_kard_stefana_wyszynskiego

Spending his formative years in a tumultuous Poland, Primate Wyszyński witnessed the country's struggles during the final period of partition between, Russia, Prussia and Austria, followed by World War I (WWI), which ended with the beginning of Polish independence in 1918. These experiences, coupled with the Russian aggression against Poland in 1920, served as the foundation for his commitment to serving the nation as a true patriot. He was ordained as priest in 1924 (Weigel, 2003, p. 107).

He was not only a priest, but also a scholar. Primate Wyszyński earned a PhD for his thesis on *The rights of the family, church and state to school* in 1929 and became a professor of Canon Law and sociology at the Higher Seminary in Włocławek, Poland, a year later. Through his unwavering dedication to the principles of the Catholic church and fearless leadership, Wyszyński became an enduring symbol of hope and resilience in the face of adversity, persecution, and terror during World War II (WWII) and then the subsequent communist regime in Poland. He was able to inspire the Polish people during these hard times and new generations to come. His tireless commitment to justice and moral integrity served as a guiding light for those who strived for a free and prosperous Poland (Malachi, 1991, p. 548-577).

Historical Context of the Polish Freedom Struggle

The historical context of Primate Stefan Wyszyński's era was marked by the relentless struggle of the Polish nation for freedom and independence, not only in the face of the three wars mentioned above, but also during the time of the Communist Regime from 1945 to 1989.

The Nazi occupation of Poland (1939-1945) was devastating, leading to the deaths of millions of both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), the Nazis created over 700 ghettos and established a network of concentration and death camps across occupied Poland. Scholars estimate that, of Poland's pre-war population of about 35.1 million, between 5.5 and 6 million people died during WWII, including roughly three million Jews (US Department of State).

Following this, there was the 42-year period of the Communist regime. Professor Rudolph Joseph Rummel² says that *from 1945 to 1948, the Soviets deported to forced labor or concentration camps in the Soviet Union from 3,000,000 to 6,000,000 Poles, of which 585,000 may have died. Hundreds of thousands and possibly near 1,000,000 Poles were killed in Soviet terror and repression* (Rummel, 1990). Poland's turbulent past, marked by invasions and occupations, strengthened its people's determination to resist oppression and restore their independence. Against this chaotic backdrop, Wyszyński emerged as a dedicated priest of peaceful resistance, advocating for the dignity and rights of his fellow citizens in the quest for a free and fair Poland.

It should also be mentioned that there was neither freedom of speech nor faith in Communist Poland. After 1947, the Polish communist government controlled the entire country and *started a violent persecuting of the Church* (Mazgaj, 2010, p. 23). The atmosphere of those times is reflected in Special Report No. 1 of the Select Committee on Communist Aggression, prepared for the American Congress in 1954. The report states that hundreds of priests were killed, tortured or imprisoned. All 10 Catholic bishops were deprived of their freedom, 2000 priests were imprisoned, and the same number of laymen were sent to the communist concentration camps (Kresten, 1954, p. 31). The report also says that Poland was totally dependent on Communist Russia's decisions, there was no room for any form of freedom.

World War II in the life of Stefan Wyszyński

The Second World War was a significant period that shaped the faith and character of Father Stefan Wyszyński. As a young priest, he went to the East immediately after the outbreak of the war. At that time, no one expected that on 17th September, Russia would attack Poland from the other side under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. It was also called the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression pact which *granted the Eastern part of Poland to the Soviets in exchange for a Soviet agreement to remain neutral in any upcoming conflict* (Barker, 2008, p. 99).

2 Rudolph Joseph Rummel (1932-2014) – an American professor of Indiana University, University of Hawai at Manoa and Yale University. His research covered analysing data on collective violence and wars. He dedicated his career to analyzing data on collective violence and war, aiming to contribute to their resolution or elimination.

Near Dęblin, while confessing to a soldier in the trenches, he saw a farmer who, despite the war, was sowing his field. He then asked him if he was not afraid of the war. The answer he received influenced his later fate. The farmer, who was not concerned about the war going on around him, said: *If I left the grain in the granary, it would be burned by the bomb, and when I throw it into the ground, someone will always eat the bread from it.* This event led Father Stefan Wyszyński to decide to return to Włocławek, teach at the seminary and become an editor of Catholic magazines. This was an activity forbidden by the Gestapo – the political police force of Nazi Germany. He had to hide from them, as being on their list meant death when caught, either by being shot or being sent to a death camp. This would have happened, but in July 1940, he went to Laski to help the nuns at the Society for the Care of the Blind, founded by Countess Róża Czacka, and the Franciscan friar (Longchamps de Brier & Domingo, 2022). There, in addition to his daily work, he gave lectures to the intelligentsia, keeping people's spirits up and fostering a sense of patriotism. However, his poor health continued to deteriorate and, fearing it would get worse, Father Stefan Wyszyński left for Zakopane in October 1941. There, he also miraculously avoided arrest by the Nazi-Germans, who regularly organized round-ups to send people to concentration camps. Then he returned to Laski, where he became a chaplain, leading retreats and lectures, lifting people's spirits, and giving them hope for a better tomorrow (Pabis & Kozłowska, 2020, p. 16-18).

On the 1st of August 1944 the Warsaw Uprising broke out. Its aim was to liberate Warsaw from Nazi German occupation and establish an independent Polish government free from Communist Russian control (Lochmatow, 2023, p. 34). Following the start of the Warsaw Uprising, the Laski Care Center for the Blind was transformed into a hospital for the wounded from the capital, serving also as a contact hub and refuge for partisans against the German occupation. Father Wyszyński took on additional responsibilities, helping care for the injured, assisting with surgery, and offering prayers and last rites to those in need. He also served as a chaplain in Żoliborz, a district of Warsaw, where heavy fighting with the Nazi Germans took place. Izabela Sieranc describes this period in her book, stating:

Years later, he recalled that the residents of the Laski asylum, despite artillery fire and the pacification of Kampinos (National Park, where some of the Polish national troops had been withdrawn from Warsaw), were never forced to give up their evening rosary [...] Sometimes the shells cut off branches, but they did not touch people.

During these various pacifications, we never stopped serving God in this chapel. And although sometimes the artillery would play during the day, when six o'clock in the evening came, when we were praying the rosary here, everything would calm down. Such a strange schedule of Divine Providence" (Sieranc, 2021, p. 25-27).

This deep spiritual experience proved to Father Stefan Wyszyński that through Mary's intercession and care, Divine Providence remains with us, even in the most challenging times. Through his profound faith, devotion to the Mother of God, and compassionate service, Father Wyszyński endured until the end of the war. I think we can say that he believed that any change and freedom for the country was possible only through the peaceful spiritual transformation of people's hearts. This was proven by his heroic work and devotion to society as a young priest.

The end of WWII ironically led to the loss of independence and almost half of its territory for the Polish nation. Nearly six million Polish citizens were killed, including Polish Jews, which meant that one in five Poles died. *The proportion among the educated elites was far higher: nearly one in three Catholic priests and doctors, and over one in two lawyers. A million Polish children had been orphaned* (Zamoyski, 2009, p. 338). In such a political and social atmosphere, Father Professor Stefan Wyszyński had to face challenges that concerned Poland as a nation, striving to preserve its identity.

Elevation to Primate of Poland

After the war, Father Professor Stefan Wyszyński returned to the Włocławek diocese, where he became the rector of the seminary. It was a very difficult time, as the building had been destroyed, books had been burned, and many professors had been killed by the Nazis. Apart from his work at the seminary, he was also active in science, ran two parishes, heard confessions, and always found time for people in need of help. After a short period of work in the seminary and parishes, he was appointed Bishop of Lublin in March 1946. Father Stefan Wyszyński placed the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa without the crown, on his episcopal seal. In the coat of arms, below the image of Mary, were the words: *Soli Deo*, meaning: To God Alone (Pabis & Kozłowska, 2020, p. 23). In such difficult times, this was a real challenge, especially since the communists saw the church as an enemy of the system (Almond, 2015, p. 393). The aim of the Soviets was to eliminate any influence of the Catholic Church, viewing it as a threat to Moscow's intended control

over the occupied countries (Levillain & O'Malley, 2002, p. 1216). Father Professor Stefan Wyszyński must have realized that the higher he rose in the church hierarchy, the greater responsibility he had to shoulder. Having become bishop of the Lublin diocese, the Catholic University of Lublin became very important to him, as a center for educating the Catholic intelligentsia, promoting free thought and shaping a society based on the values closest to his heart.

After the death of Polish Primate August Hlond, Father Stefan Wyszyński was appointed the Archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw, and the new Primate of Poland by the Pope Pius XII on 12th November 1948. *Archbishop Wyszyński took over his post exactly at the time when the Polish Union Workers' Party (PZPR) was growing very powerful and the relations between the state and the Church were worsening* (Kloczkowski, 2000, p. 315). PZPR was the ruling party in Poland, which became a communist state known as the Polish People's Republic. There was a one-party system fully dependent on Communist Russia. This was also reflected in the names of all Eastern Bloc countries, except Czechoslovakia, which included the word 'People's' or 'Democratic' in its name (Grupińska, 2023). At that time, the communist government tried to limit the role of the Church in the state by every possible means, resorting to arrests, violence and interrogations.

Being the Primate of Poland during such a difficult period of history required an incredible ability to manage the Church in a climate of persecution. Moreover, only peaceful movements, actions and approaches were able to unite the nation. The country was "colonized" by powerful Communist Russia crushing every attempt at resistance. The Church was the only place where people could gather, free from the brainwashing philosophy (Hunter, 1958, p. 18). Primate Wyszyński, as the most important figure in the hierarchy of the Polish Church, had an invaluable influence on strengthening national unity, faith, and hope for freedom, which was to come after several decades.

The Trial and Imprisonment of Primate Wyszyński

The communist government tried to suppress the Church and issued a law on 9th February 1953, stating that ecclesiastical appointments would not be binding unless authorized by the state (Dziewianowski, 1953, p. 6). This meant that the Communists wanted to control the Church from within. However, this restrictive law coincided with the death of Stalin on 5th March

1953. It did not significantly impact governmental policy towards the Church, but many people believed it would. The reality was totally different from the social expectations, priests were arrested in large numbers, the Catholic press was restricted, and various measures were introduced to suppress faith and the spirit of freedom in the nation (Weigel, 1992, p. 110).

On 8th May 1953, responding to the communist regime's attempts to control the Church, Primate Stefan Wyszyński released a statement stating:

If the external factors prevent us from appointing to religious positions people we deem proper and competent, we are determined not to fill these positions at all, rather than to delegate the religious governance of souls into unworthy hands... We are not permitted to place the things of God on the altar of Cesar. Non Possumus³.

This stance of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was met with a swift reaction from the communist government, which detained him on 25th September 1953. *He was put under close detention, originally extremely strict, which lasted for over three years* (Kloczkowski, 2000, p. 316). The Archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw faced both a trial and imprisonment. He was accused of activities against the state and sentenced to three years in prison (Grabowski, 2014, p. 60). Despite the harsh conditions, he remained steadfast in his commitment to upholding the freedom of the Polish people and defending the rights of the Catholic Church. His imprisonment symbolized the unjust persecution faced by those who stood up for the country's freedom and religious values. Throughout this difficult period, Primate Wyszyński continued to inspire others with his unwavering faith and dedication to the cause of peaceful resistance to oppression.

The turning point during Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's imprisonment was the Jasna Góra Vows of the Polish Nation on 26th August 1956. Father Stefan Wyszyński, inspired by the Lviv vows of King John Casimir on 1st April 1656⁴, wrote a text renewing the nation's vows to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland. The nation promised fidelity to its Mother and Queen

3 Memorial Episkopatu Polski do Rady Ministrów z dn. 8.5.1953 (Memorial of the Polish Episcopate to the Council of Ministers of 8 May 1953) 1992, <http://www.nonpossumus.pl/nauczanie/nonpossumus.php>

4 The Republic of Poland was almost entirely taken over by the Swedish and Russian forces. The King's Vows aimed to encourage the whole society to fight the enemies. The king placed the Polish Republic under the protective care of the Holy Virgin Mary, whom he called the Queen of the Polish Crown. He also promised to improve the situation of Polish peasants and townspeople as soon as the country was freed from the foreign

and prayed for freedom for the Cardinal Primate and the Church in Poland (Honeygoskey & Burton, 2010, p. 38). About one million people gathered at the Sanctuary of Our Lady in Częstochowa to pray. Two months later, Primate Wyszyński was released from custody and was allowed to return to Warsaw to resume his duties as head of the Polish church.

Spiritual Guide of the Nation

Primate Cardinal Wyszyński returned to Warsaw on 28th October 1956. This was a temporary period when the communist government began to assure religious freedom and seek agreement with the Church. However, this did not last long. From 10th-19th March 1959, the third congress of the Polish Union Workers' Party (PZPR) was held, during which the authorities of the ruling communist organization attacked the activities of the Church and outlined a plan to limit religious freedom in Poland. It can be said that, after a temporary respite from the hostile relations between the Church and the communist state, there was a return to the policy of repression, surveillance and oppression. The communists started using different methods to destroy the church, such as imposing high taxes on places of worship, prohibiting the construction of new churches, and conscripting young priests into the army (Mazgaj, 2010, p. 67). Primate Wyszyński knew that only through deliberate actions, attempts to maintain delicate relations with the communists, or at least engage in dialogue with them, could the political and religious conflict be calmed.

18th November 1965 marked the beginning of new relations between the Polish and German churches and peoples. On this day, the Letter of Reconciliation from the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops was presented. The Polish Roman Catholic Bishops offered forgiveness to the German Catholic Bishops and asked for the same in return. One of the authors of this letter was Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. The aim of the letter was to build relations between the people and churches of Germany and Poland, despite the past atrocities, the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing (Frieberg & Chung, 2017, p. 67). It was a milestone in Polish-German relations, heavily criticized by the communist regime. Today, we can say that the signatories of this letter confirmed their deep faith in God's

occupation. Source: Gorny, G. & Rosikon, J. (2017) *Fatima Mysteries. Mary's Message to the Modern Age*. Ignatius Press. p. 298.

mercy through the words of the Lord's Prayer saying: *...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...*

The Primate of the Millennium

Poland celebrated its Millennium as a nation and the 1000th anniversary of Christianity in 1966. The country and Christianity have been interrelated and interconnected for a thousand years. *The faith and Christian values contained in the Decalogue accompanied Poles in their moments of glory and helped them through the most difficult times of threat to their national existence* (Murawska, 2021).

Professor Brian Stanley⁵ describes Cardinal Wyszyński's preparations for the Millennium celebrations as follows:

In 1957 he began an annual schedule of catechetical intinerations to every parish in the country, drawing vast crowds wherever he went. By 1966 every Catholic church in Poland displayed a banner proclaiming "lat. Sancrum Poloniae Millenium" – Poland's Sacred Millennium, 966-1966...(Stanley, 2018, p. 51).

Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński decided to celebrate a thousand years of Christianity by dedicating the nation to the protection of the Holy Mary at the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa. Primate Wyszyński and the Polish episcopate performed the act of dedicating Poland and its people to the service of the Mother of Christ, for the freedom of the Church both in the country and in the world, on 3rd May 1966 (Weigel, 2003, p. 115). It was a special day celebrated in the Polish Catholic church, as it marked

5 Brian Stanley read history at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and stayed on in Cambridge for his PhD on the place of missionary enthusiasm in Victorian religion. He has taught in theological colleges and universities in London, Bristol, and Cambridge, and from 1996 to 2001 was Director of the Currents in the World Christianity Project in the University of Cambridge. He was a Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, from 1996 to 2008, and joined the University of Edinburgh in January 2009. Professor Stanley has written or edited nine published books and numerous articles, mostly in the field of the history of Christian missions and world Christianity. His most recent book is *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton University Press, 2018). He is currently working on two edited volumes: a collection of lectures by the late Professor Andrew F. Walls on the history of the missionary movement from the West (Wm. B. Eerdmans), and a multi-disciplinary collection on Christianity and Empire Revisited (Brill).

The Feast of Our Lady Queen of Poland. It should also be mentioned that Pope Paul VI was invited to participate in these celebrations, but the Polish communist authorities did not allow him to come, arguing that the timing was not suitable for such a visit. Therefore, the empty Papal throne was placed next to the altar, with a red rose on it. The Holy Mass was celebrated by Archbishop Karol Wojtyła – future Pope John Paul the Second.

On this day, during the celebration, the Primate Cardinal Wyszyński said:

We are standing before a significant, historical act, for the new Millennium of Faith. And just as once on Calvary, on the threshold of a new era of humanity of the supernatural order, Christ looking down from the cross said to Mary: „Behold your Son” – so today, on the threshold of a new millennium, all of us present here, bishops, priests and the People of God, turn to the Mother of God and ours, to the Mother of the Church and Queen of Poland. We are driven by a deep trust, experienced over the centuries, that she will never abandon us (Romaniuk, 1994, p. 102).

The celebrations were perceived by the Communist Regime as an *act of war* against the philosophy and politics of the state. The Communists realized that they had to confront the Church and attract the masses. Therefore, they arranged alternative public events in different towns to shift people's attention from the Millennium Church ceremonies in different cities. *There was also a great deal of administrative harassment and petty chicanery* (Gamarnikow, 1967, p. 12).

Conclusions

Primate Stefan Wyszyński, also known as the *Lion of Poland*, stood as a symbol of steadfast opposition to the oppressive grasp of communism in Poland. His tireless efforts in advocating for the rights of the Catholic Church and the Polish people serve as a testament to his unwavering commitment to justice and freedom. With a resolute spirit, he fearlessly confronted the atheistic ideology that plagued the communist regime, refusing to compromise on matters of faith and morality. Through the power of his pastoral letters and impassioned sermons, Primate Stefan Wyszyński fearlessly spoke out against the injustices propagated by the government, denouncing the suppression of religious freedom and championing the cause of the oppressed. His words resonated in the hearts and minds of the Polish people, igniting

a flame of hope and determination that could not be extinguished. Primate Stefan Wyszyński's legacy extends beyond mere words and sermons. His unwavering stance against communism became a source of inspiration for countless Poles, empowering them to resist the regime and fight for their fundamental rights. He became a pivotal figure in the peaceful struggle for Polish freedom, a beacon of light amidst the darkness of oppression. His courageous stand against the communist regime became a rallying cry for those yearning for true freedom. Primate Stefan Wyszyński's unwavering commitment to justice and his faith in the power of the human spirit continue to inspire generations, reminding us of the strength and resilience of the human spirit when faced with adversity. The impact of Primate Stefan Wyszyński's actions can still be felt today. His legacy lives on as a reminder that no matter the odds, the fight for freedom is worth every sacrifice. His unyielding resistance serves as a testament to the power of determination and the enduring strength of faith. In the annals of Polish history, Primate Stefan Wyszyński's name will forever be etched as a hero of the people, a guardian of freedom, and a champion of the oppressed.

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Summary

This study seeks to delve into the extraordinary life of Primate Stefan Wyszyński (1901–1981) and his pivotal contribution to the peaceful struggle for Poland's freedom. His upbringing and education were instrumental in fostering his dedication to the struggle for Poland's independence and the preservation of religious freedom. Through his steadfast commitment to the principles of the Catholic Church and courageous leadership, Wyszyński emerged as a lasting emblem of hope and perseverance amid the challenges, persecution, and terror of World War II and the ensuing communist regime in Poland. Serving as the Primate of Poland (1948–1981) during the communist regime demanded exceptional skill in

leading the Church under conditions of persecution. In 1966, Poland commemorated its Millennium as a nation alongside the 1000th anniversary of Christianity. Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński chose to mark a thousand years of Christianity by entrusting the nation to the care of the Holy Mary at the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa. The Holy Mass was celebrated by Archbishop Karol Wojtyła – future Pope John Paul the Second. The celebrations of 1000 years of Christianity in Częstochowa, Poland, in 1966 were attended by an estimated one million people. This gathering marked a significant event in Poland's religious and national history.

Keywords

Primate Cardinal Wyszyński, communist regime in Poland, persecution of Polish church, thousand years of Christianity in Poland, life of Primate Wyszyński

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca ma na celu zgłębienie niezwykłego życia Prymasa Stefana Wyszyńskiego (1901–1981) oraz jego kluczowego wkładu w pokojową walkę o wolność Polski. Jego młodość i edukacja odegrały istotną rolę w kształtowaniu jego zaangażowania w zmagania o niepodległość Polski oraz zachowanie tożsamości religijnej. Dzięki niezłomnemu oddaniu zasadom Kościoła katolickiego i odważnemu przywództwu, Wyszyński stał się trwałym symbolem nadziei i wytrwałości w obliczu wyzwań, prześladowań i terroru II wojny światowej, a następnie okresu władzy komunistycznej w Polsce. Pełnienie funkcji Prymasa Polski (1948–1981) w okresie reżimu komunistycznego wymagało wyjątkowych umiejętności w kierowaniu Kościołem w warunkach prześladowań. W 1966 roku Polska uczciła swoje Millennium jako naród oraz 1000-lecie Chrztu Polski. Prymas Kardynał Stefan Wyszyński postanowił uczcić tysiąclecie chrześcijaństwa, powierzając naród opiece Matki Bożej w Sanktuarium Jasnogórskim w Częstochowie. Mszę Świętą celebrował arcybiskup Karol Wojtyła – przyszły papież Jan Paweł II. Obchody 1000-lecia chrześcijaństwa w Częstochowie w 1966 roku zgromadziły około miliona osób. To wydarzenie miało ogromne znaczenie w historii religijnej i narodowej kraju.

Słowa kluczowe

Prymas Kardynał Wyszyński, reżim komunistyczny w Polsce, prześladowanie Kościoła w Polsce, tysiąc lat chrześcijaństwa w Polsce, życie Prymasa Wyszyńskiego