

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński – a great man of the Church of the 20th century who entrusted everything to Mary

On September 12, 2021, two Poles will be raised to the glory of the altars in Warsaw. One is Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of Poland in the years 1948-1981, the shepherd who saved the faith of Poles in the harsh days of communism. The other is Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka, a blind nun, the founder of the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters Servants of the Cross, the creator of the Work of Laski, a centre for the education of blind children and dialogue with non-believers.

The beatification ceremony in the Warsaw Church of Divine Providence will be officiated by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, while brief biographies of the new Blesseds will be presented by the Metropolitan Archbishop of Warsaw, Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz.

As a young priest, even before the Second World War, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński (b. 1901) made a name for himself as an eminent social activist, expert in Catholic social teaching, founder of the Christian Workers' University in Włocławek, and publisher of *Ateneum Kapłańskie*, a periodical of a very high standard. On account of these accomplishments, Pius XII appointed him Bishop of Lublin in 1946.

In November 1948, Wyszyński was appointed Primate of Poland, Metropolitan of Gniezno and Warsaw. Apart from holding the office of Chairman of the Bishops' Conference, he was a Papal Legate (in the absence of the Nuncio) and had special powers which he received from the Holy See, following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Cardinal August Hlond, who had died in 1948. These enabled Wyszyński to exercise jurisdiction over the post-German territories granted to Poland and to care for Catholics in the Soviet Union. In January 1953, he was made a cardinal.

Imprisonment despite a flexible approach

In the face of increasingly tense relations with the communist regime, Primate Wyszyński decided in April 1950 to sign an "Agreement" with the government. The Holy See saw it as a negative development as it considered the document too conciliatory. By signing it, the Primate wanted to protect the Church in Poland from a scathing attack of the communists, as it was the case in the other countries of the socialist block. Thanks to this flexible position, the Church in Poland was saved in the most difficult, Stalinist period. However, in the face of the communists' attempt to take control over appointments in the Church, he voiced steadfast opposition with the words: *Non possumus!* This led to his arrest on 25 September 1953. Without indictment, trial or sentence, he was interned in a number of places of detention for over three years, until 28 October 1956.

Struggle for the moral renewal of the nation, a victorious confrontation with the regime

Cardinal Wyszyński used the period of his imprisonment to develop a programme for the moral renewal of the nation. He was convinced that the recovery of national freedom required a moral and spiritual rebirth. The pillars of this programme were the entrustment of society to the Mother of God (the Jasna Góra Vows of the Nation in 1956), and then the programme of the Great Novena, a 9-year pastoral agenda and prayer before the millennium of the Baptism of Poland in 1966. The Novena was accompanied by a pilgrimage of a copy of the image of the Black Madonna through all Polish dioceses, which involved mass religious gatherings; these often provoked confrontation with the authorities.

As a result of these gatherings of thousands of people, later also a feature of the celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Poland, Poles experienced a sense of freedom they were unable to find outside the Church. As a result, the Church became an increasingly strong authority and an informal guide for the nation. This resulted in a deepening of religiosity, not only among the people but also among the intelligentsia. The confrontation between the Church and the atheistic regime proved victorious for the Church, a unique development in Europe of the time.

Moreover, Cardinal Wyszyński helped the Catholic Church in the USSR to survive. He secretly ordained priests working there and provided them with assistance. It was thanks to his care that the Greek Catholic Church, which had been dissolved and brutally persecuted in Stalin's state, survived in Poland.

A wise introduction of *Vaticanum II*

Cardinal Wyszyński's another accomplishment was the prudent and peaceful introduction of the Council's liturgical renewal, which did not lead to the "secularization" characteristic of many Churches in the West. Cardinal Wyszyński himself took an active part in the work of the Second Vatican Council, participating in all of its four sessions. Paul VI appointed him a member of the Council's presidium, and on the initiative of the Polish bishops, among others, the Pope proclaimed The Blessed Virgin Mary the Mother of the Church.

Polish-German reconciliation

Internationally, Cardinal Wyszyński was one of the fathers of the post-War Polish-German reconciliation, initiated by the famous 1965 letter from the Polish bishops to the German bishops.

The Cardinal's spirituality

One of the most characteristic features of Cardinal Wyszyński's spirituality was his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which had a strongly Christological character. This was expressed, among other things, through his frequently repeated motto: *Soli Deo per Mariam*. He took the idea of "slavery to the Blessed Virgin Mary" from the French mystic St. Louis Grignion de Montfort, personally entrusting himself to Mary while still imprisoned. The crowning achievement of this concept was the consecration of the whole of Poland into the maternal slavery to Mary for the freedom of the Church in the homeland and in the world, which took place on Jasna Góra on 3 May 1966. The celebration was linked to the anniversary of the Millennium of the Baptism of Poland and was attended by nearly a million believers.

Another characteristic feature of Cardinal Wyszyński was his readiness to forgive even his persecutors. After the death of Bolesław Bierut, the communist president and persecutor of the Church, Wyszyński immediately celebrated Holy Mass for his soul in his private chapel. In his last will and testament, he wrote as follows: "I consider it a grace to myself that I was able to bear witness to the truth as a political prisoner through a three-year imprisonment and that I was spared the hatred of my compatriots holding power in the state. Conscious of the injustices done to me, I forgive them from my heart all the slanders with which they have honoured me".

He had great respect for everyone, especially women, which was rare in the Church at the time. Whenever a woman entered his office, even a cleaner, he would stand up to pay her respect. He showed the importance of family values. He was a defender of life and considered

abortion to be one of the most lethal scourges. He was also a consistent defender of human rights in opposition to oppressive regimes.

A prudent support of Solidarity

When strikes started on the Baltic Sea coast in August 1980, he appealed for prudence in fear of Soviet intervention, while at the same time supporting the strikers' demands. He supported the emerging Solidarity Independent Self-Governing Trade Union while at the same time appealing to its leaders to be responsible.

He died on 28 May 1981. His funeral, attended by the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli (in lieu of John Paul II, in hospital after an assassination attempt) and representatives of numerous Episcopal Conferences, was a great demonstration attended by several hundred thousand people.

The path to beatification

The beatification process of Cardinal Wyszyński at the diocesan stage began on 20 May 1989 and concluded on 6 February 2001. Subsequently, the documents were forwarded to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. On 18 December 2017, the decree on the heroic virtues of Cardinal Wyszyński was signed by Pope Francis. On 29 November 2018, the Congregation's medical council declared a miraculous healing through the Cardinal's intercession, and on 2 October 2019 the Holy Father acknowledged this miracle. It was the healing of a 19-year-old girl, a young nun suffering from thyroid cancer. This paved the way to the beatification, which was due to take place on 7 June 2020 but was rescheduled because of the pandemic.

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