Poland: The Catholic University of Lublin 1918-1978

ROGER SYMON

I arrived at Lublin railway station late one bleak evening in March this year. The snow was thawing, and mounds of it were piled up in drifts in unused doorways, grey from dirt and dim street lighting. Not risking a bus I went to the taxi-rank. Mistakenly I thought that the number of people joining the already long queue indicated a steady flow of cabs, but in fact it was my introduction to a fact of Polish life I was to meet time and again in the next three weeks – their patience. It was an hour before I dumbly showed a taxi-man my destination which I had written in block capitals on a card: Dr W. Hryniewicz, Professor of Ecumenical Theology, Catholic University of Lublin, known by its initials KUL.

His tiny room at KUL was his study and his bedroom. Sitting on the bed alongside one wall you can touch the bookshelves lining the opposite wall with your toes. His little desk is also his bedside table, and from floor to ceiling are books, in Polish, German, French, Russian and English, reflecting the great range of his ecumenical knowledge. I was soon to learn how rare, even unpopular, ecumenism is, and how lonely the road of those who follow it.

I had come to Poland for three weeks purely for my own education. I wanted a glimpse of religion in a communist land, and through the kindness of a friend of Professor Hryniewicz, Fr Christopher Lowe CR, an invitation had been arranged for me to spend my first ten days at Lublin.

KUL is a unique institution. It is the only university in all the Eastern bloc countries which is not run by the State, and in this it has a significance out of all proportion to its size. Its degrees are recognized by the State, but it is funded by church money from Poland and from expatriates abroad. In November this year it celebrates its Diamond Jubilee, 60 years of service to the Church of Poland.

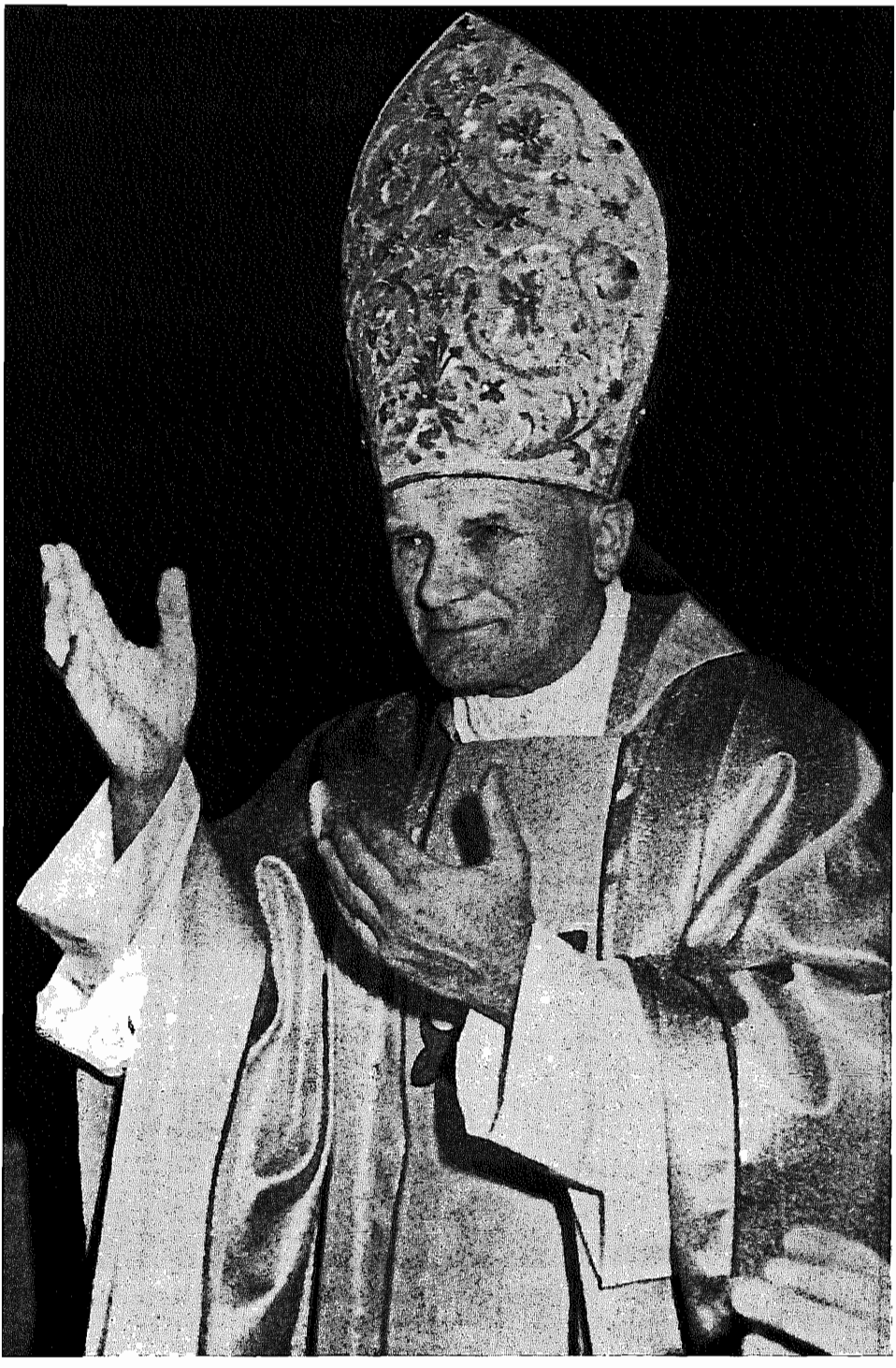
I had my meals there in the professors' dining-room, and one day I was introduced to a Professor Emeritus in his late 80s. Like many middle-class Poles he spoke French, and he told me that he was the only surviving member of the Polish Academy in St Petersburg, from which KUL

was founded in 1918. Throughout the last 60 years he has seen the university survive dashed hopes, suppression and acute pressure with that mixture of patience and humour which belongs almost uniquely to the Poles.

Traditionally KUL's role has been to enable that scholarly understanding of Catholic faith which the Church needs for its teaching. This it has done with distinction and imagination. Thirty bishops, including Cardinal Wyszynski, and many seminary teachers are among former students. The new Pope was once Professor of Ethics. There are four Faculties: Theology, Canon Law, Philosophy and Human Science, which comprise 17 sections. These include departments of Psychology, Philology, History, Fine Arts. And attached to the university are various institutes – Historical Geography of the Polish Church, Religious Literature, Polish Migration, Christian Antiquity, Medieval Culture, and the Centre for Archives. The Rector reports[1] that during the current academic year 259 academic staff are employed for 2,500 students. Academics can travel freely, and in 1976–77 staff have taken part in the 14th Congress of Sociologists of Religion in Strasbourg, the 11th Congress in Old Testament Research in Göttingen, the 32nd Congress for New Testament Research at Tübingen, and in Symposia at Uppsala (Comparative Church History) and Bonn (Medieval Philology). Official contacts have been established with universities in Belgium, Italy, Holland, France and USA, and 232 foreign visitors have been welcomed for short stays. In addition a party of 36 staff and students were guests of the University of Geneva. But in spite of this, KUL still seems to suffer from lack of access to western theological scholarship. They get no encouragement from the Polish hierarchy, which regards what they call "the latest western theological novelties" with suspicion, feeling it could be divisive and give the State just the opportunity it wants to drive a wedge into the Church's solid front. So there is little radical theology, and certainly no hint of "liberation theology" of the kind being hammered out under totalitarian regimes of the Right.

KUL's library is justly famous in Poland. It has 737,000 books, and it receives 3,200 periodicals, 1,700 from abroad. Reading some of the titles and "new acquisitions" suggests that the library stretches the capability of the censorship department beyond its limits. Staff have given up all hope of understanding how it is that certain "uncontroversial" books never get through, while other "subversive" literature slips through the net. There among "new acquisitions" were books on dissent, and *avant-garde* thought in Russia, a fact which was variously interpreted to me (like the presence of British newspapers in the local reading-room) as an example of liberalism in the system, Helsinki, or one of censorship's more absurd anomalies.

Censorship in fact is one of the many trials that KUL has to bear, along



The new Pope, John Paul II, photographed the day after his election (16 October) as he came out of the Sistine Chapel after celebrating mass. He is the first non-Italian Pope for 455 years. In Poland as Cardinal Wojtyła of Cracow he was highly respected as a man of deep faith and considerable intellectual power. (See article pp. 220-2)

Patriarch Ilya II of Georgia who was elected on 23 December 1977 and enthroned two days later at the Svetitskhoveli Patriarchal Cathedral in Mtskheta. (See documents pp. 262-5)

with all publishers. It took 20 years to get permission even to start the massive Polish Catholic Encyclopedia, and the authorities only allowed an edition of 1,200 copies of the two volumes (A to B) so far published. Undeterred, the Editorial Secretary, Romuald Lukaszyk, and his 30 full-time assistants push ahead with this mammoth undertaking. Professor Hryniewicz showed me the many entries under Anglicanism, and one could not but be impressed by the detailed thoroughness and determination which they bring to their task. But it is a venture of faith into the distant future, an act of protest like the existence of the university itself, against a regime too weak to suppress it altogether but able to hamper its life and threaten its future. KUL cannot help comparing its facilities with the much higher standard of state universities, and it has to struggle hard to get the equipment it needs. It hopes to complete the fourth side of its main quadrangle in time for the Jubilee celebrations in November, but they repeatedly meet "unaccountable" hold-ups in the supply of building materials, and the wooden scaffolding indicates the financial squeeze in which they have to work.

The atmosphere in the university, all students insist, is noticeably freer than in the state university next door, but I did not meet at KUL the same active political interest that can be found in the larger cities. KUL's opposition to the official state ideology is implicit rather than explicit, discreet rather than overt. Its very presence is a powerful symbol, but its threat is potential, and therefore much more difficult to counter; its role is behind the trenches, not in the front line. It is not even engaged directly in ideological controversy: dialogue with Marxists has been attempted, but it was the terrified Party authorities who stopped it. KUL is the backroom where attitudes, hopes and ideas are formed, attitudes of free intellectual enquiry and respect for human values, which imply an eventual clash with any form of totalitarianism. It is a seed-bed, and if it recognized this the State could, as some professors fear, discriminate against its graduates when they come to look for jobs in the future.

The changing political context of the life of KUL has certainly affected the way it sees itself. Not only does the Rector, Fr Krapiec OP, have to use all his considerable political skill to keep the institution going in the face of bureaucratic pettiness and blatant obstruction, but his reports of recent academic years reveal an interesting shift of emphasis for those who have eyes to read between the lines. No longer is it just the Church's think-tank, or training centre for seminary teachers and clergy: adversity is forcing it to realize a wider responsibility. In fact theology has become increasingly popular with the laity, and at present there is an even balance of men and women overall, with a heavy preponderance of men in Theology, and women in Philosophy and Human Science.[2] More significant is that the Rector stresses[3] that KUL is "ideologically open", that "the modern crisis of civilization makes it necessary to stress

the humanizing influence of theology", that without the "ultimate perspective human life would be neither rational nor human". Like any western Vice-Chancellor he laments "those great gaps left by technical consumer civilization", and emphasizes that scientific investigation needs an unbiased philosophical context in which to work. He summarizes KUL's task: "to reveal the relation that exists between religion and a really human culture".

But such a revelation would also constitute a direct challenge to contemporary Polish socialism, with consequences the Church would think twice about before risking. Be that as it may, the point the Rector is hinting at is well taken by aspiring students: applicants for courses in sociology, psychology and philosophy exceed places by ten to one, and the university is stretched to its limits to support the teaching of the growing number of seminarians. There were 4,000 in training in 1971, 5,000 in 1977.[4] The lecturer's rostrum at KUL, like the pulpit, keeps its reputation for being a place where truth can still be discussed and still be heard.

I left Lublin marvelling at the resilience and toughness of the senior staff, and the hopefulness of the students. No country in Europe has suffered quite like Poland. As Professor Hryniewicz put it to me, priding himself on his mastery of colloquial English, "We always live either in the frying-pan or in the fire". The ashes of those fires are still literally visible in the concentration camps across the country, and there is always the danger of another conflagration, but meanwhile KUL's Diamond Jubilee is an achievement worth pondering.

[1] Rector's Report for Academic Year 1976–77.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Albert Krapiec, OP, "A Catholic University and the Development of a Nation".
[4] Figures from *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 15 January 1978.