

Cardinal Wyszyński: A Portrait

GRAZYNA SIKORSKA

In the early hours of the morning of 29th May, 1981, on the feast of the Ascension, the "Iron Cardinal" Stefan Wyszyński, Primate of the Catholic Church in Poland, died at the age of 79.

When in 1949 he was appointed by Pope Pius XII to succeed Cardinal Hlond as Archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw he also became, according to a centuries-old tradition, Primate of Poland. At the age of 48, he was the youngest among Polish bishops with only two years' experience as a bishop of Lublin. Like two other church leaders in Eastern Europe—Cardinal Beran of Prague and Cardinal Mindszenty of Esztergom—the young Primate was faced with the post-war Stalinist onslaught of communist ideology backed by the force of Soviet arms. At that time, when the communists were consolidating their power in Eastern Europe, they were much concerned with ideological purity. The Church was regarded as the stronghold of superstition and obscurantism and the supporter of feudalism and capitalism: according to the Marxists, there was no place for talks with such an adversary. Yet of the three leaders mentioned, Wyszyński alone survived to lead his flock into a new era of uneasy coexistence between Church and State. He died as undisputed spiritual leader in Poland, revered not only by Catholics but by the whole nation, respected by Poland's communist authorities, truly "uncrowned king of Poland" as he was sometimes referred to. During his stormy "reign" he saw governments and Party bosses come and go together with their plans for destroying him and the Church, while Wyszyński remained constant. Detesting capitulation, he was nevertheless always ready to seize the opportunity for dialogue and honourable compromise with the communist authorities in the interests of the Polish Church and people. In defence of his people Wyszyński was prepared to render unto Caesar the necessary respect, but only if Caesar reciprocated. When this condition was not met he was capable of implacable and fearless opposition.

He always understood clearly the dangers which faced him. In 1948, one year after a communist regime was officially established in Poland,

Wyszyński stated:

All these social changes and this political and class struggle for social justice are irrelevant. The real struggle is in fact against the Lord and His Christ. All this talk about reaction and obscurantism is irrelevant, and so is juggling with words like "progress", "peace", "justice" and so on. These are poor, overused words; a screen for real aims. The eternal enemy of God has revealed himself on earth today, dressed as an Angel of Light, and claiming to correct God Himself. Evil does not believe in the power of Christian love but promotes struggle. It does not put its trust in the Word but in futile manifestoes. It rejects the Christian philosophy of life and Christian culture but promotes the materialistic era.¹

In confronting "evil", Wyszyński chose to make firm demands from a position of power. This power was however spiritual and moral: inspired by the Gospel with its aim of liberating man from falsehood to the Truth, he struggled for human dignity while totally rejecting any form of violence. Pope John Paul is confronting the wider problems of humanity today in the same way.² On the day of his consecration as bishop in May 1946, Wyszyński wrote to the clergy of his diocese:

I wish to join you in offering all the strength of my body and soul to the Grace of God—*solī Deo*—for the salvation of the souls given to me, trusting in God's help. We shall fight for this salvation by word, deed, example, and if need be—sacrifice.³

Brought up in the deep but simple faith of the peasantry, Wyszyński saw there the main source of strength of the Polish Church. He deepened and strengthened the faith of the people through his sermons, pastoral letters, and pastoral visits even to the most remote villages, encouraging "festivals of faith"—for example, pilgrimages to Marian shrines throughout Poland. He became a real father to his people and had their unlimited trust. "I am not a politician or a diplomat, I am not an activist or a reformer, I am your spiritual father. I am the shepherd and bishop of your souls. My mission is to baptize, confirm, preach the Word—to bear the light of Christ."⁴

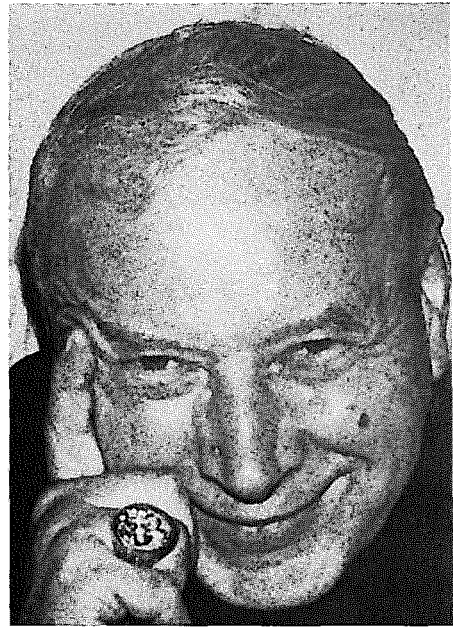
Wyszyński's influence upon the Catholic intellectuals has not been achieved so readily. Until recently, they often criticized him for encouraging "primitive Polish folklore" and even more harshly for his "conservatism" and "traditionalism". This was particularly so during the 1960s when western theological developments and dialogue with Marxism were fashionable in Polish intellectual circles. During the Second Vatican Council, criticism of the Cardinal extended its range to include religious dogma: he was accused of impeding the introduction of the Council's decisions. In 1963 one of the intellectuals' leaders, Stanisław Stomma, a member of "Znak", the Catholic parliamentary

group, "lost" in Rome a secret personal memorandum containing sharp criticism of Wyszyński, which subsequently found its way to the Vatican. At that time there were rumours that even some Polish bishops, including Cardinal Wojtyła, wished the Primate to adopt a more easy-going attitude towards the State and were critical of his conservatism in social and theological matters. These rumours were dispelled when in March 1966 all Polish bishops signed an open declaration of loyalty to Cardinal Wyszyński. Since 1978-79 it has become generally recognized even amongst his former critics that it was Cardinal Wyszyński's policies which enabled the Church in Poland to maintain and strengthen its unity, not only institutionally but most of all spiritually. It is openly admitted that it was the "religious folklore" and "festivals of faith" which put the Church at the centre of Polish society and strengthened the people's sense of unity as Catholics against the oppressive tactics of the authorities, and that the Cardinal's slow and careful introduction of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have spared Poland the division and confusion which have beset so many Catholic Churches in the West.

Apart from his religious role as a priest and as the head of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Wyszyński played an equally important role in the political life of the nation. The very existence of a united Catholic community embracing 90 per cent of society had to be recognized as a political fact, and the purely religious function of the Church took on a political aspect. Wyszyński could not become a devotee of the "godless ideology" of communism or a supporter of a system in which he could not see "any humanistic elements". He nevertheless knew that "the Church has a right and duty to act in any system including communism", and at the same time was well able to distinguish the realm of God from that of Caesar. "The Church should not feel called upon to carry out changes in the social and political system, just as Christ was not interested in the redistribution of wealth among the people."⁵ "Remember this," he said in 1974,

neither I, nor the bishops, nor the Catholic Church in Poland, nor the Catholics are fighting the government, the Party, the system or the establishment [. . .] We are fighting fearlessly for God on behalf of our country. And this is the only struggle we are waging. We are not fighting against anyone, but for the rights of our nation, in its own country, which was after all built mainly by the Catholics who make up over 90 per cent of our society.⁶

He was always a cool realist, a politician and a consummate diplomat, aware of the danger of upsetting the *status quo* in Europe. "We have no right to build castles in the air. It is not possible to reach a hundred per cent of any goal. But if we can obtain seventy per cent, let us stretch out



Above and left Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński Primate of Poland since 1949, who died on 25 May this year. See the article by Grazyna Sikorska on pp. 92-8. Behind him sits his successor as Primate of Poland, then Fr Józef Glemp. (Photographs courtesy of Keston College)

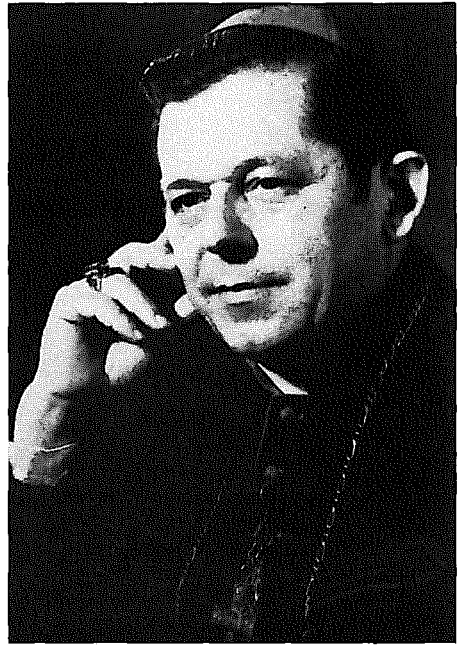


Cardinal Wyszyński in 1979, addressing a crowd. (©Keston College)



Above Cardinal Wyszyński and Polish bishops with Pope Pius XII at the Vatican in 1957. Left to right: Bishop Choromański, Bishop Klepacz, Fr Padacz, Cardinal Wyszyński, Fr Mączyński, the Pope, Archbishop Gawlina, Bishop Baraniak. This is a rare photograph of so many members of the Polish Episcopate of that time. This was Cardinal Wyszyński's first trip to the Vatican after his release from prison in 1956. (His first visit to the Vatican had been in 1951.) During his 1957 visit, he received the Cardinal's hat which had been awarded to him in 1953.

Below Cardinal Wyszyński in one of the mountain villages where he spent his holidays.



Cardinal Wyszyński's successor as Primate of Poland, Archbishop Józef Glemp. He was consecrated bishop only two years ago. See Alexander Tomsky's article on pp. 99-100. (All photographs courtesy of Keston College)

our hand in the hope that God may add the rest.”⁷ He knew how to compromise when the system was strong during the 1950s, and precisely how to attack when the system began to show signs of weakness in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, at moments of crisis, when the fate of the country was being decided in the face of possible outside intervention—in 1956, 1970, 1976, 1980—he called for prudence, moderation and responsibility. His activities were often misunderstood by the Vatican. An agreement between the Catholic Church in Poland and the communist authorities in 1950 was noted in Rome with suspicion and amazement because of the Cardinal’s readiness to compromise. During the 1960s and 1970s the Vatican tried to reach an agreement with the communist authorities over the Cardinal’s head.

Cardinal Wyszyński was uncompromising and courageous in his fight for the Church’s right to carry out its pastoral, educational, social, cultural and charitable mission, to voice its opinion in public matters concerning the whole nation. “Although today has seen the revival of the omnipotence of the State which aims at governing man in every sphere of his existence,” he said in 1975,

nevertheless there are rights which do not depend upon political conditions. They depend upon the Creator, who is our Father. No society, however strong, can violate those rights: the right to life, the right to a decent standard of living, the right to freedom [. . .] the right to worship God in accordance with one’s conscience, [. . .] a believer should not be forced to create catacombs, but has the right to worship God not only in private but also in public, the right to form associations, the right to defend and safeguard his rights [. . .]⁸

When human rights are not respected, the Church has to cry out and remind people that man has an ultimate value in the world. So when we see a violation of human rights we have to cry out: “That is not right”. We have to listen to God, not to man.⁹

Unquestionably, Cardinal Wyszyński’s national importance was rooted in his unique awareness of the Christian origins of Polish culture and the vital part played by the Church in Polish history for a thousand years.

We have to talk about the rights of believers in Poland. For a long time we have been asking the authorities to respect the rights of the believing nation. But sometimes asking is not enough. While having the right to demand that a believer in our country should be protected by law, we have also a duty to do so [. . .] because we are living in a country where the Word has been preached for a thousand years before any other so-called philosophies. Neither the Word nor the Church which has been preaching that Word has ever harmed the nation, the State or the family.¹⁰

“Wyszyński opened before our eyes the world of history” said Fr Józef Tischner.¹¹

This was why he encouraged the celebration of national anniversaries such as the Millennium of Christianity in Poland¹² [. . .] The dignity of man springs from history—from the history which man is creating. We participate in the dignity of those whose works we are continuing. No other Church is so closely linked with history as the Church in Poland. The Primate’s achievement was that he gave us a sense of self-respect by pointing to what we must remember and continue.¹³

It was this awareness of the Church’s role in Polish history which was also the source of that great sense of responsibility for the nation and its future which guided all the Cardinal’s actions, whether he was opposing the communist authorities in the name of the Church and the nation or seeking a *modus vivendi* with them—a goal which despite numerous setbacks he never abandoned.

He always believed in his nation, confident that whatever ideological differences may set Poles against one another, their common national and spiritual heritage will ultimately prove stronger than any divisive factors. Even during the 1970 riots in Gdańsk, when Polish workers were shot down by the Polish police, he said:

We must make every effort to create true democracy in Poland. It has been a Polish national tradition for hundreds of years. We Poles, because of our Christian spirit, should be capable of producing active co-operation amongst all God’s children in Poland: we have a right to our own country, and in that country, to freedom and respect for our human dignity.¹⁴

He believed in the power of the moral conscience of the nation, and of every individual within it. When the communists proclaimed that progress in history depended on general economic factors, and denied the importance of the individual, Cardinal Wyszyński pointed to moral values as the true basis of progress. “Revolution must be ethical, or it will not take place at all.” He worked hard to ensure that if any changes occurred in Poland they would always be in accordance with Christian ethics. In this way he ensured that the Polish nation kept alive its national conscience and that it eventually gave voice to that conscience in a solidarity which has won the admiration of the world.

Over the last 32 years Cardinal Wyszyński has suffered criticism, personal attacks and humiliation. In a letter of 1967 to the government protesting against their refusal of permission for him to travel to Rome he wrote bitterly:

I have had to put up with continual harassment from the authorities both material—including the confiscation and destruction of 60,000

of my own books, expensively produced, and published in Paris—and moral [. . .] the state authorities denied me the freedom to fulfil my ministerial obligations as bishop of two dioceses over a period of three years without proving any accusations against me. The Party condones a slanderous campaign against me, without my being allowed to reply to these accusations. I have been freely slandered without being free to reply for over 20 years: only the subject-matter of the slander has varied. An enormous amount of literature has been written portraying my work in a false light. Things reached such a pitch that during the celebrations of the Polish Catholic Millennium high state dignitaries made slanderous accusations against me in public. Facing this kind of struggle against myself as a fictitious adversary, I behaved with complete composure, without bothering to defend myself, or retaliating in a similar manner.¹⁵

In 1956, on the day of his release after three years' imprisonment, Cardinal Wyszyński commented: "I have come back to Warsaw and resumed my pastoral work in the two archdioceses and as a Primate of Poland after being stopped three years ago [. . .] Our heavenly Father of Truth gave us instructions never to retreat into the past but to look to the future. So forward we go. [. . .]"¹⁶

Through all tribulations, the Cardinal was able to change failures into victory. He lived to see one of his cardinals elected to the See of St. Peter. The position of the Church in Poland today is at once easier and more complex than at any time since the communists came to power. Easier, because the Church seems to enjoy greater freedom; more difficult and complex because it has to carry out its mission in new conditions which have not yet clarified themselves. Cardinal Wyszyński understood that he was leaving his country at a critical time. On 16 May, 12 days before his death, he said to the few gathered at his bedside: "I do not want to write any last will or testament, especially a pastoral one. New times are coming, which will require new luminaries and new strengths, and I know that God will give these in His own time."

¹Letter to the Clergy of Lublin diocese for the first Sunday in Advent, 1948.

²See his two encyclicals *Redemptor Hominis* and *Dives in Misericordia*.

³Letter to the Clergy of Lublin diocese on the day of his consecration, Jasna Góra, May 1946.

⁴Pastoral letter, Lublin, 6 January 1949 (his first pastoral letter as Primate).

⁵"W Świątłach Tysiąclecia Chrześcijaństwa Polski", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1 June 1958.

⁶Sermon at the consecration of the church in Zbrosza Duża, 17 August 1974.

⁷Comment in Rome, May 1957.

⁸Sermon in the Church of St Zygmunt, Warsaw, 14 April, 1975.

⁹Sermon at Skalka, Kraków, 9 May 1971.

¹⁰Sermon at Jasna Góra, 3 May 1977.

¹¹An extract from a recent book by Fr Tischner is published in this issue of RCL, pp. 139-46.

¹²Celebrated in 1966.

¹³Interview with Polish Radio, Kraków, 30 May 1981, published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 7 June 1981.

¹⁴Appeal to all Poles after Christmas Mass in the Cathedral of St Jan, Warsaw, 25 December 1970.

¹⁵Letter to the Presidium of the Polish government, 2 October 1967.

¹⁶Address, Warsaw, 28 October 1956.

THE WORLD TODAY

The monthly journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs provides the general reader with up-to-date and authoritative information on current world problems.

Recent issues include:

Lawrence Freedman	Arms control: on the wrong track?
Leonard Schapiro	The 26th CPSU Congress
Alec Nove	The new Soviet Five-Year Plan
Richard S. Newell	International responses to the Afghanistan crisis
Adeed I. Dawisha	Iraq and the Arab world
Julian Crandall	
Hollick	France under Giscard d'Estaing—a retrospect
Adam Bromke	Poland's upheaval—an interim report
Christopher Coker	The South African elections and neo-apartheid

Annual subscription (including postage):

1981 (Vol. 37)		<i>Single copies</i>	
UK	£10	UK	£1.00
US	\$27	US	\$2.70
Elsewhere	£12	Elsewhere	£1.20

Orders may be sent to booksellers and newsagents, or to the Oxford University Press, Press Road, Neasden, London NW10 0DD (Tel. 01-450 8080)