

# *The Polish Roman Catholic Church and the Fate of Former Lutheran Churches in the "Recovered Lands".*

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Having fought throughout the Second World War on the side of the Allies, Poland found herself theoretically in the victorious camp in 1945. In fact she was abandoned by her Western allies and pushed into the Soviet sphere of influence. The "sovereign" Poland which emerged in 1945 bore little resemblance to the Poland of 1939. Polish borders were moved 150 miles to the west largely because of Stalin's wishes.<sup>1</sup> To compensate for the loss, part of eastern Germany was awarded to Poland at the Yalta Conference. However, it was only at Potsdam in 1945 that the new Polish-German frontier on the Oder and Western Neisse was finally fixed, and the expulsion of Germans from Poland approved.<sup>2</sup>

The post-war resettlement programmes affected millions of people, but this expulsion of Germans from Poland was the largest single operation, involving over five million people from the former provinces of East Pomerania, East Brandenburg, Silesia, Danzig and East Prussia, and from Central Poland. Most of the expelled Germans were Protestant believers, and as a result Protestant communities in the "Recovered Lands"<sup>3</sup> were decimated; some churches, like the German Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union, disappeared almost entirely.<sup>4</sup> The nearly deserted Western Territories were repopulated by Poles from other parts of the country<sup>5</sup> as well as by refugees from the Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of

<sup>1</sup>At the Teheran Conference in 1943, involving Britain, USA and the USSR, it had already been decided that the Polish lands annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939 were to remain in Soviet hands. On 6 July 1945 an agreement was signed between the Soviet and Polish governments which offered those Poles who found themselves in the Soviet Union the option of repatriation to Poland.

<sup>2</sup>Germans were also to be expelled from Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

<sup>3</sup>The "Recovered Lands" was the term adopted by the Polish authorities to describe the territory in the west awarded to Poland by the Allies.

<sup>4</sup>The official name of this church was the "Evangelische Kirche der Altpreuussischen Union". It originated in Prussia after Friedrich Wilhelm III imposed a liturgical union between Calvinists and Lutherans. The so-called "Old Lutherans" who did not accept the Union created an evangelical-Lutheran Church in 1841.

<sup>5</sup>Some went to the "Recovered Lands" lured by the prospect of taking over former German farms; others were settled there on orders from the government, for example Ukrainians who did not want to be repatriated to Ukraine now under Soviet rule.

repatriants from the east were Catholics. As compensation for the land and property they left behind they were given land, houses and farm buildings which had formerly belonged to Germans. They felt it was only natural that they should also take over abandoned former German churches, and many church buildings which had belong to the German Evangelical Church of the Union were indeed taken over by Catholic communities in the first few years after the Second World War.

Over the years this whole subject has become enmeshed in a web of rumour, gossip and half truths which has helped to hinder the process of ecumenism in Poland especially between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches. It has also contributed to the negative image of the Polish Roman Catholic Church held in some Western Protestant circles. Even today, leaders of the Lutheran Church in Poland make the following accusations against the Roman Catholic Church:<sup>6</sup> that the Catholic Church took over churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union unlawfully and arbitrarily, taking advantage of Catholic sympathies among the local state administrative officials; that the takeover was justified only by "creating a false need"; and that as a result Lutheran believers were prevented from carrying out their religious practices. To what extent are these accusations justified?

### *A Study of Opole Region*

In the early 1980s, Fr Alojzy Sitek, a Catholic priest of Opole diocese, made the first attempt to look at this problem in an objective academic way. As he was brought up within a Protestant community and had therefore experienced ecumenical tensions personally,<sup>7</sup> he was convinced that the way to mutual understanding lay, not in diplomatic silence or acceptance of rumours, but in facing the truth courageously no matter how painful it might be. For his research he chose the Opole diocese where a quarter of all former churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union were taken over by Roman Catholics before September 1946.<sup>8</sup> The outcome of his research — a thesis on the takeover of the Lutheran churches by Roman Catholics in this

<sup>6</sup>See for example *Church of England Newspaper*, 20 March 1981 or *The Herald*, 15 August 1981.

<sup>7</sup>Ecumenism in Poland was never very easy. In a country where an overwhelming majority of the population pay allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church other denominations naturally feel threatened. The unique link between nationalism and Catholicism in the popular mind which, for example, manifested itself so strongly during the Solidarity period only enhanced this feeling of isolation among non-Catholics.

<sup>8</sup>Ks. Alojzy Sitek, *Problem przejmowania kościołów ewangelickich przez Katolików na Śląsku Opokim po 11 wojnie światowej* (Wydawnictwo Św. Krzyża: Opole, 1985).

region of Silesia — gives a unique and invaluable inside view of the problem and deserves the widest publicity.

Until 1945 the Opole region of Silesia lay within the German borders and constituted a southern part of Breslau diocese. Even before the War it was noted for its specific ethnic and denominational character. While in the other parts of the diocese the population was 63.3 per cent Protestant and 28.9 per cent Catholic, in Opole region the percentages were 10.2 and 88.9 respectively. Not surprisingly Opole region was considered the most Catholic area in Prussia.<sup>9</sup> The overwhelming majority of the 151,029 Protestants belonged to the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of 1945 ninety per cent of the Germans had left Opole region, some fleeing before the Red Army, others deported by the Polish authorities. By 1947 there were only about 15,000 Lutherans in the newly formed apostolic administrative region of Opole,<sup>11</sup> and the number continued to decrease as a result of emigration of the remaining Germans to Germany and the process of reuniting German families as well as through conversion to other denominations, mainly the Jehovah's Witnesses and the United Evangelical Church. In 1974 there were only 8,000 Lutherans and in 1983 7,000. Since then the number has decreased even more. As early as 1947 Lutherans found themselves in a minority even in the Kluczborg deanery — the only deanery where until 1945 Protestants had been in the majority. In 1929 Catholics totalled 28,544 and Protestants of all denominations 31,971; in 1947 the figures were 45,440 and 3,284; and in 1974 57,996 and 700. In other deaneries the figures were even more dramatic. In many parishes there was soon not a single Lutheran left, while in others there remained only a few families or individuals.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, out of 99 parishes existing in 1929 only eight survived until 1952,<sup>13</sup> while

<sup>9</sup>Even renowned "Catholic Bavaria" was only 74 per cent Catholic.

<sup>10</sup>There were also small communities of Independent Lutherans and Old Lutherans (1,900 believers), Adventists (about a hundred) and Baptists (about ten).

<sup>11</sup>Soon after the Potsdam Conference, Cardinal Hlond, head of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, nominated new Polish apostolic administrators for the Recovered Lands on the basis of the full powers given to him by the Congregation for Extraordinary Church Matters (Decree of 8 July 1945, No. Prot. 14167/1945, signed by Mgr Domenico Tardini). The former Wrocław diocese was divided into three administrative units: Wrocław, Gorzów and Opole. Only in 1972 did they become dioceses, after Poland's western borders were recognised by the West German government and the Vatican.

<sup>12</sup>In the Wolczyn deanery, out of 19,128 Lutherans in 1929 there remained only 1,055 in 1946. At the same time the number of Catholics rose from 2,195 in 1929 to 15,248 in 1946. Outside the Kluczborg region only 174 Lutherans remained in Poland in 1946, dispersed in 12 parishes: of these 12, one comprised one hundred believers, and five none at all.

<sup>13</sup>In 1981 there were still eight Lutheran parishes within the Roman Catholic diocese of Opole.

the number of pastors decreased from seventy to eight during the same period.

Meanwhile, repatriated Catholics were settling within the boundaries of the Opole apostolic administration, and this created an urgent need for church buildings. The situation was very difficult as until 1939 only nine Polish Roman Catholic churches existed within the new diocesan boundaries. The shortage of churches for repatriated Catholics was partially eased after a government decree of 6 May 1945 which gave the Polish Roman Catholic Church an automatic right to take over abandoned former German Roman Catholic churches<sup>14</sup>. In March 1945 all the property of the Evangelical Church of the Union came under state administration as a part of German war booty.<sup>15</sup> Many Lutheran churches had been destroyed as a direct result of the War. Now exposed to the weather they were deteriorating quickly. With the passing years the condition of the abandoned churches worsened and many in the end were demolished. At the same time, faced with a dramatic shortage of churches, the Catholic church authorities decided to apply to the state authorities for temporary use of the abandoned German Protestant churches. These requests were usually welcomed by local councils; indeed, in an attempt to divest themselves of their responsibility for the upkeep and restoration of abandoned German Protestant churches, many local authorities pleaded with Catholic communities to take them over, especially those of historic or architectural value.<sup>16</sup> Occasionally the local authorities appealed to the state for permission to hand over abandoned churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union to the Catholics even before

<sup>14</sup>As relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the state deteriorated, the authorities reinterpreted the decree of 6 May 1945, now claiming that the Polish Roman Catholic Church did not have an automatic right to take over abandoned former German churches but had to submit a request to the authorities in each individual case. A new decree of 14 July 1961 rescinded the Roman Catholic Church's right of possession in the Recovered Lands because of the Church's lack of legal status. The Church was now treated as a tenant and was asked to pay rent for church buildings used, but it refused to pay rent or to sign any agreement on tenure. The Church's stand, together with the recognition of Poland's western borders by West Germany, led to a Parliamentary decree of 23 May 1971 handing over the legal ownership of church properties in the Recovered Lands to the churches operating there.

<sup>15</sup>This circular, reiterated later in the Circular No. 55 of 18 October 1945, differentiated between possessions of the churches recognised by the state before 1 September 1939 and of those which were not recognised. Only the property of the churches not recognised before the war came automatically under government administration. "The property of the churches recognised before 1 September 1939 cannot under any circumstances be treated as abandoned even when the majority of believers were Germans or Polish citizens of different nationality," stated the circular. "The property is still legally owned by those churches and may be taken by other denominations only with the consent of the church's leaders."

<sup>16</sup>As late as 1963 a local council sent a letter to a Catholic parish urging it to "apply to take over an abandoned Lutheran church of historical value so that it could be saved from ruin".

the Catholic community had asked them to do so. Documents exist to prove that the Catholic Church was often reproached by the authorities for its reluctance to take over former German churches of historic value.

In his book about the church in the Recovered Lands Bishop Boleslaw Kominek, the first apostolic administrator of Opole diocese, wrote:

In the last few days I visited Mr Lis, the head of the local administration in Kluczborg. He urged me to take over immediately all abandoned churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union. I tried to object, pointing out to him that these churches did not belong to us. "I am giving them to your Excellency," was his reply: "If you will not take them over they will be robbed by gangs of looters."<sup>17</sup>

Mr Lis was not exaggerating. It is difficult for us to picture the unprecedented extent of vandalism in the Recovered Lands. Well-organised gangs of looters were stealing all they could from the churches — church bells, organs, even communion chalices — and selling them on the black market. In a Lutheran church in Roznowo only the church walls remained — everything else, including the roof and the floor, had been stolen.

### *Takeovers through Consultation*

For its part the Curia in Opole instructed every Catholic priest sent to work in the Recovered Lands to take over only those churches which were given to them by the local administration. Indeed in his thesis Fr Sitek states categorically that in the overwhelming majority of cases the takeover of the Lutheran churches was not "arbitrary" but took place with the full knowledge and often on the initiative of the local authorities. There exists not a single documented case to indicate that the Opole Curia agreed to take over any church of the Evangelical Church of the Union in which services were still taking place or where there was a resident pastor. Bishop Kominek made it absolutely clear that churches could be requested by the Catholic community for Catholic worship only where there were no longer any Protestant believers left or where there were so few of them that they could not afford to maintain a large church. Furthermore, in order to prevent the takeover of Lutheran churches which Lutherans were using or planning to use, the Curia of Opole tried to secure interdenominational agreement. However, any agreement between the Roman

<sup>17</sup>Boleslaw Kominek, *W Sluzbie Ziem Odzyskanych* (Wroclaw, 1977), p. 77.

Catholic church authorities and representatives of the Evangelical Church of the Union was impossible since by the time the apostolic administration of Opole was created in August 1945, the five superintendents of the Evangelical Church of the Union had already left Polish territory: the whole organisational structure of this church had ceased to exist. In this situation the Curia tried to secure agreement with representatives of the only officially recognised Lutheran church — the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. In fact Karol Klus, the most senior Lutheran pastor at that time in the region of Opole, himself approached Bishop Kominek, soon after he became the apostolic administrator, pleading with him to speed up the takeover of all abandoned churches belonging to the Evangelical Church of the Union so that they could be saved from ruin. Pastor Klus claimed that as a senior pastor of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession he had powers to arrange any agreement with Bishop Kominek. As a result, on 30 October 1945 Bishop Kominek sent a memorandum to all the relevant communities instructing them to take over former churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union and use them for Catholic services. He reminded that permission from the local authorities should be sought in every case. The bishop also asked that whenever the church listed was not suitable for Catholic worship it still should be protected against looters by the local Catholic community. In fact not all of the 29 churches listed were taken over: in some cases Protestant believers were still using the church; in others there was already a Catholic Church and there was no need for an additional one; and in other cases impoverished repatriated Catholics were not able to restore the church<sup>18</sup> (for example the church in Miechów).

Although the majority of Lutheran churches were taken over in circumstances of extreme pastoral need there were also special cases where the reasons were different. To this category belonged churches which were taken over by Catholics after the state authorities introduced religious instruction in schools. They were to become “school churches” and were legally owned by the Ministry of Education. In a similar manner “academic churches” were created in the university towns and “military churches” in places where the army was stationed. With the removal of religion from the schools in 1948-49 the churches became vacant for use by the local Lutheran community, for example in Strzelce Opolskie, Zawadzko and Gliwice. Sometimes the temporary takeover of a Lutheran church by the Catholic community safeguarded the church for future use by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. This was the case

<sup>18</sup>The authorities would allow a takeover only on condition that the church would be restored by the Catholic community without financial help from the government.

with the Lutheran church in Strzelce Opolskie which the Polish National Catholic Church, a small minority church independent from Rome, tried to take over. In a few cases when a Catholic church had been devastated during the War, local Catholics used an abandoned Lutheran church while restoring their own. Later these Lutheran churches were returned — and many of them still stand empty and unused. A separate category consisted of former Catholic churches which had been confiscated by the Prussian authorities during the time of the Partitions (1772-1918) and which were reclaimed by the Catholic Church (like the former Franciscan churches in Bytom, Gliwice, Nysa and Opole, and the former Dominican churches in Raciborz Prudnik). There were also a few churches which the Roman Catholic Church tried to take over for purely sentimental reasons. These were churches which had been taken over by Protestants during the Reformation but which retained visible Catholic elements, like the triptych depicting the coronation of the Virgin Mary in Młodzowice. There was also another reason why abandoned churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union were sometimes taken over in places where there was already a Catholic church. Encouraged by the government whole villages of Polish Catholics from the east were repatriated and settled together. They differed in customs, culture and language from their new neighbours in what they saw as German lands, where the local population spoke a Polish dialect strongly influenced by German. Poor and badly dressed, these repatriated Catholics were often despised by the local Catholic population. Both communities felt much happier living separately. The newcomers wanted a “Polish church” where their “Polish” parish priest who had been repatriated with them could say the “Polish” services they were used to. In many cases they petitioned the authorities to grant them a “Polish Catholic church”. Sometimes they simply took over a local Lutheran church, often without proper consultation with the Curia.

On the whole, the process of taking over abandoned former German churches ran quite smoothly at first. Pastor Klus had a good understanding of the pastoral problems faced by the Roman Catholic Church in the Recovered Lands, while for his part Bishop Kominek tried his utmost to avoid conflict. If conflict did arise both sides tried to solve each problem through peaceful dialogue. Bishop Kominek appointed a special representative — Fr Thullie — to carry out a detailed inquiry in every case of conflict and advise him on the just course of action. In Fr Sitek’s opinion most of these conflicts could easily have been avoided if both sides had been in less of a hurry to prepare the list of churches available for Catholic takeover. Fr Klus, relatively new to the Opole area, did not have enough data on dispersed Lutheran communities, and on occasions he allowed a

Catholic takeover of churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union in places where Lutheran communities were still living. Bishop Kominek tried to secure the return of any church whenever an active Lutheran community was traced — for example, a church in Grab already taken over by Catholics with the blessing of the local authorities was returned to the Lutherans on orders from the bishop. There are also documents which prove that whenever pressure was exerted on Bishop Kominek to take over a crumbling former German Lutheran church in an area where an additional Catholic church was not needed, he tried to find a group of Lutherans who would claim the church.

### *A New Situation*

The peaceful takeover was brought to a sudden halt on 19 September 1946. On that day the President of the Polish People's Republic issued a decree which incorporated *existing* and *active* parishes of various Lutheran churches in the Polish Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. The decree listed all churches concerned: the Old Lutheran, the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and the Evangelical Reformed Church. The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession automatically inherited the property of all these churches on the day when the decree became valid (1 December 1946). However, it was made clear that the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession could not claim any churches which were already being used by Catholics before that date, or any churches not being used by any Protestant group by that date. These two categories of churches were still to remain in the possession of the Polish state. To this group belonged about a third of pre-War Lutheran churches. In time they deteriorated and in the end the majority were demolished on the orders of the state authorities. Many beautiful churches thus ceased to exist: in Branice, Koźle, Głogówek, Glubczyce, Molno, Moszczanka, Nysa, Osiek, Osowiec, Pomorzowice, Prudnik, Racibórz, Skorogoszcza, Szybowice, Tlustotrzeby, Zabrze, Zagwizdzie. Sometimes Lutherans tried to use the church, as in Prudnik, but here, as in other cases, lack of both money and believers forced them to abandon the church and move into a smaller building. Other churches were transformed into sports halls, like the church in Tulowice, or warehouses, like the church in Biała. The authorities handed some of the abandoned churches over to the Catholics, and these were thus saved from deterioration and demolition — for example, the churches in Miechow, Kostow, Przylesie Brzeskie and

Roznow. A few Lutheran churches were restored and then sold to the Roman Catholic Church by the Lutherans, like the churches in Walidrogi and Strzelce Opolskie.

After 1 December 1946 the Curia in Opole directed that no Protestant church was to be taken over without an enquiry as to whether any Protestant group was using or planning to use it. Bishop Kominek wrote that "since the decree of 19 September 1946 I have not allowed the takeover of any Lutheran church by the Catholic community, in order not to complicate our relationship with Protestants."<sup>19</sup> Only when it was established beyond doubt that a church had been truly abandoned and left to deteriorate would the Curia allow a petition to go to the authorities to let the Catholics take over the church, thus saving from ruin many churches of great architectural beauty, like the churches in Glucholazy (taken over in 1947), Grotowice (1947), Jankowice Wielkie (1952), Jeszkotle (1953), Miechów (1958), Młodoszowice (1959), Roznow (1971), Wawrzyszów (1947), and Wojnowiec near Głubice (1948). Whenever there was doubt as to whether a church was being used or not the local Catholic communities would refer to the leadership of the Lutheran Church. In some cases the Lutherans would sublet churches to the Catholics, as in Chalupki in 1949; in others the Lutheran authorities would not allow churches to be used by local Catholic communities even though they were not being used and were left to deteriorate. In the end the authorities would order their demolition — for example, the church in Mieszkowice.

The decree of 19 September 1946, then, legally recognised Lutheran congregations, and this spurred them on to more active pastoral work. Between 1950 and 1952 a new uniform organisational structure was introduced and the new Lutheran Church embarked on a process not only of claiming Lutheran churches which were still abandoned but also of recovering churches of the former Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union which were now being used by Catholics. The number of protest letters and petitions addressed to the state authorities and the Catholic leadership, including the Pope, multiplied quickly. In 1947 the Ministry for Public Affairs tried to solve the growing conflict amicably. Two special Lutheran-Catholic conferences took place in May and June 1947 in Katowice. After hearing both sides the Ministry ordered the return of Lutheran churches in Katowice diocese. However, not a single Lutheran church from Opole diocese was to be returned even though the Opole Curia stated its readiness to give them up if officially requested to do so by the state

<sup>19</sup> Bishop Boleslaw Kominek, "Uwagi do Kwestii Ewangelickich wzgl. Poewangelickich Kościółów na Śląsku Opolskim", a memorandum sent to the Ministry for Public Affairs in 1947.

# POLAND



 Territory gained  
(The "Recovered Lands")

 Territory lost

Poland's frontiers before and after World War II.  
The present western boundary is near to that drawn  
up in the early middle ages - hence the term  
"Recovered Lands".

authorities. The Curia recognised that these churches were still legally owned by the state and that the Catholic Church had become temporary tenant with the consent of the legal owner. At the same time, however, the Opole Curia took up every complaint from Lutheran congregations, setting up its own investigation into each individual case, in order to establish whether there was a real need for a Lutheran church in a given place, and what the chances were of returning the former Lutheran church without causing a revolt among repatriated Catholics: in many cases, it was the Catholic community which had restored the church with its own money and had learned to see it as its own church. As a result both of these enquiries and of the consultations with the local clergy, some of the Lutheran churches were returned straight away. By the end of 1949 all former churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union used as "school churches" had been returned to Lutherans wherever there was a Lutheran community present. The Curia also withdrew its own requests to take over churches of the Evangelical Church of the Union in those places where a Lutheran community came forward to claim them (in Kotlarnia, Prudnik, Zabrze, Byczyna).

Unfortunately not all the churches the Lutherans asked for could be returned. Two churches especially — in Byczyna and Wolczyn — became a source of interdenominational conflict in Opole diocese which dragged on for years. Both churches belonged to that group of churches taken over spontaneously by the repatriated Catholics with the approval of the local authorities but without the consent of the Curia. In both cases, as in others, the Curia faced an open riot by the settlers who objected to Bishop Kominek's attempts to return "their" churches to Protestants. Indeed when the Bishop made a repatriated Catholic priest leave the former Lutheran rectory in Wolczyn under threat of suspension, the local Catholic community of settlers responded with a barrage of protests, even threats, addressed to the Curia. It was clear not only that the Bishop's order to vacate the disputed churches would not be heeded, but also that it might lead to open conflict with the settlers, with unpredictable consequences. In this situation the Curia decided to include these churches in the list submitted to the government for subletting to the Catholic Church.

Fr Sitek points out that, despite the takeover of Lutheran churches by Catholics, the scattered communities of Lutherans were still able to conduct their services as they either had at least one church building available where they lived or were able to travel to one not far away. He says that not a single Protestant community was prevented from holding church services because of a Catholic takeover, nor was any church overcrowded.

In 1949 the Opole Curia attempted to legalise the Catholic takeover

of former German Lutheran churches. A petition was sent to the Ministry for Recovered Lands. The Ministry responded with a demand that every parish should submit a request giving details of the number of Polish Lutherans living in the region. However, although the requests were promptly submitted together with the details demanded, they remained unanswered, probably because of the escalating conflict between the Catholic Church and the state. Instead, the government now demanded that the church pay a hefty rent even for former German Catholic churches. This led to open conflict as the parish priests refused to pay. It was only on 23 May 1971 that a parliamentary decree finally regulated the matter of church property in the Recovered Lands. This was a gesture to the churches on the part of the government after the treaty between the People's Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany was signed in Warsaw on 7 December 1970. All churches recognised by the government which were operating in the Recovered Lands gained legal rights of freehold to all their buildings used for religious purposes.

### *Recent Attempts to Improve Relations*

Since the 1970s there have been several attempts to establish a more satisfactory relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and to overcome prejudices and even hostility on the part of both Catholics and Lutherans. This ecumenical dialogue intensified under the leadership of Bishop Alfons Nossol, the new bishop of Opole diocese.<sup>20</sup> Bishop Nossol understood that the rigid stand of the Roman Catholic Church in not allowing for the dual use of the churches it had taken over was the main source of continuing interdenominational conflict. He has therefore tried to secure easy access to Catholic churches by local Lutheran communities whenever this is required: the Roman Catholic Church was after all morally committed to this kind of cooperation by the agreement between the Opole clergy and the representatives of the Lutheran Church.

In Fr Sitek's opinion, there were two reasons for the rigid stand of the Catholic Church on the question of dual usage of the churches. The first was that the post-War Polish communist government had a conscious policy of playing one denomination off against another. The second was the fact that this type of ecumenical relationship was

<sup>20</sup>Bishop Alfons Nossol was born in 1932 in Brozecz in the region of Opole. He was ordained a priest in 1957 and consecrated a bishop on 17 August 1957 by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. He is a member of the papal Catholic-Orthodox Commission and the Papal Commission for Dialogue with Non-believers.

not practised by the Roman Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council.

It is also true that the situation was not helped by the attitude of the Lutherans. It was particularly painful to Catholics that the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession seemed to be totally indifferent to the difficulties of the situation in which the Catholic Church found itself within the Recovered Lands. Repatriated Catholics were hurt by the obtrusive and ruthless way in which Lutherans demanded the return of the churches which had been taken over by Catholics in a state of ruin with the permission of the state authorities and Pastor Klus. They especially resented the fact that the churches were claimed only now, after they had been painstakingly restored and used by Catholic communities for several years. In general, ecumenical dialogue was not served by those Lutherans who cited exaggerated and often fictitious cases of intolerance<sup>21</sup> and who saturated the Lutheran press with aggressive, malicious articles of little journalistic integrity. Articles appeared which were based wholly or partly on rumour, like a 1948 attack on an allegedly malicious Catholic sermon in Miechowice. When the falsity of the information was pointed out to the editor he did not publish an apology or correction, but instead launched another attack on the Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup> Similar demagogic attacks on Lutherans were absent from the Catholic press. Another obstacle to normalising interdenominational relations was the fact that the Lutheran authorities took every case of conflict, however minute, straight to the highest state authorities in the form of a complaint. This was the Stalinist period, when the conflict between the Catholic Church and the state was at its sharpest. The state authorities often used Lutheran complaints as a convenient excuse for putting more pressure on the Catholic Church. Catholics also found it incredible that the Lutheran authorities should prefer to hand abandoned churches over to the state authorities, who used them for secular purposes, rather than to give them to the Catholics, who needed them badly.<sup>23</sup>

The Second Vatican Council, by promoting closer contacts between Catholics and believers of other denominations, allowed more ecumenical freedom to local Catholic Churches. Bishop Nossol decided to break the chain of mutual accusations and grievances in Opole diocese by promoting individual contacts between the Catholic clergy and Lutheran pastors. He encouraged ecumenical services, and

<sup>21</sup> Sporadic examples of intolerance did occur — for example a refusal by a Catholic priest to bury Lutherans in the former Lutheran cemetery now taken over by Catholics. All such acts were, however, condemned by the Opole Curia.

<sup>22</sup> The two articles are in *Straznica Ewangeliczna*, 1 December 1948 and 1 June 1950.

<sup>23</sup> Between 1945 and 1956 the authorities gave permission for only eight Catholic churches to be built within Opole diocese.

these are now commonplace especially during the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In 1979, 1981 and 1982 Stanislaw Zwak, a Lutheran pastor, was invited to preach at the ecumenical service in Opole cathedral. In 1983 a Lutheran service was held in the cathedral at which the preacher was R. Pastuch, a senior Lutheran pastor. At the same time, Bishop Nossol was preaching in the Lutheran church in Zabrze. A new practice has been adopted for taking over abandoned Lutheran churches. They are now being sold to the Catholics after a price has been negotiated by both sides. Moreover, both the Catholic and the Lutheran regional authorities have promised to solve all conflicts between themselves without drawing them to the attention of the Western press or of the state authorities. One of the most important factors in improving Catholic-Lutheran relations has been the decree WUDO/36/1981/6-8 of Bishop Nossol. This decree, the first of its type issued by the Polish Roman Catholic Church, not only allows for the dual use of Catholic churches but makes it compulsory for the church authorities to allow Lutheran communities to perform religious services in Catholic churches, regularly or whenever the need arises, without paying any fee. Dr Janusz Narzynski, the head of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland, has even written to Bishop Nossol praising his ecumenical openness.

The positive developments of recent years have given rise to new hopes for real Christian cooperation and coexistence amongst the various denominations in Poland. "After all to believe in another way does not mean to believe in Another".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> A quotation from the German Protestant theologian Karl Barth used by John Paul II at the ecumenical meeting in Warsaw on 17 June 1983.