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## John Paul II as a Doctor *Honoris Causa* of the Opole University

In 2004 the Opole University celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its existence. One decade earlier – in 1994 – the merger of two scientific institutions of Opole: the Higher Pedagogical School and the Pastoral Institute, being a branch of the Catholic University of Lublin, constituted the basis for the beginning of the process of creation of *Alma Mater Opoliensis*. However, the implementation of procedures required the approval of the Apostolic See and, to be more precise, the decision of Pope John Paul II to establish the Faculty of Theology and include it into the structures of the state university. The Holy Father's positive attitude to the idea of a university in Opole made him its cofounder in some sense.<sup>1</sup>

That particular fact decided that during the celebration of the jubilee on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 2003 the members of the Council of the Opole University Faculty of Theology put forward a motion to the Senate to award John Paul II with the doctor honoris causa degree.<sup>2</sup> Twenty days later this body, having got familiar

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<sup>1</sup> H. Sobeczko, *Laudacja z okazji nadania tytułu doktora honoris causa Uniwersytetu Opolskiego Jego Świątobliwości Papieżowi Janowi Pawłowi II*, in: *Sua Sanctitas Ioannes Paulus II Doctor Honoris Causa ex universa Universitatis Opoliensis*, Opole: Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Opolskiego 2004, p. 16; A. Nossol, *Słowo wprowadzające ks. arcybiskupa prof. dra hab. Alfonsa Nossola*, in: *Sua Sanctitas...*, p. 9; J. Musielok, *Przemówienie wygłoszone przez prof. dra hab. Józefa Musieloka, rektora Uniwersytetu Opolskiego*, in: *Sua Sanctitas...*, p. 11; T. Pieronek, *Opinia w sprawie przyznania doktoratu honoris causa Papieżowi Janowi Pawłowi II przez Uniwersytet Opolski, napisana przez bpa prof. dra hab. Tadeusza Pieronka, rektora Papieskiej Akademii Teologicznej w Krakowie*, in: *Sua Sanctitas...*, p. 22-23; B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II doktorem honoris causa Uniwersytetu Opolskiego*, in: *Indeks. Pismo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego*, 2004; 40-50 (1-2): 7.

<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Opole University Rectorate, *Jan Paweł II, Doktorat h. c. Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II. 17 II 2004, Wyciąg z protokołu posiedzenia Rady Wydziału Teologicznego*

with the proposal, supported it and appointed advisers, namely Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek – Rector of the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Cracow and Rev. Prof. Andrzej Szostek – Rector of the Catholic University of Lublin. These two people were chosen precisely because of their work at the universities that Karol Wojtyła was most closely related to.<sup>3</sup>

Both the advisers gave positive opinions on awarding John Paul II with the honorary title. After analysing the scientific career of Rev. Prof. Karol Wojtyła and tracing his path of pastoral service T. Pieronek admitted that hitherto 25 years of the pontificate of the Polish Pope is so abundant in events and achievements, also in non-ecclesial and non-religious areas, that it “cannot be subject to usual criteria of assessment”.<sup>4</sup> In the adviser’s opinion it is the Holy Father’s concern “about identity, place, and role of universities in the contemporary world”<sup>5</sup> that is particularly worth highlighting. The rector appreciated the Polish Pope’s traditional and classical vision of a university: “The basic argument for such a choice of the classical idea of a university in its crucial framework is the alienable role of science, especially of basic research, in continuous searching for and discovering the truth and passing it to the contemporary and future generations. The Holy Father indicates that a role of a university is reaching the truth in its whole dimension. (...) Therefore a holistic though always incomplete image of reality can emerge only when humanities, including philosophy and theology, will be engaged in its studying”.<sup>6</sup> According to T. Pieronek, that vision was confirmed by the fact that John Paul II so eagerly founded the Theology Faculty within the Opole University.

A. Szostek highlighted three areas of Wojtyła’s involvement that were worth awarding, namely personal rich scientific output of both a professor and a pope, promotion of science (not only theology), and holistic care about man: “The scientific output of Pope John Paul II cannot obviously be included in typically academic standards. Since his elevation to the See of St. Peter he has completely been dedicated to the apostolic service (...). In this typically papal teaching

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*Uniwersytetu Opolskiego w dniu 26.11.2003, c. 2.*

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the Opole University Rectorate, *Jan Paweł II, Doktorat h. c. Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II. 17 II 2004, Wyciąg z protokołu nr 12/2002-2005 posiedzenia Senatu Uniwersytetu Opolskiego odbytego w dniu 27 listopada 2003 r.*, c. 3; T. Dola, *Informacja o przebiegu postępowania w sprawie nadania tytułu doktora „honoris causa ex uniwersa” Papieżowi Janowi Pawłowi II*, in: *Sua Sanctitas...*, p. 7; H. Sobeczko, *Laudacja z okazji nadania tytułu...*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> T. Pieronek, *Opinia w sprawie przyznania doktoratu...*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> T. Pieronek, *Opinia w sprawie przyznania doktoratu...*, p. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> T. Pieronek, *Opinia w sprawie przyznania doktoratu...*, p. 22.



fot. Archiwum Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego

we can find enormous philosophical and theological load. Furthermore, his authentic respect for tradition does not hinder him neither from going beyond its customary framework nor from looking for new forms of spreading the Good News (...).<sup>7</sup> According to the adviser, the evidence for those theses is the cycle of innovative Wednesday catecheses on topics related to marriage and the human body or Christian *Credo*. The Rector of the Catholic University of Lublin underlined also the value of social and ethical encyclicals as well as of those related to ecumenism. A. Szostek determined the Pope's contribution to theology as "original and significant".<sup>8</sup> As for the question of science promotion, the adviser noticed the plurality of the Holy Father's meetings with scientists. Their common denominator, according to the adviser, is "sustaining those who with their research want to reliably carry out their «thinking service»".<sup>9</sup> The Pope has contributed greatly to "the renewal of the

<sup>7</sup> A. Szostek, *Opinia w przewodzie o nadanie Jego Świątobliwości Janowi Pawłowi II godności doktora honoris causa Uniwersytetu Opolskiego napisana przez ks. prof. dra hab. Andrzeja Szostka MIC, rektora Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego*, in: *Sua Sanctitas...*, p. 24-26.

<sup>8</sup> A. Szostek, *Opinia w przewodzie...*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> A. Szostek, *Opinia w przewodzie...*, p. 27.

dialogue between theology and detailed sciences which since Renaissance were in a deep (...) division”.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the adviser recognized the Pope’s care about man as a crucial aspect. He asked rhetorically: “Who can today equal to the Pope in his calling for the respect of the right of the unborn to live, for justice and mercy towards the poor, ill, elderly, immigrants, and others about whom contemporary civilization, directed by the consumptionist model of man’s greatness, forgets so easily?”<sup>11</sup>

On 18<sup>th</sup> December 2003, having got familiar with the advisers’ opinions, the Senate unanimously passed a resolution to honour John Paul II.<sup>12</sup> Reasons for which the honorary title was awarded, were precisely presented in the laudation by Rev. Prof. Helmut Sobeczko. The first mentioned were the merits in the field of reconciliation of various kinds. H. Sobeczko noticed that in the world full of complicated divisions in numerous areas John Paul II as *Pontifex Maximus* persistently worked on breaking down the wall of hostility and evil. The Professor paid also attention to the role of the Pope in social and political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. He underlined the fall of communism, that the Holy Father contributed to, became one of the circumstances enabling to found a university in Opole – the first state university in Poland with a theological faculty after World War II. The title of doctor honoris causa was to express gratitude of the Opole scientific community for the Pope’s contribution to the reconciliation between faith and reason, and religion and faith at the same time. A significant role of the encyclical “Fides et ratio” from 1989 was underlined as well. Its message, according to the academicians from Opole, “fits the mission and message of each university” “regardless of worldview”.<sup>13</sup> According to H. Sobeczko, this encyclical “explicitly and forever dispels doubts and apparent contradictions between faith and reason (...). We are sure that there has been an irreversible process of interdisciplinary approach to the truth that flies (...) «on the wings of faith and reason»”.<sup>14</sup> Finally, another reason were the Pope’s merits in the field of ecumenism, so valued in Silesia. Within the university ecumenical issues are the main interest of work for the Institute of Ecumenism and Research on Integration that includes as many as five chairs. Its aim is to

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<sup>10</sup> A. Szostek, *Opinia w przewodzie...*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> A. Szostek, *Opinia w przewodzie...*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> T. Dola, *Informacja o przebiegu postępowania...*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> H. Sobeczko, *Laudacja z okazji nadania tytułu...*, p. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> H. Sobeczko, *Laudacja z okazji nadania tytułu...*, p. 15.

promote and develop the papal ecumenical teaching.<sup>15</sup> Since all the six university faculties contributed to awarding the academic title, the character of the doctorate was *ex universa*.<sup>16</sup>

The representation of the Opole professors, whose surnames are presented in the table below, went to Rome a few days before awarding the title.

**Tab.** Members of the delegation of the Opole University to Rome

Name and surname with titles	Function
Prof. Józef Musielok	Rector of the Opole University
Archbishop Prof. Alfons Nossol	Great Chancellor of the Faculty of Theology
Rev. Prof. Helmut Jan Sobeczko	Laudator
Prof. Adam Latała	Vice-Rector for Finance and Organization
Prof. Janusz Słodczyk	Vice-Rector for Research and International Cooperation
Assoc. Prof. Leszek Kuberski	Vice-Rector for Education/Teaching
Prof. Stanisław Kochman	Dean of Faculty of Philology
Assoc. Prof. Marek Masnyk	Dean of Faculty of History and Pedagogy
Rev. Prof. Tadeusz Dola	Dean of Faculty of Theology
Assoc. Prof. Józef Kusz	Dean of Faculty of Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry
Assoc. Prof. Urszula Łangowska-Szczeńsiak	Dean of Faculty of Economics
Prof. Adam Suchoński	the author of the book about John Paul II in history student books in the world
Dr Wanda Matwiejczuk	Director of the Main Library
Andrzej Kimla, BEng, MSc	Director of Administration of the Opole University
Maria Najda, BEng, MSc	Bursar of the Opole University
Bożena Pytel-Mielnik, MA	Head of HR Department
Tomasz Paradowski	Physics student, President of the OU Student Government

Source: B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 6; Archive of the Opole University Rectorate, *Jan Paweł II, Doktorat h. c. Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II. 17 II 2004, Delegacja Uniwersytetu do Rzymu*, c. 6.

On Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2004 the members of the delegation participated in the Holy Mass in the St. Peter's Basilica and in the midday Angelus prayer after which John Paul II publicly greeted the visitors from Opole to their great

<sup>15</sup> H. Sobeczko, *Laudacja z okazji nadania tytułu...*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> H. Sobeczko, *Laudacja z okazji nadania tytułu...*, p. 13.

surprise. While waiting for the meeting with the Pope, they not only visited the most important churches of the Eternal City, but also took the opportunity to talk to the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Cardinal Walter Casper.<sup>17</sup>

The ceremony of awarding John Paul II with the doctor honoris causa degree took place on Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2004 at 11 o'clock. In the Vatican Library all the 17-person delegation gathered as well as the Republic of Poland's Ambassador to the Holy See Hanna Suchocka. Good and joyful atmosphere of the meeting caused the extension of the audience time from planned 20 minutes to 40 minutes.<sup>18</sup> It started with the speeches of the Opole bishop and the rector of the university. Once more the archbishop in his speech thanked the Pope for his contribution to the creation of the university and assured both of its successful development and its culture-forming and integrative meaning for the Opole region: "I wish to emphasize strongly that our University plays a very positive culture-forming role and also supports the efforts of the Church in integrative activities of the rich population mosaic of our beautiful Opole land. (...) As the bishop of this land I can state today that the process of agreeable cooperation and coexistence of the population is very deep already and for the last 10 years the Opole University has played a major role in the conciliatory and integrative work".<sup>19</sup>

Except for expressing gratitude the rector focused on the novelty, namely the presence of theology at the state university after 40 years of exclusion as well as on the present heyday of the school – the successes of the Faculty of Theology and also a significant increase in the number of employees and students: "During less than 5 years since the foundation of the Opole University the Faculty of Theology has gained full academic rights including the right to confer a habilitation degree (post-doctoral degree) and put forward motions on scientific titles, including professor. Uninterruptedly for many years the Committee of the Scientific Research has classified the Faculty of Theology of the Opole University

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<sup>17</sup> B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 6, 9; J. Słodczyk, *Czuliśmy się jak w domu*, in: *Indeks...*, p. 16; K. Ogiolda, *Doktorat dla papieża. Ojciec Święty przyjmie opolan w prywatnej bibliotece*, Nowa Trybuna Opolska, 2004 Feb 17, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 6-7; K. Ogiolda, *Papież dawno tak się nie cieszył. Audjencja opolan u Jana Pawła II trwała czterdzieści minut*, Nowa Trybuna Opolska, 2004 Feb 18, p. 3; B. Łabutin, *Zawieźli radość Papieżowi*, *Gazeta Wyborcza Opole*, 2004 Feb 18, p. 2; *Le Cattedrali parlano in silenzio delle radici cristiane dell'Europa. Università ne parlino ad alta voce*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2004 Feb 18, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> A. Nossol, *Słowo wprowadzające...*, p. 9-10; B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 6-7.

in the highest category in the field of scientific research in theology. (...) Ten years ago less than 10,000 students studied at five faculties of the Opole University. The number of professors and post-doctoral graduates was 137 at that time. Currently at six faculties there are over 18,000 students and the number of professors and post-doctoral graduates exceeded 210”.<sup>20</sup>

Due to the short time a decision was made to omit reading of the information about the process of conferring the title and the laudation as well.<sup>21</sup> The Head of Church accepted the diploma with undisguised and wholehearted joy. Except for it the Pope received a copy of the painting of Our Lady of Opole that he himself crowned in 1983 during the visit to the Diocese of Opole on St. Anna Mountain as well as a few publications of the Faculty of Theology. Moreover, one of the members of the delegation Prof. Adam Suchoński gave the Pope his book titled “John Paul II in Polish and foreign student history books”.<sup>22</sup> Bishop Nossol underlined that it is an honour for the university to have “the greatest – at present time – academician of the world” among its honorary doctors.<sup>23</sup>

In his short speech being the Pope’s reply to the honour, the new doctor *honoris causa* not only expressed his sincere gratitude for the visit of the scientists to the Vatican and honouring him, but also recalled his input to the founding of the university. He raised also an important for the Opole Silesia issue of social integration. He emphasized the concurrence of aims of universities and the Church – the first ones in the area of knowledge, science, and culture, and the latter one – on the basis of faith and spiritual and religious goods.<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, knowing the uneasy history of Silesia and the need of integration of the Silesian society, said: “If we talk about the integration of the society, we cannot understand it in the sense of erasing the differences, unification of thinking, or forgetting the history, frequently marked with events that divided people, but in the search for those values that are common for people of various roots, various history, and

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<sup>20</sup> J. Musielok, *Przemówienie wygłoszone...*, p. 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> A. Nossol, *Słowo wprowadzające...*, p. 10; B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 8; K. Ogiolda, *Doktorat dla papieża...*, p. 3; K. Ogiolda, *Papież dawno tak się nie cieszył...*, p. 3; B. Łabutin, *Papież szczerze rozradowany*, *Gazeta Wyborcza Opole*, 2004 Feb 18, p. 1; B. Łabutin, *Zawieźli radość Papieżowi...*, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> B. Łabutin, *Papież szczerze rozradowany...*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Gli uomini di cultura, fedeli alla verità storica, rendono testimonianza della scienza e della sapienza cresciute sul fertile terreno del Cristianesimo*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2004 Feb 18, p. 5.

connected to them their own vision of the world and attitudes to the community in which they were destined to live”.<sup>25</sup> The Holy Father expressed his joy that the Opole University is conducive to this process. He wished that *Alma Mater Opoliensis* would serve and contribute this way to the development of everyone who would want it “basing on the most noble spiritual values”.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, in his speech the Pope paid attention to another role played by universities, namely reminding Europe about its Christian roots: “Today much is being said about the Christian roots of Europe. If cathedrals, pieces of art, music, and literature are their marks, they speak, as though in silence. Universities can talk about them aloud. They can speak a contemporary language understood by everyone. Indeed, that voice can not be accepted by those deafened by the ideology of secularity of our continent, but this does not excuse the scientists faithful to the historic truth from the task of giving a testimony through reliable fathoming of the secrets of knowledge and wisdom that rose on the fertile soil of Christianity”.<sup>27</sup> After the end of the ceremony rector J. Musielok emphasized that the words of the papal speech will certainly give scientists strength for zealous academic work. The words that point the role of universities as service to man he recognized as the most important ones.<sup>28</sup>

After the completion of the official part John Paul II reminisced together with the visitors from Opole about his pilgrimage to St. Anna’s Mountain in 1983 and next he posed for a common commemorative photograph. Each of the Pope’s guests received a medal and a rosary. The meeting ended with a papal blessing imparted to the Opole University at the request of the rector.<sup>29</sup>

Except for the visit to the Pope the delegation of the university talked to the Prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, and the ambassador Hanna Suchocka. To end their stay in the Eternal City the delegation participated a General Audience that took place the next day.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Gli uomini di cultura...*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Gli uomini di cultura...*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, *Gli uomini di cultura...*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> B. Łabutin, *Zawieźli radość Papieżowi...*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 8-9; K. Ogiolda, *Papież dawno tak się nie cieszył...*, p. 3; B. Łabutin, *Papież szczerze rozradowany...*, p. 1; B. Łabutin, *Zawieźli radość Papieżowi...*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> B. Stankiewicz, *Jan Paweł II...*, p. 9; J. Słodczyk, *Czuliśmy się jak w domu...*, p. 17; B. Łabutin, *Zawieźli radość Papieżowi...*, p. 2; K. Ogiolda, *Doktorat dla papieża...*, p. 3.



Awarding Pope John Paul II with the honorary degree of the Opole University was of great importance for many reasons. Firstly, it fairly honoured the person who significantly contributed to the founding of the university and supported the idea from the very beginning. Secondly, it was the recognition of the universal mission of the Bishop of Rome whose teaching on many issues should be inspirational for all the people regardless their worldview and, to a great extent, also for the academic world. Finally, that event was meaningful locally – for the inhabitants of Opole and the students of the university. Namely, it reminded them about the input of the Holy Father to the whole undertaking. According to a small-scale survey conducted by the journalists of the daily paper “Nowa Trybuna Opolska” among the students of the Opole University, none of them realised on the papal involvement.<sup>31</sup> The honorary title, awarded after 10 years of the university’s prosperity was an opportunity to remind the academic and local community about the momentous fact. It happened especially that the local press, so abundantly referred to in the presentation, commented on that event quite accurately, with long quotations and numerous photographs, dedicating to it two days in the newspaper.

Wide horizons outlined by the Polish Pope and great requirements are a challenge for the Opole University and every other university. Having among its honorary doctors such an important and valued teacher as John Paul II is an enormous obligation. The professors and students of *Alma Mater Opoliensis* are to return repeatedly to his inspirational thought in order to reliably search for the truth, foster knowledge, and teach wisdom.

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<sup>31</sup> *Nie znają zasług papieża*, Nowa Trybuna Opolska, 2004 Feb 18, p. 3.

- lus II Doctor Honoris Causa ex uniwersa Universitatis Opoliensis*, Opole: Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Opolskiego 2004, p. 7-8.
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