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65 Anniversary of the Krakow Curia Trial

The trial of the priests of the Krakow Curia is an incredibly dramatic moment in the history of Church in Krakow, which needs to be viewed in a broader perspective of the history of Church in our fatherland. 1953 is probably the most distressing year for the Polish Church owing to the extremely violent confrontation with the communist regime. That year was the most excruciating one since, as it has to be pointed out resolutely, the Catholic Church suffered perhaps the greatest humiliation from the People's Republic of Poland (PRP) government. Subsequently, over the following years, it slowly recovered, thus strengthening the fully justified conviction of the Polish people that the Church was the major protector of the nation against the communist authorities. In order to start the proceedings of the conference, a few facts need to be mentioned as they constitute the background for the events of 65 years ago, which are under discussion today.

The offensive against the Church began on 12 January 1953 when the communist authorities denied issuing a passport to the archbishop of Warsaw and Gniezno – Stefan Wyszyński, for his journey to Rome, where he was meant to receive his cardinal hat. On 20 January, the bishop of Kielce – Czesław Kaczmarek, was detained. We all know how tragic it was for him – subjected to tortures, he broke down, in a way. On 21–27 January, the trial of the priests of the Krakow Curia was held. Not much later, on 9 February, the *State Council Decree on the*

appointment of ecclesiastical posts in the Church was published. In essence, it was an attempt to completely appropriate the Church since, in accordance with the Decree, even the appointment of a vicar required the consent of the communist authorities as well as his mandatory pledge of allegiance to the PRP government. On 5 March Stalin died. Many people were under the impression that it would be a moment when the Church, the Polish society as a whole, as well as the societies of the so-called Eastern bloc, might enjoy some more freedom. However, with regards to the situation of the Church in Poland, these hopes quickly turned out to be all an illusion. The communist authorities, under the leadership of Bolesław Bierut, had already requested, on numerous occasions, Stalin's permission to detain Primate Wyszyński and openly deal with the Church. However, Stalin was against such a frontal attack as he was well aware of how positively perceived and deeply ingrained in the Polish nation's mind the Catholic Church really was. Thus, in his opinion, a much better-suited tactic was the methodical weakening, by creating divisions among priests and supporting the so-called "patriot priests", who were inclined to collaborate with PRP, as well as by efforts aimed at separating the Church from the society. After Stalin's death, there were some internal feuds and hostilities among different factions within the Soviet communist party, represented by such figures as Beria, Melenkov, Bulganin, Molotov, Zhukov and Khrushchev. Against the backdrop of the vague situation in Moscow, Bierut felt somewhat less obliged to follow Stalin's guidelines and opted for a serious confrontation with the Polish Church. On 8 May 1953, Bierut signed the *Ordinance of the Council of Ministers on implementing the decree on the appointment of ecclesiastical posts in the Church*. Fundamentally, the introduced changes could be described as the nationalization of the Catholic Church. On the same day, the Episcopal Conference of Poland announced the famous *Memorial* containing the phrase "non possumus": we cannot agree with internal matters of the Church to be settled by the communist regime. It didn't take long for the state to react violently. On 13 May, Fr. Zygmunt Kaczyński – the editor-in-chief of the weekly "Tygodnik Warszawski", was murdered in the Mokotów prison. 16 June marked the beginning of collecting evidence against Bp. Antoni Baraniak, who was the director of the Secretariat of the Primate of Poland. On 14–22 September, the public trial of Bp. Czesław Kaczmarek was held and radio-broadcast nationwide, while, at the same time, the Episcopal Conference of Poland was in progress at the Jasna Góra Monastery. The bishops listened in horror to Bishop Kaczmarek's words in which he admitted to being an agent of the Vatican and the imperialist forces of the United States. It could be discerned from Bishop

Kaczmarek's voice that he was a completely broken man – that was Cardinal Wyszyński's personal impression, written down in his notes. Two days later, on 24 September, the Primate returned to Warsaw and submitted a protest to the government officials against the show trial of Bishop Kaczmarek. It was a document in which Cardinal Wyszyński defended the rights of the Holy See as well as the Episcopal Conference of Poland, which was accused of a conspiracy against the state. On the same day, the supreme authorities of PRP approved the plan for an investigation against Bishop Antoni Baraniak and made a decision to detain Card. Wyszyński and arrest Bp. Baraniak. The arrest itself took place overnight between 25 and 26 September. Cardinal Wyszyński was detained, first, in Rywałd, then in Stoczek Warmiński, whereas Bishop Baraniak was taken into custody and held in the Mokotów prison. His imprisonment lasted for over two years. He was interrogated and tortured by means of methods employed in that period against political dissidents. The intention was to subdue him, similarly to way it had been done to Bp. Kaczmarek, and then, make him a chief witness in the trial against Cardinal Wyszyński and the entire Episcopal Conference of Poland, which was already undergoing preparations. The indictment was planned to contain references to the contacts of the Episcopal Conference of Poland with the Holy See, starting with the period before the Second World War, then wartime and the post-war period, in order to also include, posthumously, Cardinal August Hlond, as one of the main defendants. However, contrary to the expectations of the communist authorities, Bishop Baraniak did not break. It is no exaggeration to say that thanks to him the Church in Poland survived. Poland did not follow the turn of events in Hungary, Croatia or Czechoslovakia.

Two significant moments illustrating the humiliation of the Church in that period need to be indicated. On 28 September, the government released a brief public statement informing that Cardinal Wyszyński was prohibited from “performing the functions related to the previous Church positions”. There was no mention, however, of his detainment nor of the apprehension of Bishop Baraniak. On the same day, the Episcopal Conference of Poland gathered in Warsaw and formulated the document entitled *Declaration of the Episcopate of Poland on creating conditions for normalization of relations between the State and the Church*. The Declaration did not contain any references to the arrest of the Primate and Bishop Baraniak. It was a statement by the Episcopal Conference of Poland that they acknowledged what had transpired – without any objection. Simultaneously, the Conference issued another document bearing the title *Episcopate call to the faithful to maintain peace in the country*. It was meant as a letter

to be read from church pulpits throughout Poland, calling for refraining from protests against the ensuing facts, which were very difficult for the Church. The culmination of the proceedings of the Polish bishops was the appointment of the Bishop of Łódź – Michał Klepacz, as the president of the Episcopal Conference of Poland. That choice was a direct result of the communist authorities' threat that if the bishops had selected the Archbishop of Poznań – Walenty Dymek, as their replacement for Cardinal Wyszyński, they would all have been imprisoned. Bishop Klepacz was persuaded to accept this post.

From then on, the fate of the Church in Poland depended on the actions of Bishop Baraniak, who was being interrogated in the Mokotów prison. Based on the vast documentation, now predominantly in the possession of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, it is clear that the steadfast resolve of Bishop Baraniak caused the authorities to realize that it would not be possible to connect the “Baraniak case” with the “Wyszyński case” and that the encountered problem had to be somehow solved in order not to lose face completely. For that reason, the fate of the Primate started to improve to some extent. The conditions that were created for him at the new places of detainment, first, in Prudnik – in Silesia, subsequently in Komańcza, improved significantly in comparison to those he had endured in Rywałd and Stoczek Warmiński. The situation of the Church in Poland was also greatly affected by the events of June 1956 in Poznań. The protest against the communist authorities, now often referred to as the 1956 Poznań Uprising, precipitated the downfall of the Stalinist regime. Right before 1 November 1956, Cardinal Wyszyński was allowed to come back to Warsaw. Paradoxically, it was the communist authorities who requested his prompt return to the capital. It was carried out on the terms defined by the Primate. This event finally concluded this exceptionally painful chapter in the history of the Catholic Church in Poland with the 1953 trial of the priests of the Krakow Curia as one of its most significant moments.