

Muz., 2021(62): 173-178
Annual, eISSN 2391-4815

received – 07.2021
accepted – 07.2021
DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.0682

MUSEUM CURATOR BY VOCATION. CANON MIROŚLAW NOWAK PHD (1961–2021): DIRECTOR OF THE WARSAW ARCHDIOCESE MUSEUM

Ewa Korpysz

Warsaw Archdiocese Museum
ORCID 0000-0002-8936-5043

Having fought a long and tough battle against COVID-19, on 11 April 2021, Mirosław Nowak, PhD, a theologian, art historian, museum curator, Archdiocesan Conservator, and the Director of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum (MAW), passed away.

Father Mirosław was born in Warsaw on 19 September 1961. In 1981, he began studies at the Faculty of Geodesy and Cartography at the Warsaw University of Technology, yet his strong love for art a year later made him change his mind; quitting the University of Technology, he moved to the University of Warsaw to study at the Institute of Art History at the Faculty of History. In 1987, supervised by Prof. Mariusz Karpowicz, he wrote his MA thesis on the décor of the Lublin Church of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, published several years later.¹ This was his first serious ‘adventure’ with art.

However, art was not the only and the most important passion of Father Mirosław. For long the priestly vocation had been maturing in him. In 1985, still during his University studies, he took up philosophical and theological courses at the Higher Metropolitan Seminary. Ordained by Cardinal Józef Glemp on 24 May 1990, he became a priest.

Thus a priest and an art historian. These two spheres: of sensitivity to spiritual and artistic beauty, perfectly

harmonized and complemented one another in him, both in his pastoral work, in his daily contact with historic objects in churches, and in his scholarly research, which he never stopped to continue. His theological experience enabled him to better deepen and explain the content of art works, while his expertise in art history helped him to justly assess the value of sacral objects which he dealt with in churches, and to properly protect them. Following the ordination, he served as an assistant curate in the following parishes: in Kołbiel (1990–1991), of St Mary Magdalene in Warsaw’s Bródno District and of St Alexander in Warsaw’s Centre (1993–1997). Already then during Religious Education classes, retreats, and Oasis camps, he would teach children and teenagers how to look at beauty.

In 1997, Father Mirosław became a Church assistant at the Museum of John Paul II Collection of the Carroll-Porczyński Foundation. Working with pieces dating from different epochs: from the Middle Ages up to the 20th century, is a big cognitive experience for an art historian. In this case, there was also evangelization experience involved, since a substantial part of the collection is formed by pieces of sacral themes. In 1998–2003, Father Mirosław served as deputy to the Archdiocesan Conservator of Warsaw Archdiocese Monuments, in 2003 having been himself appointed



Photo: E. Korpysz

Archdiocesan Conservator. Furthermore, he was member of the Main Conservation Committee at the office of the General Conservator of Monuments (1999–2002); in 2004–2008, he was member of the Museum Council at the Royal Łazienki Museum. Simultaneously, for a decade in 1998–2008 he headed the Library of the Higher Metropolitan Seminary in Warsaw. Furthermore, he lectured in art history at seminaries in Warsaw and Vilnius, and participated in conferences, while at the same time attending a doctoral seminar at the Institute of Art History of the University of Warsaw.

The doctoral degree was yet another important stage in the life of Father Mirosław. The topic of his particular interest was the masterpiece of Silesian Baroque: the Chapel of Blessed Ceslaus in the Wrocław Dominican Church of St Adalbert. The excellent doctoral dissertation defended in 2006 was published as a book in 2011.² Father Mirosław presented in it a penetrating analysis of this unique historic monument, exposing its exceptional value. Emphasizing its masterly spatial solution allowing the beholder entering a small space the illusion of a voluminous deep interior, he pointed to the iconographic programme and the analogies between this Silesian monument and the highest-profile ones in Italian Baroque architectures. And from that time on Father Mirosław became passionate about Baroque.

His research work was connected with archival and field investigation, involving numerous trips which for him were always an opportunity to see and visit new places as well as

historic monuments. This passion for travelling, so obvious in an art historian, had been born in him actually much earlier, and while expanding, it covered gradually larger areas of Poland, Europe, the world. Father Mirosław just loved travelling. When his workload did not allow longer voyages, he would 'pop out' (his words) just briefly, for several days, a weekend. At the same time he had the peculiar quality of maximally taking advantage of the time he was given: he visited places actively, and saw a lot.

In 2008, Father Mirosław Nowak became the dean of the downtown deanery and the pastor of the capital parish of All Saints, and he held both of these responsible positions for five years. And in 1913 he was entrusted with the position of the director of the Museum of the Archdiocese of Warsaw and the rectory of the Holy Trinity Church situated in the same architectural complex. Father Mirek took over the duties of the retiring director, a distinguished priest, prelate Andrzej Przekaziński, who managed the museum continuously for 35 years, from the post-war reactivation of the institution in 1978.

The Warsaw Archdiocese Museum is an institution of special history. Although opened in September 1938 by Primate Aleksander Kakowski, it boasted exhibits collected still before WWI.³ In Autumn 1938, after the Kanonia tenement houses had been purchased, the collection was made available to the public together with earlier prepared catalogues of some collection fragments.⁴ Regrettably, Warsaw did not enjoy the new museum for long. During WWII, it was plundered by the Nazis and demolished. In post-WWII Poland's capital for decades it was impossible to reactivate this Church museum. Finally, as a result of Primate Stefan Wyszyński's determination, the Museum was reopened in 1980, yet not at its original location, but in the old Baroque Trinitarian Church at Warsaw's Solec, distanced from the Centre.⁵

The historic edifice, reconstructed and furnished with much effort, in the early 21st century became too small for the growing collection, as well as inappropriate for modern display requirements. A need arose to find a new larger seat in harmony with the standards of contemporary museology. An opportunity for that move occurred in the early 2010s. In 2012–2015, the Project *Treasury of Cultural Heritage: Archcathedral Basilica and Museum of the Warsaw Archdiocese* was implemented; it assumed a thorough refurbishing of the Cathedral as well as rebuilding and adaptation of the former Deans' Manor of the Warsaw Chapter, called the Dean's Palace, adjacent to it, to serve museum purposes.

The Director of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum (MAW) was faced with enormous challenges. The priority task was to prepare the new seat for the Museum, which naturally involved designs and construction issues, while at the same time the collection was being inventoried; subsequently, the transfer of museum exhibits and documentation followed, as well as preparing of a new display, acquiring storage space and managing it. The team of co-workers was modest at that point: the Director, his deputy, and a curator. With such limited staff and insufficiency of financing, the whole process required extreme logistic skills. The role volunteers played in the Project cannot be overestimated. However, even before the construction works were completed, the Solec

presbytery, Father Mirosław's flat turned into a temporary office, was the place where new ideas for exhibitions germinated. Already then the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum enjoyed international success. In 2015, at Father Mirosław's instigation an exhibition of the Cathedral treasures was shown in Norway's Trondheim.⁶ That very year the display of the most precious goldsmithery pieces from the MAW collection was displayed at an exhibition of Polish art presented at national museums in Beijing and Seoul.⁷

In autumn 2015, after a number of decades of operating at Solec, the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum returned to the vicinity of its pre-war seat in the Old Town.⁸ Thanks to its Director's logistic competences and commitment, the institution soon became prominent on Warsaw's cultural map, turning into a Warsaw-resident-friendly venue for meetings with authors, poetry soirees, book promotions, presentations, concerts, lectures, scientific conferences, and popular classes for children and teenagers.⁹ However, first and foremost, the Museum became a dynamic display institution. After the move to Dziekania (Deanery) over the period of five years Father Mirosław Nowak together with his team, increased by three additional individuals, mounted about 40 exhibitions, including about a dozen of substantial size and prominence. The Museum rooms served to recall the oeuvre of excellent Polish artists: Gustaw Zemła,¹⁰ Józef Czapski,¹¹ Maria Hiszpańska-Neumann,¹² Alfons Karny,¹³ Jerzy Tchórzewski,¹⁴ Czesław Rzepiński (finalized already after Father Mirosław's death, but planned by him and discussed with the artist's family and works' owners).¹⁵ The



Photo: D. Górnicki

Director also established international cooperation, first of all with the Paris Roi Doré Gallery specializing in promoting contemporary Polish art outside the country. Together with the Gallery he held interesting and intriguing exhibitions at the Deanery: 'Art of the Cross, Cross in Art',¹⁶ 'Apocalypse',¹⁷ and 'Beksiński. In Hoc Signo Vinces'.¹⁸ The latter demonstrates that Father Nowak did not fear challenges, that he reached for important topics, sometimes difficult, controversial, even perhaps out of proportion to our small Museum.

However, the biggest of Father Mirosław's successes was the Warsaw presentation of Michael Willmann's exhibition titled 'Willmann in Warsaw', prepared and mounted thanks to the excellent cooperation with the National Museum in Warsaw and the MT 5,14 / Museum of John Paul II and Primate Wyszyński.¹⁹ It had been preceded by visits to Wrocław, long talks and consultations. The idea of Father Mirosław was to prepare a presentation composed of two complementing parts. Actually, they were two displays: 'Willmann Encore. Martyrdom of the Apostles' at the branch of the MT 5, 14 Museum at Warsaw's Bankowy Square and 'Willmann. Opus Minor' in the building of the Archdiocese Museum at Dziekania. Both were accompanied by an excellent catalogue. Father Mirosław launched this Exhibition shortly before Christmas 2020. In January, he personally delivered catalogues to the parishes which had lent their works for the display. In February, he was already in hospital... He did not live to the closing of the Exhibition in May. Unquestionably, the best and most important in the museological output of Father Mirosław, it was perceived by visitors as his last will.

It is important to add that all the bigger exhibitions mounted by Father Nowak were accompanied by meticulously prepared catalogues and posters. The Director supervised the textual content, photos, and the editing by carefully selecting authors. He also made sure that the Museum attracted visitors, who were to feel comfortable in it. He also controlled everything to be perfectly ready before the preview. And made sure the Museum reverberated with people's presence.

The care for the Museum's image also means dissemination of knowledge of the collection. This was conducted through the lectures organized by the Director, and also through the participation in displays mounted by other organisations. The institution headed by Father Nowak has a lot of accomplishments in this respect. Items from the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum were presented at many national exhibitions held at large museums, e.g., the national Museum in Poznań, Manggha Gallery in Cracow, museums in: Chełmno, Bytom, Jelenia Góra, Gliwice, Przasnysz, and Warsaw (National Museum, Royal Castle, and Museum of Literature): additionally, diocesan museums served as venues for such exhibitions in Poznań, Łomża, Sandomierz, and Siedlce. Moreover, Father Nowak continued his cooperation with international institutions. Apart from earlier-mentioned Trondheim, Beijing, Seoul, and Paris, recently the list has also included Montricher in Switzerland (Fondation Jan Michalski pour l'écriture et la littérature), in which Father Mirosław presented Józef Czapski's painting from MAW titled *At De Stael' Exhibition* to the international public.²⁰

Father Mirosław showed extreme concern for the Museum collection. When he was the Director, the

Museum's resources grew by ca 1.000 exhibits, including also outstanding works of great relevance, e.g.: Michael Willmann's print *Vision of St Bernard of Clairevaux*, Baroque sculpture *Our Lady of Loreto*, Józef Simmler's *The Last Supper*, *Ezekiel's Vision* by Jacek Malczewski, Maria Hiszpańska-Neumann's works, interesting icons, Zofia Trzcńska-Kamińska's plasters. From the very beginning at the new MAW seat he conducted systematic digitizing of the collection. At Director's instigation conservation of gold-misthery items, historic clocks and paintings was launched. Acting as Director of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum, as well as the Diocesan Conservator, Father Mirosław initiated a thorough conservation of the Gothic *Baryczka Crucifix*, artwork of particular importance to our city, to be performed at the Museum in 2019.

Such listing of accomplishments may sound slightly dull, however, it demonstrates that the Director, in the course of the seven years of his assignment, including the five years at his new venue at the Deanery, wrote a beautiful page in the history of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum. Under Father Mirosław Nowak it turned into a modern dynamic institution. Father Nowak additionally created a well-integrated and engaged team of employees, trying hard to create a friendly atmosphere at the workplace.

As much as the Museum was the major focus of Father Nowak's activity as far as history of art was concerned, at the same time he applied his museology knowledge and experience performing many other important functions. From 2013 he served as a member of the Architectural-Artistic Committee of the Warsaw Archdiocese. In 2016, he became a consultant at the Council for Culture and Preservation of Cultural Heritage of the Polish Episcopal Conference. A year later, he was involved in co-organising a conference in Mszczonów dedicated to the status of church museums: 'Church Museums in the Face of New Challenges'.

It is worthwhile dedicating a few more words to the latter.

The organisation of the Conference held by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ) together with the Council for Culture and Preservation of Cultural Heritage of the Polish Episcopal Conference was also supported by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Bringing together directors, museum curators, and professionals employed at church and lay museums in Poland and abroad (Italy, Albania, the Czech Republic, Lithuania), it provided a platform for the exchange of experience and definition of the role and tasks of church museums, also in view of their relation to state legislation. In the course of the session, the 'Ars Sacra Church Museums and Treasuries' Association was established, with Father Andrzej Rusak, Director of the Sandomierz Diocesan Museum, becoming its President. Father Mirosław Nowak was assigned the function of Deputy President.

In 2018, Father Mirosław was given yet another function: he became Plenipotentiary for the Management and Care of John Paul II Collection, Carroll-Porczyński Foundation. Despite so many responsibilities, he always found time for his research, he participated in numerous conferences domestically and abroad where he delivered papers related to art and preservation of cultural goods. He authored books and scholarly papers, academic works for the general public, as well as catalogue entries and press releases in relation to the MAW-organized exhibitions. He was also involved in his own academic investigation.

Still, amidst that multitude of responsibilities, Father Mirosław always had time for another person: time for a smile, pastoral advice. Time to meet with his employees, to have a loose friendly talk, to share reflections, to sit at the table together at holidays, to share Christmas wishes, even to travel somewhere together. A good and righteous man. This is what our Director was like...

Abstract: Having fought a long and tough battle against COVID-19, on 11 April 2021, Mirosław Nowak PhD, a theologian, art historian, museum curator, Archdiocese Conservator, and the Director of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum, passed away. In 1982–1987, Fr. Mirosław studied art history at the History Department of the University of Warsaw, at the same time studying philosophy and theology at the Higher Metropolitan Seminary in Warsaw. Having taken holy orders in 1990, throughout his life he was able to successfully harmonize his ministry with the profession of an art historian. With his research focused on Baroque art, in 2006, he defended his doctoral dissertation on the Chapel of Blessed Ceslaus in the Wrocław church of the Dominicans. Fr. Mirosław Nowak performed many Diocese-wide

functions, with 2013 being for him breakthrough: it was then that he became Director of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum. Under him, the Museum was moved to a new extensive home in the centre of Warsaw's Old Town; he mounted a permanent exhibition, and created an energetic cultural centre of high impact. At the Museum, he organized lectures, shows, authors' presentations, concerts, and conferences. Fr. Nowak established contacts with other museums in Poland and abroad; he organized around 40 temporary exhibitions, among which the biggest and most interesting was that dedicated to the Silesian master of the Baroque Michael Willmann, The Warsaw Archdiocese Museum will painfully miss a good human and an excellent director.

Keywords: Fr. Mirosław Nowak Warsaw Archdiocese Museum, Solec, 1 Dziekonia Street, Michael Willmann's Exhibition, 'ARS SACRA Church Museums and Treasuries' Association.

Endnotes

- ¹ M. Nowak, *Dekoracja wystroju kościoła karmelitanek bosych pod wezwaniem Niepokalanego Poczęcia NMP w Lublinie* [Decor of the Interior of the Church of Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady in Lublin], 'Ikonothea' 1993, No. 5, pp. 139-166.
- ² M. Nowak, *Kaplica błogosławionego Czesława we Wrocławiu* [Chapel of Blessed Ceslaus in Wrocław], Warszawa 2011.
- ³ J. Marlewska, *Pinakoteka płocka i jej twórca* [Płock Pinakotheka and Its Creator], 'Notatki płockie' 1989, Vol. 34, No. 2(139), pp. 32-40.
- ⁴ M. Walicki, *Otwarcie Muzeum Archidiecezjalnego w Warszawie* [Opening of the Archdiocese Museum in Warsaw], 'Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury' 1938, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 296-297.
- ⁵ K. Burek, *Muzeum Archidiecezji Warszawskiej* [Warsaw Archdiocese Museum] 'Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne' 1987, No. 54, pp. 14-145; Fr A. Przekaziński, *Wdzięczność* [Gratitude] in: *Świadcstwo wspólnoty. Pamiątka jubileuszu dwudziestolecia powojennego Muzeum Archidiecezji Warszawskiej* (kwiecień 1080 – kwiecień 2000) [Testimony to Community. Memento of the Jubilee of the Two Post-War Decades of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum (April 1980-April 2020)], K. Burek (ed.), Warszawa 2000, p. 3.
- ⁶ 'Golden Links. Two Cathedrals, Two Nations', Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim (Norway), April 2015–April 2016.
- ⁷ 'Treasures from Chopin's Country. Polish Art from the 15th to the 20th Century', National Museum of China in Beijing, 6 February–10 May 2015; 'Polish Art: Invincible Spirit', National Museum of Korea in Seoul, 4 June–30 August 2015.
- ⁸ E. Korpysz, *Muzeum Archidiecezji Warszawskiej pod nowym adresem* [Warsaw Archdiocese Museum at a New Address], 'Stolica' 2016, Nos. 6-7, pp. 52-54.
- ⁹ Eadem, *Muzeum Archidiecezji Warszawskiej, historia i współczesność. Dwa lata działalności w nowej siedzibie* [Warsaw Archdiocese Museum: History and the Present. Two Years of Operations at the New Seat], in: *Muzea kościelne wobec nowych wyzwań. Materiały konferencji zorganizowanej w dniach 18-20 października 2017 r.* [Church Museums Facing New Challenges. Proceedings of the Conference Held on 18-20 October 2017], Narodowy Instytut Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zbiorów, Warszawa 2019, pp. 337-353.
- ¹⁰ Gustaw Zemła's 'Charity Gates', »Caritas« Cycle, MAW, June–September 2016; and 'Gusta Zemła. Sculptures', MAW, 9 October–1 December 2019.
- ¹¹ 'Czapski Today. Painting and Drawing. Works from the Collection of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum', MAW 10 October 2017–28 January 2018.
- ¹² 'Overshadowed by the Cross, in the Brightness of the Resurrection. The 100th Birthday of Maria Hiszpańska-Neumann (1917-1980)', MAW, 27 October 2017–4 March 2018.
- ¹³ 'Alfons Karny. Faces. 30 Years Since the Artist's Death', MAW, 18 October–1 December 2019.
- ¹⁴ 'Jerzy Tchórzewski. Another Look at. Works from Private Collections', MAW, 5 December 2019–1 March 2020.
- ¹⁵ 'Czesław Rzepiński. Native Landscape', MAW, 1 June–5 September 2021.
- ¹⁶ 'Art of the Cross. Cross in Art', exhibition of the Paris Roi Doré Gallery at the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum, MAW, 23 March–30 September 2017.
- ¹⁷ 'Apocalypse (Dürer, Lebenstein, Majka)', MAW, 29 May–29 September 2019.
- ¹⁸ 'Beksiński. In Hoc Signo Vinces', MAW, 30 May–30 September 2018.
- ¹⁹ 'Willmann in Warsaw: Willmann Encore. Martydrom of the Apostles', Mt 5,14 / Museum of John Paul II and Primate Wyszyński, 1 December–16 May 2021; 'Willmann. Opus Minor', MAW, 21 December 2020–16 May 2021.
- ²⁰ 'Józef Czapski. Painter and Writer', Fondation Jan Michalski pour l'écriture et la littérature (Switzerland), 3 October 2020–17 January 2021.

Ewa Korpysz PhD

Doctoral degree in humanities, graduate from the Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw; a long-standing employee and head of the photo collection of the Institute of Art History, (1982–1985) at the Educational Department at Zachęta, (1996–1998) adjunct at the Mediaeval Art Gallery, National Museum in Warsaw, (since 1995) co-working with WSP, (since 2013) curator of the Warsaw Archdiocese Museum collection; lecturer at the University of Warsaw, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, and at private universities; she focuses in her research on Gothic and Renaissance masonry as well as artistic culture of old Warsaw; author of numerous academic papers, dictionary and catalogue notes and entries, in e.g.: 'Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki', 'Ochrona Zabytków', 'Przegląd Wschodni' and 'Biuletyn Historii Sztuki'; scholarship holder of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura and the Lanckoroński Foundation; laureate of the Fr Prof. Szczyński Dettloff Contest; awarded with the following distinctions: 'Honour Merituous for the Warsaw Association of Artists', 'Honour Merituous for the Warsaw Archdiocese', and the decoration of 'Honour Merituous for Polish Culture'; e-mail: e.m.korpysz@gmail.com

Word count: 3 135; **Tables:** –; **Figures:** 2; **References:** 20

Received: 07.2021; **Accepted:** 07.2021; **Published:** 08.2021

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.0682

Copyright©: Some rights reserved: National Institute for Museums and Public Collections. Published by Index Copernicus Sp. z o.o.



This material is available under the Creative Commons – Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). The full terms of this license are available on: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

Competing interests: Authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Cite this article as: Korpysz E.; MUSEUM CURATOR BY VOCATION. CANON MIROSŁAW NOWAK PHD (1961–2021): DIRECTOR OF THE WARSAW ARCHDIOCESE MUSEUM. *Muz.*, 2021(62): 173-178

Table of contents 2021: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/13664>

