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The Catholic Church in Poland in the Years 1944-1950

Abstract

The reality, in which the People's Republic of Poland found itself after world war II, made the Catholic Church in Poland meet the new challenges, in spite of much authority which it had in the society. The one of a principle importance was breaking the Concordat by the State authorities. After a certain period of time lack of any legal solution on such a level considerably complicated relations between the State and the Church. Searching closure in this area was supposed to guarantee the Church certain freedom in priests' activities and the State authorities – acceptance in the international arena. In spite of certain inconveniences the Polish Episcopate decided to sign an agreement, which however did not protect the Church against further excluding from the social life.

Key words: Episcopate, the Church, agreement, President, government, cooperation.

Kościół katolicki w Polsce w latach 1944-1950

Streszczenie

W powojennej rzeczywistości Polski Ludowej Kościół katolicki w Polsce, mimo iż cieszył się dużym autorytetem w społeczeństwie, musiał podjąć nowe wyzwania. Zasadniczym było zerwanie konkordatu przez władze państwowe. Brak rozwiązania prawnego na takim szczeblu po pewnym czasie w znaczący sposób utrudniało relacje państwowo-kościelne. Poszukiwanie zbliżenia na tej płaszczyźnie miało zagwarantować pewną swobodę pracy duszpasterskiej Kościołowi, a władzom państwowym – uznanie na arenie międzynarodowej. Pomimo pewnych niedogodności, episkopat polski zdecydował się na podpisanie porozumienia, które jednak nie ustrzegło Kościoła od dalszego rugowania z życia społecznego.

Słowa kluczowe: episkopat, Kościół, porozumienie, prezydent, rząd, współpraca.

1. Introductory Remarks

After the Red Army entered the Polish territory at the end of World War II, a marionette Communist government was installed under the Moscow auspices. The leading part in it was

played by Bolesław Bierut, who became the President of the State National Council on 31 December 1944. After the Constitution of 1947 was adopted, he also became the President of the Republic of Poland¹. During this period Cardinal August Hlond was the head of the Catholic Church in Poland. As it is commonly assumed, under the special empowerment of the Apostolic See, in 1945 he established the Church administration on the Western and Northern territories². Soon, on 3 May 1946, after the repeal of the personal union between Gniezno and Poznań, he was appointed the Archbishop of Warsaw, keeping also Gniezno archdiocese. After his unexpected death on 22 October 1948, Primate Stefan Wyszyński became his successor on 12 November 1948³. Similarly as his predecessor, he continued a dialogue with the Communist authorities in Poland, having resulted in a notorious agreement, which was a certain novelty in the relations between the State and the Church in the Communist camp.

2. In a New Political Reality

After World War II the Catholic Church in Poland found itself in a new reality, which was marked out by several factors. First and foremost, huge losses, which it suffered during the Hitler occupation, dozens of priests among them, ought to be counted as such. Another considerable element determining its position was national unification, which also meant confessional uniformity. Jewish extermination, change of borders, as well as massive resettlements contributed into it⁴. During this period of time there took place an increase of the Church authority in the society, in the face of seizing power by the Communists in Poland. The first steps of the State authorities in the confession sphere were very cautious and presumed correctness in their relations with the Church, until the new political system strengthened distinctly⁵.

Unfortunately, the Communist authorities, by a unilateral breaking of the concordat on 12 September 1945, proved that there would be no return to the kind of relations between the State and the Church, which existed during the interwar period. Taking up such a decision was supposed to give the Polish State freedom in decreeing the Catholic Church in Poland. At

¹ M. Smoleń, *Bierut Bolesław*, [in:] *Encyklopedia „Białych Plam”*, t. 3, Radom 2000, p. 30-39.

² Wider about it in: Z. Zieliński, *Kościół w Polsce 1944-2002*, Radom 2003, p. 42 & the next.

³ P. Nitecki, *Biskupi Kościoła w Polsce w latach 965-1999. Słownik biograficzny*, ed. 2, Warszawa 2000, col. 149, 500.

⁴ J. Kłoczowski, L. Müllerowa, *Chrześcijaństwo polskie po 1945 r.* [in:] *Chrześcijaństwo w Polsce. Zarys przemian 966-1979*, ed. J. Kłoczowski, Lublin 1993, p. 591-595.

⁵ A. Dudek, *Państwo i Kościół w Polsce 1945-1970*, Kraków 1995, p. 7-8.

the same time, breaking the concordat made the Church free in taking up many personal decisions, which under the concordat they would have had to consult with the State authorities. However, this appeared to be a short-time achievement, because the authorities immediately took up relative steps in order to subordinate the Church to them⁶. One of the ways of making pressure over the Church were numerous arrests among the priests accused of cooperation with the anticommunist underground⁷. At the same time, referendum of 30 June 1946, and falsification of its results led to rapprochement in the relations between the Polish People's Party and the Church hierarchy. Unsuccessful for the peasants' party voting results of 19 January 1947 and the reaction of the State authorities for its protests were interchangeably commented soon by Primate A. Hlond, during his conversation with Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha. The official condemnation of the held elections could have resulted in a sharp reaction of the Polish Working Party, therefore the Episcopate kept determined cautiousness in forming its opinions. Further contacts with the authorities were characterized by maximum concessions and activities oriented for outlasting that difficult for the Church period⁸.

In spite of numerous concessions, the Episcopate did not give up its right to take voice in public affairs. It was expressed in the *Catholic Constitutional Postulates* passed to Józef Cyrankiewicz on 14 March 1947⁹. The State authorities reacted very sharply on the Episcopate's postulates, stating that they were at least improper, and even insulting for the government¹⁰. Further escalation of relations between the State and the Church showed off in autumn 1947, when the Episcopate, debating at Jasna Góra, published a letter to the faithful, in which bishops came out against violating civil freedoms, cancelling church holidays and implementing censure. On 1 October 1947 the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party definitely reacted to the letter, giving relative directives for the purpose of further struggle with the Church. Security bodies ordered local village-mayors to hear rectors, intensified censure and limited the number of services transmitted by radio. The Ministry of Security started to put those tasks into effect¹¹.

The Head of the V Department of the Ministry of Public Security Julia Bristigierowa

⁶ J. Kopiec, *Kościół w Polsce po 1945 r.*, Opole 1999, p. 12 & the next.

⁷ H. Dominiczak, *Organy bezpieczeństwa PRL 1944-1990*, Warszawa 1997, p. 96-110.

⁸ W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, J. Majchrowski, *Najnowsza historia polityczna Polski*, collection of sources 1945-1948, part 4, Kraków 1993, p. 166.

⁹ *Kościół katolicki o konstytucji (wybrane dokumenty z lat 1947-1991)*, collection and introduction M. T. Staszewski, Warszawa 1991, p. 9-13.

¹⁰ P. Raina, *Kościół w PRL. Dokumenty 1945-1959*, t. 1, Poznań 1994, p. 82.

¹¹ H. Dominiczak, *Organy bezpieczeństwa...*, p. 99-100.

presented a paper on the problem under the title *Clergy's Offence versus our Actions*. She put a principle emphasis in struggle with the Church on working out particular priests, bishop curias, Caritas, especially underlining the necessity of monasteries' surveillance. She pointed out a threat of the catholic organizations' activities in the workers' environment and youth-groups. She ordered to work out school prefects, pilgrimage groups, as well as to limit publishing catholic press¹². The MPS's and the Military Intelligence's activities resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of over 400 priests till September 1948. Means of mass communication, led by the Party apparatus, played a considerable part in destroying the Church influence. Small progress in atheization of children and school youth induced the State authorities to act in the direction of Western and Northern territories, publicizing the opinion of the Apostolic See in this matter. That was the main obstacle in maintaining correct relations between the new power and the Church¹³.

The territories annexed to Poland after World War II, which had earlier belonged to Germany, were the main point of discord. As far as the Church administration was concerned, they used to be a part of Berlin, Gdańsk and Warmia dioceses, Piła prelatore and Wrocław archdiocese. On 15 August 1945, under the special empowerment of a Pope legate, Cardinal A. Hlond established five apostolic administrations with the capitals in Gdańsk, Gorzów, Olsztyn, Opole and Wrocław¹⁴. Acting under the same empowerment, the Primate appointed apostolic administrators for those church provinces, but the State authorities did not admit it¹⁵. This state of affairs was caused by the fact, that the government of Edward Osóbka-Morawski was not respected by the Apostolic See. Primarily, the State authorities did not complicate church activities at the regained territories. Later however, they demanded establishing permanent administration there. Vatican depended establishing permanent administration at those territories on signing a peace treaty with the Germans by the Polish authorities¹⁶.

The Polish side considered that this postulate aimed at the revision of the Polish borders. Despite the above mentioned tensions, the state authorities led a dialogue with Vatican. Ksawery Pruszyński, being a special emissary of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, conducted negotiations with the representative of the Secretariat of State of the Apostolic See Domenico

¹² A. Garlicki, *Z tajnych archiwów*, Warszawa 1993, p. 41-52.

¹³ J. Godlewski, *Kościół rzymskokatolicki w Polsce wobec sekularyzacji życia publicznego (1944-1974)*, Warszawa 1978, p. 154-156.

¹⁴ P. Raina, *Kościół w PRL...*, t. 1, p. 46-68.

¹⁵ H. Misztal, *Polskie prawo wyznaniowe. Zagadnienia wstępne. Rys historyczny*, Lublin 1997, p. 184-186.

¹⁶ *Sprawa polska w czasie II wojny światowej na arenie międzynarodowej*, collection of documents, Warszawa 1965, p. 764.

Tardini. On 6 February 1947, during a conversation, the Polish side made a proposal of running negotiations in three concrete directions: cancelling accusations of the Pope Pius XII, assuring religious freedoms and enabling to create a report on the situation existing in Poland by a special Pope emissary. The first two conditions were left to be discussed during the Vatican emissary's visit, which also meant the acceptance of the third condition¹⁷. This however did not happen, despite setting the date of the emissary's visit on May 1948. Such effect was caused by a letter of the Pope Pius XII to German bishops from 1 March 1948, in which he took the side of 12 million mass of resettled Germans¹⁸.

In such a complicated situation, on 24 May 1948 Cardinal A. Hlond decided to address a message, warning of making a mistake in judging the Church, which allegedly had reservation concerning the future of the Western territories. The care of the Polish Episcopate for the so-called regained territories was showed in the fact of appointing a Special Committee, which task was to inform Vatican about the situation on these territories¹⁹. Further escalation of the difficulties in State-Church relations was the effect of limiting civil freedoms in Poland, as well as an irreconcilable Vatican's position towards the Communist authorities. The Pope Pius XII's decree of July 1949, threatening to excommunicate those Catholics, who belonged to Communist organizations or cooperated with the Communists, as well as the matter of a so-called Lublin miracle²⁰, caused anxiety in the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) and inclined it to a radical analysis of the relationships with the Church. During the meeting on 19 July 1949, a member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the PUWP Hilary Minc determined the hitherto methods of struggle with the Church as insufficient and presented a new, two-phase plan of fight on a massive scale. The first phase consisted in activating the clergy of a pro-government attitude by creating a so-called initiative group. The second phase aimed at presenting, among others, all the clergy a special declaration of loyalty to be signed by them. Such actions were supposed to result in deep divisions within the clergy, which would have helped to break up the Church²¹.

Directions of the confession policy in Poland were determined by Józef Stalin, who

¹⁷ J. Wiśłocki, *Konkordat polski 1993. Tak czy nie?* Poznań 1993, p. 66-72.

¹⁸ A. Rogalski, *Katolicyzm w Niemczech po II wojnie światowej*, Warszawa 1952, p. 208.

¹⁹ H. Misztal, P. Stanisław, *Działalność Komisji Wspólnej Przedstawicieli Rządu i Episkopatu w latach 1949-1989*, [in:] *Vetera Nowis Augere. Studia i prace dedykowane profesorowi Wacławowi Uruszczakowi*, ed. S. Grodziski, t. 2, Kraków 2010, p. 763 n.

²⁰ K. Rudnicki, *Cuda i objawienia w Polsce 1949-1986*, Warszawa 1990, p. 12 & the next.

²¹ W. Wlazlak, *Dzieje diecezji częstochowskiej w okresie działalności biskupa Zdzisława Golińskiego (1951-1963)*, Kraków 2000, p. 54-55.

consulted those matters with B. Bierut on 1 August 1949. The effect of those talks was *A Decree on the Protection of the Freedom of Conscience and Confession* of 5 August 1949²², which was intended to formally guarantee the freedom of religion in Poland, but in practice served the State authorities to repress the Church. Another *Decree Changing certain Legal Regulations Concerning Associations*, issued on 5 August 1949, also served the state authorities a similar purpose²³. It was aimed at controlling church associations, that is why on 3 November 1949 the Church in Poland suspended the activities of all its associations²⁴. Constant misunderstandings in the State-Church relations led to the establishing of a Mixed Committee, though proposals of bishop Zygmunt Choromański – the Secretary of the Episcopate, made on 25 November 1948, were ignored. Soon the State authorities changed their position in this matter. On 5 August 1949 the Mixed Committee started its activity. The government was represented in it by the Minister of Public Administration Władysław Wolski, the Minister of National Defense Edward Ochab and a Member of Parliament Franciszek Mazur, also a member of the Central Committee of the PUWP. From the Episcopate's side the Committee consisted of the following bishops: Zygmunt Choromański, Michał Klepacz and Tadeusz Zakrzewski²⁵. An agreement with the Peoples' Poland authorities elicited controversies within the Episcopate. Finally, the opinion of the new Primate S. Wyszyński decided, that the confrontation did not take place²⁶.

3. Agreement and Persecution

During the Mixed Committee's debates, there did not lack actions for the sake of destabilization inside the Church from the State authorities' part. It showed in the activity of the Priests' Committee at the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy, which consisted of almost several per cent of Polish clergy²⁷. Talks led within the Mixed Committee were accompanied by the pressure from the State authorities' side, which were to cause acceptance of the Church part for the new processes taking place in the country, i.e. cooperative movement, questioning of the Pope's supremacy over the Church in Poland and solutions concerning the

²² Journal of Laws – Dziennik Ustaw (further: Dz.U.) 1949 No 45, item 334.

²³ Dz. U 1949 No 45, item 335.

²⁴ T. Biedroń, *Organizacje młodzieży katolickiej w Polsce w latach 1945-1953*, Kraków 1991, p. 25-26.

²⁵ H. Misztal, *Komisja Wspólna Przedstawicieli Rządu i Episkopatu Polski*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 9, Lublin 2002, col. 458.

²⁶ P. Raina, *Kardynał Wyszyński. Droga na Stolicę Prymasowską*, t. 1, Warszawa 1993, p. 195-197.

²⁷ A. Żelobowski, *Stanowisko Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego wobec przeobrażeń socjalistycznych w Polsce w latach 1944-1970*, Warszawa 1987, p. 320-321.

church administration at the Western and Northern territories, taken up in accordance with the State authorities' vision. But such a solution was unacceptable for the Church in Poland. The State authorities were under the pressure of striving to sign the agreement at any price, which could be seen in the matter of Caritas established in 1945, coordinating the Church's charity activities. Subsidies, collections and donations were good occasions to accuse, as well as Caritas's legal personality, which started to be questioned by the authorities, was another touchy matter. A letter of A. S. Sapieha of 16 March 1948, addressed to the Ministry of Public Administration on the protection of Caritas's legal personality, which referred to the Constitution being then in force, did not succeed. Starting with the next year the authorities withdrew subsidies for charity. Liquidation of Caritas was accompanied by a propaganda action, in which the Church's abuses were attacked²⁸.

Depriving the Church of the control over Caritas's activity and transferring it to the groups connected with the State authorities, caused protest of bishops. On 24 January 1950 it was expressed by Cardinal A. S. Sapieha, who sent a telegram to the President B. Bierut. Several days later, during the Episcopate Conference, which took place in Cracow, bishops protested in a letter to the President. At the same time bishops addressed a letter to the clergy, warning of involving in political activity and all types of associations, which weakened the Church's unity. Bishops' care for the Caritas matter was also expressed in one more letter addressed to the faithful during the Episcopate Conference debating in Cracow. The text was titled *Episcopate's Declaration to the Faithful on the Caritas Matter*²⁹. The State authorities, being afraid of shattering the propaganda action around Caritas, started actions in order to frighten priests and deter them from reading the above Episcopate's letter in churches. On 15 February 1950 the Prime Minister J. Cyrnakiewicz addressed a letter to Cardinal A. S. Sapieha, responding to the accusations of the Episcopate included in the letter to the President B. Bierut, in which he rejected all the slanders concerning the illegal overtaking of Caritas. The culminating point in the Caritas matter was seizing bishop of Chełm Kazimierz Kowalski in a home arrest³⁰.

The next step in limiting the Church's sovereignty, was issuing a Law of 20 March 1950 on overtaking by the State the so-called "dead hand" estate³¹, in this way denying the

²⁸ J. Żaryn, *Kościół w PRL*, Warszawa 2004, p. 24-25.

²⁹ *Listy pasterskie episkopatu Polski 1945-1974*, Paris 1975, p. 87, 89.

³⁰ J. Wolny, *Ostatnie lata działalności kościelnej Adama Stefana Sapiehy* [in:] *Księga Sapieżyńska*, ed. J. Wolny in cooperation with R. Zawadzki, t. 2, Kraków 1986, p. 554.

³¹ Dz.U. 1950 No 9, item 87 with changes.

earlier decisions, which excluded the land belonging to the Church from the Law on Agricultural Reform. Despite the difficulties on the State-Church line, the Episcopate decided to finalize the talks concerning the agreement with the State authorities. During the final editing of the State-Church agreement, the leadership of the Episcopate strove only for a gentler formulating of certain articles. On 14 April 1950 *The Agreement between the Representatives of the Government of the People's Republic of Poland and the Polish Episcopate* was finally signed³². It was confirmed by the signatures of W. Wolski, F. Mazur and E. Ochab from the state authorities' side and by the bishops Z. Choromański, M. Klepacz and T. Zakrzewski from the Church part. There was annexed a four-point protocol to the Agreement. The first point obliged the Episcopate to enable the clergy to act in the Catholics' Association Caritas. The next two concerned the so-called Law on Dead-Hand Estate, which was a source of suitable funds assigned to be at the disposal of ordinaries and church institutions. The last point regulated the matter of military service of the clergymen. During their studies it was to be postponed in order to enable them to finish the studies. Those who were already ordained or monks after vowing perpetual holy orders, were to be transferred to the reserve with the ancillary service use³³.

The Agreement between the Episcopate and the Communist power in Poland was a novelty in the Eastern Europe. It aroused serious uneasiness in the Apostolic See, as well as among Polish bishops. It is very difficult to determine interchangeably, to what extent the signed Agreement weakened the attacks of the Communist authorities towards the Church in Poland. However, it seems, that the Episcopate, having the legal grounds, could refer to the State authorities in different matters concerning the Church affairs. It could not have done it before, because formally the concordat had been broken. The State whereas could resist the opinion on persecution of the Church in Poland at the international arena. Another argument of the Communist authorities in further struggle with the Church was a different treatment of bishops by the Apostolic See in connection with the administration at the regained territories. In order to fulfill these tasks on 19 April 1950 there was established the Office for Confessions Matters, which was supposed to totally coordinate confession policy³⁴.

Soon after signing the Agreement, it came to the first conflict of the State authorities with the Church. Its reason was connected with collecting of signatures under the so-called *Stockholm Appeal* in May 1950, which showed the pro-soviet block in a positive light, and at

³² H. Misztal, *Polskie prawo...*, p. 198-200.

³³ *Położenie prawne kościołów i związków wyznaniowych w PRL. Zbiór przepisów wg stanu na dzień 1 października 1960 r.*, opr. E. Małkiewicz, S. Podemski, Warszawa 1960, p. 127-128.

³⁴ Dz. U. 1950 No 19, item 156.

the same time possessed an American overtone. The Church authorities refused signing the *Appeal*, explaining it by their political indifference, but it did not protect the Church against repressions from the Communist authorities' side. Primate S. Wyszyński and Cardinal A. S. Sapieha protested against the antichurch resolution of the state authorities. On 12 September 1950 they sent a letter to the President B. Bierut, in which they criticized the five-year cooperation between the Church and the State. They underlined, that since signing the Agreement the situation of the Church had not been improved, and that it had been subjected to more intensive repressions. After signing on 6 July in Zgorzelec the Border Treaty between Poland and the Democratic Republic of Germany the Church was exposed to more attacks of the Communist authorities. The Polish government maintained, that the Episcopate, subject to point 3 of the Agreement, was obliged to demand the Apostolic See to establish permanent church administrative units at the Western and Northern territories. However, lack of the relative treaty with the Democratic Republic of Germany prevented from the proper solving of the problem³⁵.

Conclusions

In the first years after World War II the State-Church relations in Poland were influenced by several factors. One of them was the unilateral breaking of the concordat, which took place several months after the military actions were finished by the Polish State. At the same time it should be noticed, that at that time the Church had much authority among the faithful, which was caused by inflexible position of the clergy during the Hitler's occupation. It must have been because of that fact, that primarily the State authorities did not take many actions against the Church. It was only after eliminating political opposition, that the Communists took up more decisive actions against the Church. They resulted in persecution of the priests, liquidating church associations and Caritas. Despite all those unfavourable actions of the State authorities, the Episcopate decided to sign the Agreement which was to guarantee the legal status of the Church in Poland. Unfortunately, it did not protect the Church against further repressions.

³⁵ P. Raina, *Kościół w PRL...*, t. 1, p. 253-261, 265, 271.