

Letters from Częstochowa: a Bishop Friendly to Jews

Next year, the Catholic faithful will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Częstochowa Diocese. On 28th October 1925, the papal bull, *Vixdum Poloniae unitas*, by Pope Pius XI, established a new administrative section of the Church, in accordance with the concordat, signed in February 1925, between the Republic of Poland and the Holy See. In December 1925, Father Teodor Kubina became the first Bishop of Częstochowa.

He was the first bishop and, at the same time, is remembered with the greatest respect by both Christians and by the people of Częstochowa, whether they are believers in other gods or are non-believers. Following his death, he became a symbol of an “open church”, in direct contrast to the “intolerant” clergy of the Second Polish Republic.

This is evidenced by the flattering words of Adam Michnik, reinforced by Aleksandra Klich's article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* about the "red bishop." If the deceased had time to read the press, the tone and title of the article would surely have surprised Teodor Kubina. Anyone, who took the time to read the selection of the bishop's writings, compiled by Father Marian Duda (*Bishop Teodor Kubina (1880-1951). Pastoral Letters – Messages – Appeals*, Częstochowa 2023) would surely share that astonishment.

Born in Świętochłowice and raised in Górny Śląsk, this cleric, distinguished by his Polish Śląsk accent, was an orthodox servant of the Church shaped by pre-Vatican Popes, fulfilling the mission of social Christianity as defined by Leo XIII.

He came to Częstochowa from Katowice where, as the priest of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, he had dedicated himself to the cause of Polish identity in Górny Śląsk. He was convinced of the unity between Polishness and Catholicism, believing that the Church enabled the nation to survive the partitions and that it was essential for the building of a lasting foundation for an independent Polish Republic.

We should not judge this from a contemporary perspective, as everyone is a product of their own time. Today's disputes differ from those from before the War. It is not appropriate to apply words,

from a different reality, to modern agitation. Biskup Kubina called for national unity based upon Catholicism.

“Instead of uniting our forced in a harmonious effort for the good of our homeland, as God commands and as external dangers and harsh economic conditions require, we are divided, obstructing one another, suspecting and accusing each other. The spirit of partisanship has penetrated, not only political life [...] but, worse yet, it has also infiltrated cultural, economic, social and community life, paralysing them. [...] And since today’s economic life is dominated by un-Christian selfishness, it is no surprise that selfishness has also crept into affairs of state and public services [...], regarding the state as the highest good of man on earth, a kind of god which recognises no one above itself, that needs to acknowledge or respect no laws other than its own, neither the laws of Almighty God, nor the laws of the Holy Church, not the natural rights of family and man. [...] (*Pastoral Letter – The Year 1928 in the Light of Eternity. Częstochowa, 14th January 1929.*)

“Although the Holy Church – as we have stated – does not proclaim or impose any strictly defined economic or social system upon human society, it possesses something that is of an incomparably greater value for economic and social life, namely economic and social ethics. [...] To renew economic and social life in Christ, to reform or restructure the economic and social order in the spirit of Christian ethics, in order to remove, or at least alleviate, social misery and to create healthy and stable conditions for the common good of humanity – this should be our clear goal.” (*Pastoral Letter on social issues, Częstochowa, 16th March 1930.*)

“It is no wonder that, taking advantage of our thoughtlessness, the enemy threatens us in various forms – whether it be sectarian, Freemasonry, Judaism, godless communism, pagan totalitarianism or un-Christian nationalism – not only externally, but even through infiltration of our ranks, bringing confusion of ideas, breaking our unity, weakening our strength, diminishing our possessions, gaining influence over our Private and public lives, trying to shape them not according to our spirit and our faith, but according to a foreign, un-Christian spirit and, thus, anti-Polish.” (*Pastoral Letter – Watch and Pray, Częstochowa, 25th September 1938.*)

The stigmatisation of “Judaism”, as a threat to Poland, alongside sectarianism, Freemasonry, Bolshevism and pagan totalitarianism, was consistent with the Content found in the contemporary

press and the Church's social teachings. At the same time, preserved memories of the Bishop of Częstochowa indicate that, while he condemned "sin", he respected the dignity of every individual. While it may be an exaggeration to speak of the bishop's friendship with Częstochowa Chief Rabbi Nachum Asz, during public meetings, Bishop Kubina ostentatiously showed respect to the rabbi.

The bishop's decisive reaction, to the events of the June 1937 pogrom in Częstochowa, surprised many. On 19th June 1937, a quarrel between two young men – kosher butcher Jusek Pędrak and porter Stefan Barań, ended with the shooting of the Polish porter. The news, that a Jew had shot a Pole, inflamed tensions, leading to a five-hour pogrom, where an angry mob destroyed Jewish shops and homes I Aleja, in the Stary Miasto (Old Town), on ul. Garibaldiego, al. Kościuszki and ul. Ogródowa. A total of 260 families were affected, twenty people were seriously injured and material losses amounted to an estimated 300,000 złoty. Peace on the streets was restored only by the arrival of police units from Kielce.

Bishop Kubina responded by issuing a proclamation that appeared as posters on the city's walls and published in *Goniec Częstochowski*, *Gazeta Polska* and in the *Łódź Ilustrowana Republika*.

"Częstochowa is still experiencing difficult and dangerous moments. A crime, worthy of condemnation, has been committed. [...] We rightly demand satisfaction for this crime. [...] However, the evil spirit seeks to exploit this atmosphere to push the people of this city towards actions unworthy of a Catholic and a Pole, - actions that would turn this city of the Blessed Virgin Mary into a stronghold of hatred, inflicting serious wounds upon the religious heart of Poland, which is the capital of the Crown of Poland. Such actions would poison the wellspring of the Polish spirit with the seeds of crime and bring upon us terrible dangers and misfortunes. [...] As your arch-pastor, I appeal to you, with a heartfelt call, to maintain balance and calm during these difficult times and to help calm others."
(Proclamation to the Catholic and Polish Society of Częstochowa in connection with anti-Jewish incidents in Częstochowa, Częstochowa, 22nd June 1937.)

The majority of Częstochowa's Catholic community supported the National Party. A local printing house published the works of Dmowski, including his programme text – "The Church, Nation and State". Pilgrimages of University youth, to Jasna Góra, were parades of nationalism and antisemitism. Pogroms in the 1930s also occurred in many other towns and cities across the

Republic. There were no audible words of condemnation from the clergy. Bishop Kubina's proclamation was the exception. However, it would distort reality to present it as being motivated by the author's philosemitism. The Bishop of Częstochowa wrote as a Catholic, addressing Catholic believers. He did not defend the Jews, but rather sought to protect Catholics from the poisoning of the "wellspring of the Polish spirit with the seeds of crime". This was how he perceived his duty.

During the Nazi occupation, he fulfilled his duty in the same manner. He felt the weight of responsibility for the Church and considered survival to be of the utmost importance.

"Due to the war, conditions have become so difficult, that despair could overtake us. This should not happen, as despair is the worst advisor and could only increase our troubles. [...] Let us attend our services more diligently and devoutly than ever before. [...] Let us deepen our family life, sanctifying it with daily, preferably communal, prayer. We should take special care of our children and young people. As long as schools are open, let us send our children to learn, especially religious education. [...] Let us return to our workplaces, both in the countryside and in the cities, in order to provide for ourselves and our neighbours with the necessary means of sustenance. Let us help one another, as our Divine Saviour commands us. Let us support one another, not only with almsgiving, but also through our labour."
(Pastoral Letter - Pastoral Care in Wartime Conditions, Częstochowa, 2nd October 1939.)

Survival did not mean being passive. In other proclamations, he called for sacrifice, for helping the poor and the wronged. He worked together with the Rada Opiekuńcza (Welfare Council), organising aid centres supported by church institutions. This generosity was most effective when organising help for Warsaw Uprising refugees. The call to help others did not only relate to self-help within the Catholic community.

Unable to speak about it publicly, Bishop Kubina discretely encouraged and supported efforts to save the Jewish population. Attempts were made to save Jewish children by sheltering them in orphanages run by nuns – this was how Rabbi Asz's granddaughter was saved. Parish priests were involved in producing "false" birth certificates for those in hiding. Father T. Popczyk, from St. Barbara's Parish, paid for this with his life. For helping children from the ghetto, the elderly Father Bolesław Wróblewski was beaten unconscious by the Germans – his sister died from the beatings.

The burden of responsibility for Church had a tangible cost. Of the 260 priests serving in the Częstochowa Diocese, over ninety became victims of Nazi oppression. Nearly eighty were sent to concentration camps, of whom only twenty-nine returned. Such was the price for setting an example for the faithful of how a Catholic should behave in the face of terror.

However, Bishop Kubina's greatest fame did not come from his actions against German terror. It came from the words which he spoke after the war, in a different atmosphere of fear. The Church had survived and, amid the ruins, in conditions dictated by the communist authorities, it resumed its mission of shaping people.

The war brought about immense moral degradation. The destruction of humanity resulted in a series of misfortunes, including the tragedy of the pogrom and murder of Jews, Holocaust survivors, in Kielce. The reaction of the Bishop of Częstochowa, to This event, was immediate, decisive and aligned with his values of his faith. Together with the local authorities, the city's mayor, the county starost and the chairmen of the local and county national councils, he issued an appeal to the residents:

"A crime of mass murder was committed, in Kielce, against Jews, who were Polish citizens Thirty-two Jews and two Poles, who survived the hell of the German occupation, who witnessed the deaths and suffering of their loved one, not without the help of Polish Christian society, were murdered.

"The moral and actual perpetrators of this murder trampled on human dignity and committed a terrible violation of the Christian commandment to love one's neighbour and the universal principle – "Thou shalt not kill". Nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies the crimes of Kielce, which deserves the wrath of both God and man. The background and causes of This crime lie in criminal fanaticism and unjustifiable ignorance.

"The fanaticism of some, using false notions, from the Middle Ages, for criminal purposes, foreign to the beliefs of the Christian community and the principles of harmonious coexistence amongst all the country's citizens, regardless of nationality or faith, conceived this crime and exploited the ignorance of others in order to carry it out. Both groups

deserve to be unconditionally condemned as criminals under God's law and the law of man. While leaving the first group to be dealt with by the justice system, we lament for the second, for they allowed themselves to be provoked into a crime which disturbed our national coexistence and tarnished the good name of Poles abroad.

"The Kielce crime has been unequivocally condemned by all those whose hearts beat with the love of neighbour, with attachment to the steadfast beliefs and customs of our forefathers, and with pure human decency. Despite this, we have found that, even here in Częstochowa, there are a few individuals, fortunately very few, who, as in Kielce, try to do everything to push the ignorance of the streets and homes toward the type of crime that Kielce witnessed with horror. Therefore, as a representative of Częstochowa society, trusting in this society and firmly believing in its human conscience and the Christian and moral principles it holds, we declare and appeal:

"All claims about the existence of ritual murders are lies. No one from the Christian community, whether in Kielce, Częstochowa or elsewhere in Poland, has been harmed by Jews for religious or ritual purposes. Not a single case is known of the kidnapping, by Jews, of a Christian child. All the information and versions spread in this matter are conscious fabrications of criminals or the delusions of misled individuals, aiming to provoke criminal acts. Criminals and the deluded deserve either a just trial or compassionate pity, but never society's attention.

"Therefore, we appeal to all citizens of the city and country of Częstochowa, without exception, especially to all people of goodwill, not to pay attention to criminal versions and rumours. These versions and rumours should be verified at their sources, corrected within the closest community and all efforts should be made to prevent any kinds of excesses against the civilian population.

"We believe that the civilly-minded and morally Christian community of Częstochowa will not listen to criminal whispers and will not stain itself by raising a hand against a fellow citizen, simply because they are of a different faith and nationality." (*Appeal dated 7th July 1946, published in "Głos Narodu" No. 159, 9th July 1946.*)

Every word, in that text, was significant. The content revealed who the authors were – representatives of the communist authorities signed under the bishop's words. While coordinating the text of this joint appeal, Bishop Kubina arranged a meeting with representatives of various institutions and associations, people connected with the Church, including the editor of *Niedziela*, and the city's mayor, Jan T. Wolański. At this meeting, on 8th July 1946, a declaration was made expressing a readiness to create an organisation similar to the League to Fight Against Racism. They offered to mobilise all available forces to prevent incidents and crimes like those that had occurred in Kielce. A public appeal was issued, also signed by the bishop, which read:

“The Kielce murder is not the first act by individuals, whose consciences are burdened with a chain of crimes committed against their fellow citizens. It is the culmination of these crimes and exhausts society's patience. The Polish nation, feeling responsible for the fate of the country, stands firmly on the side of respect for human dignity and the right to life. The Polish nation has never wanted, and does not want, the murder of its fellow citizens. It cannot remain indifferent to the crime committed in Kielce. [...]

“With this understanding, we, the representatives of all social classes of the city of Częstochowa and the country of Częstochowa, respectfully acknowledging the issue of an appeal by the highest ecclesiastical dignitary of our diocese and the representatives of the authorities, call upon society, not only to condemn the moral and actual perpetrators of the Kielce crime, but also to oppose, by all available means, any attempts to incite disturbances and excesses.

“We call upon society to resist the actions of those whose vile goal is to provide the deluded and the uninformed into crime and to spread lies that can lead to or result in crimes.” (*The text of an appeal which was posted on the streets of the city on 9th July 1946 and published in “Głos Narodu”, No. 160 on 10th July 1946.*)

However, similarly strong voices were lacking in other cities. The joint appeal by the province *wojewoda* [similar to governor] and by the Bishop of Kielce condemned the political perpetrators, but did not specify who was murdered nor why. Kielce Bishop Kaczmarek's appeal did not condemn antisemitism either, using vague phrases such as “a series of unfortunate events”, “sad

occurrences” and “tragic and pitiful incidents”. A clear denunciation of antisemitism was also lacking in the statement by the Primate of Poland, Archbishop Hlond.

The resolutions adopted by the National Councils and the “spontaneous” workers’ assemblies had a political character. In the Częstochowa County National Council’s resolutions, it was stated that

“enemies of democracy, the countryside and the peasantry are sowing unrest and confusion in the country. [...] It is they who, for their own vile purposes, have created the fairy tales for the blinded and deceived by reactionary propaganda, that Jews murder Polish children, to create disorder and chaos in the country.”

In the propaganda of the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR), the “reaction” was blamed for the pogrom, suggesting that it was revenge for the support, given to the Democratic Front, in the 1946 referendum. Some statements, issued by the “anti-communist underground”. Also linked the Kielce massacre to this provocation, which was seen as covering up the falsified referendum results. Regarding Częstochowa, this theory had some basis. In July 1946, there were at least three attempts to provoke disturbances through rumours of ritual murders. It is possible that the immediate and decisive stance taken by Bishop Kubina saved the city from tragedy.

Bishop Kubina’s intentions were well understood by the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Dr. Izaak Herzog who, at the time, was in the Holy Land at the time. In a telegram sent to the Częstochowa Curia, he wrote:

“Regarding His Excellency’s humanitarian and courageous statement, following the Kielce events, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks and blessings. [...] I wish to assure His Excellency that the Jewish people will remember the bishop who, in difficult times for the remnants of Polish Jewry, has demonstrated that he is one of those who fulfills the great commandment of God: ‘Love thy neighbour’.”

The reaction from the Polish Episcopate, however, was much cooler. In a statement, issued after a conference in September 1946, it was noted that:

“One of the bishops participated in the issuing of these appeals, the contents and intentions of which are deemed unacceptable based on the intellectual and canonical principles of the Catholic Church”.

The reserve expressed by the Episcopate probably stemmed from the fact that the appeal was jointly signed with the communist authorities. Yet, a similar joint appeal had been issued by Bishop Kaczmarek, together with Kielce *Wojewoda* [Governor] Wiśnicz–Iwańczuk.

However, it is difficult to accept that the words “Thou shalt not kill” and the rejection of ritual murders committed by Jews would deviate from the “intellectual and canonical principles of the Catholic Church”.

The appeal, regarding the antisemitic events in Kielce, regardless of how it was received by Church authorities, served as a timeless catechism imparted by the Pastor to the faithful. Just as in 1937, the bishop was not defending the Jews *per se*, he was defending Catholics from the corruption of their faith through hatred, from the misfortunes that result from poisoning the “fountain of the Polish spirit” with the seeds of crime. Although I am not a Catholic, I hope that such words are taught in religious education classes.

Thanks to Bishop Kubina and the century-long existence of the Częstochowa Diocese, my city has become better than it once was. It is a place inhabited by good people.