

## ■ 1965: A letter of Polish Bishops to their German counterparts

December 10, 1965 marked the launch of the largest anti-church propaganda campaign in the history of the People's Republic of Poland. The campaign was targeted at the authors of an unusual religious and moral document that, out of necessity, was also political. Drawn up two decades after the end of World War II and made famous by its reference to forgiveness, the letter of Polish bishops to their German counterparts was perhaps the most consequential and boldest initiative aimed at reconciling the two nations. Published in late November and early December 1965, it was strongly condemned by Poland's communist authorities. The letter was also widely decried by Polish clergy and by the majority of the Polish public. To make things worse, the response of the German bishops was unanimously received as disappointing, to say the least. Primate Stefan Wyszyński, who became the target of party and government propaganda, was particularly crestfallen.

For Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of Poland, in addition to its religious connotations, the decade-long celebration of the millennial anniversary of Poland's adoption of Christianity, which began in 1956 and, in particular, the celebration of the Jasna Góra Vows taken by the Polish Nation on August 26 of that year, was a way to challenge the communist regime. That alone was sufficient to provoke a confrontation between the Polish Episcopate and the state authorities. All along, the government criticized the commemoration of Sacrum Poloniae Millennium. Unexpectedly however, a new row arose over differences in the way the two parties saw the past and the future of Polish-German relations. Things were further aggravated by a personal conflict between the Primate and Władysław Gomułka, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, which had been escalating for years.

The failure by successive Bonn governments to recognize the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers stood in the way of Poland and Germany establishing official diplomatic ties. Despite that, both countries maintained permanent trade representations and informal relations. Ever since 1958, political talks in Germany had been conducted by Catholic Member of Parliament Stanisław Stomma (with the acknowledgement of the Polish government) as well as Mieczysław F. Rakowski, Editor in Chief of the popular party weekly *Polityka* with connections to German social democratic party leaders. In the early 1960s, West Germany's Christian community first reached out to Poland in a gesture of reconciliation. However, the Christians behind the push were German Evangelicals and Social Democrats rather than Catholics or Christian Democrats. On October 1, 1965, the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) published a memorandum entitled "The Condition of the Expelled Germans and the Relationship of the German People to its Eastern Neighbors". The document was critical of claims that Germans were entitled to return to their "homeland" and stressed that such a return would be detrimental to the



young generation of Poles who were born and raised in the territories annexed to Poland in 1945.

During the final fourth session of the Second Vatican Council (Vaticanum Secundum) in November 1965, Polish bishops penned dozens of letters concerning the Millennial Anniversary, addressed mainly to the episcopates of various countries. The letters announced the upcoming celebration of the millennial anniversary of Poland's adoption of Christianity, requested that the event be kept in memory and prayers and invited the addressees to attend. A prominent example of such letters was "The pastoral letter of the Polish bishops to their German brothers in Christ" submitted to the German bishops on November 18, 1965. The letter of Polish bishops revolutionized views on the history of Polish-German relations and ended with a call for mutual forgiveness for past wrongs.

The originator and actual author of the letter (which was signed by 36 bishops) was Archbishop Bolesław Kominek of Wrocław. Having grown up in the Polish-German borderland in the Silesia Region, he was perfectly bilingual. The Archbishop was the first apostolic administrator of Opole Silesia (1945-1951) (the Vatican did not yet recognize the finality of Poland's western border), which gave him intimate knowledge of the challenges that plagued Polish-German relations. He had extensive connections with German bishops. He was ready to attempt to break the taboo and seek a way to end the strife between the two nations. He had written and talked about the need for dialogue between them and managed to persuade Primate Wyszyński to make a significant gesture towards the German bishops and embark on a path towards reconciliation.

Archbishop Kominek began writing the letter in October 1965. He worked on it in a house run by the Elizabethan Sisters in Fiuggi, Italy, and wrote it in German. A few other bishops made minor insertions, deletions and changes to the text. The draft was then consulted with the German bishops at large to whom it was sent on October 27 with a note that said: "We have written this letter not only for the German nation but also for ours. None of the historical facts to which it refers have been falsified. We believe that a great opportunity has arisen to turn around the current state of affairs. (...) We implore you not to dismiss this mutual opportunity".

The letter portrayed the history of Polish-German relations very differently from the predominant narrative seen in Polish schools and in party and government propaganda. It brought up not only the past wrongs suffered by Poles at the hands of the Germans, and especially the atrocities that the Germans committed in 1939-1945, but also the plight of the millions of Germans displaced post 1945. Next to the painful and tragic events of the past, references were made to the benefits derived from good neighborliness in various periods, especially the Middle Ages. Much emphasis was placed on the role of the Church and on Poland being an integral part of Western culture. Contrary to the view that prevailed in communist Poland and which portrayed Poland as a victor of World War II, the letter described the country as one that emerged from the war "not as much a victor as an utterly depleted state". The letter called for dialogue and reconciliation between the Polish and German nations.



The final version of the letter was signed on November 18 and submitted to the German Episcopate. Its text was never shared with the government of the People's Republic of Poland.

The most compelling part of the letter was its closing paragraph: "In this most Christian but also human spirit, we reach out to you, sitting here on the benches of the Council, which is soon to be concluded, granting forgiveness and asking for forgiveness. And if you, the German bishops and Council Fathers, grasp our hands in a brotherly manner, we will be able to celebrate our Millenium with a clear conscience in a truly Christian spirit." In its amended and simplified version, the key part of the letter was reduced to "we forgive and ask for forgiveness". A key role in the matter was played by the PAP (the Polish Press Agency) and Trybuna Ludu correspondent in Rome, Ignacy Krasicki, who was allegedly tasked to act as an intermediary between Archbishop Kominek and the Polish government. The letter was to be accompanied by the article "Propozycje dialogu z Niemcami" ("Proposals for dialogue with Germany") by Archbishop Kominek, which was to appear in Tygodnik Powszechny and Przewodnik Katolicki. However, censors forbade its publication.

The German reply of December 5 in a letter entitled "Greetings from German bishops to Polish brothers in the episcopal mission and a reply to the letter of November 18, 1965" came as a major let-down. Stanisław Stomma recalled: "A letter written from the bottom of pastoral hearts, a voice of heroic morality with which Polish bishops had risked unpopularity and misunderstanding by their faithful, was answered with a laconic, polite, and correct but, in fact, evasive reply". Particularly noteworthy was the failure on the part of German bishops to recognize the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka and acknowledge Poles' claims to the Western and Northern Territories. The German bishops failed to show the same level of courage that was displayed by Polish hierarchs, who, after all, lived in an oppressive state.

It was only much later that the Polish public learned about the letter of Polish bishops. As late as early December, not even members of the Catholic club Znak in the Polish Parliament were familiar with the document. Meanwhile, partial and full reprints of the letter appeared in West German press as early as November 30. In Poland, the document was not published until late December, when it appeared in the Forum, a weekly with very limited circulation.

The response of the Polish government proved to be quite forceful. Gomułka took offense considering the affair a personal insult. He found it unthinkable for bishops to engage in a foreign policy debate to which the party and the government were said to have exclusive rights, and not to have consulted the text with either of them in any form. The authorities decided that the bishops overstepped their authority and encroached into a territory reserved for the Polish government. The letter was seen as coming very close to a betrayal of the Polish *raison d'état*. The call for forgiveness was condemned with particular harshness.

The propaganda attack was a massive campaign that began on December 10 with articles published in *Życie Warszawy* and *Słowo Powszechne*. Orchestrated by party leadership,



the campaign continued for months. Some of the confidential instructions suggested making it clear to Polish bishops that “to forgive German aggressors would be to insult the Polish people as there can be no forgiveness without absolute remorse, a promise to atone and proper amends.” The guidelines said further that “the unprecedented disregard for national dignity shown by the Polish bishops can only be explained by their desire to establish good relations with German revisionists with a view to winning them over as allies for their fight against communist Poland and its power system”. The Primate of Poland was decried with utmost severity. The letter was described as having been borne “out of Wyszyński’s anti-communist mindset.” Party activists and propagandists were instructed to say that “emerging from Wyszyński’s writings is a picture of a cardinal of the Counter-Reformation period, an anachronistic heir to the worst traditions of the Catholic thought, a clergyman transported into the 20th century straight from the times of the Holy Inquisition”. A further argument said that vis-à-vis Germany, “our nation stands fully united, as evidenced by the reaction of the Polish public to the letter with the voices of indignation coming from all sides, the believers and non-believers alike.”

In mid-December 1965, acting at the request of the writer Seweryna Szmaglewska, the Council for the Protection of Monuments to Fighting and Martyrdom issued the following statement: “The letter (...) violates the most vital interests of the Polish nation, undermines our historic rights to the Western and Northern Territories and tarnishes the memory of the 6 million Polish citizens who were brutally murdered. (...) We refuse to forgive nor will we ever forget”. At the 5th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party held on December 15, Władysław Gomułka denounced the letter as “a large-scale long-term political subversion” against the People’s Republic of Poland. Speaking about the Primate, the First Secretary said that “deep-down, he hates communism and although he is a religious fanatic, he is prepared to side with the devil if it helps him to fight communism”.

In places of employment, resolutions that strongly condemned the bishops were passed collectively. Government agents held thousands of talks with parish priests and administrators about the letter. The subject was also brought to the attention of dozens of bishops, among them Archbishop Karol Wojtyła. Prominent historians criticized the letter in the press, radio and television. Thousands of damning presentations were delivered. A proposal in Wrocław went as far as to ban Archbishop Kominek from entering the city. It should also be noted that many of the views spread by party and government propaganda fell on fertile ground as the general public was predominantly anti-German. On the other hand, the anti-communist sentiment shared by large portions of society and the loyalty of the faithful towards the Church had the effect of softening initial reactions.

The Episcopate leaders was astonished at the sheer ferociousness of the assault. In a special address of December 15, 1965 (read out four days later during Sunday services in churches across the nation), the points made in the letter were explained and partially renounced. Reconciliation was no longer defended while assurances were made that the Polish Episcopate had never questioned the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka. At a press conference on December 22, Archbishop Wojtyła assured he did not co-author the



letter. Cardinal Wyszyński, on the other hand, showed great determination in justifying it, deflecting the allegations of the authorities in several sermons, and even accusing them of weakening the state's authority internationally by championing the anti-church campaign regarding the letter. During a Holy Mass in the Gniezno Cathedral on January 1, 1966, the Primate said: "We consider such appeals to Catholic bishops from around the world to be our right and testimony to our freedom, a voice of free citizens addressed to free nations. We consider it our episcopal right to speak to other nations on matters of great importance to the Church in Poland. (...) We therefore refuse to comply with the order that silences Catholic bishops and prevents them from speaking out on domestic and national matters. Just as any other citizens, we are entitled to express ourselves (...) on matters that are pertinent to our homeland and nation".

An attempt to defend the bishops' position was made by the "Znak" Parliamentary Club during the December 13-14 session. The Club approached the matter rather bashfully though. The speech of Jerzy Zawieyski in the Parliament turned out to be feeble and unconvincing. It resembled strained maneuvering between the party/the state authorities and the Church. Primate Wyszyński took it very badly. Stanisław Stomma later admitted that his political sense failed him miserably in this matter. During an audience, the Primate had reasons to give MP Stomma, who opposed him on the issue, a cold shoulder if not an earful in a show of outrage.

According to sources, the position presented in the letter was widely considered to be unacceptable to the general population of Polish Catholics. A mere two decades after the war ended, many members of the clergy were also far from willing to endorse the views contained in the letter.

The party and government propaganda fell on fertile soil. Particular opposition arose over the request for German forgiveness made by the Polish hierarchs. The essayist Andrzej Kijowski wrote this in his daily journal: "The letter should have been drafted so it would not insult the nation. It should have said less about forgiving and more about the need to embrace 'the spirit of Christian love which balances the scales' (...)". It is only years later that one can appreciate the universal Christian message contained in this document. The Episcopate explained its stance to the faithful in a letter of February 10, 1966: "We feel that if only one Pole turned out to be unworthy, and if only one Pole in history committed an unworthy act, it would be reason enough for us to apologize".

Cardinal Wyszyński anticipated his possible re-internment. He also considered stepping down (which he mentioned at a meeting of the Episcopal General Commission on March 2, 1966). The authorities revoked the Primate's passport and prevented Pope Paul VI from attending the millennial anniversary celebrations in Poland. Gomułka himself restated his position at length, albeit less forcefully, in a speech on January 14, 1966. March saw letters exchanged between the Primate and the First Secretary (March 12 and 23), who again indignantly lashed out at the cardinal. The latter wrote in his diary that Gomułka's letter was "appalling, offensive, if not veritably unhinged".





An epilogue to the story came with two parallel millennial anniversary celebrations held by the church and the state in April 1966 in Gniezno and Poznań. The government made it difficult for the faithful to attend the church ceremony (by inspecting the roadworthiness of their cars with malicious meticulousness). In a speech delivered on April 17 in Poznań, Gomułka attacked Primate Wyszyński with particular viciousness: “This irresponsible shepherd of shepherds, who is fighting our people’s state and proclaims he will not bow to Poland’s *raison d’état*, places his illusory claims to spiritual authority over the Polish people before Poland’s independence.” Gomułka went on to accuse the cardinal of seeking to “drive a wedge between the Polish and Soviet nations and break up the Polish-Soviet alliance.” On June 26, party activists disturbed the millennial celebrations of the church in Warsaw sparking riots in the city center that would continue for hours. Soon, however, tensions eased. To this day, the letter remains a key and fascinating event in the history of Polish-German relations.

For years afterwards, Primate Wyszyński remained disheartened and embittered over the German bishops’ response. He declined repeated invitations to revisit West Germany (the next two heads of the German Episcopate visited Poland in 1973 and 1977). He was quoted as saying: “I will not go to Germany”. It was not until 1978 that he actually set foot in the Federal Republic. He was pleased with the visit.

In their joint statement marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and the 30th anniversary of the Letter, the Polish and German episcopates declared: “Our churches have paved the way for reconciliation and have significantly contributed to dismantling the wall of hostility that separated our nations as a result of the Second World War and its aftermath”. In the statement, the German bishops apologized for “the immeasurable wrongs that the criminal aggression of Nazi Germany and its consequences inflicted on Poles at the hands of Germans.” However, this was 1995 and a completely different world. Thirty years earlier, the words of Polish bishops had fallen on deaf ears and were either rejected or ignored in both Poland and Germany.

Written by Prof. dr hab. Stanisław Zerko

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