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# The Role of the Catholic Church in Polish Independence

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## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

### THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLISH INDEPENDENCE\*

WLADYSLAW SILA-NOWICKI\*\*

Thank you very kindly for those nice words about both my homeland and myself. I think that this meeting, which perhaps will enable us to take a look at my country and its history, will be very useful. One cannot understand a nation without knowing at least a little bit about its history. Similarly, one would not be able to understand the United States if one knew only its present and not its past. The introduction made by your colleague described certain crucial events in the history of Poland. One should emphasize that Poland, for several centuries, had been a powerful European empire, and, only recently, lost its independence as a result of certain historical coincidences. Consequently, no generation of Poles, has ever accepted the loss of independence or ceased in the fight to regain it.

World War I brought independence to several European nations, but Poland was the only one that, in the face of a threat to her independence, managed to maintain her freedom on her own. This was pri-

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\* This is the text of an address delivered at New York Law School in January, 1985. The *Journal* would like to thank Mr. Eugene Chmura of the Kosciuszko Foundation for his help in translating the text.

\*\* Wladyslaw Sila-Nowicki was born in Warsaw on January 22, 1913. The son of a judge, he graduated from Warsaw Law School in 1935. Before World War II, Mr. Sila-Nowicki worked in the Polish government in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education. When the war broke out, he became an officer in the Polish Army. Twice wounded during the German invasion of September, 1939, he fled with his family to Lithuania. In 1941, he returned to Poland by walking from Lithuania to Warsaw with his wife and small child, whereupon he joined the main resistance (Armia Krajowa) and participated in the "Warsaw uprising" against the Nazis in 1944. After the war, he became a member of a political party opposing the Communist Party, *Stronnictwo Pracy* (Labor Front), until he was arrested in 1947 for his political activity and sentenced to life imprisonment, barely escaping execution. He served nine years of his sentence. In 1956, he was considered fully rehabilitated, and, consequently, released. In 1959, Mr. Sila-Nowicki returned to the law as a defense attorney representing Cardinal Józef Wyszyński and Lech Wałęsa (Walesa). Today, he is a leading practitioner and legal advisor to the Solidarity movement.

marily accomplished by winning a war against the Soviet Union in 1920. Later, during World War II, although Poland was one of the most faithful allies in the Western alliance, that war did not result in the regaining of real independence. Despite the fact that Poland had, at least twice, played a decisive part in the course of the war, (namely, the campaign of September, 1939 and the Battle of Britain), at the moment of victory over German fascism, we were left alone by our Western allies; including, unfortunately, the United States. Today there are occasional declarations by leaders of the United States that the Yalta agreement called for free elections in Poland as one of its conditions. The reality of the situation was, however, that the Polish State, against the will of the vast majority of the people, was handed over by the Western countries to Russian domination. Since the Second World War, however it is nevertheless true that we have managed to gain a larger sphere of independence than any other nation of our political bloc. This achievement is due to a period of great suffering and effort by our nation.

Spiritual ties between Poland and the United States are very strong. Outstanding Polish leaders, like Kosciusko and Pulaski, participated in the struggle for the United States independence. After World War I, the United States gave Poland immense support for rebuilding itself and strengthening its independence. Even today, in various political difficulties, we look with hope toward the United States. We do this despite the disappointments we suffered after World War II. Your country is, without doubt, a hope for freedom and independence for the entire world. I want to express my opinion, however, that Poland with its particular position in the Eastern bloc also has great importance for the United States and for all people who are striving to broaden their freedom. I think that we need each other.

There is no doubt that in gaining our freedom, an immense role has been played by the Catholic Church. I would like to try to explain in a few words where the power of the Church comes from. You have been raised in the United States, and, therefore, the notion of religious tolerance is for you something which is taken for granted. The history of Europe, however, is much older than the history of the United States. One should not forget that the idea of religious tolerance was virtually unknown in most of Europe until recently.

The power of the Catholic Church in Poland has evolved out of the fact that for many, many centuries Poland accepted the principle of religious tolerance. For example, it was a Pole, Pawel Wlodkowic, who made a speech at the largest council in Konstanze, saying that nobody should be forced to profess a certain religion, and furthermore, that any such pressure is contradictory to the teachings of Jesus

Christ. At a time when the rest of Europe was split apart by bloody religious wars, Poland was a country of religious freedom. And as a result, people from many different countries took refuge in our country to escape religious persecution. Because nobody in Poland was forced to profess a particular religion, and because the principle "*Huius regio eius religio*" (the king's religion is ours) was never in force, the power of the Polish Church has grown to be immense.

This power was strengthened, while Poland was partitioned. During this time we did not enjoy national independence and as a result, many priests took an active part in the fight for independence. The power of the Church was further strengthened in the years between World Wars I and II. It increased even more during the cruel period of the Second World War, when Poland was occupied partially by the Germans and partially by the Russians. Neither the Church hierarchy nor the lower clergy ever collaborated with the Nazis.\*\* In the fight against the invaders, the Church played a significant role and in comparison to other social groups it suffered exceptionally high losses.

The difficult times which were to come after the Second World War started with the Russian-German alliance of 1939. We should recall the words spoken in October 1939 by the Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, Vyacheslav Molotov, who said: "Poland will never rise again. It is guaranteed by two great world powers, Germany and Russia." Molotov changed his mind during the course of World War II. Poland, was recreated in 1945 but, against the will of the majority of the people, it fell under Russian domination. In this connection, the situation of the Church in Poland was quite clear. In good times and hard times, the Church was strongly connected with the life and activities of the Polish nation. Poland, however, found itself not only in a secular system, but also in a system in which an ideological struggle against every religion was openly proclaimed. The main ideologue of the system, the outstanding statesman Vladimir Lenin, used to say, "Religion is the opium of the people." These words were never repudiated by Lenin.

The Polish state authorities, however, did understand the necessity of some form of cooperation with the Church. As a result of territorial losses in the east and territorial gains in the west, millions of people had to be moved to the territories previously inhabited by the Germans. This, of course, required the formation of a new church network. Because the Polish State had a strong interest in maintaining stability of the social order, the Polish authorities assisted in the Church's reorganization. Nevertheless, since the late 1940's, efforts to subordinate the Church to State authority have continued. Anyone who tries to analyze the situation in Poland must admit that this fact

is of utmost importance.

People of little faith maintained that it was impossible for the Church to remain independent from the state authorities, because no church has ever achieved independence from state authorities in the Eastern bloc. It was said that any assertion that an independent Church could be maintained in Poland was unrealistic, that it was a political daydream. Indeed, throughout the late 1940's and the early 1950's, there were visible efforts made by the Polish state authorities to subordinate the Church organization in Poland. The Church defended itself in a skillful way, taking advantage of its immense political experience, as well as the firm support of a majority of Poles. In 1953, a decree was passed in Poland that required state approval for all personnel changes within the Church. According to this decree, the appointment or removal of any Church official or the changing of Church offices required the approval of the official authorities. The church vigorously protested against this decree and, as a result, many priests were imprisoned, among them the head of the Polish Church, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, popularly known as the "Primate of a Thousand Years."

After the Stalinist period was over around 1956, there were internal changes both in the Soviet Union and in Poland. Cardinal Wyszynski resumed his office as Primate, the period of severe fighting against the Church passed and a period of some hope for understanding began. Serious problems remained, however, because the Church always supported freedom movements in Poland. For example, the Church supported the student movement in 1968 and the coast workers in 1970.

This is not to imply that relations between church and state have been in any way smooth, especially in the 1960's and 1970's. Friction with the State inevitably occurs, because the Church is so influential with workers, with intellectuals, and also with peasants, upon whom influence of the Church has always been very strong. These ties became even stronger during the creation and legal existence of Solidarity. In various difficult moments, the leaders of Solidarity have consulted Primate Wyszynski and the Church hierarchy and many times Solidarity has received political advice and support from the Church.

Solidarity was an extraordinarily popular movement and included millions of people in Poland. Although the surface structure of Solidarity has been crushed, the idea of Solidarity has survived in the hearts of millions of Poles. Undoubtedly, this will bear political fruit in the future. In Poland, we understand the necessity of an understanding between the society and the state authorities. But I always say openly, inside of and outside of Poland, that in order to reach true harmony, the ideas represented by Solidarity and the principle of the pluralism

of the labor union must be restored.

The Church was present at the creation of Solidarity. The Solidarity Congress in Gdansk was started with a mass celebrated in nearby Oliwa by Primate Glemp. And the Church did not abandon Solidarity, during the period of martial law when the official surface structures of Solidarity were being liquidated.

I was a defense lawyer at a trial of the Solidarity chapter in Szczecin. During the trial, I saw the Primate arrive suddenly with some other bishops. Poland is a peculiar country and when the Primate entered everybody stood up—not only the defendants and audience, but also the policemen. When the court announced recess and the Primate was greeting everybody, two of the policemen kissed his ring.

Although there are many problems and the relations between the State and the Church are not ideal, these relations have never been as good as they are now. Many recently nominated bishops, were unopposed by state authorities. It is also much easier to build new churches today than at any time during the last forty years. And even though there are no religion classes in Polish schools right now, the Church has managed to establish a huge network of religion classes outside the public schools and the vast majority of students in Poland take advantage of this training.

Although all of today's problems have not been eliminated and we can expect more problems in the future, the very existence of an independent Church, an institution unique in the Eastern Bloc, must be recognized as a political victory for the Polish people. It seems that the state authorities understand that it is better for them to look for an agreement with the Church than to fiercely fight against it.

