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Palm Sunday Ceremonies in Poland: The Past and the Present

Teresa Bela

Professor Hans-Jürgen Diller's note about the *Palmesel* from the Cracow region, published in the *EDAM Newsletter* in 1989,¹ drew attention to the secular customs observed on Palm Sunday until the last decades of the eighteenth century and to their later forms in this part of Poland. It is obvious that those customs had their roots in religious ceremonies for which such objects as the *Palmesel* had been specifically made. The principal characteristics of the drama of the medieval Church, including the ceremonies for Palm Sunday, have been treated by Karl Young and other scholars.² Nevertheless, a brief description of such dramatized ceremonies for Palm Sunday as they were observed in medieval Poland and connected with the liturgy for this day may prompt further discussion about national differences in the form and presentation of such apparently widespread practices.

Palm Sunday ceremonies belong to the so-called "liturgical dramatizations," distinguished from liturgical drama proper since they are not based on dialogue but on monologue and are aimed at illustrating by means of gesture, costume, or "props" some event from the scriptures to which allusion occurs in the liturgy. One such prop is, naturally, the Palm Sunday donkey carrying a wooden statue of Christ. Polish editors of the dramatic liturgical texts insist on the difference between the two categories—dialogue drama, on the one hand, and, on the other, liturgical dramatizations—and point out that to date only one type of fully developed dialogue drama, so prevalent elsewhere in Europe, has been found in Poland: the *Visitatio*

¹ Hans-Jürgen Diller, "A *Palmesel* from the Cracow Region," *EDAM Newsletter* 11 (1988–89): 27–30.

² See especially Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, 1:90–99. A *Palmesel* from Steinen, Switzerland, is illustrated in *ibid.*, pl. 2, facing 94.

sepulchri. Although crib decorations and Nativity performances were known in Poland in the fourteenth century, no dramatizations of Christmas liturgy have been traced to such an early date. All liturgical dramatizations extant in Poland are connected with Passion Week, all are centos—i.e., skillfully juxtaposed quotations from various liturgical texts—and all were sung. They were in fact a continuation and supplementation of the obligatory liturgy, occupying a precise day in the liturgical year and a precise place in the Church ritual.³ Large audiences watched liturgical presentations in Poland only during Passion Week, but they saw them every year. These ceremonies, sung in Latin by the clergy and expressing a natural human need to supplement the usual ritual and the ordinary religious experience with art, became very popular in the Middle Ages. The liturgical dramatizations developed individual characteristics within particular Polish dioceses or even within parishes, and flourished until the end of the sixteenth century when on the authority of the Council of Trent liturgical books were made uniform, purged of local additions, and reduced with regard to the amount of prescribed gesture.

Being extremely popular, the Palm Sunday procession (*processio in ramis palmarum*) is the best documented of all liturgical dramatizations in Poland. Approximately fifty records of the ceremony are known to exist in missals and antiphonals of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the earliest description of the procession being found in an antiphony, Cracow

³ I have drawn on the following sources for information about liturgical dramatizations in Poland: *Dramaty staropolskie* [*Old Polish Dramas*], ed. Julian Lewanski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1959), vol. 1; Zenon Modzelewski, “Estetyka średniowiecznego dramatu liturgicznego” [“The Aesthetics of the Medieval Liturgical Drama”], *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 1, no. 1 (Catholic University of Lublin, 1964); Julian Lewanski, *Dramat i teatr średniowieczny i renesansowy w Polsce* [*Drama and Theatre of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Poland*] (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1981); and Piotr Towarek, “Średniowieczny dramat liturgiczny i jego oddziaływanie na współczesną liturgię Kościoła” [Medieval Liturgical drama and Its Influence upon the Present-Day Church Liturgy], *Studia Elbląskie* 9 (2008): 101–11.

Chapter Library MS. 88, fol. 18.

The procession involved crowds of lay people as the participating audience, and probably for this reason it surpassed in popularity other liturgical performances of Passion Week—*Cena Domini* on Holy Thursday, the *Depositio crucis* on Good Friday, or even the *Elevatio crucis* on Easter Sunday—which were more limited in scope and less spectacular in character. The procession commemorating Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem five days before his death was observed in all Polish dioceses every year from the first half of the thirteenth century until the middle of the sixteenth century. The texts of the Palm Sunday procession vary regionally, but it is possible to point out some similarities and influences between different regions. For instance, the rituals described in the oldest manuscript from Cracow (cited above) bear close resemblance to those recorded in Wrocław in 1300 (strong connections between Silesia and Cracow are evident until the end of the fifteenth century) and are also copied in Kielce.

On the basis of extant texts it is possible to distinguish seven types of the procession, depending on the route covered, the place of welcome (inside or outside the church), and the direction followed since later forms of the procession shorten the route and depart from the topographical realism characteristic of the earlier types. To date the most detailed commentary on the procession in Poland is found in the fifteenth-century Kielce Missal. It is this text that mentions the figure of Christ on the ass as central to the entire procession. Other texts refer to the crucifix carried by the celebrant, a practice that seems to have been more common in the northern and central dioceses in Poland, while the figure of Christ on the donkey was preferred in the southern regions of the country, that is, Little Poland and Silesia. Carrying a Host or a Gospel Book on a *portatorium*, common in England, Italy, and France, was not observed in Poland on Palm Sunday. It seems therefore that the tradition of the *Palmesel* had come to Poland

from Germany by way of Lower Silesia (Wrocław), which, although given to German princes by King Casimir the Great in the fourteenth century, remained within a Polish diocese until the end of the fifteenth century. Hence this region retained close contacts with the capital, Cracow, and the entire southern part of the country, which constituted the main part of Little Poland. The two Silesian *Palmesels* from the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Wrocław and the Church of St. Nicholas in Brzeg, lost in World War II, showed stylistic features characteristic of the Veit Stoss school, present also in two extant Polish figures of Christ riding on the ass: the impressive *Palmesel* from Szydłowiec (c.1500), now in the National Museum in Cracow, and a slightly later figure of Christ on an ass, now in the cloister of St. Claire's Convent in Stary Sącz, approximately 100 kilometers east of Cracow.⁴

Texts of the Palm Sunday procession concentrate around three topics, all of them theatrically elaborated by means of gesture: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the enthusiastic greeting of Jesus by the people present, and the prophecies of the Passion and the future dispersion of the disciples. The most active participants in the procession were young men or boys—young priests or clerics—impersonating *pueri hebraeorum*. They threw flowers, spread garments on the ground in front of the *Palmesel* or the celebrant carrying the crucifix, and climbed to a higher place, analogous to Zaccheus climbing a tree (Luke 19:1–10), to sing a hymn of welcome, traditionally *Osanna filio David*. The incorporation of prophecies appears only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when texts added Jesus' prophetic words predicting his death and the effect of this upon the apostles: “I will kill the shepherd and scatter the sheep”

⁴ Małgorzata Dyga-Stobiecka, “Rzeźba Chrystusa na osiołku z Szydłowca w Muzeum Narodowym w Krakowie” [“The Sculpture of Christ on the Donkey from Szydłowiec in the National Museum in Cracow”], unpublished M.A. Thesis, Institute of Art, Jagiellonian University of Cracow (1973).

(Mark 14:27–28). This was usually illustrated theatrically by a priest hitting the figure of Christ on the donkey or touching the crucifix with a palm. Another variation introduced by some texts exploited the theatrical potential of the scene by introducing two priests, one of them lying in front of the crucifix and adoring it, the other one hitting him with the palm and pronouncing the words of the prophecy. The priest impersonating the stricken shepherd would rise and categorically reply to the negative prophesying by denying the annihilation of the shepherd and the new religion. Some texts of the *Processio in ramis palmarum* from the sixteenth century instruct the priest to lie *on* the cross, thus intensifying the analogy between “actor” and Jesus. Such instructions are found, for instance, in the text from Wrocław (c.1500), a diocese which, along with Cracow and Kielce, had employed a *Palmesel* for the procession. There is, then, some ground for supposing that the preference for the figure of Christ on the donkey might have gone together with more realistic tendencies in liturgical dramatizations of the procession in Silesia and certain locations in Little Poland.

At some time in the first half of the sixteenth century Latin antiphons of the Palm Sunday procession began to be followed by free Polish translations and paraphrases or verses closely corresponding to the Church rituals, *intermedia*, *declamationes*, or “dialogues,” sometimes performed during the procession. The texts of such Polish mini-plays, never earlier than the sixteenth century and always written under Latin titles, show dramatic additions not connected with Christ’s entry into Jerusalem—e.g., the cleansing of the temple (John 2:13–25) or the plotting of the Pharisees—growing in theatrical importance.⁵

⁵ *Declamationes pro Dominica Palmarum*, Ossolineum, MS. 198 (seventeenth century); *Intermedium pro Dominica Palmarum in processionem debet fieri* (sixteenth century); and *Dialogus de Passione Domini Nostri pro Dominica Palmarum* (sixteenth century) in Ossolineum MS. 6709.

After the Palm Sunday liturgy had been purged of liturgical dramatizations and vernacular embellishments in the post-Tridentine reform that was completed in Poland by the end of the sixteenth century, it became a custom to organize processions or gatherings outside the church on Palm Sunday. In Cracow and its vicinity this practice gradually turned into a secular performance with the wooden ass as its central prop and accompanied by facetious verses made up by students or schoolboys, who replaced the persons who earlier represented the *pueri hebraeorum*. Desiring popularity and reward from the crowd, the performers turned toward pure entertainment, and the occasion soon lost any seriousness of purpose. It was these customs that were finally suppressed by the Episcopal Curia in Cracow in 1780, but in a very modest form they have survived in the vicinity of Cracow until the present time.

Another direction in the development of the Palm Sunday liturgical dramatizations was toward paraliturgical spectacles performed in Polish, with the clergy taking part in them or at least sponsoring them. Thus the Palm Sunday procession, along with other liturgical dramatizations of Passion Week, made up what actually became a Passion *mysterium* performed annually from the beginning of the seventeenth century until present times in a few locations, especially in the shrines that were built on a hill in imitation of the Way of the Cross in Jerusalem—that is, the hill of Calvary. Known in Europe since the fifteenth century, such shrines became popular in Poland in the seventeenth century. The oldest and best known of them all is Kalwaria Zebrzydowska (ca. 35 km. south of Cracow), a place of frequent pilgrimages and of most impressive Passion Week performances organized every year. Now, as was the case over four hundred years ago, the audience participates in the dramatization together with the principal actors to achieve a unique blend of religious and aesthetic experience among those present.⁶

⁶ Cf. Hieronim Wyczawski, *Dzieje Kalwarii Zebrzydowskiej* [*The History of Kalwaria*

The Palm Sunday procession in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska is a realistic spectacle. It includes all the important elements of the sixteenth-century dramatization, including the cleansing of the temple, and takes up considerable time and space. In present-day performances live actors take on the roles so that Christ and the ass are represented by an actual man and a donkey, whereas in the past a wooden figure of Christ on a wooden donkey would have been used. Nevertheless, an image rather than an actor is still used for the scenes of the beating of Christ and the Crucifixion in the later parts of the *misterium*.⁷

The Passion Week mystery cycle has survived in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska and in one or two other places in Poland, but the tradition of the liturgical (or paraliturgical) Palm Sunday procession has been kept alive in many other locations, especially in southern Poland in the Beskidy Mountains. In 1968 in the parish of Tokarnia, for instance, a folk sculptor, Jozef Wrona, made a figure of Christ on a donkey, which is a copy of the original medieval *Palmesel* of Szydłowiec, now in the National Museum in Cracow (fig. 1). Since that time the *Palmesel* has appeared at the head of the annual procession in Tokarnia (fig. 2). The donkey is placed on the platform on wheels which is followed by the celebrant who is assisted by other priests and participants carrying palms, most often decorated with banners. The palms from Tokarnia, and from the Beskidy region in general, are widely known in Poland as the finest specimens of the traditional Palm Sunday decorations, reaching the height even of several meters.⁸

Zebrzydowska] (Kraków: Prow. OO Bernardynów, 1947); Tomasz Dziubecki, *Ikonografia Męki Chrystusa w nowożytnym malarstwie kościelnym w Polsce* [*The Iconography of Christ's Passion in modern church paintings in Poland*] (Warszawa: Neriton 1996).

⁷ For impressive photographs of the scenes from the Passion Week dramatizations in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska and Cracow, see Adam Bujak, *Misteria Polskie* [*Polish Misteria*] (Warszawa: Sport i Turystyka, 1989).

⁸ Dyga-Stobiecka, "Rzeźba Chrystusa na osiołku z Szydłowca," fn 99.



Fig. 1 Psalmesel (Christ on a donkey), from Szydłowiec.
Wood carving, c. 1500. National Museum, Cracow.



Fig. 2. Tokarnia Palmesel, based on the example in the National Museum, Cracow,
by J. Wrona (1968).
The Palmesel, here in procession, is being greeted with “palms,” which are draped with banners.

Since the 1990s there have been many instances of renewed interest in medieval religious traditions connected with Passion Week in various places in Poland. Most parishes in the southern region of the country prepare their own dramatizations of the story of Christ's suffering and death that are staged in the churches during the last weeks of Lent. The amateur actors are usually either young clerics or students and even school children willing to take part in such activities, which also provide an opportunity for raising money for charities. In many parishes in Poland there are also competitions for the highest and the most splendid palms, which are blessed in churches on the Sunday before Easter. The "producers" of such spectacular home-made palms get prizes from the parish community, and the whole occasion is usually celebrated as the last joyful moment at the beginning of Passion Week.

Since 2004 the town council of Szydłowiec, the location associated with the oldest and most famous Polish *Palmesel* that is extant, has organized annual celebrations on Palm Sunday in the Main Square which combine secular and religious elements. The main item on the program is a procession from the town center to the parish church, with the figure of Christ on the donkey which is, like the figure in Tokarnia, a modern copy of the medieval *Palmesel* in the National Museum in Cracow (fig. 2). The copy, made by the folk artist Jerzy Krześniak in 2005, reminds the citizens of Szydłowiec of their town's important contribution to the history of the Palm Sunday ceremonies.⁹ It can be thus said that undoubtedly both the Palm Sunday processions in Tokarnia and in Szydłowiec testify to a survival of the most popular of the medieval liturgical dramatizations and also to an extraordinary reanimation of the old *Palmesel* that was constructed five hundred years ago for the processions on this Church festival in the Church of St. Sigismund in Szydłowiec.

⁹ www.domnaskale.net.pl/artykul/x-niedziela-palmowa-w-szydowcu/ Accessed on 3 Nov. 2013.

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