

The Missionaries in Poland (1651-1697)

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In the 17th century, the Polish Republic was at the crossroads of a serious internal and external crisis. The Jagellon Period (1385-1572) had established the Polish-Lithuanian country as a powerful nation. Geographically, it was the third largest in Europe at 900,000 km. In later years, the Polish Republic would struggle to maintain this position because of wars with Sweden, Turkey, and the Cossacks. On the Russian border were the Ottoman and Crimean khanate; at the east were principal waterways for commerce; and at the north, Sweden expanded because of access to the Baltic Sea. The 1648 revolt in the Ukraine also created serious consequences; it became a battle of the entire Ukrainian nation rebelling over Polish domination. In 1654, at the command of Czar Alexis Michailovictch, the Russian army invaded territories in the Polish Republic, killing half the Polish and Lithuanian population of some villages.

Shortly afterward, a new enemy appeared in Swedish King Charles Gustave X, who started a destructive war lasting from 1655-1660. Although this conflict ended with the treaty of Oliwa, there were losses of territory in the north and the east, which resulted in the partition of the Ukraine between the Polish Republic and Russia. Soon after, Poland was forced to make more concessions to Russia. In 1667, a truce was signed at Ardrusssovo, whereby Poland ceded Kiev and the vast territories of the Ukraine to Russia. In addition, the Turkish invasion in 1672 brought more territorial losses from Poland to the Ottoman Empire. It was not until 1699 that Poland was able to re-conquer part of the Ukraine. The 17th Century brought further instability to the Polish Republic which would hasten its eventual collapse late in the 18th Century.

For the Polish Church, this epoch was characterized by the reinforcement of its authority in implementing the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Established religious orders and new communities helped augment these reforms through pastoral work, missions, retreats, and other creative activities that brought renewal to the Church in Poland. Among religious communities, the Jesuits occupied a prominent place in Poland. In 1564, they ran a dozen

secondary schools; by the mid 17th century, they had founded 28 new schools. In addition, new orders such as the Discalced Carmelites in 1605, the Hospitallers in 1609, the Reformed in 1622, the Piarists in 1642, the Congregation of the Mission in 1651, (who became known in Poland simply as “The Missionaries”), the Theatines in 1664, and the Oratorians in 1668; all these “new communities” helped to strengthen Poland’s Catholic heritage. In addition to pastoral and charitable works, a major domain for the renewal of the Church was in the formation of the diocesan clergy which occurred mainly through the establishment of seminaries. Religious communities who undertook this work included the confreres, the Jesuits, and the Bartholomites. Religious communities founded in Poland also appeared, including the Marianists in 1673, the Bartholomites in 1683, and the Trinitarians in 1685. Women’s religious orders and congregations were also engaged in many educational and charitable works, most notably the Discalced Carmelites in 1612, the Catherines in 1571, and the Daughters of Charity in 1652.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE MISSIONARIES IN POLAND AND THEIR FIRST APOSTOLATE (1651-1660)

The first Missionaries arrived in Poland in November 1651, thanks to the petition of Queen Marie-Louise de Gonzaga, the wife of King John Casimir. The Queen knew St. Vincent personally and was familiar with the works of the Congregation of the Mission. As in France at this time, it was necessary for Poland to develop works of charity in the face of poverty, famine, epidemics, and wars that were ruining the country. It was also necessary to form the diocesan clergy. In the letter announcing the departure of the first group of confreres, St. Vincent wrote to the Queen: “Finally, here are the missionaries who prostrate themselves at your Majesty’s feet to offer you their humble services. They are no more than three or four, even though it was planned to send eight or nine. We think that, for the start, they would suffice. They do not speak the language of the country, but because they know Latin, they could at once occupy themselves with the education of the young seminarians, inculcating on them piety and virtues to practice, all the other usages which they should know and practice” (Letter of September 6, 1651).

Included in the first group were Fr. Lambert aux Couteaux (superior), Fr. Wilhelm Desdames, sub-deacon Nicolas Guillot, the cleric Casimir Zelazowski and Brother Jacob Posny. They lived in a small house offered by Queen Marie-Louise, located in Warsaw (on the lot belonging to the parish of the Holy Cross). St. Vincent wanted them to occupy themselves with seminary formation when they arrived, but his desire

did not come to pass for several years. In 1652, the Queen offered the missionaries the parish of Sokółka near Białystok, and in December 1653, she also succeeded in giving them the parish of the Holy Cross at Warsaw. Fr. Jean Zeydlic, then the parish priest of Holy Cross, gave the parish to the Congregation. Bishop Casimir Florian Czartoryski, Bishop of Posnan, has approved the right to patronage given to the Superior of the Congregation. Queen Marie-Louise financed these works by giving the confreres income from a small plot of land near the Palace of the King, and revenue from their gardens, brewery, and an inn in the village of Skuły.

At first, the confreres sent to Poland did not know Polish (except for cleric Zelazowski) and therefore could not engage in many activities linked to their mission. Thus, they developed a pastoral activity for French nationals who lived in Warsaw. They also assisted the Sisters of Mercy in their first foundations when they came to Poland in 1652. They also assisted the Sisters of Mercy in charitable activities in Cracow during the time of the epidemics. Shortly afterward, the confreres suffered their first losses in January 1653, when their first superior Father Lambert died at Sokółka. He had set an example by his service in aiding the sick and the poor, and in doing so, he became a victim of the epidemic. Despite this major loss, in 1654, the confreres gave their first popular missions at Holy Cross parish at Warsaw and at the parish in Skuły.

In 1654, St. Vincent sent a new group of Missionaries: Fr. Charles Ozenne, Fr. Nicholas Duperroy, Fr. Nicolas Guillot, cleric Rene Simon, cleric Jacob Eveillard and cleric Antoine Durand (the clerics were ordained to priesthood shortly after they arrived in Poland.) However, even with this infusion of new confreres, challenges abounded. Frs. Guillot and Posny left Poland, while Br. Zelazowski left the Congregation. During the Swedish invasion, Frs. Durand, Eveillard, Guillot, and Simon left Poland, while Fr. Ozenne went to Silesia with the Royal Court.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INSTITUTIONS IN THE YEARS: 1651-1697

Following the death of St. Vincent, the Congregation expanded its activity in Poland. The Holy Cross parish in Warsaw offered many opportunities to develop pastoral and educational activities. After the erection of the first diocesan seminary in 1677, other seminaries were placed under the direction of the confreres. These included administration of the seminaries in Chełmno in 1677, Chateau in Cracow in 1682, Vilnius in 1685, Przemyśl in 1687, and Łowicz in 1700. In 1676, the confreres also founded their own Internal Seminary to prepare

future generations of Poles to be “The Missionaries.” The growth of works of the Congregation in Poland enabled confreres to expand their preaching of popular missions throughout various parts of the country.

After the death of Fr. Lambert aux Couteaux in 1653, St. Vincent designated Fr. Wilhelm Desdames as superior. He served twice in this role, from 1653-1654 and 1658-1668. He was followed by Fr. Francois Dupuich from 1668-1670; Fr. Nicole Duperroy from 1670-1674; and Fr. Jacob Eveilland from 1674-1685. By 1685, twenty-one priests (of whom half had done their formation in the Internal Seminary at Holy Cross) worked in the three houses of Congregation established in Poland. In 1685, at the Fourth General Assembly of the Congregation, Fr. Edmund Jolly, Superior General, erected the Province of Poland and appointed Fr. Michel Bartolommeo Tarlo for the position as first Visitor. He served in this position from 1685-1710.

Holy Cross parish in Warsaw became the Provincial House and office of the Visitor. From 1679 to 1696, the confreres enlarged the building near Holy Cross Church, replacing it with new construction. They also built a school and hospital nearby. In 1675, the confreres were invited by Bishop Stephan Wierzbowski of the Diocese of Poznan to open and run the seminary. The finances for construction of the seminary came from parish benefices in Skuły and Wiskitki, along with revenues from the localities of Zamienie, Podolszynie, and Jeziorki. The Chapter of Warsaw offered funds to maintain the seminary and remunerate the confreres for their services, the Chapter of Warsaw offered assistance.

In 1676, at the invitation of Bishop Jean Małachowski, of the Diocese of Chełmno, the confreres opened a house there, and in 1677 took administration of the Seminary of Chełmno. In 1678, Bishop Małachowski gave the confreres the parish at Chełmno and the Chapel of Mater Dolorosa, whose revenues were able to support the work of the seminary. To this were added revenues from leasing of a plot of land situated in the villages of Dziamiany. Revenues were also raised from a parish in Fiszewo, as well as income from tolls on crossing the Vistula River near Chełmno. There were five confreres designated to pastoral work and to preach missions: three priests and two brothers.

In 1681, Bishop Jean Małachowski was nominated bishop of Cracow. The next year, he invited the Congregation of the Mission to the royal city and confided to it the administration of the Seminary of Chateau, founded in 1602. The financial maintenance of the seminary and its twenty students, along with remuneration for the three confreres assigned there was provided by the chapter of Cracow. Their installation at Cracow gave them the opportunity to expand their presence

in Cracow. Soon after, the Congregation erected a new house. In 1686, a small house with surrounding lands in Stradom (near Wawel Castle) which was a gift from Bp. Jean Małachowski enabled the confreres to set down roots in Cracow, which endure to the present day. At first, the "North Wing" of the present building was constructed, consisting of rooms for the confreres who gave popular missions in the Diocese of Cracow. In addition, there were also rooms for retreatants who were candidates for ordination and for other ecclesiastics.

In 1685, the first projects to resume the ecclesiastical Seminary of Vilnius began. Alexandre Kotowicz, the Bishop of Vilnius, invited the confreres to come and confided to them the administration of the seminary. They organized retreats for the candidates for ordination and preached popular missions in the diocese of Vilnius. In the ensuing years from 1695 to 1698, thanks to local benefactor, the confreres constructed a church under the patronage of the Ascension of Christ on the summit of Mount Savior at Vilnius.

In 1687, Jean Zbąski, Bishop of Przemyśl, entrusted to the confreres the administration of the newly constructed Seminary of Przemyśl. To support the seminary, the Bishop directed revenues from properties in Sokółów, Dubiecko, Lubello be used, along with other donations. For the activities of the house and other works, the confreres obtained revenues from a deanship of the chapter at Sambor. Soon after this, the confreres expanded their ministry in this locality.

In 1689, Michael Radziejowski, primate and archbishop of Cracow, asked the confreres to go to Łowicz and entrusted to them the task of giving popular missions in the Archdiocese. He also asked them to organize spiritual retreats for the candidates for ordination and for the priests. In 1700, after the construction and furnishing of a new diocesan seminary, the Archbishop invited the confreres to administer and staff it. The confreres helped finance their work at the seminary from profits of properties in Dmosin, Wola Cyrusowa, Gozdy, and Zurawica. The Archbishop subsidized the running of the seminary from the sum of 80,000 PLN.

THE WORKS OF THE CONGREGATION IN POLAND

Among the most important works undertaken by the confreres in the 17th century were the organization of the popular missions, preparation of the candidates for the priesthood, parish pastoral ministry, retreats for ordinands, and philanthropic works.

The Jesuits, who within the same time period established eighty-one houses in Poland, were famous for their popular missions. To a lesser extent, popular missions in Poland were also undertaken by the Dominicans and other orders. The confreres developed a number

of new foundations, building a network to expand their presence throughout Poland and Lithuania. Priests at Holy Cross at Warsaw and Łowicz preached missions in Mazowie; the confreres also preached in Pomerania and Varmie; houses in Cracow near the Seminary of Chateau and Stradom preached in that area in Silesia: those of the House of Vilnius, in Lithuania. The records preserved at Cracow, Warsaw and Vilnius documented 157 popular missions done through 1697. At the start, a successful mission took 8 days. Later, it was expanded into two to three weeks. The number of faithful who participated varied from 800 in Pniewnik in 1674 to 7,000 at Zbuczyn in 1686. In 1655, the confreres had prepared a translation of a booklet for the popular missions entitled "The Obligations of Christians: what each Christian has to know and how he should act in order to attain the salvation of his soul."

The direction of the diocesan seminaries was the confreres' second important work. As was stated already; foundations in many places in Poland were often linked to the administration of the diocesan seminaries, in seen in Warsaw, Chełmno, Vistule, Cracow, Vilnius, Przemyśl and Łowicz. Otherwise, the missionaries engaged themselves by giving retreats to candidates for the priesthood and ordained priests. The seminaries administered by the confreres were not unlike other seminaries administered by the Jesuits and the Batholomites. However, one particular difference in diocesan seminaries administered by the confreres was that they instituted a program mandated by the Third General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1673. The "Ratio Studiorum" was characterized by a strong emphasis on pastoral and spiritual preparations for the seminarians. As always, the concerns and needs of local bishops were taken into account. In teaching how to preach a sermon, the confreres used "The Little Method of St. Vincent", their signature style of preaching for popular missions. The seminary course of studies lasted on an average of two years, but it could also be adapted into segments of three to eight months a piece, depending on the needs of the local bishop.

In 1652, the confreres linked their apostolic activities to pastoral activity in parishes. The first parish was opened at Sokółka near Białystok, and the second parish, Holy Cross was opened in Warsaw, near the Royal Palace. This foundation gave the confreres opportunities to preach popular missions, besides administering diocesan seminaries. After these works came several parochial schools, four hospitals, a Pious Bank which gave credits, a pharmacy and a printing press. The confreres served in parishes of Chełmno at Holy Spirit, St. Martin, St. Gregory, and St. Laurent. They exercised pastoral activity in the properties of foundations in Skuły and Wiskitki). The pastoral activity of the confreres was characterized by an elegant and exemplary liturgy,

prayer, processions, and founding of pious and philanthropic parish associations.

The Congregation, faithful to the mission entrusted to it by Holy Founder, gave aid to the poor and the sick. In the mid 17th century, as an epidemic was spreading in Warsaw and Cracow, the confreres dedicated themselves the care of the sick. They helped to create and administer hospitals, including Holy Spirit in Chełmno in 1678, and one in 1682 in Warsaw near Holy Cross parish. They also assisted the Sisters of Mercy in establishing St. Catherine's Hall in Warsaw to care for and educate young orphaned girls in the area.

Like the Congregation of the Mission, the Sisters of Mercy were also invited to Poland by Queen Marie-Louise de Gonzaga. Fr. Lambert Couteaux served as their first director, followed Fr. Wilhelm Desdames. The confreres and Sisters of Mercy engaged in many activities of charity which led to a fruitful cooperation.

The confreres also founded parochial schools in the parish at Warsaw and Chełmno. One of the exceptional works of the confreres was the re-foundation of the Academy of Chełmno which functioned as an Academic Gymnasium. The pastor of the parish of Chełmno gave financial support to the Academy. As a result, the Academy became a distinguished institution with strong academic programs, linked to numerous scientific contacts at the Cracow Academy.

THE DAILY LIFE OF THE MISSIONARIES IN THE 17th CENTURY

It is difficult to find sources that accurately portray the life of the confreres in the early years of the mission in Poland. Community life developed according to the model of life of clergy of that time and according to the traditions of the Congregation implanted in France. The order of the day provided began with rising at 4:00 am, followed by common prayer in chapel at 4:30 am (breviary, meditation, reading of Sacred Scriptures, and Mass). The activities were set by the superior and were carried out in mornings from 7:00 to 11 am and in afternoons from 1:00 to 6:00 pm. Meals were served twice; at 11:00 am and at 6:00 pm, and were preceded by a short prayer. After both meals there was an hour of rest. The day ended at 9:00 pm after an hour of prayer in common. In addition to the order of day, there was spiritual formation through weekly use of the sacrament of penance and a preached spiritual conference. On Friday, chapter was held in which all confessed his failings before the community and the superior imposed a penance. Every year, each confrere was required to make a spiritual retreat of eight days duration; only the Visitor could dispense a confrere from fulfillment of this obligation.

In this group of devoted and eminent confreres who served as missionaries to Poland of the 17th Century belonged the first superior – Father Lambert aux Couteaux, along with confreres Fr. Jean O’Fogerty, Fr. Paul Godquin and Fr. Visitor Michael Bartholome Tarla. Father Lambert distinguished himself by his spirit of sacrifice and his devotion to his work with the sick of Warsaw, which led to his untimely death in 1652. Fr. O’Fogerty showed great fervor in hearing confessions and was known as a protector of the poor and of the sick, replenishing these spiritual forces in the long adorations of the Blessed Sacrament. Father Godquin was remarkable for his work during the missions. He rapidly learned Polish which opened up new avenues for him to serve the Church in Poland, including teaching from 1670-1694, as well as giving a large number of popular missions.

Father Michael Bartolomé Tarło, the first visitor of the Province of Poland was remarkable for his astonishing leadership and courage. His parents were Jean Szczekarzewice Tarło and Princess Anne Czartoryski; he was born on August 24 1656 at Lubowwia in Splsz. During his studies in Rome at the College of Monte Citorio run by the confreres, he decided to enter the Congregation, and was received into the community on August 25, 1677. After his studies, he was ordained a priest in Paris, where he taught Philosophy at the Seminary of St. Lazare. In May 1685, he was nominated as Visitor for the newly created Province of Poland. His initiatives led to the creation and development of the missionary works in the houses of Cracow-Stradom, Łowicz, and Przemyśl. In 1710 he was nominated Bishop of Proznan. He continued to reside in Warsaw, at the house of the Holy Cross, where he lived a modest life of a missionary, he was sensitive to the poor and to their needs, during the years of famine in Poland, and he appealed to take help to the most destitute. He died in Łowicz on September 20, 1715.

For the years 1651 to 1697, sixty-seven priests and fifteen brothers in the Congregation served in Poland. Until Polish confreres were ordained after 1685, 11 French confreres were sent, as were two Italians, and three Poles (who pursued their formation in Paris or Rome). As the community became more established in Poland, eleven native priests entered and finished their studies at the Seminarium Internum at Warsaw. After the exhausting works caused the death of two missionaries (Frs. Lambert and Ozenne) and following the misunderstandings within the Community, three priests left the Congregation. Many French Missionaries left Poland for good. However, the seed sown by the early missionaries to Poland has borne abundant fruit that happily endures to the present day. Due to the vision and perseverance of the first confreres to go on mission to

Poland, "The Missionaries" have made a lasting and significant contribution to the Church in Poland and provide to the present day a lasting legacy of faith, hope, and love.

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