

## The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939-1945

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The issue of the attitude taken by the Catholic Church in Poland when confronted with the destruction of the Jews in that country is a complex one, and must be understood within a broad context. Many factors played a role in influencing the behavior of the Church leaders in Occupied Poland. Although one must not underestimate the importance of pre-war attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, it is equally important not to disregard the complicated situation in which the Church found itself under German occupation. The present article shall relate exclusively to the Catholic Church. It will not discuss the activities of organizations devoted to assisting Jews, such as the Żegota, nor will it relate to the influence of religion or the Catholic faith on the conduct of the Polish population as a whole toward the Jews.

### The Attitude of the Church to the Jews in the Inter-War Period

During the inter-war period, and in the 1930s in particular, many political streams in Poland saw the Jews – who were a large ethnic minority of over three-million residing in Poland – as a “problem”. The political right wing was convinced that the Jewish minority posed an economic and a cultural threat, and a threat to Polish national identity. The Jews, according to right-wing ideology, had given birth to Bolshevism and were the reason for its successes. This approach was warmly adopted by many members of the Catholic Church, who supplemented and enriched right-wing anti-Jewish rhetoric with traditional elements taken from Church doctrine. The Church’s desire was to shape a model of Polish nationalism that would be in accordance with the demands of Catholic moral doctrine. The pastoral letter composed by August Hlond, head of the Catholic Church in Poland, in February 1936 bore the title “On the Principles of Catholic Morality”. This pastoral letter serves as a clear example of the tensions between Polish nationalism and Church morality, which the Polish clergy attempted to

combine. The obligation to respect the Jew as an individual, along with a prohibition against the adoption of tactics in political struggle that would conflict with Christian ethics coexist in this letter with an extensive list of accusations against the Jews. According to Hlond, the Jews do battle against the Church and serve as the vanguard of atheism and Communism. Furthermore, they corrupt morality, disseminate pornography, and deal in treachery and usury.

## The Attitude of the Bishops to the Jews during the German Occupation

German policy toward the Church after the occupation of Poland was inconsistent. In the territories annexed to the German Reich, a process of dismantling and destroying the Church's infrastructure was adopted at once by the German authorities. Church leaders were arrested, Polish clergymen were sent to the Generalgouvernement, and churches, monasteries and convents were closed. In the Chelmno diocese alone, a few hundred clergymen were arrested and murdered in 1939. In the Generalgouvernement, the policy was different. There, although the Church and its leaders were persecuted, it was not dismantled and destroyed, and its fate there, although very harsh, cannot be compared with what took place in the territories annexed to Germany.

Bishops and clergy in the Generalgouvernement and in the territories occupied from the Soviet Union in 1941 were witness to the murder of the Jews. Their stances regarding the Jews' plight can be gleaned from their appeals to the German authorities in the Generalgouvernement, from their correspondence with the Vatican, and from autobiographical materials.

Archbishop Hlond left Poland in September 1939, and in his place the Archbishop of Lvov, Adam Sapieha, was recognized as head of the Catholic Church in the occupied country. Sapieha was held in high esteem by the Polish public due to his open opposition to German terror and his intervention with the German authorities for the alleviation of that terror. Polish research tends to unanimously emphasize his intervention on behalf of the Jews, and points to the assistance provided to Jews by the clergy of the Cracow diocese,

of which Sapieha was informed. In fact, however, this oft-cited assistance mostly took the form of intervention on behalf of Catholics who were of Jewish origin. Not one of the three Councils the Polish Bishops held during the German occupation mentioned the mass murder of the Jews. This is true even of the Council that took place on June 1, 1943 – less than two weeks after the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, even though it is possible that this event had a direct impact on the exact timing chosen for the convention. On the other hand, Archbishop Sapieha personally provided the priests who helped Jews with baptism certificates intended for Jews who were in hiding in Cracow.

The sources mention a number of Bishops who were actively involved in providing aid to Jews. The Bishop of Pinsk, Karol Niemira, who worked in cooperation with an underground organization that maintained ties with the ghetto, was particularly noteworthy in this regard. In a meeting that took place on December 17, 1943, German officials reminded Cardinal Sapieha that a number of Jewish families had even found refuge in the Archbishop's home in Lvov. Polish apologetic literature cites the names of over ten Bishops who were active on behalf of the Jewish population. Given the paucity of reliable written sources, however, it is difficult to verify these assertions.

In contrast with Bishops' letters from other occupied countries, the Polish Bishops' correspondence with Rome makes scarcely any mention of the annihilation of the Jews. Even in the letters of Cardinal Sapieha himself, who worked ceaselessly to defend the Polish nation and the Polish Church, and who included in his letters detailed descriptions of the Germans' inhuman behavior, one finds no reference to the tragic fate suffered by the Jews of Poland.

The lack of determined public condemnations of genocide from a Christian moral point of view can be explained on the basis of the profound difference between the situation in Occupied Poland as opposed to that which pertained in Western Europe. In Poland, any expression of opposition to the Germans' anti-Jewish policy presented a life-threatening danger. This, however, cannot serve as an explanation for the fact that no effort was made to inform the Pope of the crimes committed against the Jews in the Polish dioceses –

information that the Bishops surely possessed. Nor can this be explained as resulting from fear of German reprisals against the Polish Church. The Bishops' silence seems rather to indicate that German persecution of the Church – and the Polish Church in particular – combined with the Bishops' attitudes toward the “Jewish problem”, made them unable either to comprehend the extent of the Jewish tragedy or to attribute much importance to it.

### The Attitude of the Clergy and the Monastic Orders to the Jews

The attitude taken by the Catholic clergy and nuns to the Jews during the period of annihilation is representative of the attitude taken by the Polish population as a whole. There were instances of heroism and courage alongside cases of extreme opportunism. The difficulty in assessing the period is that Polish scholars have tended to focus primarily on those Church leaders who assisted Jews or who were sympathetic to their suffering. For this reason, one is forced to try to complete the picture on the basis of indirect or secondary sources. The possibilities for action which the priests had were largely conditional upon objective factors – the location of their diocese, their involvement with the Polish underground, and their contacts with the Jewish population.

The clergymen who helped Jews did so in a variety of ways and at different times. In almost all cases, their activity was the result of personal initiatives taken by the lower clergy. Up until mid-1942 – i.e. until the beginning of the peak period of the “Final Solution” – the help provided usually took the form of care for baptized Jews, issuance of baptismal certificates that allowed the recipients to obtain documents necessary for survival, and a variety of philanthropic activities. At times, clergymen turned to their congregations from the pulpit and asked them to help Jews and to be sympathetic to them. From mid-1942 onward, the priests' activity centered on hiding Jewish children in convents and monasteries and on providing assistance to refugees from the ghettos that had been liquidated. Many Church people joined in the activities off the *Zegota*, which was established in late 1942, in cooperation with Catholic groups.

Testimonies and documents often reveal negative attitudes toward Jews held by Church leaders. A report on the Catholic Church that was transmitted to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London in the summer of 1941 was written in the style of pre-war Catholic journalism and included the thesis that the Germans, in spite of the evil they had perpetrated, had been proven to possess a realistic attitude in “liberating Polish society from the Jewish plague”.

The question arises as to what priests were involved in aid activity for the Jews. The antisemitic views held by many Church leaders did not prevent them from providing assistance in individual cases. It is unknown how many priests altered their views on the “Jewish problem” in the wake of the genocide they witnessed, or, on the other hand, how many of them clung to their views, even while feeling compassion for the persecuted victims.

### Concluding Remarks

What was the extent of assistance, and to what degree was it in fact helpful? Polish literature on this question tends to accept as axiomatic the view that among the people involved in aid activities throughout the period of 1939-1945 were 17 Bishops, 60 monks, and 265 nuns. However, due to the questionable reliability of some of the writings that serve as the basis for these calculations, these numbers are themselves highly questionable. Furthermore, I have been unable to find anywhere any interpretation of these numbers. The question has not been raised as to the numerical relation between those involved in activities of this nature and those who remained indifferent or uninvolved. No attempt has been made to characterize or to describe the most active clergymen, who appear to have numbered no more than a few dozen.

These numbers should not come as a surprise. This type of activity, after all, was extremely dangerous, and required determination, will-power, and a strong character. From late 1941 on, Poles who provided assistance to Jews faced a death penalty. Many priests, even had they wanted to help, could in fact do nothing. At the same time, however, the inactivity of certain priests stemmed directly from their pre-war views on the “Jewish problem”.

Finally, the question must be asked as to whether the annihilation of the Jews, to which the Polish clergy was a witness, had any direct influence on changing the Church's attitude to the "Jewish question". Here too one must be wary of statements that pertain to the majority of the population under question. In the immediate wake of the war, censorship made it impossible to hold any discussion of the annihilation of the Jews that was not subordinated to a political context. The new regime in Poland, which was Communist-inclined, increased the Catholic clergy's sense of threat. For this reason, one is hard-pressed to find many words in the journalism of the period that pertain to the destruction of the Jews. This does not mean, however, that the matter was ignored in official declarations. In his first sermon following his return to Poland, August Hlond, now once again head of the Church in Poland, described his vision for the future of the Polish nation: "We have the possibility of working together with the Savior Jesus Christ, and in this way, of playing an important role in the re-organization of the world, or on the other hand, we might attempt to build without Jesus and thus risk the tragic fate that befell Jerusalem, which failed to recognize the advent of redemption." Echoes of the traditional view, according to which Jewish suffering is punishment for their rejection of Jesus' appearance as savior, can be heard clearly in this statement.

In a statement after the Kielce pogrom, perpetrated by Poles against surviving Jews in 1946, Hlond blamed the Jews for the deterioration in Polish Jewish relations. He blamed the Jews for occupying important positions in the new government and for imposing a form of government that was alien to the Polish nation. In his speech he stressed the suffering of the Church and of the Polish nation, and the help provided by the Catholic clergy to the Jews during the period of German occupation. These became central motifs in the education provided by the Bishops to their congregations, and they had great historical importance in terms of the next generation's historical consciousness. Like the Bishops, the authors of journalistic articles and editorials in the Polish press during the first post-war years had no doubt that the Church's help to the Jews had been extensive and of great importance.

Influenced by the horrors of destruction and of concentration and death camps, many priests surely forsook the extreme positions they had held prior to the war. But the anti-Jewish views of the Polish Catholic clergy proved to be deep-rooted and vigorous, and they found renewed sustenance in the new political reality of the late 1940s.

**Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith and Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 74-78**