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Bohdan W. Oppenheim

Loyola Marymount University, boppenheim@lmu.edu

Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

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A small minority of Poles has moved toward nationalism, fundamentalist Catholicism, fear of the West, the search for scapegoats and, especially troubling, open anti-Semitism.

The Polish Church Examines Its Conscience

By BOHDAN E. OPPENHEIM
and THOMAS P. RAUSCH

POPE JOHN PAUL II IS DETERMINED that the beginning of the new millennium be observed as a "Great Jubilee," a religious event, a time of prayer and celebration. To make this jubilee concrete, he has called on Catholics throughout the world to make an "examination of conscience" about various sins and offenses committed in the name of the church throughout history. Among those sins and offenses, he has specifically mentioned the treatment of Jews. Two conferences have been held recently in response. An international conference on "Jesuits and Jews" took place in Krakow, Poland, Dec. 27-31, 1998. Another, entitled "Examination of Conscience: The Polish Church Confronts Anti-Semitism, 1989-1999," was held on Jan. 20 on the campus of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles conference examined how the church in Poland has dealt with episodes of anti-Semitism in Poland during the past 10 years, since the collapse of Communism in Poland in 1989. The focus was on this period for two reasons. First, anti-Semitic rhetoric has increased significantly during this period in some circles in Poland. The last decade has been a time of dramatic economic and social upheavals that have polarized that society. While the majority of Poles have begun the journey toward Western structures, NATO, democratization and liberalization, a small minority has moved in the opposite direction toward nationalism, fundamentalist Catholicism, fear of the West and of any liberalism, the

BOHDAN W. OPPENHEIM AND THOMAS P. RAUSCH, S.J., are professors at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.



search for scapegoats and, especially troubling, open anti-Semitism. Recently, this small minority has become very visible and embarrassing to both the Government and the church. The minority identifies itself with the church and receives a degree of support from some clergy and even from several bishops. A second reason for the conference is that, for the first time in 50 years, the Polish church is free to speak and act without pressure from external powers.

The conference was conceived and organized by Bohdan W. Oppenheim, professor of Mechanical Engineering at Loyola Marymount. Assisting him were the Polish con-

ART: CORINNE DIDISHEIM

sul general, the Hon. Maciej Krych, and the Polish cultural consul, the Hon. Pawel Potoroczyn, both in Los Angeles, as well as Iwona Liczbanska of Loyola Marymount, Witold Czajkowski from the National Polish American-Jewish American Council, and Stanislaw Obirek, S.J., from Krakow. Participants in the panel included Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, former Secretary General of the Polish Episcopate and now the President of the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Krakow; Adam Michnik, editor of the influential Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*; Krzysztof Kozlowski, a senator from Warsaw and editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the liberal Polish Catholic weekly; Andrzej Korbonski, a professor of political science at U.C.L.A.; Piotr Wrobel, a historian from the University of Toronto, who served as the moderator; and Thomas Rausch, S.J., chair of theological studies at L.M.U. All participants represented only themselves.

Initially intended as a quiet scholarly event, the conference took on an entirely different dimension after Edward Moskal, President of the Polish American Congress, attacked the organizers and panelists in the Polish-American ethnic media. He alleged that the conference would be another "bashing of Poland, Poles, Polonia and the Polish church." During the next several months, Moskal and his supporters attempted to torpedo the conference, writing open letters to the president, prime minister and foreign minister of Poland, Polish diplomats in the U.S., Polish Parliament deputies, members of the Polish episcopate, as well as to members of the administration at Loyola Marymount University. In Poland, representatives of the right-wing media and various politicians picked up the attack and started collecting signatures protesting the conference. Despite these efforts, the conference took place as planned.

THE CONFERENCE BEGAN with a review of Pope John Paul II's call for a jubilee celebration. Then Professor Korbonski presented the bill of charges directed against the Catholic Church in Poland by the media for recent mistakes that have contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism, particularly the issues surrounding the Carmelite convent and the crosses at Auschwitz, as well as some provocative statements of the Rev. Henryk Jankowski, a controversial priest in Gdansk. He asked why the church has failed to take a sufficiently strong stand in fighting anti-Semitism, considering its influential status in Poland.

Bishop Pieronek, whose participation was personal rather than official, agreed that anti-Semitic incidents by church members occurred and that the Polish church has a long way to go, but he also said that the journey it has entered upon is

the correct one. He outlined a number of significant new initiatives, not well known in the United States, taken by the Polish church for dialogue and reconciliation with Jews. He acknowledged that he was in favor of stronger actions than those undertaken in the past to discipline some openly anti-Semitic priests. In response to one questioner, he agreed that a new pastoral letter from the bishops reaffirming that anti-Semitism is a sin against God and humanity would be very beneficial at this time.

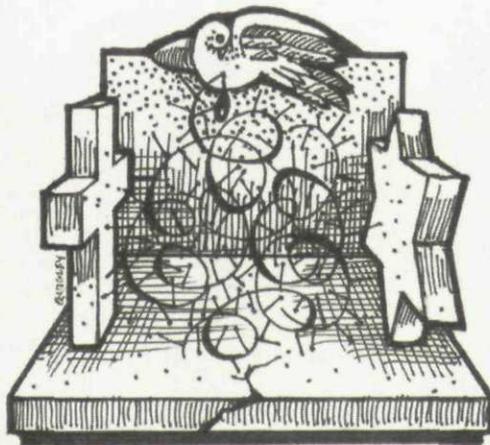
SENATOR KOZLOWSKI UNDERLINED the contrast between the well-intentioned

actions of political and church leaders in fighting anti-Semitism and the reactions of those who are less educated and even of some members of the clergy. "Anti-Semitism in Poland can be found among very simple people, among educated ones, also among the clergy and in the church." He expressed regret that "there is too much tolerance for anti-Semitic expressions in the society. Nevertheless, it is not a majority; it is even not a dominating tendency." He underscored the vastly increasing interest in Jewish culture in Poland, like book publica-

tions, festivals and cultural events.

Adam Michnik presented an in-depth social and historical analysis of anti-Semitism in Poland, which is different from anti-Semitism elsewhere. It is no longer religious in nature, and has little to do with real Jews, but has changed to a mix of Polish hypersensitivity on this subject, deep historical wounds, a defensive posture against stereotypes and the search for scapegoats. His extraordinary sense of humor gave the audience a better insight into this complex problem, and provided some lighter moments.

The conference registration exceeded 140, mostly Polish Americans, both Jews and Catholics, as well as members of the Jewish community from across the United States, including vice presidents from the Holocaust Museum and the American Jewish Congress. The reaction to the conference has been enthusiastic. The organizers have received 20 laudatory letters and congratulations from both Catholics and Jews. Leopold Page, whose story served as the basis for the book and movie "Schindler's List," stated: "I must congratulate Professor Oppenheim for creating this conference and our guests for presenting their high-level lectures, and for putting out the hand that searches for the reconciliation between the Catholics and Jews and makes their relations at a higher level than they have been." Dr. Andrzej Bytnerowicz wrote: "The conference was a great idea. In my opinion, this kind of meeting at universities, with participation of respected moral and intellectual authorities is conducive to a dialog."



ART: GERARD QUIGLEY

