

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7432,The-Church-saving-Jews.html>

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The Church saving Jews

Many seem not to remember today that all Polish citizens were subjected to the terrors of occupation during the Second World War. Maybe that is the reason behind questions being asked whether the help of the Catholic Church for Jews was enough during that time. It is, then, worth reminding the scale of repressions against the Church and the scale of help it nonetheless provided to Jews.



After the year 1989, there were many precious publications analysing e.g. the role of the Catholic nuns in saving Jewish children. Not long before, at the Catholic University of Lublin, research on this subject was conducted mainly by Pr. Prof. Zygmunt Zieliński and, similarly, by Pr. Prof. Franciszek Stopniak at the Warsaw Theological Academy. The next themes in this subject were researched along the process of beatifications of 108 martyrs of the Second World War. Finally, in recent years research projects like *Priests for Jews* led by Pr. Paweł Rytel-Andrianik, the lecturer of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome and currently the media spokesman of the Episcopal Conference of Poland. As part of this project, a wide query was conducted in archives in Poland, USA, Israel, Great Britain, Germany and countries of central-eastern Europe. The result of the research

brought not only a confirmation of the previous findings regarding priests bringing aid to oppressed Jews, but also documented many new cases previously unknown to historians.

Important statistics

In the face of theses claiming that too little priests engaged in helping Jews during the occupation, the appropriate statistics are unfortunately often omitted or simply not taken into account at all by those supporting such theories. It is worth noting, that in 1939 there were just over 10 thousand diocese priests working in the Second Republic of Poland. Around 20% of this number died, so every fifth priest. In some dioceses, which were directly joined to the Third Reich, almost every other priest was murdered and the pastoral activity of the Church was almost entirely eradicated. It was similar with chapter priests. In 1939, male chapters in Poland counted more than 7.5 thousand members (priests, clergymen, chapter brothers). 370 of them were killed. Moreover, during the Second World War around 4 thousand priests and monks and 11 thousand chapter nuns were imprisoned in German camps, while those who remained free were repressed. Additionally, the number of victims should also include the priests and clergymen killed by the Soviets and sent to gulags. As a result of all these forms of repression, according to the research by Salesian priests Jan Woś and Wiktor Jacewicz, nearly 50% of priests were eliminated from the pastoral work. Thus, it was impossible for them to fulfil their duties, but also to bring aid to those repressed.

Only after presenting these facts can one assess the scale of the

engagement of the priesthood in helping Jews. If we take the aforementioned statistics into account and add to them the results of the research mentioned in the opening of the article, it turns out the scale of the engagement of the Polish priesthood in the operation of helping Jews was impressive and far from the theses proposed e.g. by Jan Gross who, in his publications, tries to systematically falsify the picture of the approach of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish population during the war.

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