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The Primate of Poland and Farmers' 'Solidarity'

The engagement of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński for the individual farmers' trade unions in their formation following August 1980 was referred to by Prof. Andrzej Stelmachowski as 'the last great social action of the Primate of the Millennium'.

Without a doubt, there would be no 'Solidarity' in the countryside were it not for the position of the episcopal conference of Poland, and, personally, its head, the head of the Polish Church. The attitude of the Primate forty years ago decisively influenced the acknowledgement by the leaders of the People's Republic of Poland of the farmer's trade union as independent of the state and the single party.



Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński mentioned on numerous occasions that he is the grandson of a farmer from the shores of the rivers Bug and Liwiec, and he was proud of this. A distinguished specialist for Catholic social teachings, the rules of which he attempted to actually implement – including with respect to the Polish countryside – even before World War II, throughout his entire service as primate he cared deeply for the countryside and for farming. In the period of intensification of the greatest economic and socio-political crisis in the history of the People’s Republic of Poland, which overlapped with the last years of his life, he paid much attention in particular to the worsening situation of the farmers not only in his homilies, but in talks with the representatives of the highest circles of leadership of the People’s Republic of Poland and in relationships with the activists of

the independent popular movement and the anti-communist opposition.

The social views of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński were already shaped during his time in Wrocław, meaning, before 1939. He frequently stressed the traditional values he inherited from rural life: respect for bread, the love of the land as the mother providing food for her children, field labour treated as a God-given calling. These notions remain in all the teachings of the Primate, however, the years 1976–1981 saw increased statements directly in defence of the rural population, a consequence of which was the acknowledgement of the right of the farmers to unionise, and support for farmer 'Solidarity'.

Already before World War II, the Primate was critical of socialism and communism; he believed that the cause of the 'abnormal' situation of agriculture in Poland was caused by the errors of Marxist doctrine, which neglected ex definitione this area of the economy, favouring heavy industry and the urban society. Condemning the 'totalitarian-collectivist' vision of development, he believed that the concentration of the land in the hand of the state at the expense of rural family farms was an economic mistake. He defended the rural population removed from the forests of Kampinos – where he was chaplain of the Polish Home Army during the Warsaw Uprising – and he defended minor farmers who fell prey to industrialisation and urbanisation forcibly introduced by the leaders. He called their removal from their family land 'clear lawlessness' and called for the wrongs to be righted.

The emergence of rural 'Solidarity' was to a great extent possible thanks to the support of the majority of parish clergy and of diocesan bishops, the more so that the farmers fighting for their union rights expressed a traditional bond with the Church and Christian values. The participants of rural protests also spoke about issues of significance for all the faithful in Poland.

There was a progressive lack of self-sustainability of the country in terms of food and the rising dependence of the economy on foreign loans. Noting the economic errors, in particular in terms of agricultural policy, he frequently said that the power of Poland lies in agriculture, hence, the fatherland should be appropriately 'acknowledged and served'. He frequently referred to symbols of the struggle of entire generations of Poles for the right to their own land, taken from history and literature: he recalled the resistance of the farmers from Wielkopolska and the Zamość region, the defence of the countryside in the regions of Podlasie and Chełm; the historical Drzymała and the peasant Ślimak from the Bolesław Prus novel *The Outpost*, in particular, however, Boryna from the writings of Reymont. In the year 1975, in the cathedral of Warsaw, he unveiled, encouraged by the former activists of the Polish People's Party (Pl. PSL) of Stanisław Mikołajczyk, together with then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, a commemorative plaque for Wincenty Witos, the leader of the Polish peasants. Despite strong pressure from the state leaders, he did not agree to the transfer of parish priest Czesław Sadłowski to a different parish within the diocese of Warsaw, who was the patron in Zbrosza

Duża in 1978 for the Committee of Peasant Self-defence of the region of Grójec, which was established there.

From the mid-1970s onward, meaning, in the time of the intensifying crisis of the People's Republic of Poland in the times of Edward Gierek, the episcopal conference of Poland headed by Primate Wyszyński devoted much attention to the situation in the countryside. In three letters to the state authorities, written before the passing of the changes to the constitution of the People's Republic of Poland in 1976, the Polish bishops motioned for equal rights for farmers, and the General Council of the episcopal conference of Poland in session during the strikes (August 26, 1980) in Jasna Góra, included among others the inalienable rights of the people, e. g., the right to individual possession and disposition of farmland and the development of favourable conditions for individual farms.

The establishment of rural 'Solidarity' was, to a great extent, possible thanks to the favourable attitude of the majority of the parish clergy and diocesan bishops, the more so that that the farmers fighting for their union rights expressed a traditional bond with the Church and Christian values. The participants of rural protests also spoke about issues of significance for all the faithful in Poland, such as the construction of new churches, religious education, freedom of religion for children at camps and on holiday, religious services in the army and in penitential institutions, the operation of preschool facilities by monasteries, and an increase in the circulation of the Catholic press. The Primate first voiced his defence of the right of peasants and

farmers to unify and self-govern on January 24, 1981 in Warsaw, during a Christmas wafer-sharing meeting with veterans of the war. At that time, occupations by farmers from Ustrzyki Dolne and Rzeszów were ongoing; the farmers' main demand was for the government to agree to the registration of a trade union. The Primate noted that the agricultural world has the same needs as the world of industrial workers. 'If you agreed to worker self-governance, you also have to agree to farmer self-governance' - he said in Warsaw to the politicians, reminding them that the right to freedom is a natural liberty of any individual, and it may not be taken away from anyone. The head of the episcopal conference advised that it would be 'healthier and more proper' if the agricultural population would be provided voluntarily with the acknowledgement of their rights: 'Better voluntarily than if they had to force their acknowledgement'.

The bylaws of the independent self-governing trade union of the farmers (Pl. NSZZ Rolników), later amended by the words 'Solidarność Wiejska' (Rural Solidarity), were filed with the voivodeship court in Warsaw on September 24, 1980. The government of the People's Republic of Poland decided, however, that the role of the trade union of individual farmers will be played by 're-established' farmers' circles, with the court deciding on October 29, 1980, that there are no legal grounds for the registration of this union or other union organisations, of which owners of farms are members. Farmers from across the country protested in the streets of the capital, when on December 30, 1980, the Tribunal of Justice deferred the revision hearing indefinitely; a wave of discontent rose across the countryside, and the Solidarity

movement expanded. In essence, the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party and the satellite United People's Party (Pl. ZSL) feared the establishment of a true 'worker-peasant union' and the reactivation of the Polish People's Party of Stanisław Mikołajczyk. Strong pressure not to allow a 'counter-revolution' in the countryside was also exerted by Soviet comrades; the lack of legal provisions (with discussions ongoing in this regard, in fact) was just an alibi for the lack of political will to register the 'Rural Solidarity'.

Cardinal Wyszyński confirmed his attitude when speaking at the cathedral in Gniezno on Candlemas, February 2, 1981:

'To drag out the provision of the right to unionise to the peasant population as it wants it, is unwise, even more so - it goes against natural laws and own rights of this great provider of our Nation, who is the farming population'.

Meeting the joint urban and rural population representatives of 'Solidarity' from Wielkopolska two days later, the Primate recalled again the rules of Catholic social teachings, according to which the right to unionise is a natural right of man:

'This is an expression of the natural right of the countryside to unionise. They can tell you: But there already are farmers' circles and other unions. However, the so-called individual liberty of man is expressed by the fact that they decide for themselves about the organisations and trade unions they would give rise to, which ones they need in order to be able to master the tasks bestowed upon them

[...]. By what law do you provide some with the right to unionise, yet not others? This is discrimination! Hence, the objectives of the rural population, the providers of our motherland, are proper [...] to create their own agricultural "Solidarity" unions, which - we believe - will cooperate most closely with the industrial "Solidarity".'

The Primate announced that the Church will demand rights for farmers 'not once and not twice, but until rural "Solidarity" will also receive its rights of the freedom of labour, of unionisation, as it needs'. The Primate particularly supported the rural 'Solidarity' movement on the occasion of the February 6, 1981, meeting in Warsaw with representatives of farmers' trade unions that were not acknowledged by the government of the People's Republic of Poland. His residency in Miodowa street was visited by a delegation of twenty-five people from three union centres which operated at that time - and which fought, e. g., over their names; participants of the strike in Rzeszów were also present. The farmers thanked him that 'for the past 35 years of struggle of the Polish peasant, the provider of the Nation, for the right to exist and to their family land, the Catholic Church was always at our side'. The delegates informed 'the most distinguished and revered Father' about the struggle to unite the union movement, the demands made and the protest actions undertaken. Cardinal Wyszyński stressed once again that the farmers' right to unite as they please - according to their will and needs, independently of existing structures - is a natural right that is not given by the state government; this right requires protection by the state. The Primate encouraged the farmers

to continue persevering and to do wise union work in the social and professional circles, as indeed 'how will you be named is, after all, not the most important issue'; 'one needs a little diversity due to local conditions'. Following the meeting, the press office of the episcopal conference issued a statement with the information that the Primate of Poland accepted in Warsaw a delegation made up of representatives of the free trade union of farmers 'Rural Solidarity' (Pl. NSZZ Rolników 'Solidarność Wiejska'), of the free trade union of individual farmers (Pl. NSZZ Rolników Indywidualnych 'Solidarność') and of the peasant trade union 'Peasant Solidarity' (Pl. Chłopskie Związki Zawodowe 'Solidarność Chłopska'). The censors of the People's Republic of Poland, which implemented a ban on information in this regard, allowed no publications about the meeting. However, already in the evening of that same day, the Primate was notified by his advisor, Romuald Kukołowicz, that the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party Stanisław Kania would be eager to meet him. Immediately after breakfast, on February 7, 1981, the Primate transferred to the secretary of the episcopal conference, Bishop Bronisław Dąbrowski, a letter for the 'First Secretary' to clarify that he would meet Stanisław Kania at 18:00 - 'privately, to exchange views about the situation'.

The Primate noted in his letter that the 'case of individual farmers who feed our nation' is of particular importance to him. Through very calm argumentation, he encouraged his addressee to reach courageous political decisions 'allowing the establishment of a legal framework for the emergence of new farmer unions'. In the three-page text, the word

'Solidarity' is not mentioned even once, and only one passage speaks of a general struggle of the farmers to create independent unions'. Stressing that the 'peasants are determined to claim their rights with all means', Cardinal Wyszyński declared that the Church is on their side, 'even though it cannot approve of all means to claim these rights'. 'It is hurtful in itself that they have to voice their opposition against the position of the state in the form of strike actions and hunger strikes' - wrote the Primate; a protest hunger strike of eleven farmers from the Peasant Solidarity chapter of Wałbrzych started on January 27, 1981, in a small parish hall at the Church of St. Joseph in Świdnica. 'This is no feather in the cap of our system of governance. I cannot agree with the view that it is all just some political game'.

Kania immediately showed the letter to the comrades of the politburo of the Central Committee of the PZPR, considering the support of the episcopal conference for the registration of the farmers' 'Solidarity' to be a 'distressing new element' that 'must be taken into account'. 'Wyszyński created a political fact' - said General Wojciech Jaruzelski, and Mieczysław Moczar followed suit: 'The letter proves that the Church and the Workers' Defence Committee (Pl. KOR) stand side by side with "Rural Solidarity".'

The leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party and the satellite United People's Party feared the establishment of a true 'worker-peasant union' and the reactivation of the Polish People's Party of Stanisław Mikołajczyk. Strong pressure not to allow a 'counter-

revolution' in the countryside was also exerted by Soviet comrades; the lack of legal provisions was just an alibi for the lack of political will to register the 'Rural Solidarity'.

During the meeting in Natolin on February 7, 1981, the Primate got the impression that Kania was a man 'deeply fearful' of the situation of the economy and the state. He responded negatively to the registration of the rural 'Solidarity', believing that 'the countryside is working towards establishing a political party'. The Primate managed to convince his interlocutor that the registration is necessary.

'If the government were to back down on this issue due to a general strike in the countryside, then it's better to do it preemptively and make concessions' - he advised the worried First Secretary. 'If the government would not acknowledge this liberty - the tensions will mount. A coalition of the injured will start to form - to oppose the party. There may even be a rural uprising' - he warned. 'Bloodshed must be avoided. The Church acknowledges this liberty of the countryside - on general principles - and will support it'. The Primate concluded also that 'the establishment of a new party is a hypothesis, and the far future'.

Kania took these expositions in with polemic; it seemed all 'noble moralising' to him. After a three-hour conversation, the Primate concluded that he might have been able to break the thought pattern of 'Mr K.', but that he was unable to win him over for the issue of the registration of individual farmers in 'Solidarity'. On this occasion, the

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR informed the head of the episcopal conference that the prime minister will change, and that the government will be headed by General Jaruzelski.

When the Tribunal of Justice denied the registration of 'Rural Solidarity' on February 10, 1981, for lack of legal grounds, the spokesperson of the Polish Ministry of Justice stated that activities undertaken for the purpose of the establishment of an independent trade union of farmers 'are not legal' (the Polish National Press Agency was personally told by Kania to publish this information, during a meeting of the Politburo on that day), and the General Council of the Polish episcopal conference spoke up.

'Failed agricultural policy over many decades led to the danger of hunger in our country. The Church had warned against this danger for a long time - it reminded those who would listen. 'The process of repair of damage caused to our countryside will be long, and requires effort both from farmers as well as the authorities, as well as city inhabitants. First of all, the certainty of ownership of the cultivated land must be guaranteed, and the right to free professional unionisation must be acknowledged' - said the statement read out in churches. 'The farmers' right to freely unionise according to their will and needs, independently of existing unions, is a natural liberty'; the clergy referred here to the encyclical Mater et Magistra by John XXIII.

The Primate continued to observe the situation in rural areas with

great attention and accompanied the farmers in their struggle for their due rights. His special delegate, Romuald Kukołowicz, participated in talks of strike committees with the governmental committee in Rzeszów and Ustrzyki Dolne. The Rzeszów-Ustrzyki Agreement (February 18-20, 1981) to end the strikes brought great joy to the Primate, even though the authorities had not yet agreed to the registration of the farmers' 'Solidarity'.

Cardinal Wyszyński confirmed the attitude of the Church on this issue on March 1, 1981, when he unveiled a commemorative plaque for Stefan Starzyński in the cathedral in Warsaw:

'It is political nonsense to attempt any limitation of the rights of the people of the land, the heaviest working in our Homeland. It is not the place of the state to grant those rights. The state may only defend them. That is all it needs to do. This is a natural liberty, a constitutional right, it follows from the socio-political development of the Nation'.

A week later, the Primate sent a telegram to a national meeting in Poznań - illegal according to the authorities - which on March 8 and 9, 1981, unified the peasant unions, calling into existence the Independent Self-governing Trade Union of Individual Farmers "Solidarity" (Pl. NSZZ Rolników Indywidualnych 'Solidarność'); the meeting passed a special resolution thanking the Primate. The authorities considered Rural Solidarity to be an illegal organisation that needs to be fought; the Security Service (Pl. SB) 'preventively' warned close to three thousand activists. In this situation, the Polish episcopal conference openly supported the efforts of farmers' 'Solidarity' towards

registration. In the communique from the 178th plenary conference of March 13, 1981, the bishops wrote that 'deep hope goes hand in hand with the emerging independent self-governing trade unions of individual farmers. [...] The right to such unions is embedded in Catholic social teachings. The Church will support the efforts of the Polish farmer in his patriotic and societal service to the Nation'.

During a subsequent occupation by the farmers of Bydgoszcz, the conflict escalated; on March 19, 1981, after an interrupted session of the Voivodeship National Council (Pl. WRN), the security forces intervened, and three activists of 'Solidarity' were beaten up, including sixty-eight-year-old farmer Michał Bartoszcze. The Primate received a direct description of these events from his emissary, Kukołowicza; on March 26, he met with Prime Minister Jaruzelski, substantiating the position of the Church during a three-hour discussion. The general, who previously suggested the suspension of registration of 'Rural Solidarity' for a year, allegedly promised a swift conclusion of the dispute, however, the communique after the meeting was very terse. The most serious crisis since August 1980 was concluded on March 30 with the so-called Warsaw accord; the government declared that so long as the issue of unionisation of farmers is not resolved by an extraordinary committee of the Sejm, the legality of their union work will not be questioned. Censorship was also lifted, and the ban on media information about the farmers' 'Solidarity' was removed.

Despite his advancing illness, on April 2, 1981, Cardinal Wyszyński met members of the authorities of Rural Solidarity in Warsaw; they thanked him for the decisive support of the Church; this was his last meeting. In his speech on this occasion, the Primate devoted much time to the tasks ahead of the new organisation, he also wished them patience in their work; before he blessed those present, he uttered words that today seem like a prophecy fulfilled :

‘There will come a time, sooner or later, when not only social and professional, but others as well, will certainly be achieved by the powerful industrial and individual farmers’ “Solidarity” movements. You will certainly achieve it!’.

The conflict concerning the legalisation of farmers’ ‘Solidarity’ was finally resolved in the so-called Agreement of Bydgoszcz of April 17, 1981; the emissary of the Primate, Romuald Kukołowicz, participated in the talks with the government committee. In the letter dated April 28, 1981, sent to the Rural Solidarity chapter in Bydgoszcz, Cardinal Wyszyński expressed joy that the ‘patient perseverance brought about the fruit of the acknowledgement of the farmers’ trade union’. On May 3, 1981, the dying Primate recorded a phone call with John Paul II, whom he informed, inter alia, about the general situation in the country:

‘After the episcopal conference won the rights of trade unions for individual farmers – a great social base was established for the work of the Church: the industry and the countryside’.

It may be considered symbolic that the registration of Rural Solidarity, which became possible after the Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland passed a special law about trade unions of individual farmers, took place on May 12, 1981 - on the 35th anniversary of the creation of Cardinal Wyszyński. The celebratory mass for the farmers of 'Solidarity' was held on this day in the cathedral in Warsaw by suffragan bishop Władysław Miziołek, replacing the mortally ill Primate.

The support provided by the head of the Church in the People's Republic of Poland, the Primate of the Millennium was decisive for the acknowledgement of Rural Solidarity. The awareness of the service of Cardinal Wyszyński for the Polish countryside was common for the farmers, and he was deeply revered during his lifetime and following his passing. A delegation of the authorities of the union participated in the funeral, but during the thirty days of mourning, the farmers of 'Solidarity' took part in masses celebrated for the deceased in Gniezno and in Warsaw; prayers were initiated at the sarcophagus at the Cathedral of Warsaw to beatify the Primate. The popular authority he enjoyed among the members of Rural Solidarity and the population of the countryside in general is indicated by numerous articles in the union press and initiatives to honour his memory by christening streets with his name, and by monuments. During events organised - illegally in 1982-1988 and later, in the new political system, legally - on the subsequent anniversaries of the registration of the trade union closed down by the authorities during martial law in Poland, prayers of the farmers for the Primate of the Millennium, wreaths were laid without

fail on his grave and at the monument in Krakowskie Przedmieście. This was the case this year as well, during the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of Rural Solidarity.

A fragment of the speech by the Primate from his last meeting with 'Solidarity' farmers was recounted by John Paul II in the homily of Poznań of June 20, 1983, when he wished for 'farmers of the entire Homeland' to commit these words to memory 'as testimony of a great Pole, a great lover of Polish land and the Polish nation'. The papal pilgrimage took place during martial law, and the Rural Solidarity movement was deemed illegal. The social teachings of the Primate concerning the countryside and agriculture also became the basis for the operation of church services designed particularly for farmers, thanks to which the farmers' 'Solidarity' survived the final years of the People's Republic of Poland.

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