

“To Kneel Only Before God”: Father Jerzy Popiełuszko

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Until the introduction of martial law in December 1981, Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko was just one of 20,000 Roman Catholic priests working in Poland. Since then he has won fame and esteem not only inside Poland but also in the West. He is considered by his countrymen as a kind of third “national hero” after Pope John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa, the leader of the banned Solidarity, and seen almost as a symbol of the Church’s unity with the suffering nation. He owes his influence largely to the sermons he preaches at the mass for Poland which he says every month in Warsaw. The sermons have appeared in book form in *samizdat* and are widely distributed in Poland. They offer a deep insight into the experience of a nation which over the last 200 years has been less often a state than a state of mind, and go to the heart of the perpetually frustrated national desire to live life in a Polish way, in a Christian tradition, free from alien ideological domination.

Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko has lived his entire life in post-war Poland. Born in 1947 he entered the Warsaw Seminary in 1966, the year in which the Polish Church celebrated its first Millennium, but which also marked the height of an anti-Church campaign and saw the worst church-state relations since the early 1950s.* Seminarians were being called up into the Army despite an agreement exempting them, and after only a year at the Seminary Jerzy Popiełuszko found himself doing two years’ military service in a special unit in Bartoszyce. It was there that Jerzy had his first experience of difficulties he would be facing as a Catholic priest in an officially communist country. One day he was found with a rosary in his hand and was ordered to throw it on the floor and trample on it. He refused and was severely punished. From the Army he returned to the Seminary and was ordained by Cardinal Wyszyński in 1972. He later served as a curate in various parishes in Warsaw and the surrounding villages. His ill health prevented him from having a parish of his own; instead he was sent to work within the medical community of Warsaw, as a priest attached to

*See article by Alexander Tomsky in *RCL* Vol. 9 Nos. 1-2, 1981, pp. 28-39 — *Ed.*

the Warsaw curia. It was at that time that he became a resident priest at St Stanisław Kostka church in the Żoliborz district of Warsaw.

In the summer of 1980 Fr Popiełuszko was sent by Cardinal Wyszyński to organise pastoral care for the striking workers of a Warsaw steel plant, who had asked for a priest. He said masses and heard confessions, and, as he himself says, his involvement made such an impact on him that it would last until his death. It was there that the bond between the workers and Fr Popiełuszko was born.¹ Soon afterwards, he was chosen as their chaplain by the workers at the plant, and St Stanisław Kostka church became an official “parish” church for the Warsaw steel workers with the blessing of Fr Teofil Bogucki, the parish priest. St Stanisław Kostka church was even then known as a “patriotic” church with a huge banner over the main entrance bearing the slogan “*Bóg i Ojczyzna*” (God and Country). It is crowded with plaques commemorating heroic struggles from the nation’s past and has a long tradition of special services for Poland celebrated by Fr Bogucki.

Martial law was declared on 13 December 1981, and thousands of Solidarity members and supporters were detained. Fr Popiełuszko remained very close to the workers: he believed this to be his duty as a priest.

The work of a priest is in a way an extension of the work of Christ. A priest is taken from the people and ordained for the people to serve them. Hence the duty of a priest is to be with the people at any time, where people need him most, where they are most wronged, degraded and maltreated [. . .] I felt it was then that they needed me most, in those difficult times, in prison cells, praying for them, in the courtrooms where I went to hear the trials.²

It was in the courtroom that he had the idea of holding special services for those in prison or under pressure, and for their families. The first mass for Poland under martial law took place in St Stanisław Kostka church in February 1982. Since then it has been celebrated on the last Sunday of each month, watched over by a large number of police. It attracts a regular congregation of several thousand. People come from all over Poland to participate in the service, and to pour out their anguish in prayer, in spontaneous singing and in the solidarity of silence. They listen to poems recited by famous Polish actors, but also hear Fr Popiełuszko preaching one of his sermons. The sermons express Fr Popiełuszko’s desire to “include God in the difficult and painful problems of the country”³ and his conviction that in witnessing to the truth the Church cannot be neutral in the face of injustice and human suffering but must become the first defender of all the oppressed.

To serve God is to seek a way to human hearts, to serve God is to speak out about evil as a sickness which should be brought to light so it can be cured. To serve God is to condemn evil in all its manifestations.⁴

His treatment of the issues of the day is courageous and direct. He talks of “families shattered by martial law, people detained, brought to trial, sentenced to many years’ imprisonment, their only guilt being their determination to remain faithful to the ideals of Solidarity”⁵; of “tragedies suffered by children whose parents have had to go into hiding, whose parents have been imprisoned, the irreversible psychological shock suffered by children faced with brutal evil and hatred . . .”⁶ He does not hesitate to address the state authorities directly:

The nation seeks unity and cooperation but it also demands a guarantee that it will not again be misled, and that its efforts will not go to waste. It seeks compromise without capitulation or resignation of its ideals, its aspirations and its faith in a better and more worthy future.⁷

He offers the authorities a long and detailed list of all factors that are preventing reconciliation:

The bitter helplessness and humiliation which many people suffer daily does not assist reconciliation. The trials of those who have been democratically elected as representatives by the workers do not assist reconciliation, for if they are guilty they should answer to those who elected them. Shattered families do not assist reconciliation nor do children who long for their imprisoned parents, wives awaiting the return of their husbands, mothers awaiting their sons and daughters, and the hardships and anxieties of many families. Rounding up people returning home quietly from church services does not assist reconciliation, nor do demonstrations of force in the street, near the churches where people pray [. . .] Reconciliation is not served by documents which state that a Solidarity activist who undertakes to form new unions at his place of work will have his salary doubled, but that if he wants to remain faithful to his conscience, then he will be demoted and transferred to a different factory on the other side of Warsaw.⁸

Meditating on current problems, Fr Popiełuszko always touches upon the wider issues involved, such as the nature of authority and government, justice and the fundamental human right to freedom, independence and dignity. He is deeply convinced that the problems of Poland stem from the exclusion of God from socio-political life and of Christian ethics from the process of governing.

Government means service. The first love of the authorities should be for those whom they govern. And if this really were the case, if this basic Christian truth became a part of real life, if the authorities were moral, if Christian ethics dominated the principles of government, how different our lives would be. However, we have become witnesses of the tyrannical state, where communication with the citizen takes the form of orders from the Police.⁹

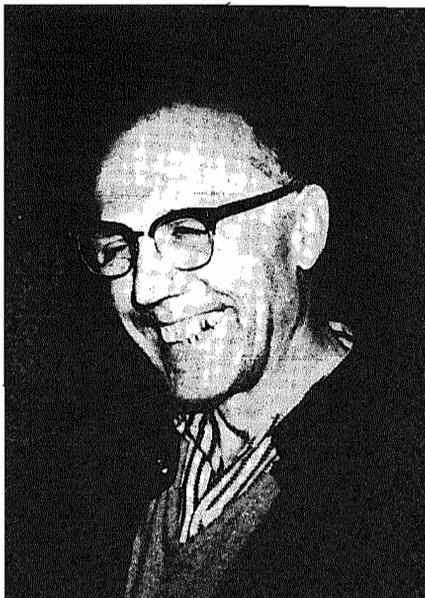
Any government which has no other means of implementing its policies than the use of force is not a government but a blasphemous usurper, and the people are as defenceless as an unarmed man who is confronted by a highway robber. Even if he were as innocent and holy as Christ Himself, nothing could defend him then, neither his religion, nor the law, nor any moral norms. The cry of Abel will only arouse the fury of his brother Cain. You cannot expect anything good from people who do not respect your dignity and freedom.¹⁰

Fr Popiełuszko frequently reminds his hearers that freedom is a reality implanted in man by God, and that any violation of freedom, especially freedom of conscience, is opposition to God himself.

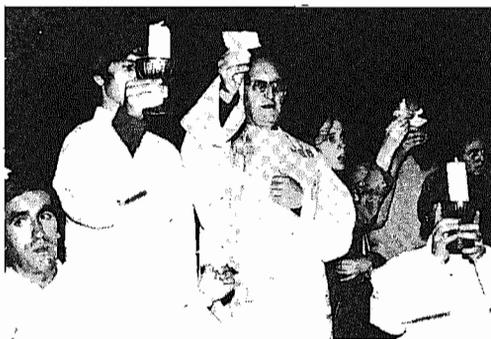
The whole activity of Jesus Christ was aimed at making people realise that they were created for the freedom of the children of God. God created man in His image, so he is free; indeed, man can accept or reject his Creator. Where then did all enslavement come from, why are there prisons? There are many kinds of prison. There are prisons of system and structure. There are prisons which not only destroy the body but penetrate further, into the human spirit, into true freedom. There are prisons built of bricks and stones, surrounded by barbed wire and high walls. And though these prisons are sometimes needed because the system of God's values has been destroyed by man, they should not be used to confine those who think otherwise and feel otherwise and seek the good of the country in alternative ways.¹¹

While condemning evil outright, Fr Popiełuszko also speaks out against any thought of hatred or revenge, and points to the cross of Resurrection — the sign of the victory of good over evil, life over death and love over hatred. He asks people to pray not only for those who are wronged, but also for those “who cause human suffering, anxiety and fear . . .”, for those “who violate human conscience . . .”, for “lawyers, representing justice, who do not have the courage to oppose lies and falsehood”.

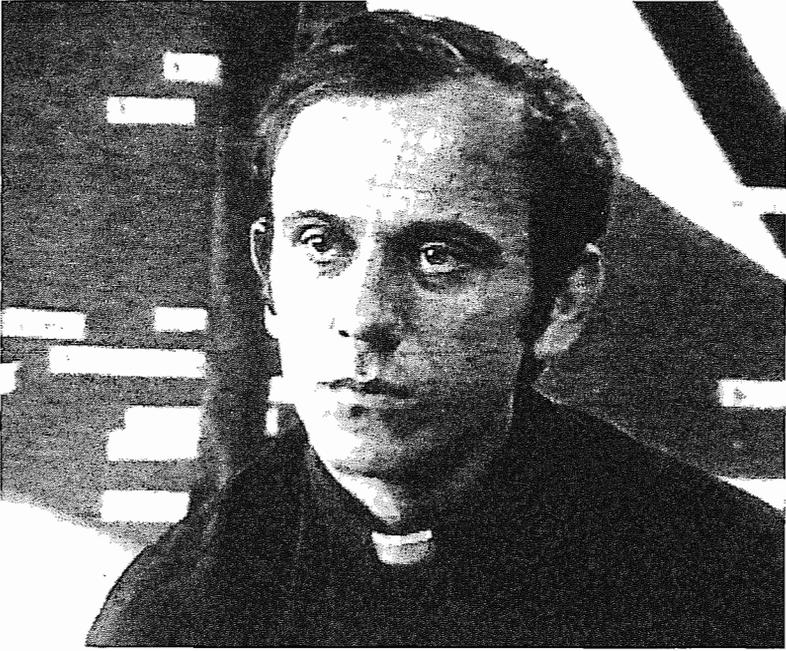
Right: Pastor Ferenc Wisky of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania. See Chronicle item on pp. 204-5 of this issue. (Photo courtesy Keston College.)



Right: An official photograph of the choir of the Protestant church in Chengdu, taken at Christmas. The text above the altar reads: "Let the whole earth rejoice". See article on pp. 124-9 of this issue. (Photo courtesy Christine Cullingford.)



Left: Father Blachnicki celebrating mass at the Oasis centre in Króscienko in south-east Poland on the day of Pentecost. Representatives from the Oasis groups come to Króscienko for a special service. From a candle on the high altar each representative lights an individual candle and these are then taken and used during the celebration of mass at the summer camps as a symbol of unity. See article on pp. 157-67 of this issue. (Photo courtesy Keston College.)



Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. See article on pp. 149-56 of this issue. (Photo copyright London Weekend Television.)



Dr Lajos Ordass (1901-78), Bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. See article on pp. 144-8 of this issue. (Photo courtesy Keston College.)

Let us be strong through love, praying for our brothers who have been misled, without condemning anybody but condemning and unmasking evil. Let us pray with the words Christ spoke from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And give us, O Christ, an ever greater awareness that love is stronger than violence and hatred.¹²

A staunch supporter of Solidarity, he often refers to the Solidarity period as the "patriotic struggle to reinstate human dignity", as a spontaneous expression of national identity and of the desire of working men to be answerable to their own country, their own people and themselves.

Solidarity helped us to see evil and its mechanisms clearly; it brought to the surface many historical events which had previously been passed over in silence. Solidarity wanted to work for God and for the benefit of the people, it wanted to build God's kingdom on earth.¹³

He rejects outright all official claims that Solidarity has been destroyed:

Solidarity is like a gigantic tree, which in spite of the fact that its roots are continuously being cut off, keeps putting out new ones [. . .] and it stays firmly in the soil of our country [. . .] Solidarity is still the hope of many millions of people united in prayer with God, and nobody can kill that hope.¹⁴

A nation with a thousand years of Christian tradition behind it will always seek full freedom. The yearning for freedom cannot be stopped by violence, as violence is the weapon of those who do not possess the truth. Man can be crushed by violence but not enslaved. Poles who love God and their country will rise again after any humiliation, for they have knelt only before God.¹⁵

Pointing to the Christian duty of fortitude, he offers a vision of liberation through non-violent, psychological resistance in conditions where fear and repression are the norm.

A Christian fulfils his duties only when he is stalwart, when he professes his principles courageously, when he is neither ashamed of them nor renounces them because of fear or material needs. Woe betide a society whose citizens do not live by fortitude. They cease to be citizens and become more like slaves. It is fortitude which creates citizens, for only a courageous man is conscious of all his rights and duties. If a citizen lacks fortitude, he becomes a slave and causes immeasurable harm not only to himself but to his family, his country and the Church [. . .] Woe betide state authorities who want to

govern citizens by threats and fear. Fortitude is an essential part of one's life as a citizen. That is why fortitude is, for a Christian, the most important duty after love.¹⁶

In order to remain spiritually free men, we must live in truth. To live in truth means to bear witness to it to the outside world at all times and in all situations. The truth is unchangeable. It cannot be destroyed by any decree or law. The source of our captivity lies in the fact that we allow lies to reign, that we do not denounce them, that we do not protest against their existence every day of our lives, that we do not confront lies with the truth but keep silent or pretend that we believe in the lies. Thus we live in a state of hypocrisy. Courageous witnessing to the truth leads directly to freedom. A man who witnesses to the truth can be free even though he might be in prison. If the majority of Poles set out on the way of truth today, if the majority had not forgotten a year ago what truth is, we would even now become more spiritually free as a nation. External freedom or political freedom would come too, sooner or later — as the consequence of this freedom of spirit and faithfulness to the truth [. . .] The essential thing in the process of liberating man and the nation is to overcome fear. Fear stems from threats. We fear suffering, we fear losing material goods, we fear losing freedom or our work. And then we act contrary to our consciences, thus muzzling the truth. We can overcome fear only if we accept suffering in the name of a greater value. If the truth becomes for us a value, worthy of suffering and risk, then we shall overcome fear — the direct reason for our enslavement. Christ told his followers: “Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do”. (Luke 12:4).¹⁷

The essence of Fr Popiełuszko's vision of liberation is the concept of solidarity of hearts, a concept first offered to the Poles by Pope John Paul II.

Do we remember our brothers and sisters who were sentenced under martial law for defending the dignity of the workers? They were sentenced because they tried to remain faithful to their ideals and dreams, shared openly by millions of others in 1980. How important it is for them, but also for us, to feel that the solidarity of hearts still exists, that their problems are ours. How important is the knowledge that their families are cared for materially and spiritually; the knowledge that every day we include the innocently-imprisoned in our evening prayers, that we teach our children to pray for our country, for our ideals. Satan will strengthen his earthly kingdom in our country, unless

we become stronger in God and His grace, unless we show care and love for those of our brothers who suffer innocently in prisons, and for their troubled families. There are places where the families of the imprisoned are cared for and respected. But there are also places where fear is stronger than moral duty. Remember what Christ said: "In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me." (Matt. 26:40).

A group of women prisoners wrote: "We want to go free, but not at any price. Not at the price of renouncing our ideals, not at the price of self-betrayal of those who put their trust in us." Let us put the truth, like a light, on a candlestick, let us make life in truth shine out, if we do not want our conscience to putrefy [. . .] Let us not sell our ideals for a mess of pottage. Let us not sell our ideals by selling our brothers. It depends on our concern for our innocently-imprisoned brothers, on our life in truth, how soon that time comes when we shall share our daily bread again in solidarity and love. At this time, when we need so much strength to regain and uphold our freedom, let us pray to God to fill us with the power of his Spirit, to reawaken the spirit of true solidarity in our hearts.¹⁸

Fr Popiełuszko's vision holds little appeal for the Polish authorities who see the services for Poland only as "rallies hostile to the Polish State" and accuse Fr Popiełuszko of abusing the Church and his role as a priest. Since 1982, when the first mass for Poland was organised, Fr Popiełuszko has been under close surveillance by the police, and in September that year an official investigation began into Fr Popiełuszko's alleged "abuse of freedom of conscience and religion to the detriment of Poland's interests". He was accused of slandering the Polish People's Republic and disseminating false information. He was put under enormous pressure and exposed to a great deal of intimidation. Day and night he is constantly followed by two unidentified cars and has reluctantly decided to accept bodyguards for his personal protection. In December 1982 his parish house was broken into and vandalised by "unknown hooligans". At that time a huge rock was thrown through his window. He has been detained on a number of occasions, for example on 28 August 1983, just before he was to celebrate the monthly mass for Poland. He was refused permission to travel to Rome for the canonisation of the Polish saint Fr Maximilian Kolbe. To discredit him in the eyes of people and the Polish Episcopate large quantities of explosives and leaflets calling for a national armed uprising were planted in his flat by the security police and then "found" amidst great publicity, but Fr Popiełuszko made an official statement denying any knowledge of their existence.

Despite these provocations, Fr Popiełuszko enjoys growing prestige and respect even among people outside the Church. People come to confess to him from the remotest regions of the country, some for the first time in years.¹⁹ When he was in prison ordinary criminals, some on trial for murder, treated Fr Popiełuszko with respect and admiration. There have been reports of local policemen refusing to participate in persecuting him. Asked once whether he was not afraid, Fr Popiełuszko answered: "Even if I am afraid, I cannot act otherwise. In fact, I'd only be truly afraid if what I was doing was wrong [. . .] and then, we always live with the risk of death. If we must die suddenly, then it is better to meet death while defending a worthwhile cause than while sitting back and letting injustice take over."²⁰

¹ Unpublished interview.

² *Ibid.*

³ Sermon by Fr Popiełuszko March 1983.

⁴ Ditto, March 1983.

⁵ Ditto, April 1983.

⁶ Ditto, June 1983.

⁷ Ditto, March 1983.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Sermon by Fr Popiełuszko August 1982.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Sermon by Fr Popiełuszko February 1983.

¹² Ditto, March 1982.

¹³ Ditto, August 1983.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sermon by Fr Popiełuszko January 1983.

¹⁶ Ditto, March 1983.

¹⁷ Ditto, October 1982.

¹⁸ Ditto, February 1983.

¹⁹ Unpublished interview.

²⁰ *Ibid.*