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POLISH WITNESSES TO THE FAITH SPEAK ABOUT OF MARY

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A b s t r a c t. Father P. Skarga and John Paul II no adopted the principle that every biography of a saint must mention his or her devotion to Mary. This “omission” of sorts was due to various reasons. Sometimes testimonies were missing, other times the biographers only wanted to highlight the central truths of the Christian Mystery. They both spoke of Marian devotion in the context of the whole of Christian witness, the whole Mystery of Christ. Their accounts indicate that the Polish saints discussed here represent many models of Marian devotion. Fr. Skarga and John Paul II pointed to various forms of Marian devotion of the Polish saints: from summoning of the Mother of the Lord to imitating her attitudes. In the light of these accounts, the hypothesis that there is one way in which the Polish saints lived their devotion to Mary is disproved.

Key words: Piotr Skarga, Jan Paweł II, Polish mariology.

To review the Polish cult of the Virgin Mary in a historical panorama seems to be a task of enormous size. What one can reasonably do then is to present a contribution to this extensive topic, limiting the discussion to a single source. One such special source are biographies of saints. To take a clear account of the time parameter, it is worth consulting two great promoters of testimonies of the saints and Marian devotion, Fr. Piotr Skarga (writings from the turn of the 16th/17th century) and John Paul II (communications from the last two decades of the twentieth century). Although their status in the church

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hierarchy is different, the level of their authority and popularity in respect of the matter of sanctity is very similar. Let us then pay attention to the descriptions found in their works of the role of Mary in the life of the Church and society.

If not the author, St. John Paul II is certainly the promoter of the term *witness to the faith*. Speaking of *witnesses to the faith*, the Pope did not mean only those who had been beatified or canonized. Such teaching was first propounded in the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* in 1994, which called for more than just creating a martyrology of the Christians of the twentieth century.

Piotr Skarga (1536-1612), a Jesuit, published his *Lives of the Saints* in 1579 in Vilnius. The book has enjoyed popularity since its first edition. Seven editions of the book were published during the author's lifetime, and to date there have been more than 30 editions¹. The latest edition contains a selection of the lives of twelve Polish saints: Casimir, Adalbert, Florian, Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr, Andrew Zorard, Kinga, Hyacinth, Stanislaus Kostka, Wenceslaus, Hedwig of Silesia, John Cantius, and Salomea. The biographies of these saints contain longer or shorter references to their devotion to the Virgin Mary. However, none of the figures Skarga presented was described by him as a Marian person. Presenting the spiritual lives of Florian, Bishop Stanislaus, Andrew Zorard, and Wenceslaus, Skarga did not write anything about their devotion to the Virgin Mary.

This leads to the first conclusion. Not all the biographies written by Fr. Skarga pay attention to the attitude of the saints to the Virgin Mary. The manner of presentation was influenced here by the concept of sanctity. For Fr. Skarga, the greatness of the saints lay in the fact that they enjoyed the light of the Lord and were an example to follow. From a theological point of view, this approach is extremely interesting and true, because it points to the source of the Christian virtues. The author does not mention the intercession of the saints.

Meanwhile, John Paul II, referring to the same saints, at least generally mentions the intercession of the saints to Mary: "In our history we have experienced many times the special maternal protection of the Mother of Christ. Casimir the Restorer calls the Mother of God and recovers his lost heritage. In Wiślica, Ladislaus the Elbow-high hears the words: 'Rise, have

¹ P. S k a r g a, *Lives of the Polish Saints*, Cracow 2011 [hereinafter: LPS]. Similar editions were published in the years 1855 and 1912.

confidence, and you shall win' – the Mother of God heartens in this way the king, who has brought the country out of feudal fragmentation. We have associated all the breakthrough victories in our history – from Legnica to Chocim and Vienna, and in our century, the year 1920 – with the intercession of the Mother of God. And in particular, this amazing victory of the monastery-fortress at Jasna Góra in 1655”². It can be seen that in portraying Marian devotion of some of the saints, the Pope was sensitive to more contexts, related both to the Church and society.

1. ST. CASIMIR (d. 1484)

Fr. Skarga, in a short passage, describes St. Casimir's devotion to Mary as *dilectio* and *veneratio*. The author of the *Lives* does not say that Casimir composed verses *to* Mary, but *about* Her. If, therefore, one had to point to the presence of an *invocatio*, then a reservation would have to be made that in this case it did not mean an asking prayer, but a blessing and contemplation of the life of the Mother of Jesus. The influence of Mary in this case is shown as an inspiration to follow.

John Paul II says the following about St. Casimir: “Born into the famous Jagiellon family, Prince Casimir was characterized by special virtues and ‘being made perfect in a short space, he fulfilled a long time’ (Wis 4:13) [...]. A shining model of purity, love, humility, and willingness to serve his brothers, Casimir put nothing above the love of Christ, and he earned among his contemporaries the honourable title of ‘defender of the poor’”³. In the letter for the 6th centenary of the Baptism of Lithuania, we can read the following words: “In this temple, in which beats the heart of the Lithuanian nation, rest, regarded with reverence, the mortal remains of St. Casimir, which were re-interred in the chapel dedicated to him on March 4, 1989”⁴. It is thought-provoking that the Pope says nothing about St. Casimir's veneration of Mary. In his final speech he only mentions Mary as a daughter of

² *4th Pilgrimage to Poland* (Lubaczów 1991), in: J o h n P a u l I I, *The Collected Works*, t. 9, Cracow 2009 (hereinafter: JPDZ) 462.

³ *Apostolic Letter on the Occasion of the 6th Centenary of the Baptism of Lithuania* (1987), JPDZ 3, 132-133.

⁴ *Pilgrimage to Lithuania* (Vilnius, 1993), JPDZ 11, 617.

God the Father, the Mother of Christ, and the Mother of the Church and the apostles, but without reference to the saint himself. It was only during the celebration of the 5th centenary of the death of Casimir that John Paul II made reference to his devotion to the Virgin Mary: “St. Casimir’s short life was marked by unwavering faith, persevering prayer, transparent purity, active love of the poor and needy, and wholehearted devotion to the Holy Virgin”⁵. Worth noting is a hierarchy of sorts in which the saint’s characteristics are presented: the Pope puts in the foreground St. Casimir’s faith. If it is assumed that the previously cited passages from papal teachings followed the same train of thought, then the fact that the Pope is silent about St. Casimir’s Marianity cannot be seen as an oversight or acknowledgement of the negligible value of the saint’s devotion to Mary. If the passage about the saint was to be short, it is obvious that the author had to point first to the fundamental matters of faith and baptism – fundamental also for the building of the cult of the Virgin Mary.

2. ST. ADALBERT (d. 997)

Before addressing the matter of the martyr’s devotion to Mary, it is worth paying attention to the notion of Polishness, not only in the time of Fr. Skarga. St. Adalbert, and even St. Florian, had been included in the group of Polish saints not because of their ethnic origin, but due to the fact that they were worshipped by the Poles in Poland. In this case, the concept of Polishness (and thus society) is similar to the concept of the Church, a reality that transcends boundaries and is subject to Providence. If this logic were to be adopted, then a discussion of Marian devotion of Polish witnesses to the faith would have to embrace many other saints venerated in Poland: St. Francis, St. Anthony, St. Christopher, etc.

In Adalbert’s biography, Fr. Skarga mentions *Bogurodzica*, a hymn to the Mother of God. The biographer does not call the song Marian, but only says that it contains Catholic truths. St. Adalbert is not portrayed as a Marian person, either, but primarily as a teacher of faith among Poles. Fr. Skarga shows a huge fascination with the text of the hymn, noting that St. Adalbert

⁵ *Angelus* 4.03.1984, JPDZ 15, 353-354.

only taught it and was not its author: “That means: Thou who hast given birth to God and man, our Lord, Mother of God’s will chosen, obtain for us the granting of God’s promises.” Mary is shown here as one who intercedes for people to God along with other saints.

Also in this place the Jesuit biographer does not lack theological precision: “And note that we do not invoke the saints in this song, or ascribe divine veneration to them, or call them gods, but treat them as our lives’ companions [...]. With them we go to Christ and say: Christ, have mercy”⁶. Extremely interesting in this passage is the theology of intercession. Mary and the saints are not only the recipients of the prayer: the prayer is addressed to Christ, and their task is to help those who are praying. Intercession understood in this way does not belong to the so-called “tier model”, because it highlights the importance of prayer “to” and “with” Mary and the saints. It is also worth bearing in mind the context in which the significance of such intercession is explained. The author first talks about the reasons for the Incarnation, and then about the value of Christ’s death, the boon of redemption, the hope of heaven, and about what the faithful should ask for in their prayers.

Fr. Skarga does not see the title of the hymn *The Mother of God* as purely Marian, but points out that its text speaks in defence of the mystery of Christ – God and human. This type of approach is characteristic of antiquity. The Ephesian-Alexandrian ruling shows Mariology as a function of Christology. It is necessary to reiterate at this point that this is Skarga’s interpretation and not a characterization of St. Adalbert’s veneration of Mary. The merit of this martyr is that he taught to people this important song that contains a confession of faith.

John Paul II had a lot of opportunity to refer in his teachings to St. Adalbert⁷. On an anniversary of his martyrdom, the Pope said: “Recalling the glorious testimony of this edifying figure of a shepherd, a tireless preacher of Christ to those near and far, we started to listen to his voice. He keeps speaking! With his appealing example, he shows to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and young people an ideal of life offered generously to the Lord and the brethren”⁸. The Pope first points to the need of following the

⁶ Ibid, 75.

⁷ *Apostolic Letter on the Millennium of Episcopal Consecration of St. Adalbert*, JPDZ 3, 674-676; *Letter to the Polish Bishops 1997*, *ibid.*, 870-873.

⁸ *Angelus 27.04.1997* [Millennium of Adalbert’s Martyrdom], JPDZ 16, 276.

saint and the need to live in a relation, or discovering the truth about the *communio sanctorum*. He does not talk about praying to St. Adalbert, but about listening to him. John Paul II utters similar words on another occasion: “And on this Common, St. Adalbert is speaking to our forefathers”⁹. This type of exhortation encouraging the faithful to listen to the Saint sounds original and is not frequently encountered in the theology of the saints.

According to the Bishop of Rome, St. Adalbert was a martyr, because he was a witness. His martyrdom thus not only relates to the suffering associated with death. Such a great testimony had its foundations in the grace of baptism, but also in the community of the baptized forefathers.

Just as in the case of his teaching about St. Casimir, John Paul II first drew attention to the most fundamental issues. Only then did there appear an opportunity to talk about Mary: “It is common knowledge that the author [of the hymn – my note, kp] is unknown. The tradition ascribes the origin of *The Mother of God* to St. Adalbert. But let me first speak from my own position”¹⁰. And he continued in the following way: “Dear brothers and sisters, *Bogurodzica* is the most ancient monument of Polish literature. The history of literature enables us to place the oldest records of this wonderful song–message in the fifteenth century. I call it a song–message because *Bogurodzica* is not just a song. It is a profession of faith, a Polish symbol, Polish *Credo*; it is catechesis; it is even a document of Christian upbringing. It incorporates the main truths of faith and principles of morality. It is not merely a historical monument. It is a document of life. Jakub Wujek, who came from Wągrowiec in Wielkopolska, and who was the oldest Polish biblical scholar and translator of the Scriptures, referred to the song as ‘the Polish catechism’. It is always with deep emotion, with rapture, that we sing it, remembering that it used to be sung at solemn and decisive moments. And we read it with deep feeling. It is difficult to read these ancient verses in any other way, if we think of the fact that generations of our forefathers had been brought up on them. *The Mother of God* is not just an ancient cultural document. It has given Polish culture its fundamental original framework”¹¹. The Pope’s interpretation is similar to the one proposed by Fr. Skarga. Neither of the authors draws the conclusion that St. Adalbert was a Marian person.

⁹ *1st Pilgrimage to Poland* (Gniezno 1979), *ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹ *1st Pilgrimage to Poland* (Lubaczów 1979), JPDZ 9, 44.

3. ST. STANISLAUS, BISHOP AND MARTYR (d. 1079)

In the biography of Bishop Stanislaus, Fr. Skarga says nothing about his devotion to the Virgin Mary, and does not even mention Mary herself. A similar picture emerges from the teachings of John Paul II.

Before he became Bishop of Rome, Karol Wojtyła devoted many years to organizing the celebrations of the 9th centenary of St. Stanislaus' death. In a special letter, he wrote: "Surely one must extol the power present in baptism, namely in the sacrament by which we are buried with Christ into his death. He [St. Stanislaus – my note, k.p.] now protects that nation with his heavenly patronage together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland, and with St. Adalbert [...]. Therefore, both Saints, Stanislaus and Adalbert, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland and Mother of the Church, protect the fatherland¹²". This passage says nothing about the bishop's devotion to Mary. The Pope only points to the presence of the bishop martyr among the saints, among whom is also the Mother of Christ. In addition, he emphasizes the power of the sacrament of Baptism.

During his first pilgrimage to Poland, where a lot of references were made to the 9th centenary Jubilee, the Pope's speeches contained no mention of Mary or Marian devotion: "Nine hundred years have passed since his death at the hands of King Boleslaw the Bold at Skałka. The death of the Bishop who proclaimed to everyone – not excluding the King – the truth of the faith and of Christian morality had a significance of special witness to the Gospel and to Christ himself"¹³.

The Pope also spoke on the occasion of the anniversary of the canonization of Stanislaus, but again made no reference to Mary or the Bishop's worship of Mary¹⁴, despite the fact that the papal letter included many historical and theological details: "Sometime in the thirteenth century, in 1253, the Poles lived to witness the canonization of the first son of their land, who at the same time was the shepherd of the capital city of Cracow. The canonization of Saint Stanislaus was held in Assisi; his countrymen, however, and especially the Princes from the ruling Piast dynasty, felt the need for assem-

¹² *Apostolic Letter on the 9th Centenary of the Death of St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr* (1979), JPDZ 3, 839-842. Mary is indirectly invoked during the Vespers of Pentecost.

¹³ *1st Pilgrimage to Poland* (Częstochowa 1979), JPDZ 9, 74.

¹⁴ *Letter on the Occasion of the 750th Anniversary of the Canonization of Saint Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr* (2003), JPDZ 3, 879-881.

bling in Cracow, to experience on their own land the Paschal joy of their compatriot's elevation to the altars of the universal Church: the joy of the birth of a saint to the land of their fathers. They saw in him a sign of God's Providence for this land. They saw him as their patron and intercessor before God. They pinned on him high hopes of a better future for their homeland, which was then in a difficult position because of feudal fragmentation"¹⁵. It is worth noting that the Pope brings to the foreground the Paschal mystery, in which the Bishop and then the whole Church of Poland were called to participate.

4. ST. KINGA (d. 1292)

In the Life of Saint Kinga, Fr. Skarga described a certain practice: "There was this custom that the king's children, as soon as they had been weaned from milk, were given the Most Holy Body of Christ in a chalice, but because she, as soon as she had been baptized, spoke the words: *Ave Regina coelorum*, she was given the Lord's Body even before she tasted the breast"¹⁶. According to the biographer, the Saint's first words were: "Hail the Queen of Heaven". Skarga then reminisces Kinga's youth and her love of Mary: "When on her way, she never passed a church without sending an offering to it, and when the church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, she walked to it barefoot on the worst and most rocky of roads"¹⁷. And further: "On the eve of Virgin Mary's day, she only ate some wafers"¹⁸. According to this account, St. Kinga's worship of Mary would consist in *veneratio* and *dilectio*.

John Paul II canonized Kinga in 1999, during his seventh pilgrimage to Poland. His speeches made no mention of Mary or veneration of Mary, but much was said of the need to bear witness to the faith: "St. Kinga and all the Saints and Blessed of the thirteenth century reply: it requires witness. It requires courage not to put your faith under a bushel-basket. And in the end it requires that in the hearts of believers there should abound that desire for

¹⁵ *2nd Pilgrimage to Poland* (Niepokalanów 1983), JPDZ 9, 202.

¹⁶ LPS, 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 148

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 157.

holiness which not only shapes one's private life but also influences society as a whole"¹⁹. Sanctity, according to these words is, above all, the exposing of one's faith in the form of a testimony.

5. ST. HYACINTH (d. 1257)

Fr. Skarga wrote about the Dominican in the context of Mary only this: "Once on the Eve of the Assumption of Our Lady, *pondering* [emphasis mine, kp] with tearful joy on Her life and glory in Heaven, he saw heavenly light and in it the most Praiseworthy Virgin, and rejoiced immensely in her words that he had heard"²⁰. St. Hyacinth's devotion to Mary would then involve *veneratio* and *invocatio*. This was not, however, an invocation of Mary as such, but rather contemplation of Her in the glory of Heaven and listening to her words.

6. ST. STANISLAUS KOSTKA (d. 1568)

The biography of St. Stanislaus written by Fr. Skarga contains quite a lot of references to his veneration of Mary: "He had wholehearted devotion towards the Most Pure Mother of God; and because his companions, young students, had the Brotherhood of St. Barbara, virgin and martyr, in Vienna, he also took Her for his patroness and piously recommended himself to her prayers and compassion. And having turned all his mind to heavenly things, he dedicated both his school exercises and argument writing to the praise of the Most Pure Mother"²¹. It was, then, a cult of Mary based on the "to Mary" model.

While reading, one can find in the text features specific to St. Stanislaus' Marian experience. It was an experience of receiving Jesus from Mary. It was

¹⁹ *7th Pilgrimage to Poland* (Stary Sącz 1999), JPDZ 9, 875.

²⁰ LPS, 176.

²¹ LPS, 189.

He who had become the cause of the Saint's joy. According to Fr. Skarga, Stanislaus' love of Mary developed with time. The Saint persisted in his love of Mary until his death.

John Paul II had an occasion to mention St. Stanislaus Kostka, writing a letter to the parish in Cracow where he began to read the works of John and Teresa. In this letter, however, the Pope does not say a single word about the Saint's devotion to Mary²².

7. HEDWIG OF SILESIA (d. 1243)

The work of Fr. Skarga contains only very brief information about St. Hedwig's veneration of Mary. A picture of Mary held in her fingers had become a kind of sign of her love of the Mother of Jesus.

St. Hedwig's veneration of Mary was given more attention in John Paul II's homily delivered during his stay in Wroclaw: "It was in her widowhood that she discovered that through the vocation of marriage and maternity Christ prepared her for yet another vocation, by which she was to fulfil to the end the will of God, becoming – through utter and exclusive devotion to the Divine Spouse, adopting the monastic style of life – a sister and mother of Christ, according to His own words: 'For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mk 3,35). We read these words in today's Gospel. Jadwiga fulfilled God's will to the end, becoming in the Holy Spirit 'a sister and mother' of Christ. And it was her – Hedwig's – spiritual motherhood that was to be fulfilled and confirmed in a special way in relation to her own son, Henry the Pious. He died – as we all know – in an unequal battle of Legnica fought against the Tartars, who at that time (in the first half of the thirteenth century) penetrated with their warlike hordes far into the west, raiding the whole of the Polish land. Henry the Pious fell on the battlefield at Legnica, but the Tartars did not go further west; on the contrary they retreated to the east, relieving the lands of the Piasts from their yoke. One can say that already at that time, Poland had become the 'Bulwark of Christendom'. Hedwig the mother grieved the death of her son Henry in

²² *Letter to the Parishioners of St. Stanislaus Kostka's Church in Cracow* (1996), JPDZ 3, 869.

the spirit of faith, resembling in this the Mother of God, who at the foot of the cross of Calvary made a sacrifice of her Divine Son for the salvation of the world. In this way, saint Hedwig of Silesia entered the history of Poland and the history of Europe”²³. The papal account clearly highlights Hedwig’s attitude of imitating Mary. The Saint’s motherhood is compared to that of the Mother of Christ. And the whole account of the Saint’s life is shown in the light of the word of God.

8. ST. JOHN CANTIUS (d. 1473)

Fr. Skarga attests to the Saint’s love of Jesus and Mary²⁴. The biographer also brings up the subject of Marian apparitions. The account regards an event that took place on Christmas; John Cantius, going for an early matins, saw a man lying in the snow, freezing, and gave his coat to him. On coming back home, he found the coat had been returned to him.

The teachings of John Paul II provide no insights into the Saint John Cantius’ veneration of Mary.

9. BLESSED SALOMEA (d. 1268)

Fr. Skarga wrote in the biography of Saint Salomea: “Do not ask the Lord for my life, because I am asking Christ to free me from this prison [...], and by intercession of His Most Blessed Mother, may Christ deign to bring me to eternal coolness”²⁵. The biographer gives a testimony about Salomea’s summoning of Mary, but also stresses that the addressee of the Saint’s prayers and the one who could fulfil her request, was Christ.

The teachings of John Paul II provide no insights into the Saint’s devotion to Mary. This should not come as a surprise, because the Pope did not make

²³ *2nd Pilgrimage to Poland* (Wrocław 1983), JPDZ, 253.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 286.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 298.

it a rule that all his accounts of the saints should mention their devotion to Mary. This, for instance, was the case during the beatification of 108 martyrs in 1999, when he made no reference to their veneration of Mary. Only in the hour of the Angelus, did he say a few words about Mary on that day: "Together with Mary, we give thanks to God for those from our own generation who are witnesses to his presence. We give him thanks, believing that from him comes the power which enables the weak to persevere in love, despite trials and difficult experiences. May the example of the martyrs, raised today to the altars, strengthen our religious life, our hope and our confidence; may it become a support for those who are tempted to doubt or despair because of the difficulties of daily life. May we never cease to draw from Christ, the Son of Mary, the strength which fills the human heart with the courage of faith, with trust in Divine Providence and with the love that is stronger than death"²⁶.

10. CONCLUSIONS

Neither Father Skarga nor John Paul II adopted the principle that every biography of a saint must mention his or her devotion to Mary. This "omission" of sorts was due to various reasons. Sometimes testimonies were missing, other times the biographers only wanted to highlight the central truths of the Christian Mystery. They both spoke of Marian devotion in the context of the whole of Christian witness, the whole Mystery of Christ. Their accounts indicate that the Polish saints discussed here represent many models of Marian devotion. A distinction is made among them in the writings of both authors, but there is no evidence that one form of Marian devotion is promoted or favoured over others. Where Marian devotion is mentioned, this is done to show how the love of the Mother of the Lord, confidence in her intercession and vibrant presence in the community of the Church, and especially the imitation of her Christian attitudes, had helped the saints in fulfilling the will of God. Fr. Skarga and John Paul II pointed to various forms of Marian devotion of the Polish saints: from summoning of the Mother of the Lord to imitating her attitudes. In the light of these accounts, the hypothesis that there is one way in which the Polish saints lived their devotion to

²⁶ *7th Pilgrimage to Poland* (Warsaw 1999), JPDZ 9, 845.

Mary is disproved. Thus, a claim can be made that the witness of the saints does not contain one theological model of the impact of the Mother of the Lord on the life of society.

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POLSCY ŚWIADKOWIE WIARY MÓWIĄ O MARYI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Studium życiorysów polskich świętych z okresu X-XVI wieku, których przedstawiali ks. Skarga i Jan Paweł II prowadzi do wniosku, że polscy święci reprezentują wiele modeli maryjności: od przyzywania Matki Pana, po naśladowanie Jej postaw. W relacjach obu autorów widać umiejętność ich rozróżnienia, ale brak dowodów na promowanie i eksponowanie jednej formy maryjności. Żywoty niektórych świętych nawet przemilczają sprawę maryjności. W świetle tych relacji negatywnie zostaje zweryfikowana hipoteza o jednej drodze maryjnej polskich świętych.

Słowa kluczowe: Piotr Skarga, Jan Paweł II, mariologia polska.