

Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko as an Authority Figure and Role Model for Contemporary Youth:

A Reflection on the 40th Anniversary of His Martyrdom

Błogosławiony Jerzy Popiełuszko jako autorytet i wzór osobowy dla współczesnej młodzieży: Refleksja w 40. rocznicę jego męczeństwa



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Abstract: The article takes a closer look at Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko as an authority figure and role model for today's youth, the occasion for which is the 40th anniversary of his martyrdom. The analyses are based on interdisciplinary methodology developed at the intersection of moral theology, pedagogy and sociology of values. The first part presents a theoretical outline of the concepts of *authority figure*, *role model* and *imitation/emulation*, pointing to their biblical, historical and axiological determinants. Then the main trends and socio-cultural transformations that affect the contemporary crisis of authority are presented. The main part of the study is a biographical sketch of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, showing the key values in his teaching (truth, freedom, solidarity, human dignity, love and courage) in the context of the socio-political realities of Poland of the 1980s. A comparative analysis of the axiological preferences of Polish youth and the values preached by the chaplain of "Solidarity" confirms the hypothesis that these attitudes are compatible. In conclusion, Fr. Popiełuszko's figure can be an important point of reference for the young generation in building their identities and searching for authentic models based on Christian values.

Keywords: Jerzy Popiełuszko, authority figure, role model, upbringing, youth, values, moral theology

Abstrakt: Artykuł przybliża postać błogosławionego Jerzego Popiełuszki jako autorytetu i wzoru osobowego dla współczesnej młodzieży, zwłaszcza w kontekście czterdziestej rocznicy jego męczeńskiej śmierci. Analiza opiera się na metodologii interdyscyplinarnej z pogranicza teologii moralnej, pedagogiki oraz socjologii wartości. W pierwszej części przedstawiono zarys teoretyczny pojęć: *autorytet*, *wzór osobowy* i *naśladowanie*, wskazując na ich biblijne, historyczne oraz aksjologiczne uwarunkowania. Następnie zaprezentowano główne nurty i przemiany społeczno-kulturowe, które wpływają na współczesny kryzys autorytetu. Zasadniczą część opracowania stanowi rys biograficzny ks. Jerzego Popiełuszki, ukazujący kluczowe wartości w jego nauczaniu (prawda, wolność, solidarność, godność człowieka, miłość i odwaga) w kontekście realiów społeczno-politycznych Polski lat 80. XX wieku. Analiza porównawcza preferencji aksjologicznych młodzieży polskiej oraz wartości głoszonych przez kapelana 'Solidarności' potwierdza hipotezę o kompatybilności tych postaw. W konkluzji wskazano, że postać ks. Popiełuszki może stanowić dla młodego pokolenia ważny punkt odniesienia w budowaniu tożsamości i poszukiwaniu autentycznych wzorców oparcia na wartościach chrześcijańskich.

Słowa kluczowe: Jerzy Popiełuszko, autorytet, wzór osobowy, wychowanie, młodzież, wartości, teologia moralna



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INTRODUCTION

The fortieth anniversary of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko's martyrdom provides a special opportunity to take a fresh look at his figure and the impact he had on shaping the modern understanding of authority figure and role model in the field of upbringing and education. Murdered in 1984, the chaplain of "Solidarity" remains a symbol of steadfastness, fidelity to Christian values and commitment to human dignity. His testimony of life acquires special significance in the context of the contemporary crisis of authority and growing moral relativism, especially among young people.

This is a study in moral theology, placing particular emphasis on the practical dimension of ethical and spiritual formation. At the same time, its content is a result of interdisciplinary research, considering findings in such fields as pedagogy, sociology, psychology, philosophy, ethics, praxeology, cultural anthropology and linguistics.

Theological reflection (especially in the moral aspect) allows for a deeper understanding of the role and importance of persons picked as role models and authority figures. This is particularly important in the process of upbringing and the broader perspective of forming human identity. The main research objective is to answer the question to what extent Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko can be viewed today as an authority figure and role model, and what implications this may have for today's upbringing and educational process.

In addition, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the concepts of *authority figure*, *role model* and *imitation/emulation* in light of the tenets of moral theology and other human and social sciences. The most important values that Fr. Jerzy preached and lived by—in the context of the socio-political situation of Poland in the 1980s—will also be identified, and the axiological preferences of contemporary Polish youth will be established, based on available empirical data, in order to confront them with the values represented by Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko.

An interdisciplinary analysis was used to achieve these goals, combining the perspectives of moral theology, pedagogy and sociology of values. The subjects of the study include source texts and biographies of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, as well as scholarly publications and empirical data (both qualitative and quantitative). It is supplemented by sociological reports on values and religiosity, which provide the background for the verification of the main hypothesis of the compatibility of the attitudes of young people with the values proclaimed by the chaplain of "Solidarity."

In order to answer the question of whether the figure of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko can be currently perceived as an authority figure and role model, the idea of imitation as the foundation of a role model and rule of conduct will first be presented, with reference to the biblical and historical dimension of the *sequela Christi* and its development in the Christian tradition, taking into account the development of this concept in moral theology. The following part will present the most important socio-cultural transformations that affect the perception

of authority figures and role models. Then selected models of education and upbringing will be analyzed in the context of contemporary educational needs. Finally, the significance of authority figures and role models in upbringing and education will be discussed.

In the next part, which refers directly to the person of Blessed Jerzy, his biography will be outlined, taking into account the historical context and the values important to young people, and then a comparison will be made between these values and the axiological preferences of young Poles. Finally, conclusions drawn from the analysis will be presented, followed by an assessment of both the timeliness of Fr. Popiełuszko's message in relation to the young generation and the possibility of using his testimony in the educational process. The theological and moral approach, enriched by the results of sociological and pedagogical research, allows for the complete evaluation of whether and to what extent Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko can be an authentic point of reference today for young people seeking lasting values, courage and authority based on truth and human dignity.

1. THE IDEA OF IMITATION/EMULATION AS THE FOUNDATION OF A ROLE MODEL AND RULE OF CONDUCT

In theology, the role model issue appeared at the very beginning of Christianity and was closely related to the idea of following in the footsteps of Christ (*sequela Christi*) (Rylko 1996). This profoundly evangelical concept, developed by the patristic tradition and medieval thinkers, gradually acquired a moral dimension and practical application in various forms of Christian life (Zadykiewicz 2011). In the 19th century, thanks to the legacy of Fritz Tillmann (1939abc), it became one of the key ideas of Christian morality, to be also reflected in the teaching of the Church (Jan Paweł II 1993).

Although a detailed analysis of the importance of the idea of imitation in moral theology is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the concept originated from the ancient concept of *μίμησις* (Latin: *imitatio*). Initially it referred mainly to aesthetics and fine arts, but over time it began to take on an ethical dimension as well (Reale and Radice 2012): not only inanimate objects can be made in the likeness of some exquisite and beautiful specimen (imitation), but also human life can be led according to a superior and admired model (emulation). Imitation/emulation plays an important role in human religious experience, and traces of it can be found, both in relation to deities and human role models, in almost all cultures and religious traditions (Zadykiewicz 2011).

2. MODERN CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

In today's society, the approach to categories such as imitation/emulation, authority figure or role model is not clear-cut. In addition to the affirmation and constant emphasis on their importance in education and upbringing, in forming

one's own identity (Rynio 1997), and even in defending democracy and liberty from degradation (Hallowell 1993), one hears more and more about the waning of authority figures, their disappearance, destruction or pathological fall (Wagner, 2005; Mikołajko 1991). Even if—as Hanna Arendt (2011) points out—authority has not entirely disappeared from the modern world, it is undoubtedly experiencing a deep crisis and is subject to change (Rewera 2023).

After the Second World War, Western societies, to refer to Alexander Mitscherlich's (1963) term, became a society without a father (*Vaterlose Gesellschaft*), suffering from a crisis of fatherhood and the erosion of previous authority figures. In this society, the traditional father figure as a symbol of authority, moral guide and role model has been undermined by social change (having its background in urbanization) in favor of modern institutions (e.g., school, media, state). The consequences were the breakdown of the family structure, a crisis of identity and authority, and a change in upbringing (parenting) and education: as more emphasis was now placed on the partnership model of upbringing, this necessarily entailed weakening of hierarchical relationships. A society without fathers taught children only critical theories, confusing the very vision of upbringing and reversing the order of discipleship. Today it is fathers who want to learn from their sons. In this situation, the attitude of emulation, and consequently authority figures and role models, tend to be considered a violation of the fundamental ethical rule related to the need to affirm one's own self (Zadykowicz 2011).

The metaphor of a fatherless society captures well certain unease about ongoing cultural changes and the lack of stable authority figures. It fits more broadly into the anthropological and cultural crisis arising from several currents of thought and ideologies that have shaped the understanding of man, his dignity, social relations and the end-purpose of his existence over the centuries. These include cognitive relativism and the crisis of truth, subjectivism, deconstruction of reality and the crisis of identity, cultural fragmentation and pluralism or permissivism. They are essential elements of the postmodern vision of reality, in which the classical concepts of meaning, value and truth are negated (Życiński 2001). As observed by some philosophers (Vattimo and Rovatti 2010), postmodernism leads to a radical deconstruction of all fixed points of reference, which translates into the rejection of the objective moral order and the decline of authority.

This is also fostered by the current understanding of freedom as unlimited autonomy, in which authority tends to be seen as a tool of coercion. Submission to authority is sometimes interpreted as a threat to self-realization or a manifestation of behavior incompatible with democratic ideals. This phenomenon is closely linked to the crisis of intergenerational relations, traditionally based on asymmetry and authority. Nowadays, one can see the gradual withdrawal of adults from educational and parenting responsibility, which further weakens the role of authority figures and role models (Bakiera and Harwas-Napierała 2016).¹

¹ For the sake of the public good, which requires the involvement of positive role models, the sphere of public affairs should be reserved exclusively for people who enjoy social authority. In reality,

Strong anti-authoritarian tendencies emerged in pedagogy and psychology in the 20th century. They were a reaction to earlier rigorism and authoritarianism in upbringing and education and an expression of fascination with new concepts of freedom and personal development. Among the manifestations of these tendencies was the idea of liberal (commonly called “stress-free”) upbringing (parenting), promoted by Benjamin Spock (1946) and popularized in the 1960s.

3. MODELS OF UPBRINGING AND THE AUTHORITY OF AN EDUCATOR

Diana Baumrind distinguished three basic styles of upbringing (parenting): authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative (Baumrind 1966 and 1967). In the context of this analysis, the latter is crucial. The mechanisms and goals indicated by the author apply to parents, but can also be applied to other authority figures and role models, as well as to the idea of emulation itself:

The authoritative parent attempts to direct the child's activities in a rational, issue-oriented manner. She encourages verbal give and take, shares with the child the reasoning behind her policy, and solicits his objections when he refuses to conform. Both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity are valued by the authoritative parent. Therefore, she exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergence but does not hem the child in with restrictions. She enforces her own perspective as an adult but recognizes the child's individual interests and special ways. The authoritative parent affirms the child's present qualities but also sets standards for future conduct. She uses reason, power, and shaping by regime and reinforcement to achieve her objectives and does not base her decisions on group consensus or the individual child's desires. (Baumrind 1966, 981).

Similar mechanisms operate in the model of education omitted from Baumrind's typology, referred to as the preventive system of St. John Bosco. In it, Turin educator developed a unique relationship between the educator (tutor, formator) and the pupil. His approach, based on love, reason and religion, not only did not weaken the authority of the educator, but actually strengthened it. A key element of his pedagogy was assistance, that is, the creative presence of the educator in the daily lives of young people, and the educative love referred to as *amorevolezza* (Gocko 2011).

One researcher of the St. John Bosco system noted: “Assistance renders the preventive system as a positive action, directing the pupil towards the good through the person of the educator.” (Misiaszek 1987/1988, 59). Furthermore, the Italian concept of *amorevolezza* meant love that is reasonable and heartfelt, through which the educator not only gained the respect of young people, but also

however, this is not the case. Democracy does not have the proper tools for, and even does not require, verification of the competence and qualities of those who engage in public life. Given the deficit of personal role models in social life, there is a risk of promoting negative, ambivalent or contradictory models, often artificially created through the media in the form of idols, celebrities or trendsetters. However, they cannot offer a coherent worldview, an original sense of life or a thoughtful moral stance, essentially becoming a negation of authority and a role model (Bakiera and Harwas-Napierała 2016).

built lasting relationships based on mutual trust (Braido 2006). It characterized an educator who was concerned about the pupil's development and contributed to strengthening his authority (Bosko 2016). This approach reveals that authority based on personal commitment, responsibility and authentic testimony of life remains the key element of effective upbringing.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF AUTHORITY AND ROLE MODELS IN UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION

Etymologically, "authority" derives from the Latin word *auctoritas*, one of the key concepts in ancient Roman political, philosophical and social thought. *Auctoritas* referred to the prestige, solemnity and respect enjoyed by a person or institution, whereby it did not derive directly from formal power or office (potestas or imperium), but from social recognition, charisma, influence, experience and virtue. Authority expresses model, example, esteem and influence (Opozda 2016). Given its important public function, authority is linked to responsibility for values and the formation of responsibility for values in others. For this to happen, authority must find consent and acceptance (Łuczyński 2012).

In the discourse on authority figures and role models, the axiological dimension plays a key role. In contrast to authoritarian tendencies, being an authority figure is determined by a person's internal conditioning, including personal qualities, and the immanent qualities of the institution / social setting involved, in the broadest sense of the term (Barabas 2019). Authority is associated with subjects who stand out, inspiring social recognition, and who, through mechanisms of imitation, identification and modeling, exert influence on others, providing them with models of responsibility and facilitating the categorization of complex social reality (Wołpiuk-Ochocińska 2023). The positive consequences of the existence of authority are associated with inspiration, the source of which is an individual distinguished by certain qualities, which in itself is an important criterion for recognizing him or her as an authority (Bakiera and Harwas-Napierała 2016).

The concept of the role model is variously grasped, classified and characterized. This diversity, as in the case of authority, is the result of the diversity of the disciplines that take it as the object of study. Each of these disciplines emphasizes different aspects. A few of them are worth noting, given the importance of role models in upbringing and education. In pedagogy, the role model is defined by the overarching concept of the educational ideal, which is the highest goal of upbringing, to which other elements of the process (objectives, content and methods) should be subordinated. In sociology, a role model is a model of an ideal member of a community, determined by a set of norms and perceptions related to one's social role and defined by recognized authority figures in a given community. In psychology, on the other hand, a role model is described through the prism of the category of mature personality, which is the goal of human development (Wysocka 2008). Thus, a role model is a real or fictional character that implies

a certain valuation (Kulpaczyński 2008) and encourages emulation as someone to look up to (Ossowska 2000).

Role model and authority figure are sometimes treated as synonymous terms, although they are different. The association of authority figure with the axiological dimension adopted in this research makes the person perceived as an authority both a significant person and a role model. However, this does not work the other way around: not every role model performs the function of authority figure, since role models can also have a negative or ambivalent dimension. In contrast, authority refers only to the qualities of a person perceived positively. The impact of an authority figure takes place only after the affirmation of his or her qualities, while role models also have an impact when they are negated (Bakiera and Harwas-Napierała 2016).

The strongest connection between role models and valuation is evident in Max Scheler's concept, who—while classifying values—simultaneously categorized and described basic role models: The saint embodied religious values, the genius—spiritual values (truth, goodness and beauty), the hero—vital (life) values, the pioneer of civilization—utilitarian and technological values, and the artist—hedonistic values (Scheler 2004).

Małgorzata Karwatowska's 2010 study of authority in the opinion of young people, conducted among 120 high school students in Lublin, confirmed the axiological determinants of the emergence of authority figures, as well as the identification of role models with personal authority based on subjective qualities. Consequently, an important issue for further research steps in this study is an attempt to determine, on the basis of available research, the axiological preferences of contemporary Polish youth, and to establish to what extent the figure of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko addresses these preferences. Research involving the reconstruction of axiological preferences of the young generation has been carried out by sociologists and pedagogues in Poland using various methodologies and techniques for at least several decades. This paper will use the research of Małgorzata Karwatowska (2012) and the report of a nationwide sociological survey released this year: *Religious and Moral Condition of Upper Secondary School Students throughout the Years* (Marianiński 2024). Before we get to that, however, a brief biography of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko will first be presented, taking into account those qualities, attitudes and values that can respond to the axiological preferences of today's youth. In the final part of the research, this step will make it possible to answer the question to what extent the chaplain of the "Solidarity" movement can be an authority figure and role model for young people.

5. BLESSED JERZY POPIEŁUSZKO AS A ROLE MODEL

The survey, conducted a month before the beatification of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko in May 2010 by the Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [Public Opinion Research Center] (on a 1,000-person representative random sample

of Poland's adult population), showed that knowledge of who Fr. Popiełuszko was was declared by 81% of respondents, with nearly one-third (32%) believing they know the figure very well. Nearly one-fifth (18%) admit they had heard of Fr. Popiełuszko, but did not know exactly who he was. One person in a hundred had not heard of him at all. The best familiarity with the figure of the priest was declared primarily by respondents from the largest urban areas, especially Warsaw (where Fr. Popiełuszko worked in several parishes), people over 45 years of age and religious people. Familiarity was weakest among the youngest respondents (18-24 years old): only 13% of them declared that they knew the figure very well, 44% said that they knew him fairly well, and 41% that while the name was not unfamiliar to them, they did not know exactly who he was or what his merits were. Two in a hundred of the young from among the surveyed have never heard of him. More than three-fourths of those surveyed (78%) had watched a movie or documentary show about Fr. Popiełuszko at least once in the quarter-century since the priest's assassination, one in eight (13%) had visited his grave at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Warsaw's Żoliborz district, and 12% had seen an exhibition dedicated to this pastor of workers from the *Huta Warszawa* [Warsaw Steelworks] (CBOS 2010).

These data might suggest that the presentation of a biography of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko within the context of this research is dispensable. However, the author is aware that among potential readers there may be—due to the publication in English—people unfamiliar with Polish history and the life and work of Fr. Popiełuszko. Hence, it is expedient to show briefly, with reference to selected English-language biographies firmly rooted in the political realities of the totalitarian system of the time, the most important facts of his life, the circumstances of his martyrdom, the main themes of his teaching and the birth of devotion to the chaplain of “Solidarity.”²

5.1 BLESSED JERZY POPIEŁUSZKO AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF HIS TIMES

Jerzy Popiełuszko was born on September 14, 1947 in the village of Okopy in the Białystok region. At his baptism at the parish church of St. Peter and Paul in Suchowola, he was given the name Alfons (Alphonsus), which he changed to Jerzy (George) at the end of his studies at the higher seminary—on the advice of a close relative, Fr. Jerzy Rydzewski, a Salesian. He finished elementary school and high school in Suchowola. He was an average student, but his family home atmosphere endowed him with an air of piety, openness, respect for truth and respect for human dignity.

² Several years ago, an English-language article entitled “Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko—Victim of Political Repression or Martyr of the Faith?” was published in *Seminare: Learned Investigations*. Milena Kindziuk, author of numerous publications on the Church's recent history in Poland and Bl. Jerzy Popiełuszko, analyzes in it the pastoral involvement of the chaplain of “Solidarity,” the motives for his activity, the course of the Masses for the Homeland celebrated by him and the content of the sermons he preached (Kindziuk 2017).

After passing his leaving exams (Polish: *matura*) in 1965, he entered the Higher Metropolitan Seminary in Warsaw. His courage and charisma began to show at the beginning of his second year of studies, when he was drafted into the army for two years after his oblation. The conscription of seminarians was part of the repression against the Church in Poland. Alumni were sent to special units of heightened regime, where they were subjected to systematic atheization and pressure to abandon their vocation or cooperate with the state apparatus. As one of his biographers writes, for Popiełuszko this was a time of growing up for the role he was to play in the future: "Paradoxically, the difficult military service unleashed hidden energies in him that were soon to surface when, already as a Warsaw priest, he had to come face to face with the apparatchiks of the Security Service." (Sochoń 2010, 26–27). He has never given in, initiated forbidden religious practices, and kept up his colleagues' spirits, even though he faced severe punishment and humiliation for doing so. This seriously damaged his health, and the troubles associated with it followed him for the rest of his life.

He was ordained a priest on May 28, 1972, in the Warsaw Archcathedral at the hands of the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński (beatified in 2021). On his primatial card Fr. Jerzy included the words: "God sends me to preach the Gospel and heal the wounds of aching hearts" (cf. Luke 4:18). From 1972 to 1979 he worked as a curate in various parishes in Warsaw and the surrounding area. He was remembered as a humble, dedicated pastor with an extraordinary gift for establishing contact and close ties with people, especially the sick and needy. During his ministry at the Child Jesus parish in Żoliborz, he was appointed chaplain of the medical professionals. Due to health problems, Cardinal Wyszyński later delegated him to the academic pastoral ministry at St. Anne's Church. As pastor of medical students, Fr. Popiełuszko became a confidant, counselor and excellent confessor for them. In May 1980, he took up residence at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Żoliborz.

In the summer of 1980, a wave of strikes against the communist regime broke out in Poland. On August 31, Fr. Jerzy celebrated the first Mass for the protesting workers of the Warsaw Steelworks, thereby becoming their pastor. In time, his commitment to the world of labor led him to the First National Assembly of "Solidarity" in Gdańsk and to support striking students at the Medical Academy in Warsaw and cadets at the Higher Officers School of Firefighting (now the Main School of Fire Service, SGSP). Following the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981, Fr. Popiełuszko actively organized aid to the internees and their families, brought medical supplies from the West and provided spiritual support to the persecuted. Beginning in February 1982, he celebrated Masses for the Homeland, during which he reminded people of human dignity, freedom (always referred to the good, truth and love), solidarity and the need for involvement in building the common good. The regime authorities attempted to get him to cooperate, with subsequent provocations, harassment attempts and pressure on the archdiocesan curia to restrict the priest's activities. Fr. Popiełuszko was falsely accused of

playing politics, and content considered “hateful” was being sought in his sermons (Kindziuk 2017). In fact, he preached the principle “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). On October 13, 1984, the first attempt was made on his life (Szczecina 2023).

On October 19, 1984, Fr. Popiełuszko traveled to Bydgoszcz, where he celebrated Mass at the Church of the Holy Polish Brothers Martyrs and led meditations during the Rosary, encouraging people to pray for freedom from fear, revenge and violence. On his way back, he was abducted by Security Service officers, brutally tortured and murdered. He was thrown into the Vistula River from the dam in Włocławek in a sack loaded with stones. His body was not found until October 30. One of the prosecutors investigating the circumstances of Fr. Popiełuszko’s abduction and murder claims that after his abduction he may still have been tortured by Soviet secret services for several days, prompting the official date of death of October 19, 1984 to be postponed by at least a few days (Gromadzki and Witkowski 2022).

Fr. Jerzy’s funeral on November 3, 1984 gathered between 450,000 and one million people (Kęska 2023). His grave at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church became a place of pilgrimage. On June 6, 2010, he was beatified as a martyr for the faith, and his death was recognized as an authentic martyrdom.

5.2 THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF BLESSED JERZY POPIEŁUSZKO AS A SOURCE OF EDUCATIONAL VALUES

The condition for the emergence of authority and, so to speak, its foundation are values (Karwatowska 2012). An important step toward achieving the research goals will be to identify the most significant values that Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko followed and defended. They will then be confronted with the axiological preferences of Polish youth in the 21st century to answer the question of whether these values find recognition in the opinions of contemporary youth and to what extent they can inspire everyday life.

Based on the anthology of homilies and sermons of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko and selected publications analyzing his character and activity in terms of axiology and role models, the following values, preached and defended by him, were singled out:³

- *Truth*: Fr. Popiełuszko consistently emphasized the importance of truth in the life of man and society. In the anthology of his 141 public appearances, the word “truth” is used over 450 times, alongside such words as “man” (Polish:

³ For this purpose, AI analytical-generative technology was used as the ChatGPT advanced artificial intelligence model developed by OpenAI (GPT-4.0 and o3 mini models). Using the following prompt: “Analyze the text and identify the most important values that Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko followed and defended; take into account especially those values that today’s youth can appreciate,” the most important values characterizing Popiełuszko’s life and work were extracted from his writings and sermons collected in the anthology *Zawsze głosiłem prawdę* [I Have Always Preached the Truth] (2024), and from selected articles (Juroszek 2023; Juroszek. 2023/4; Kindziuk 2017; Marek 2014; Skoczylas 2012; Szczecina 2018ab; Tułowicki 2016).

człowiek), “God,” and “Fatherland” (Kęcki 2023, 9). He saw it as the foundation of human freedom and dignity. He reminded: “Truth must never be betrayed. ... Man is founded on the truth. If he betrays the truth, he betrays himself.” (Popiełuszko 1984b, 375).

- *Freedom*: He understood it both as national independence and inner, moral independence from lies and fear: “True freedom is the first feature of humanity. It is a special indication of the image of God in man” (Popiełuszko 1984a, 310). Under the communist regime, Fr. Popiełuszko stood up for basic human liberties, religious and civil. He stressed that inner freedom, rooted in faith, was a condition for a dignified life (Szczecina 2018a).

- *Solidarity*: In his teaching, it was not only a social movement, but also a spiritual community of concern for the common good: “Solidarity ... is a constant concern for the Homeland; it is the preservation of internal freedom even under conditions of external enslavement” (Popiełuszko 1983c, 221). Fr. Popiełuszko was a spiritual mentor to the “Solidarity” movement; he organized aid for the families of interned workers, and stressed the importance of community and mutual support.⁴

- *Courage coupled with responsibility*: For Fr. Jerzy its measure was “a willingness to risk personal assets and a readiness to sacrifice them for the sake of the good of another person, individual or society” (Popiełuszko 1984c, 381). In his pastoral activities, he demonstrated steadfastness in the face of repression and harassment by the communist authorities. His example shows that courage does not mean the absence of fear, but acting in spite of it. In light of Christian pedagogy, Fr. Popiełuszko is a model of education in the virtue of fortitude. He spoke of the need to overcome fear, because fear leads to enslavement: “Let us pray that we will be free from fear, intimidation, but above all from the lust for retaliation and violence.” (Popiełuszko 1984e, 429).

- *Love and peace*: One of his most important messages were words taken from Sacred Scripture that were echoed in John Paul II’s message: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (John Paul II 1983). With his attitude and teaching, Fr. Popiełuszko showed that Christianity is first and foremost about serving others. He not only helped people in difficult circumstances, but also taught how to respond with love to hatred.

- *Human dignity*: Fr. Popiełuszko stressed that every human being has inalienable dignity, and for this freedom he pleaded: “Things cannot go well in a country where man can be trampled, where he can be falsely accused with

⁴ Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko’s first three essential values] show the path from truth, through freedom to solidarity. It is a path leading from inner liberation to the liberation of the national community. This path was walked by the Masses for the Homeland participants at St. Stanislaus Church, commonly referred to as a “slice of free Poland.” As the Center for the Documentation and Devotion of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko demonstrates, the first Masses were attended by several hundred people each. In contrast, the last Masses were attended by tens of thousands. During the initial greetings, the arriving delegations were listed, which not only took up much time, but above all gave a sense of community and solidarity. Over time, such Masses were celebrated throughout the country, and Fr. Jerzy was hosted in one city after another. The last one was Bydgoszcz (Kęska 2023).

reference to a supposed law, where laws are not for the good of man, but are often directed against man, established to torment man.” (Popiełuszko 1983b, 178–79).

- *Love of the Fatherland*: It was one of the key values preached by Blessed Fr. Jerzy (Popiełuszko 1983). His teaching had a strong patriotic component, particularly evident in the sermons he preached during Masses for the Homeland, which he celebrated in 1982–84, mainly at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Warsaw. He emphasized that patriotism is the duty of a Christian and follows directly from the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue, which he extended to the duty to respect and care for the nation and the state. Love for the Homeland should be fidelity to Christian and ethical values, and not just an emotion (Szczecina 2018b).

Fr. Popiełuszko not only taught publicly, but above all lived according to the principles he preached. He was a conscientious and consistent man who became a model of fidelity to one’s ideals—not only for young people.

6. FR. JERZY POPIEŁUSZKO AND AXIOLOGICAL PREFERENCES OF POLISH YOUTH

Continuing the line of thought based on the assumption that the condition for the emergence of authority is precisely rooted in specific values (Karwatowska 2012), it is now time to reflect on the axiological preferences of Polish youth of recent years—despite the transformation of these preferences and, in a sense, their crisis, corresponding to the crisis of authority. Thanks to this procedure, it will be possible to answer the fundamental question: Whether and to what extent the values to which Fr. Popiełuszko was faithful and about which he taught coincide with the values indicated by young people as the most important, especially among core values and solemn values?

Core Values

Core values (Polish: *wartości podstawowe*) Core values are common goods, recognized by the majority of society, without which it would not be able to function properly. They form the so-called normative orientation of society and are the source of evaluation criteria in discerning reality. These are the values that make human life valuable and worthy (Mariański 2015a) and become the foundation of dialogue and social consensus in support of the common good (Piwowarski 1994). In the Polish context, core values are rooted in the Christian tradition, often guarded and passed on in families and informal social networks.

The level of acceptance of these postulated core values is shown in Table 1. In response to the question, “Which of the following values and attitudes do you think are important for the Polish nation?” each student could choose the three most important. Other answers outside the prepared set were also possible. For a detailed analysis of gender, type of school, place of residence, attitudes toward religious faith and participation in Mass, see the report on the nationwide sociological survey: *Religious and Moral Condition of Upper Secondary School Students throughout the Years* (Mariański 2024).

Value Category	1988	1998	2005	2017
Democracy	37,7	20,6	24,6	25,7
Dignity of the human person	66,1	15,6	32,7	28,8
Freedom	52,4	47,8	58,0	64,3
Religion	46,7	39,9	39,4	25,7
Patriotism	54,8	45,2	33,1	42,7
Social justice	72,9	24,9	23,0	23,5
Social equality	58,7	23,0	23,4	25,2
Truth	74,9	24,2	26,4	20,2
Human solidarity	50,5	10,5	15,6	17,6
Human rights	53,1	36,7	28,5	32,8
Other values	2,8	1,6	2,0	2,2

Table 1: Values significant for the Polish nation in the opinion of high school students.
Source: Mariański 2024, 366.

Taking into account only the most recent survey (2017), it can be said that the high-school students collectively indicated the following values as fundamental to social life, in order of significance: freedom (64.3%), patriotism (42.7%), human rights (32.8%), dignity of the human person (28.8%), democracy (25.7%), religion (25.7%), social equality (25.2%), social justice (23.5%), truth (20.2%), human solidarity (17.6%), and other values (2.2%).

In other sociological studies, higher indicators or different ranking of the postulated values were not infrequent. A study of high school graduates from five cities (Szprotawa, Puławy, Kraśnik, Chełm and Gdańsk) is interesting, in which among the frequently postulated values were those that, according to the respondents, are not realized in society: social justice (76.6%), social equality (72.5%) and truth (72.5%) (Mariański 2014). Similarly, among high school graduates in Lublin (2009–2010), the most frequently selected values were truth (80.4%), social justice (81.1%) and social equality (74%) (Rola 1016).

Solemn Values

The concept of solemn values (Polish: *wartości uroczyste*) was introduced into Polish sociology by Stanisław Ossowski (1967) in contrast to everyday values. They refer to the sphere of symbolism—to specific events or objects considered uncommon, lofty and extraordinary. Their distinguishing feature is not necessarily the intensity of the experience, although they generally leave more lasting traces in the psyche and are more respected in the social environment. In sociological studies, the declared willingness to risk one's life in one's defense is taken as an indicator of solemn values. The higher the position in the hierarchy of values a given category occupies, the more difficult it is to give it up and the more one is willing to sacrifice for its realization (Mariański 2015b). Importantly, solemn values are shared not only by individuals, but also by social groups, and then they are "related to the standards that a social group officially sets for its members." (Ossowski 1967, 67).

Table 2 shows the attitude of high school students to solemn values. Respondents rated the selected values according to three possibilities: ‘yes,’ ‘no’ and ‘hard to say;’ only ‘yes’ responses are included in the table.

Value Category	1988	1998	2005	2017
Defense of peace	74,3	67,1	43,6	65,1
Saving human life	86,5	84,6	78,8	82,4
Defense of one’s religion	63,1	41,2	33,8	37,0
Defense of freedom	73,6	73,4	49,2	75,3
Defense of one’s own convictions	43,7	43,4	30,7	44,8
Defense of social equality	30,7	32,1	22,9	43,5
Defense of justice	60,1	55,0	38,7	60,6
Defense of truth	54,8	47,2	40,7	58,2
Defense of human dignity	54,9	51,1	41,3	63,9
Defense of Homeland	74,4	70,6	52,7	70,7

Table 2: High school students’ attitudes towards solemn values (percentage).

Source: Mariański 2024, 355.

In 2017, the most felt values (i.e., “worth sacrificing one’s life for”) were human life (82.4%), freedom (75.3%) and homeland (70.7%). Also, more than 50% of the ratings were for peace, human dignity, justice and truth. Lower ranked were one’s own beliefs and social equality. Religion received the least approval (37%). The average approval rate for solemn values was 60.2%, disapproval was 9.5%, undecided was 19.8%, and no response was 10.6% (Mariański 2024).

Even this rather general presentation of the axiological preferences of Polish youth allows one to conclude that among the core and solemn values indicated by them are those that can be found in the life, work and message of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko: truth, human dignity, solidarity, love and peace, social justice, freedom. This peculiar “axiological compatibility” confirms the research hypothesis that, despite the waning influence of authority figures in education and upbringing, the chaplain of “Solidarity” can be considered a possible role model for young people. The values to which he was faithful and the attitudes he manifested in his life are part of the world of values of the young generation.

Other available surveys confirm this. For example, in 2006, high school students ranked parents first among authority figures (66.4%), as they were the most accessible in everyday life. This was followed by authority figures present indirectly, including clergy figures (mainly John Paul II, but also priests: 55%), religious figures (Christ and saints: 43.6%), followed by athletes and coaches (39.6%), teachers and educators (36.9%), and also friends (5.9%). Among highly religious adolescents, the authority attributed to clergy members (64.2%) and religious figures (65.4%) was even higher (Wysocka 2009). Meanwhile, the results of a 2010 study on the authority figures of Lublin high school students (Karwatowska 2012) explicitly mention the person of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko. Among the 54 figures listed in the written statements of young people, spiritual leaders and moral authorities

dominated, with John Paul II (32 indications), Mother Teresa of Calcutta (21) and Jerzy Popiełuszko (7) being the most frequent. Of the other authority figures mentioned, only the band of heroes from the book *Kamienie na szaniec* [Stones for the Rampart] (16 total indications) received more indications than him.⁵

CONCLUSION

The life and activities of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, especially in the context of the birth of the “Solidarity” movement and the socio-political changes in Poland in the 1980s, take on exceptional significance today. This is so particularly true in the face of the contemporary crisis of authority, the attitudes of young people toward values and the discrepancy between Christian ideals and lifestyles promoted in the media. Although the characterization of the axiological preferences of Polish youth as presented here is quite general, relating it to the values represented by Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko leads to the conclusion that the chaplain of “Solidarity” may be a role model for today’s youth.

An analysis of the values he represented, as well as those declared as upheld by young people, makes it possible to give a positive answer to the main research question, all the more so because the hierarchy of authority figures is shaped parallel to the hierarchy of values (Wagner 2005).

Today’s young people can draw inspiration from Fr. Jerzy’s attitude in several key aspects: *authenticity*—his life was consistent with the values he preached, which makes him a reliable role model; *courage in defending values*—he taught and showed that it is worthwhile to stand by one’s convictions, even in the face of adversity; *opposition to injustice*—young people can see in him an example of a person who did not accept moral compromises; and *spirituality and living by faith*—Fr. Jerzy shows that a deep relationship with God can be a source of strength in moments of hardship.

Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko, in a “fatherless society,” in a world where stable authority figures are becoming increasingly difficult to find, bears witness that fatherhood need not be limited to a biological relationship, but can take on a spiritual and moral dimension. As a person, he shows authority based on values and not on coercion or control; he is a model for young people by showing that truth and freedom must be defended, and that it is possible to live with dignity even amid adverse circumstances.

⁵ A novel by Aleksander Kamiński (first underground edition: July 1943) telling the story of the exploits of a group of boy scouts (Polish: *harcerze*) who volunteered into the Grey Ranks (Polish: *Szare Szeregi*, i.e. underage combatants registered within the structures of the Polish Underground State) in Warsaw during the Second World War. The narrative is based on actual events from the late 1930s and the German occupation period, and all protagonists were actual historical figures. The title is taken from the poem *Testament mój* [My Last Will] (1839) by one of the Polish National Bards, Juliusz Słowacki (*A kiedy trzeba, na śmierć idą po kolei, Jak kamienie przez Boga rzucone na szaniec!* [And when it is due, off to death they go, one by one, Like stones thrown by God on a rampart!])

Father Jerzy sacrificed his life for the sake of the most important values. Aware of the danger, he did not yield, and remained faithful. He symbolized the struggle against the regime and the fight to defend human rights. His universal message, proclaimed on the 40th anniversary of his martyrdom: "A Christian cannot be satisfied with mere condemnation of evil, lies, cowardice, enslavement, hatred and violence. The Christian has to be a true witness, spokesperson and defender of justice, goodness, truth, freedom and love" (Popiełuszko 1984d, 420) and does not lose relevance despite the passage of time. In a world full of manipulation, conflict and challenges, Fr. Popiełuszko preached values can still provide a moral foundation to inspire new generations.

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