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The Legacy of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Polish Primate, in the World Striving for Peace

1. The Context and Significance of Cardinal Wyszyński's Legacy

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's legacy extends well beyond the borders of Poland, which was under Russian occupation with the communist government in Warsaw. At that time, he was one of the most influential figures in 20th-century Polish history. During this challenging era for the Catholic Church, Wyszyński was a priest and Primate of Poland. Wyszyński played a pivotal role in reshaping Polish religious life and redefining the relationship between Church and state, with worldwide implications¹. Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's passing away in 1981 was widely acknowledged in the Western world, where his profound witness to the Christian virtues of love, mutual respect, and unwavering faith in God was deeply esteemed as a vital contribution to the promotion of peace and human dignity². Donald J. Albosta, the American Congressman, said that he had a particular fondness for Cardinal Wyszyński, who was not only the spiritual leader for the Polish nation but also showed people how to maintain Christianity despite the communist government policies³. At the same congressional hearing, Congressman Dwyer said that Primate Wyszyński was one

¹ T.A. Byrnes, *Transnational Catholicism in Post Communist Europe*, 2001, p. 131–132.

² A. Micewski, *Cardinal Wyszyński, A Biography*, San Diego 1984, p. 57.

³ D. Albosta, *Congressional Record House. Proceedings and Debates of the American Congress*. Vol. 127, part 9, 1981, p. 1740

of those times' most courageous religious heroes. He also said that Cardinal Wyszyński's commitment to peace and reason won him universal respect⁴.

His leadership was particularly significant because it unfolded under the oppressive conditions of Communist rule, a reality often difficult for Western societies to fully grasp. Priests were persecuted, freedom of expression was suppressed, and individuals were imprisoned and interrogated simply for thinking differently than the regime demanded. There was no place for Catholic schools and values⁵. Wyszyński's steadfast defense of human dignity, faith, and moral integrity became a powerful form of resistance in a Communist regime intent on confrontation with the Catholic Church. While the regime sought open conflict, the Church under Wyszyński's leadership recognized that such a clash would devastate the nation's faith and autonomy. Instead, it chose to avoid violence and accept only bearable compromises to ensure the Church's survival during these harsh times. In this context, I aim to highlight the nature of his legacy, which is rooted deeply in the Polish experience yet offers a broader vision of spiritual and social transformation with global significance⁶.

However, if we look at the testimony from the hearings in the U.S. Congress, one common theme emerges. We may assume that the 1954 hearings responded to the detention of Polish Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. He was arrested on September 25, 1953, in Rywałd, Poland, and subsequently placed under house arrest by the Communist authorities, first in Stoczek Klasztorny, in the Opole region, and later in the monastery in Komańcza, in the Bieszczady Mountains⁷.

This development must have come as a shock to Western democratic governments: the Communist regime had incarcerated the head of the Polish Church. Ironically, the communists' attempt to suppress Polish intellectual and spiritual autonomy had the opposite effect. The imprisonment of Cardinal Wyszyński underscored the need for the West to pursue

4 B.J. Dwyer, *Congressional Record House. Proceedings and Debates of the American Congress*, Vol. 127, part. 9, 1981, p. 1740.

5 E. Fishlova, *Interim Report of Communist Aggression. House of Representatives. Thirty-Eighth Congress*, United States Congress House, USA, 1954, p. 16.

6 M.K. Dziewanowski, *Communist Poland and the Catholic Church*, "Problems of Communism" 1954 no. 5 vol. 3, p. 1-7.

7 P.H. Kosicki, *Catholics of the Barricades: Poland, France and "Revolution" 1891 – 1956*, London 2018, p. 257.

diplomatic efforts urging the Communist regime to adopt a more humane approach toward its opposition⁸.

This event also marked the beginning of Cardinal Wyszyński's sacred mission to lead the Polish nation toward freedom of belief, human dignity, and democratic values.

Cardinal Wyszyński, known for his unwavering opposition to the communist regime and his firm defense of human rights, became a powerful symbol of resistance to oppression⁹. Cardinal Wyszyński's message, grounded in the enduring values of love, solidarity, and the pursuit of freedom, resonated profoundly with the Polish people and served as a source of inspiration for Catholic and social movements on a global scale. Situated at the center of Poland's resistance to the suppression of freedom of speech and religion, and advocating for the rightful place of the Church and faith in both personal and public life, Wyszyński emerged as a paradigmatic figure of spiritual leadership with international significance. A defining moment in his ecclesiastical and national influence was his leadership of the Millennium celebrations of Christianity in Poland in 1966, an event that reaffirmed the country's Christian heritage and reinforced its cultural and moral identity amid political oppression¹⁰. Through his unwavering commitment, Cardinal Wyszyński played a pivotal role in shaping the ethical and spiritual consciousness of a nation in search of dignity, truth, and sovereignty.

Wyszyński's spiritual and cultural legacy extends far beyond the confines of religious or political spheres. It embodies a broader influence, shaping education, inspiring social initiatives, and contributing to profound philosophical reflections on humanity's place in a world created by God. This enduring legacy, continually engaged in dialogue between tradition and contemporary modernity, remains vital for understanding today's global religious and ethical principles and discourses. Undoubtedly, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's impact on post-war Poland and Western European social thought affirms his continued recognition and respect as a moral authority,

8 Encyclopaedia Britannica Poland, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. Macropaedia: Knowledge in Depth*, London 1998, p. 998.

9 M. Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Changes to the Secular State, from Christian Militants to Al Qaida*, California 2008, p. 158.

10 M. Sweeney, *Poland and Mali*, *Congressional Record, Proceeding and Debates of the American Congress*, vol. 112, part 8, University of California, USA, 1966, p. 9716.

whose vision of God's love for humanity offers meaningful guidance amid the social and spiritual challenges of our time.

2. Historical Context

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's legacy must be understood within a broad historical context that extends beyond Poland's national boundaries. His influence was deeply embedded in the wider political, social, and religious transformations that characterized the 20th century. As a prominent figure in the Polish Catholic Church, Cardinal Wyszyński emerged as a steadfast defender of faith and human dignity during the period of intense Communist repression across all Soviet Bloc countries¹¹.

By the late 1980s, approximately 434 million people lived under the ideological constraints of the Soviet Bloc. "Interpretation of history by Central Europeans will differ from an interpretation by those to whom the Iron Curtain is merely a delicacy of history, but not experienced reality"¹². Within this oppressive system, the convictions and actions of a single individual could be perceived as a threat to the entire regime. This was certainly the case with Cardinal Wyszyński, whose unwavering faith and symbolic act of entrusting the Polish nation to the protection of the Holy Virgin of Jasna Góra on August 26, 1956, challenged the Communist authorities and inspired millions¹³.

Many readers may recognize that this was a difficult period. Still, they might not fully grasp the profound gravity of the situation, even in light of contemporary events such as Russia's war against the innocent people of Ukraine. Setting aside theoretical discourse, trying to understand Putinism as a paradigm of fascism brings us closer to emotionally sensing the fear and oppression once felt by those behind the Iron Curtain¹⁴. To better understand the severity of the era, one must imagine living without the safety of peaceful sleep, constantly fearing arrest, torture, or death, whether for oneself or one's loved ones, merely on suspicion of opposing the Communist regime.

11 J. Karpinski, *Problems of Communism*, vol. 36-37, New York 1987, p. 46-48.

12 T. Kavaliauskas, *Transformations in Central Europe Between 1989-2012*, Lanham 2012, p. 19.

13 F. Millican, *The Christian's Pot of Oil*, Bloomington 2010, p. 92.

14 M. Suslov, *Putinism – Post-Soviet Russian Regime Ideology*, New York 2024.

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's leadership resonated within Poland and on the international stage, particularly in the fight against totalitarian ideologies¹⁵. He upheld Christian moral principles as a shield against injustice, cruelty, and atheism. His courageous actions took place during a time shaped by the devastating aftermath of World War II and the ideological confrontations of the Cold War, both of which redefined the Church's role in public life. They were grounded in his unwavering belief in God and his dedication to preaching the transformative power of God's love in the life of every person, family, and society. Stefan Wyszyński's words echoed the message: "A person within a nation lives not only for themselves and not only for the present, but also within the dimension of the nation's history". When we were told, "*Finita la Polonia*," and a voice from the Vatican responded, "*Poland does not want to die*," it was a profound affirmation of the nation's freedom. Poland can live by its strength, resources, and native culture, enriched by the Gospel of Christ and guided by the vigilant, prudent action of the Church. Poland can endure in its rightful place but must possess the strength to do so. It must also look to the past to better understand the present and have the ambition to endure into the future"¹⁶.

Winston Churchill most accurately described what was happening after World War II during his speech at Fulton, Missouri, USA, in March 1946. He said, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent." It was the "Cold War" between the East and the West¹⁷. During his testimony before the United States House Select Committee investigating Russian aggression and the forced annexation of the Baltic States, General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski stated: "...the Polish Nation is anti-Communist...Poland learned to know quite well what Communism is." This hearing showed the scale of cruelty extended by the Soviets over the Polish nation, starting from the Katyn massacre of Polish officers in May 1940, up until 1954¹⁸. Despite imprisoning bishops and priests in the early 1950s, the communist regime failed to crush the spirit of the Polish Church. Though it wielded censorship as a weapon and sought to silence religious voices, the Church remained a symbol

15 M. Nabożny, M. Wysocki, *The Church in the Face of Crisis and Challenges Over the Centuries*, Göttingen 2023, p. 107.

16 P. Raina, *Kardynał Wyszyński i Solidarność*, Warszawa 2005, p. 220.

17 S. Ross, *Causes and Consequences of the Second World War*, London 2003.

18 T. Bór-Komorowski, *Investigation of Communist Takeover and Occupation of Poland, Lithuania, and Slovakia. United States Congress House. Selected Committee of Communist Aggression*, Minnesota, 1954.

of resistance and hope. Catholic publications, though limited and closely monitored, continued to circulate, offering spiritual strength to a nation under ideological siege¹⁹. Far from abandoning their faith, the Polish people clung to it all the more fiercely. In churches, in homes, and in whispered prayers, belief endured. It was not merely religion; it was defiance, identity, and a quiet revolution of the soul²⁰.

The sources presented above offer only a faint glimpse into the dark and oppressive era in which Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński undertook his mission. Amid the silence or indifference of much of the outside world, despite Western proclamations supporting democratic ideals and diplomatic overtures to Moscow, few beyond Poland's borders fully understood the extent of the suffering endured by the Polish Church and nation. In this atmosphere of fear, repression, and moral isolation, Wyszyński emerged as a central figure in sustaining religious faith and national identity, assuming a responsibility that few could fully comprehend.

3. Wyszyński Spiritual Legacy

When John Paul II was announced as the first Polish Pope in history on 16 October 1978, it must have come as a significant surprise to the Christian community and a shock to the Communist leaders governing half of Europe. The term „shock” is significant here, as it represented a threat to the system established by Moscow after World War II. “The election of Karol Wojtyła as Bishop of Rome added a further complication to relations that were already described as thorny between Rome and Moscow²¹.

The profound spiritual connection between Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II, played a crucial role during a pivotal moment in the history of Polish Christianity. In 1966, the Church in Poland commemorated the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Poland. Every church in Poland displayed a banner stating in Latin: *Sacrum Poloniae Millenium*, which means *Holy Polish Millennium*²². This significant celebration of a millennium of Christianity in the nation took place

19 J. Karpinski, *Problems of Communism*, vol. 36-37, New York 1987, p. 46-48.

20 P. Lernoux, *People of God. The Struggle of World Catholicism*, London 1990, p. 31-32.

21 S. Pons, *Gorbachev, Italian Communism and Human Rights, Rethinking Political Culture at the End of Cold War*, Rome 2023, p. 62.

22 B. Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History*, New Jersey 2019, p. 51.

under the shadow of communist rule. Wojtyła was appointed Archbishop of Kraków in 1964 and was deeply involved in the preparations for this historic jubilee, collaborating closely with Primate Cardinal Wyszyński. Their efforts helped the Church maintain its spiritual authority and moral leadership despite political pressure. One of the most memorable moments was the message from Polish bishops to their German counterparts, which included the powerful words: „We forgive and ask for forgiveness.” This act of reconciliation was not only a spiritual milestone but also a bold statement of Christian values during a politically charged time²³. The celebrations in Poland were also honoured in the USA, where 100,000 people gathered that night to celebrate the Polish Millennium of Christianity under the patronage of John P. Cody, Archbishop of Chicago²⁴.

The vision and courage embodied in this celebration left a lasting imprint on Wojtyła. When he became Pope John Paul II in 1978, the influence of Cardinal Wyszyński and the millennial jubilee was evident in his efforts to uphold human dignity, foster reconciliation, and defend the faith in the face of adversity. To understand the spiritual legacy of Cardinal Wyszyński, we must examine the pontificate of John Paul II through the lens of this shared mission, deeply rooted in Poland’s rich Christian heritage that spans over a thousand years. Therefore, the words of John Paul II “In Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his humanity, and of the meaning of his existence”²⁵ can be interpreted as a continuation and deepening of Cardinal Wyszyński’s redefined message concerning human freedom and dignity. This message is founded on the transformative and reciprocal relationship of love between the individual and God, emphasizing the theological and existential dimensions of human worth within a Christian framework.

Another essential aspect of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński’s work is his profound devotion to the Virgin Mary. He believed that only under her protection could Poland become a free, strong, and independent nation. This deep conviction is firmly rooted in Polish history. Since Duke Mieszko I baptized Poland in 966, the Polish nation has remained deeply connected

²³ T. Wojciechowski, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge 2019, p. 927.

²⁴ R.C. Pucinski, *Polish Millennium of Christianity, The Congressional Record*. US Government Printing Office, USA 1966, p. 2109-2112.

²⁵ C. Curran, *Moral Theology of John Paul the II*, London 2006, p. 69.

to Christianity²⁶. King John II Casimir Vasa significantly strengthened this spiritual bond by proclaiming the Virgin Mary the Queen of Poland in 1656. It was after the Swedish siege of the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa that the Poles began pushing back against the Swedish invasion of the country. The grateful King crowned the Black Madonna as the Queen of Poland. This declaration was not merely symbolic; it served as a powerful plea for the Holy Virgin to intercede before Almighty God on behalf of the nation²⁷.

The only Polish king who did not make such vows to the Virgin of Częstochowa was Stanisław II August Poniatowski (1764-1795). His reign coincided with the tragic loss of Polish independence and the partitions of Poland by Russia, Austria, and Prussia, which began in 1772²⁸. In this historical context, Cardinal Wyszyński firmly believed that only through renewed devotion to the Virgin Mary and her protective presence could Poland be liberated from the oppressive grip of communism.

This belief found powerful expression on April 26, 1956, when the Vows of the Polish Nation to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Częstochowa were renewed at Jasna Góra. Although Cardinal Wyszyński remained imprisoned by the Communist regime and was unable to attend, the ceremony was conducted by the Polish Episcopate in his name. Among those present was Bishop Karol Wojtyła, then the Bishop of Kraków and an emerging figure within the Church. His presence at this solemn act reflected not only his solidarity with Cardinal Wyszyński's vision but also his personal commitment to the Marian tradition, which is so deeply woven into the fabric of Polish Catholic identity.

This devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, particularly as expressed through the national cult of Our Lady of Częstochowa, had a profound and lasting impact on Karol Wojtyła. Pope John Paul II carried this Marian spirituality into his pontificate, making it a central theme of his service as the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church. Pope John II devoted his life and pontificate to the Holy Mary²⁹. His episcopal and papal motto, *Totus Tuus* ("Totally Yours"), directly expressed his life devotion to the Holy Mary. Throughout his papacy, he consistently emphasized the Blessed Virgin's role

26 S.P. Rampet, *The Catholic Church in Polish History*, London 2017, p. 15.

27 N. Abe, *The Martyr and The Red Kimono. A Fearless Priest Sacrifice and A New Generation of Hope in Japan*, London 2024, p. 12.

28 R. Butterwick R., *Poland Last King and English Culture: Stanisław August Poniatowski, 1732-1798*, Oxford 1998, p. 7.

29 D. Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast*, Eugene 1994, p. 459.

as a guide, intercessor, and model of faith for all Christians³⁰. In this way, the Marian tradition of Poland, strongly shaped by Cardinal Wyszyński and the events at Jasna Góra, became a vital part of the universal Church's spiritual heritage through the ministry of Pope John Paul II.

4. A Living Legacy Abroad: The Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński Polish School at the Basilica of St. Hyacinth in Chicago

While institutions named after Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński are numerous within Poland, they remain relatively rare outside its borders. One remarkable exception is the Polish School named in his honour, operating at the Basilica of St. Hyacinth (Św. Jacek) in Chicago. This school serves as a living testament to Wyszyński's enduring influence, particularly among the Polish diaspora, by actively promoting the Christian values and cultural identity he passionately defended throughout his life.

The school was established in August 1984 through the initiative of Mrs. Wiesława Kosycarz, whose vision was realized with the support of Father Konstanty Przybylski. Their joint efforts culminated in the opening of the institution just one month later, in September, providing comprehensive instruction across all grades of primary education.

In its early years, the school was modest in scale, serving fewer than one hundred students and employing only a handful of teachers. Yet for the parishioners of St. Hyacinth, it marked the fulfillment of a long-standing aspiration: to create a space where Polish language, history, and religious heritage could be nurtured among younger generations. As demand increased, so too did the school's capacity and instructional offerings. At its height, the institution hosted multiple parallel classes in each grade to accommodate rising enrolment.

By 1987, the curriculum had expanded significantly, integrating catechetical instruction in Polish alongside courses in language, history, and geography. This development allowed students in the second and eighth grades to prepare for the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation within a culturally and linguistically familiar environment.

Recognizing the need for ongoing educational opportunities beyond the primary level, the school established a high school division during

³⁰ B. McMaster, *Totus Tuus. A Consecration to Jesus Through Mary with Saint Paul II*, Huntington 2013.

the 1999/2000 academic year. After three years of study, students have the chance to take the traditional Polish secondary school-leaving examination, the Matura, thereby upholding an academic standard consistent with that of Poland.

After sixteen years of dedicated leadership, Mrs. Kosycarz stepped down as principal, and Mrs. Ewa Koch, who has been a member of the teaching staff since the school's founding, assumed the role. Mrs. Koch continues to serve in this position today, guiding new generations of Polish-American youth from both Chicago and its surrounding suburbs.

In 2007, the school adopted a revised organizational statute that was collaboratively developed by its staff and is still in effect today. In addition to the principal, the school is overseen by a president, traditionally the parish priest, currently held by Father Stanisław Jankowski. Alongside the School Council, which provides strategic and operational guidance, they ensure the institution remains true to its mission.

Despite changing demographics in the neighbourhood and a gradual decline in the local Polish-speaking population, the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński Polish School has maintained its vital role in community life. Students often travel from distant suburbs, and their families, driven by a strong commitment to heritage and faith, invest considerable time and effort into the school's ongoing development. It is not just a place of learning, but a lively cultural and spiritual centre, where the ideals of Cardinal Wyszyński – truth, faith, and national identity, continue to inspire and shape future generations.

Conclusion

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's legacy serves as a powerful Catholic testament to faith, resilience, and the ongoing quest for human dignity in the face of Communist oppression. Deeply rooted in the turbulent history of 20th-century Poland and situated at the heart of the Eastern Bloc, behind the Iron Curtain, his spiritual leadership transcended national boundaries, inspiring a global spiritual transformation grounded in Christian values and the defense of freedom. Amid the harsh realities of the Communist regime, Wyszyński's unwavering commitment to spiritual and moral integrity not only shaped the Polish Church but also influenced the conscience of the world, evident in discussions that the liberalism of Communists was a distorted truth akin to social liberalism and fascism, marketed

to the West³¹. His profound impact on figures such as Pope John Paul II, along with his dedication to Marian devotion, reinforced a vision of hope, reconciliation, and renewal that continues to resonate today.

Beyond political and religious spheres, Cardinal Wyszyński's impact is vividly alive within communities, exemplified by institutions like the Polish School at the Basilica of St. Hyacinth in Chicago. These living legacies nurture cultural identity and faith among new generations, ensuring that his message of truth, faith, and national pride endures across borders. Ultimately, Cardinal Wyszyński's life and work remind us that even in the darkest times, steadfast belief in Christ and courageous spiritual leadership can illuminate a path toward peace and true freedom for all humanity.

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³¹ I. Adams, *Political Ideology Today*, Manchester 2001, p. 213.

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Abstract

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's legacy is examined in this article, set against the broader historical and spiritual context of 20th-century Europe. As a tireless advocate for faith and human dignity during the Communist era, Wyszyński played a crucial role in maintaining the Church's moral authority in Poland and inspiring the spiritual resistance of its people. His connection with Karol Wojtyła, who would later become Pope John Paul II, helped shape a vision of Christian leadership rooted in love, reconciliation, and devotion to Mary. The article also emphasizes how this legacy endures today through educational and cultural initiatives beyond Poland, such as the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński Polish School at the Basilica of St. Hyacinth in Chicago, which helps preserve Polish heritage and Catholic values among younger generations. Wyszyński's life and mission remind us that faith and resilience can thrive even under oppressive regimes, and that Christian values are intertwined with a profound respect for human dignity, tolerance, and educating people in values such as the ability to forgive and respect.

Key words

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the legacy of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Christianity in 20th-century Europe, Karol Wojtyła, John Paul II.

Streszczenie

Dziedzictwo kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego zostało w niniejszym artykule ukazane na tle szerokiego kontekstu historycznego i duchowego XX-wiecznej Europy. Jako niestrudzony obrońca wiary oraz godności człowieka w czasach komunizmu, Wyszyński odegrał kluczową rolę w zachowaniu moralnego autorytetu Kościoła w Polsce oraz w podtrzymywaniu duchowego oporu narodu. Jego bliska relacja z Karolem Wojtyłą, późniejszym papieżem Janem Pawłem II, przyczyniła się do ukształtowania wizji chrześcijańskiego przywództwa zakorzenionego w miłości, pojednaniu i oddaniu Maryi. Artykuł podkreśla również, że dziedzictwo to wciąż żyje, między innymi dzięki inicjatywom edukacyjnym i kulturalnym poza granicami Polski, takim jak Szkoła Polska im. kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego przy Bazylice św. Jacka w Chicago, która pielegnuje polskie tradycje oraz wartości katolickie wśród młodszych pokoleń. Życie i misja kard. Wyszyńskiego przypominają, że wiara i duchowa siła mogą przetrwać nawet w obliczu opresyjnych reżimów, a wartości chrześcijańskie nierozerwalnie łączą się z głębokim szacunkiem dla godności człowieka, postawą otwartości oraz troską o wychowanie do odpowiedzialności i poszanowania drugiego człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe

kardynał Wyszyński, dziedzictwo kard. Stefana Wyszyńskiego, chrześcijaństwo w Europie XX wieku, Karol Wojtyła, Jan Paweł II