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REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE

»PRAWDZIWA WOLNOŚĆ JEST PIERWSZĄ CECHĄ CZŁOWIECZEŃSTWA«

(17–18 October 2024, Toruń, Poland)

Abstract

Report from the conference entitled »Prawdziwa wolność jest pierwszą cechą człowieczeństwa« – różne wymiary wolności od lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku do chwili obecnej. Ogólnopolska konferencja naukowa w 40. rocznicę śmierci błogosławionego ks. Jerzego Popiełuszki [”True Freedom is the First Characteristic of Humanity” – various dimensions of freedom from the 1970s to the present day. All-Poland academic conference in fortieth anniversary of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko’s death] held on 17–18 October 2024 in Toruń, Poland, organised by Centrum Badania Historii Solidarności i Oporu Społecznego w PRL [Centre for Research on Solidarity History and Social Resistance in Polish People’s Republic] of the Nicolaus Copernicus University and Kujawsko-Pomorski Urząd Marszałkowski (Cujavia-Pomerania Voivodeship Marshal Office).

Keywords: Jerzy Popiełuszko, conference report, Toruń

On 17–18 October 2024, a nationwide academic conference entitled »Prawdziwa wolność jest pierwszą cechą człowieczeństwa« – różne wymiary wolności od lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku do chwili obecnej. *Ogólnopolska konferencja naukowa w 40. rocznicę śmierci błogosławionego ks. Jerzego Popiełuszki* [“True Freedom is the First Characteristic of Humanity” – various dimensions of freedom from the 1970s to the present day. All-Poland academic conference in fortieth anniversary of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko’s death] was held in Toruń, Poland.

The conference was organised on the initiative of Professor Wojciech Polak, and the papers presented at the conference addressed issues of freedom understood in the context of the struggle for truth and human dignity. The quote was not only the motto of the conference but also served as the conference’s overarching theme.

The event was organised by the Centre for the Study of the History of Solidarity and Social Resistance in the Polish People’s Republic, operating at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, in cooperation with the Marshal’s Office of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship. The conference was held as part of the celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the tragic death of Blessed Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, the chaplain of Solidarity, murdered by Security Service officers in 1984, whose martyrdom became a symbol of the ongoing struggle for freedom and truth in Poland.

The event was attended by nearly thirty scholars representing universities and research institutions from across the country, providing an opportunity for a comprehensive discussion on the role and significance of freedom from the 1970s to the present day. In particular, the latest research on the figure of Fr. Popiełuszko and his teachings was discussed, as well as issues related to the cult of the blessed in the Catholic Church and forms of commemoration of his person, which emphasised the importance of his legacy in the national memory.

One of the key points of the meeting was reflection on the support that the Catholic Church provided to opposition groups during the Communist era in Poland. The significance of the Solidarity movement as a social force striving for freedom was also analysed. Current aspects of freedom in Poland – in the religious, cultural and political spheres – have prompted reflection on the influence of history on the contemporary understanding of freedom and social

responsibility. The conference was therefore not only a platform for academic debate, but also a space for joint exploration of questions about the significance of the past for contemporary values and human rights.

The conference was organised by Professor Wojciech Polak, Dr. habil. Sylwia Galij-Skarbińska, and Fr. Michał Damazyń PhD, with Judyta Bielanowska PhD acting as academic secretary. The event was intended not only to commemorate Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, but also to reflect on the role of freedom in history and the present day. It was an excellent opportunity for researchers and representatives of the Church to exchange ideas and experiences, which contributed to strengthening cooperation between various academic circles in Poland.

Conference Sessions

The conference consisted of six sessions, the first of which, entitled “The Church in the face of totalitarianism”, was led by Dr. habil. Sylwia Galij-Skarbińska. It began with a lecture by Professor Mirosław Golon from the Nicolaus Copernicus University, who presented the topic “The catastrophe of real socialism or a chance for reform? The Communist Party and trade union freedoms in the Polish People’s Republic provinces in 1980–1981.” In his speech, Professor Golon provided a detailed analysis of the Communist Party’s response to growing social discontent in Poland, highlighting the various measures taken by the authorities in response to the trade union movement. Next, Professor Krzysztof Brzechczyn from the Adam Mickiewicz University and the Institute of National Remembrance in Poznań delivered a lecture entitled “Did John Paul II’s pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979 contribute directly to the events of August 1980? An attempt at methodological analysis”. His presentation focused on methodological aspects of researching the impact of the Pope’s pilgrimage on public sentiment, pointing to the links between religious and political events.

After the break, the second session took place, entitled: “Father Jerzy Popiełuszko – the steadfast chaplain of Solidarity, martyr and blessed of the Church,” chaired by Professor Wojciech Polak. It was opened by Dr. habil. Łucja Marek from the Institute of National Remembrance in Cracow, who presented a paper entitled “A fighter for the faith. Thoughts and resonance of the teachings of Fr. Jerzy

Popiełuszko.” In her lecture, she emphasised the priest’s key ideas and their impact on society, highlighting how his teachings influenced the struggle for human rights. The next speaker was Dr. habil. Cecylia Kuta, who in her paper “Reactions of the Krakow underground press to the murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko and politically motivated murders in the 1980s,” analysed how the underground press reported on the murder of Father Popiełuszko and what the social and political consequences of this tragic event were.

The third session continuing the themes of the second session, and also entitled “Father Jerzy Popiełuszko – the steadfast chaplain of Solidarity, martyr and blessed of the Church” led by Fr. Michał Damazyn, began with a presentation by Dr. Paweł Stachowiak of the Adam Mickiewicz University, entitled “Father Jerzy Popiełuszko and Cardinal Józef Glemp. An analysis of their relationship.” Professor Stachowiak emphasised the importance of the complex relationship between Fr. Popiełuszko and Cardinal Glemp (the then Primate of Poland) in the context of the struggle for freedom and dignity. His presentation was followed by a lively discussion, with, among others, Prof. Golon, Prof. Brzechczyn, and Prof. Polak. During the same session, Fr. Antoni Poniński discussed the issue of censorship in the context of reports on the Toruń trial of the Fr. Popiełuszko murderers, highlighting the difficulties that censorship posed in reporting on this key event.

The fourth session, entitled “Priests who remained steadfast in the face of the communist regime,” was again moderated by Dr. habil. Sylwia Galij-Skarbińska. During this session, Artur Brożyniak from the Institute of National Remembrance in Rzeszów discussed the figure of Fr. Stanisław Czenczek, emphasising his importance as a priest who supported the Solidarity movement both locally and nationally. Next, Fr. Michał Damazyn from Nicolaus Copernicus University presented the life and work of Fr. Wojciech Dzierzgowski, focusing on his unwavering stance against the Communist regime.

The second day of the conference began with a session also entitled “Priests who remained steadfast in the face of the Communist regime,” led by Professor Wojciech Polak. The session was inaugurated by Fr. Professor Józef Marecki from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, who delivered a lecture entitled “He fought for truth and his homeland,” focusing on the steadfast attitude of Fr. Ryszard Śleboda OFMCap in the face of the Communist regime, emphasising his courage and determination in the fight for truth. Prof. Marecki’s presentation inspired participants by illustrating the influence of

clergy attitudes on the social reality in Poland in the 1980s. The next speaker was Dr. habil. Elżbieta Wojcieszak from the Institute of National Remembrance in Poznań, who, in her paper “Pastoral care for working people and individual farmers – the support of the Catholic Church for organising opposition groups and communities in the 1980s” drew attention to the key role of the Church in organising and supporting opposition groups.

The sixth session, entitled “The Machine of Communist Repression” was led by Fr. Dr. Michał Damazyn. The session was opened by Professor Wojciech Polak from the Nicolaus Copernicus University, who gave a lecture on “The Persecution of the Catholic Church in Toruń in the 1980s.” In his presentation, he presented specific cases of persecution of the clergy and the faithful, analysing their historical context. Next, Dr. Franciszek Dąbrowski from the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw delivered a lecture entitled “The latest status and needs for the publication of source documentation from the security apparatus concerning Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko,” in which he emphasised the current state of research and the need for further source publications. During his speech, he discussed a series of publications devoted to the repressive measures taken against Father Popiełuszko (under the common series title *Aparat represji wobec księdza Jerzego Popiełuszki*), consisting of four volumes: the first, “The apparatus of repression against Father Jerzy Popiełuszko 1982–1984,” edited by Jolanta Mysiakowska, with an introduction by Jan Żaryn (2009); the second volume entitled “The apparatus of repression against Father Jerzy Popiełuszko 1984. Investigation into the abduction and murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko,” with an introduction and commentary by Jakub Gołębiowski (2014); the third, “The apparatus of repression against Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. The case of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko in the documents of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Intelligence,” compiled by Dr. Witold Bagieński (2023), containing a selection of documents and an introduction; and the fourth, “The apparatus of repression against Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. The case of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko in the documents of the Ministry of State Security of the German Democratic Republic,” edited by Dr. Franciszek Dąbrowski himself (2024). It is worth noting that the first two volumes are available as open access. Dr. Dąbrowski’s speech highlighted the importance of these publications for understanding the scale and nature of the security apparatus’s actions against the clergyman, and pointed to the need for continued work on editing documents that could contribute to a fuller understanding of the impact of the security services’ actions

on the life and work of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko. Next, Dr. Marta Milewska from the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw discussed the role of the Memorial Chamber at 8 Strzelecka Street in Warsaw. In her speech entitled “The truth hidden in inscriptions, or the Memorial Chamber at Strzelecka 8 dedicated to the prisoners of the Voivodeship Department of Public Security,” she focused on the significance of this place as a symbol of remembrance of the victims of repression. At the end of the session, Dr. habil. Sylwia Galij-Skarbińska from the Nicolaus Copernicus University discussed the topic “First attempts to settle communist crimes in autumn 1989 – the Sejm’s Extraordinary Commission for Investigating the Activities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.” Her presentation shed light on the difficulties and challenges associated with the process of coming to terms with the past, which concluded the series of speeches and inspired participants to continue the discussion on historical memory and its significance in the context of contemporary Poland.

Conclusion

The conference was an important step in reflecting on the history of resistance to totalitarianism, highlighting various aspects of freedom and steadfastness that shaped Polish society in difficult times. Participants emphasised that events of this kind are crucial for commemorating the heroes of the struggle for freedom and for understanding their impact on contemporary Poland.

The conference concluded with a discussion during which participants shared their insights on the significance of the issues raised for the contemporary understanding of Polish history. It was pointed out that the events of the 1980s and figures such as Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko were of great importance for collective memory and current values. Participants expressed their hope that such important topics would continue to be analysed in order to inspire new generations to work for truth and justice.

The participants of the meeting, including Fr. Professor Marecki, emphasised the need to take into account the psychological and social context in research on this event. An important element of future analyses should be the development of a collective portrait of martyrs and a psychological profile of political prisoners who experienced communist repression, which had a significant impact on their personal lives and social relations.

Recent reflections have focused on the significance of martyrdom in Polish history and its impact on contemporary values. The exchange of ideas and experiences enriched the discussion, and participants unanimously emphasised that knowledge of history is crucial to understanding current values and aspirations. The conclusions drawn from the discussion opened up new directions of research into social trauma and its legacy, which shapes the identity of contemporary Poles.

The papers presented during the conference and the discussion enabled participants to seek answers to numerous key research questions, while inspiring the formulation of new research problems, including whether the assassination of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko contributed to accelerating or, on the contrary, delaying the process of political transformation in Poland. The official interpretation of this act, formulated by then government spokesman Jerzy Urban, presented the murder as a provocation aimed at the government of General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Undoubtedly, the joint work of researchers and representatives of the Church, focused on the memory of the martyrs, their teachings and their social influence, will certainly contribute to a better understanding of both the historical and contemporary contexts of freedom and human rights. The full program of the conference is available online on the Marshal's Office in Toruń website. The conference proceedings were published in the end of 2025 by the Jagielloński Instytut Wydawniczy in Toruń (see Galij-Skarbińska, Polak and Damazyn 2025).

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