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“Do Not Grow Bored with Christ: A Week with the Dominicans in Poland”

By Anthony E. Clark, Ph.D. (for *CWR*, December 2014)

On a bitterly cold Sunday morning I approached the basilica church attached to the Dominican Priory in Krakow’s Old Quarter. The church and priory are named after the Most Holy Trinity, and as I entered I saw a dense crowd of faithful flooding through the three main doors below the remarkable church façade. Fr. Ireneusz Wysokiński, OP, warned me that Masses throughout the day would all be crowded, but I was not prepared for what I encountered – extra chairs had to be set out to accommodate the overflow. Sunday Masses in the Dominican church run all day, with a brief pause from 3-5:00 pm; the rest of the day is animated with Mass attendees. Even as I walked by other nearby churches I could see large crowds entering and leaving for Mass – the rumors I had heard that Poland is a vibrantly Catholic country are true, and the ninety Dominican friars who serve in the Krakow priory are part of the central heartbeat of the city’s Catholic culture. Earlier that morning, Bro. Grzegorz Kuraś, OP, took me into the elegant church sacristy to show me historic vestments with beautiful needlework, painstakingly made by sisters as a gift to God for use in Holy Mass. The liturgy celebrated in Poland is a sumptuous feast for the senses that elevates the soul; a choir of friars intones chants throughout the Mass, and an assembly of Dominican habits surrounds the altar during the words of Consecration in a cloud of incense. No wonder their church is full – they know how to transport one’s heart and mind to God, which is what, as St. Augustine tells us, we were created for.

The long history of the Dominican priests and brothers who live in Krakow is punctuated with some of the world’s most turbulent events – two World Wars, Nazi occupation, and the harsh, anti-Christian Communist invasion of Catholic Poland. Illuminating the dark shadow of these eras is the memory of Poland’s spiritual hero, Karol Józef Wojtyła, or Pope St. John Paul II, whose image is seen in almost every part of Krakow. This holy son of Poland once said, “I kiss the soil as if I placed a kiss on the hands of a mother, for the homeland is our earthly mother,” and this love of his native country is returned to him by the thousands of young Poles I joined for Mass in Krakow’s

Dominican church. On my final day in Krakow I reflected on the many countries I have visited; none has left a stronger impression of Catholic devotion and spiritual maturity as Poland, and the flourishing vocations and filled liturgies of the Dominican community there remain, at least in my mind, the best example of the “hermeneutic of continuity” discussed by Pope Benedict XVI. For an entire week I was enfolded in the Dominican community, joining them for meals, Masses, daily prayers, and even an evening with the brothers at a local pub, where we discussed their observations of Catholic life in America. Comparing Poland, with its history of Nazi and Communist horrors, to America, with its history of economic triumph and materialism, Bro. Grzegorz Kuraś, OP, said that his largest concern for the US is that it is “growing bored with Christ.” “To all Americans, I would simply say, do not grow bored with Christ.” Perhaps we Americans can learn something from the Dominican’s of Krakow, who are anything but bored with Christ, and their love of God is contagious. I cannot remember a single Mass in their huge basilica that was not filled with faithful, a very different scene than I am accustomed to in my native city.

Fr. Reginald Wiśniowski, OP

In preparation for this report I was introduced to the oldest Dominican priest in Poland, Fr. Reginald Wiśniowski, OP, who is now ninety-four years old, and has lived through Nazi and Communist occupations, and has worn the Dominican habit since 1939. Fr. Reginald recounted to me how on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Poland his Novice Master rushed into his room, administered the canonical examination for entrance into the Order, and hurriedly dressed him in the habit so that he would not be conscripted into German service. His Student Master was, as Fr. Reginald remembers, one of the most holy men he ever met, Blessed Michał Czartoryski, OP, who was shot by Nazis for refusing to abandon the hospital patients entrusted to his spiritual care. Fr. Reginald studied under a blessed, but he was also the personal friend of a saint, and was the Confessor of St. John Paul II’s maid when Wojtyła was the archbishop of Krakow. When I asked Fr. Reginald about the brutal era of Nazi occupation in Poland, he said that, “Life inside was mostly the same as it always was,” but he did note that when the Nazis used their cloister to store cans of food, the Dominican friars in his community helped the Polish underground to disarm the German guards and capture some of the food for the

Catholic resistance. They also gave food to “the poor” during that time, who they knew may have been Jews evading Nazi internment, a “crime” punishable by execution. I asked for Fr. Reginald’s blessing, which he imparted to me and my family, and recommended that we “pray for one another until we meet in heaven.” As he approached the door he suddenly turned back and said, “Maybe we’ll meet in purgatory – one never knows. . . .”

Bro. Grzegorz Kuraś, OP

Br. Grzegorz Kuraś, OP, was born into a small industrial town, built by the Communists to mine for sulfur. I asked him what brought him from a Communist mining town to a vibrant Dominican priory in Poland’s cultural capital. “I have always been interested in talking to people,” he replied, “but I have also struggled to know what I should do in life.” “I have fought with God – I have had false images of who He is. And, when I was young I was superstitious, but finally, God gave me a light of better understanding.” After a childhood of seeking understanding and growing more interested in developing more profound relationships with other people, Br. Grzegorz says that, “The Dominican Order has given me the chance to know people at the deepest level, and to be an instrument for God.” He has come to see that despite the wounds in people’s hearts, most are seeking to know others and to know God, to find the peace that only He can provide. “People take their shots at you, and I used to shoot back. But now I know that you have to wait until the person you’re talking to has used all his ammunition – listen – and then we can begin to truly talk. We have to still be there when the ammunition is over.” Poles, he tells me, are naturally reserved, and after living in America he has grown more open and expressive. But America has a dark side, he insists, and that is materialism and wealth. “There is no rich country that remains Christian,” he suggests, “except maybe the Vatican,” he notes with a laugh. Materialism draws us away from Christ, and when we turn away from His love we turn away from lasting joy. As we ended our discussion about his vocation to serve the Church, Br. Grzegorz said that, “In America I realized that we all have the same fears and joys, and God gave me my vocation to make me vulnerable before others.” As he introduced the next friar I was to interview, I reflected on his remarks, and compared them to the writing of St. Paul: “‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will

boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12: 9-10).

Bro. Marek Rozpłochowski, OP

Br. Marek Rozpłochowski, OP's, story is summoning. He grew up in a tough Polish village; half labored on farms and half worked in gritty factories. Br. Marek described his family in grim words: "I came from a broken family; I don't know my father, and I grew up in a very poor family. I don't even know all of my siblings. I've always felt that no one understands me; even my family doesn't understand me." Putting my pencil down, I asked him what drew him out of such a painful past into his current life of prayer and service to God's people. "Both of my brothers are in jail," he said, "and I was always looking for some sense to my life." Br. Marek looked "for meaning in every subculture I could find – it was all disappointing." He recalled bumping into a Catholic friend one day, at a low point, feeling his life was "aimless." "I was fifteen or sixteen years old. I thought I was tough and that they were weak. 'What can they do for me?' I asked." He went to Mass with his friend. "These Christians were kind," he recalled, "and no-one else I knew was kind." Br. Marek asked God for a miracle; he said that he was only prepared to become a Christian if He showed him a miracle. "The miracle was nothing like I expected – I suddenly knew that God loved me. That was the miracle!" He continued: "This might sound strange to you, but everyone told me my face changed when I became a Christian. I used to look angry, but suddenly my face looked joyful, at peace." Years later, Br. Marek received the Dominican habit and made a simple vow to God in his heart: "I'll give you my life if I can lead others to you." Near the end of our discussion he told me that he spent his childhood feeling lonely. Br. Marek said that his favorite passage from Scripture is near the end of John 16: ". . . and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (John 16: 32). "When I first read this passage I cried, and then I felt joy. I knew that God was healing me, and this is what I want to give to others."

Evening Vespers and Life in Community

From the pews in the nave during vespers one sees the choir stalls near the high altar filled with white Dominican habits, partly covered by the distinctive black cappa magna. The personal stories of each friar seems to disappear as they collectively intone the traditional Latin prayers of vespers; they have chanted the Psalms according to the

ancient Dominican rite for centuries, Psalms such as number 147. “*Laudate Dominum, quoniam bonus est psalmus; Deo nostro sit jucunda, decoraque laudation* (Praise the Lord; the Lord is gracious; sing to our God, a God who so claims our love; praise is his right).” Unlike in my native America, Latin carries less ideological baggage in Poland; it is sung because it is beautiful, because it lifts our hearts to higher things, and because it is a Language that connects the Dominicans today to the time when St. Hyacinth, the disciple of St. Dominic, established the Dominican Order in Krakow in 1222. In fact, after intoning vespers each night, the friars file out of their choir stalls following two illuminated candles, still chanting in Latin, and make their way through the church’s dramatic Baroque chapel dedicated to Mary, back through the Gothic nave, and up a long staircase to the splendid Chapel of St. Hyacinth, where they end vespers singing beside the remains of the holy saint himself.

After vespers, the ninety Dominican priests and brothers stream through the dimly lit cloister, which dates to the Middle Ages, passing dramatic eighteenth-century paintings of Dominican preachers and martyrs, and into their large refectory with paintings – all based in some way on the theme of food –by the seventeenth-century Italian painter, Tommaso Dolabella. High above the head table is a fresco of St. Dominic meditating on the Crucifixion with a copy of St. Matthew’s Gospel attached to his arm. Prayers are sung and everyone shares a final meal as a community of friars, as they have since the time of St. Hyacinth. The history of their life in Krakow, in their priory, continues to exist in continuity with its noble past. An early sixteenth-century epigraph in their cloister walk features a woman holding rosary, as people still do there, and the ring marks of Nazi cans remain visible on the floors as one approaches the refectory. Within the busy walls of Krakow’s Dominican church and priory is the discernable voice of St. Dominic, who said to his followers, “We must sow the seed, not hoard it.” After living with these sons of Dominic for a week – after eating, conversing, praying, and attending reverent liturgies – I began to understand that this is perhaps the “secret” of their success, that is, to keep no secrets when it comes to spreading the seeds of the Gospel.

Mass in St. Dominic’s Chapel in Rome

After a week in Krakow, I flew to Rome for research and Christmas near the dome of St. Peter’s. I received an email the night before leaving Krakow; it was from Fr.

Krzysztof Popławski, OP, and Fr. Jacek Buda, OP, inviting my wife and me to “join the Polish Dominicans at Santa Sabina for Holy Mass in the Chapel of St. Dominic.” These holy friars from Poland are everywhere, extending their hospitality and spiritual encouragement wherever God has planted them. After Mass we strolled through their ancient basilica while they recounted stories of St. Dominic, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Catherine of Siena, whose footsteps are still felt in that sacred place. Fr. Jacek now “sows the seeds” of the Gospel in the U.S., and Fr. Krzysztof serves the Order in Central and Eastern Europe. Dominican footsteps continue to sweep across the world, and many of these footsteps can be traced back to a small part of Krakow that has left a large legacy of Christian evangelization. In Rome I remembered the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception back in Krakow – the brothers ushered me up into the organ loft so I could see what “special holy days” are like in Poland. Below me was the massive basilica church filled to capacity; the mostly-young crowd of attendees knelt through Mass, and received Holy Communion with a reverence I rarely witness elsewhere. After Mass the faithful gathered in the cloister and outside on the streets to greet one another. At the risk of making their church even more overcrowded, I recommend my readers visit the Dominican church in Krakow, and be refreshed by the priests, brothers, and faithful who have found a way to “not grow bored with Christ.”

Images:[All photos by Anthony E. Clark]

- 001: Dominican community at evening vespers (Krakow, Poland)
- 002: Holy Mass at the Dominican Church of the Most Holy Trinity (Krakow, Poland)
- 003: Black capes (cappa magna) of the Dominican habit outside the community refectory (Krakow, Poland)
- 004: Prayer before lunch in the Dominican refectory (Krakow, Poland)
- 005: Dr. Anthony Clark with Poland's oldest Dominican, Fr. Reginald Wiśniowski, OP (Krakow, Poland)
- 006: Ring marks from Nazi food cans stored in the Dominican cloister during the German occupation of Poland (Krochow, Poland).
- 007: Br. Grzegorz Huraś, OP, in the St. Hyacinth Chapel at the Dominican Church of the Most Holy Trinity (Krakow Poland)