



ARTYKUŁ

## **„Crusades”. Secular Catholics in defence of the cross and religion lessons.**

Author: **Adam Dziurok** 01.12.2019

Demonstrations, occupation of schools, thousands of protesting letters – it's the little known picture of the Catholics' fight against the secularisation of education in the „people's” Republic of Poland.

The general perception of the history of the Catholic Church during the Communist era is usually dominated by the institutional and political perspectives. The main attention gather the stories of the church's hierarchy fighting against the totalitarian authorities, the fate of the diocese and chapter priests and the political involvement of the faithful. However, what remains somewhat out of the spotlight, are the activities of the countless secular Catholics who spontaneously and eagerly stood in defence of the Church, their faith and the

broadly understood religious freedom.

One of the areas of conflict between the Church and the state, where the secular Catholics played an important role, was the presence of religion and religious symbols in schools. Every attempt to remove crosses and religion lessons from educational facilities was met with firm responses from not only the priesthood, but first and foremost from the students and their parents themselves and even teachers.

### **Bierut's crusade**

The first operation of this type was initiated already in Autumn of 1948, so during the rules of the Stalin administration, with Bolesław Bierut as the leading figure. The testing ground for the fight against religion in schools was the Upper Silesia province. Crosses were moved to the side walls of the classrooms and then – even removed entirely. Among the people who called for the removal of crosses from schools was the Silesian curator – Jerzy Berek, a protestant who suggested that „the image of the Crucified awakens bloodthirsty instincts”. The state policies were met with counteractions – the youth hanged crosses back on or „drew or carved crosses on walls” (as the Katowice bishop Stanisław Adamski wrote in his pastoral letter in 1949). In classrooms, where crosses were moved to the sidewalls, the youth often turned their tables towards them; there were also instances of students leaving the school in protest. In the Żore high school, young pupils hanged a cross every day, which would disappear after the lessons. The Communist authorities noted many „incidents related to moving crosses”. The fight about the crosses, according to the Katowice curia, lasted several weeks and „stopped only after the threats of the highest punishments were made, and in some cases even carried out” (that’s what happened e.g. in Panewniki, Chorzów, Szopienice and Piekary). The protesters were threatened with the Citizens’ Militia intervention (in Józefowo) or the Security Office’s (e.g. in Cieszyn and Nakła), with imprisonment (in Kamień) and the complete removal of crosses (in Tarnowskie Góry, Radostowy, Repty and Cieszyn), also with expelling from school (e.g. in Rybnik and Pszczyn).

The appeal of the Katowice bishop Stanisław Adamski from 1952 calling for the faithful to sign the petition to the State Council in defence of religion lessons, made a lot of noise as well. Around 100 thousand people from the Katowice diocese signed it, which – according to historian and columnist Andrzej Grajewski – means it was probably the biggest show of social disobedience in the

entire Eastern bloc during the Communist era.

Similar determination could be found in the fight for teaching religion in schools and sustaining of the Catholic educational facilities. The appeal of the Katowice bishop Stanisław Adamski from 1952 calling for the faithful to sign the petition to the State Council in defence of religion lessons, made a lot of noise as well. Around 100 thousand people from the Katowice diocese signed it, which – according to historian and columnist Andrzej Grajewski – means it was probably the biggest show of social disobedience in the entire Eastern bloc during the Communist era. Apart from that, there were many smaller protests e.g. several thousand people signed the petition to the minister of education in the case of the priest and religion teacher fired from the school in Prokocim (firing of religion teachers was one of the ways to remove religion from schools). However, the Catholics did not stop at written protests. In 1955, in the Roczyny parish in the wadowicki province, a group of around 70 people demanded at the local Municipal National Council to bring back religion lessons to the local school. The protesters threatened to not deliver the obligatory agricultural tribute and not send their children to school until their demands were met. Another religious demonstration took place in Dąbrowa Narodowa (Chrzanów district), where on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1954 parents gathered in front of the school, demanding religion to be brought back. Priest Antoni Adamek recalled this about the protest:

The situation was grave. The teachers hid in basements, schools were closed and people gathered next to the building singing „We want God" and „God save Poland" - they demanded religion lessons in schools. Forty officers of the Citizens' Militia watched from the distance. Then, repressions and arrests began.

Many times, the Polish parents called for the right to a Catholic upbringing of their children in educational facilities ran by the Church. Thanks to the firm protests, it was possible to protect from immediate liquidation the following schools in Częstochowa: Trade School of the Sisters of Resurrection and Trade High School of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth.



---

**Youth from Miętne at the retreats given by bishop Jan Mazur during the fight for crosses, town of Garwolin, 1984 Photo from the archives of the Agricultural School in Miętne**



---

**Card created after the events of the Agricultural School in Miętne in 1984**



Wooden memorial plaque with crosses taken down from classrooms in the school in Miętne, photo: malygosc.pl



Cross in front of the Miętne school with the Latin sentence: "In this sign thou shalt conquer". Photo from the archives of the

### **Gomułka's fight against the „religious fanatics”**

The breakthrough of 1956 and Władysław Gomułka coming to power, for a brief moment brought some improvements to the „educational frontline”. The Polish society more and more bravely demanded reinstating crosses and religion lessons in schools – the number of delegations and petitions to the Communist authorities rose, strikes and protests were organised more often (e.g. in front of the municipal national councils in Tarnobrzeg and Gorlice). Crosses were spontaneously hanged in schools, but not long after the state authorities ordered to take them down. After a circular about the secularity of schools was published in 1958, the Catholics firmly defended the right to hang religious symbols in educational facilities.

After a circular about the secularity of schools was published in 1958, the Catholics firmly defended the right to hang religious symbols in educational facilities. [...] The scale of the resistance is best exemplified by the fact, that by September 15<sup>th</sup> 1958 there were 832 demonstrations, 112 boycotts, 70 occupations of schools and more than 1300 instances of crosses being hanged. At that time, the Motorised Reserves of the Citizens' Militia intervened as many as 41 times to „resolve incidents”.

The Communist authorities, remembering the events of late 1940s, knew that they had a tough battle ahead of them and a strong resistance of the Catholic society to deal with. These assumptions proved right, as „conflict situations” began spreading throughout the entire country. The scenario was almost the same as before – usually groups of parents (mostly women) occupied schools, hanged crosses there, sent protests and petitions and called to boycott lessons. There were instances of students wearing little crosses on jacket

lapels, as a sign of protest. Demonstrations gathering a few hundred people each took place in several towns and villages across the country (e.g. in the Gałki village in the kielecki province around 400 people entered the school and hanged crosses) – the Communists used Motorised Reserves of the Citizens' Militia, armed with batons and tear gas, to disperse them. The scale of the resistance is best exemplified by the fact, that by September 15<sup>th</sup> 1958 there were 832 demonstrations, 112 boycotts, 70 occupations of schools and more than 1300 instances of crosses being hanged. At that time, the Motorised Reserves of the Citizens' Militia intervened as many as 41 times to „resolve incidents”. During the second „war on crosses”, a few hundred secular Catholics were repressed – 182 people got arrested, more than 600 were held until further explanation and more than 1200 were put in front of special commissions and punished (these statistics must be incomplete since in the Warsaw area alone 552 people were repressed in various ways). Most protests were noted in the southern provinces: Kieleckie, Rzeszowskie and Krakowskie, although the most serious demonstrations (counting more than 100 people) took place at the Warsaw province (along with the Kieleckie one). The scale of the social resistance in September 1958, makes these events one of the biggest protests against the Communist authorities during the whole Communist era.

After the year 1956, the state authorities systematically limited religion lessons in schools brewing up even more conflicts. Street protests took place e.g. in Mszczonów, where a delegation of parents demanding religion lessons to be brought back to the local high school were arrested. When a crowd of a thousand people attacked and occupied a Citizens' Militia outpost, the Motorised Reserves stepped in. When in 1959, one of the schools in Starachowice were to be transformed into a secular facility, the determined parents gathered at the headquarters of the City National Council demanding religion to be brought back. As the Church documents read „the provoked mothers didn't really watch their mouths and were put into detention for several days”. What's more, one of the members of the parents' delegation which went to the ministry of education in Warsaw, was arrested after he got back and then fired. Parents, who went to the ministry's facilities demanding bringing back of religion lessons for their kids, were questioned for several hours at the Citizens' Militia stations, where they were blackmailed.

Removing religion from public educational facilities after the year 1956 was of systematic and „growing” nature, and in 1961 it was removed entirely. However, the protests were not as strong that time as during the removing of crosses in 1958.

Mass parents' demonstrations took place all across Poland – e.g. in September of 1960 in a few cities of the

Olsztyńskie province groups of angered parents disrupted the beginning of the school year chanting: „We want God and religion in schools”. At the same time, in the local department of education 57 petitions were handed concerning the religion lessons, signed by 4648 people (called „religious fanatics” in the state documents). Removing religion from public educational facilities after the year 1956 was of systematic and „growing” nature, and in 1961 it was removed entirely. However, the protests were not as strong that time as during the removing of crosses in 1958.

### **Jaruzelski strikes back**

The third battle for the presence of crosses in schools took place in the 80s, so during the rules of Wojciech Jaruzelski. The return of the „religious emblems” to the public space during the „Solidarity carnival” ended with the introduction of the martial law. The authorities got back the positions they lost at the „educational frontline” by conducting yet another operation of removing crosses in the beginning of 1982. Different to the previous protests, this time the main protesters were not the parents, but rather the students. One of the biggest demonstration took place in Miętne near Garwolin, and in Włoszczowa. When by the end of 1983, the crosses in the Agricultural School in Miętne were taken down, the local youth began a protest which after a few months turned into an occupational strike. The protest, participated by a few hundred students, was only dispersed thanks to the mediations of the Siedlce bishop Jan Mazur. The students agreed to only one cross being hanged in the school – in the library. However, the compromise did not stop the repressions – some of the protesting students and parents were moved to other schools, the rest had huge problems with passing the matura college exams and others were even sent to the harshest military units. A similar conflict took place at the Vocational School in Włoszczowa, where in December of 1984 more than 700 students commenced an occupational strike, demanding crosses to be put back in classrooms. The demonstrations was backed by two young vicars, who spent time with the students during the strike. After the two weeks long protest had ended, the vicars were put on trial. The crosses were removed once again.

Although the cases of Miętne and Włoszczowa are the most known, there were many other spontaneous instances of defending the crosses (usually in written form or hanging them back) across the entire country. The fight for crosses, which began during the martial law, kept going almost until the very end of Communism in 1989.

Article comes from no. 7-8/2018 „Biuletyn IPN”