

What is Poland?

by Thomas Storck

The title of this article, "What is Poland?" might seem a bit impertinent. After all, is not Poland obviously a European country, and even if not everyone could find Poland on a map, most do indeed know that Poland is a country. But the title of this article is nearly the same title that G. K. Chesterton gave to a lecture that he delivered in 1927 shortly after his return from a trip to Poland. And in that lecture, although Chesterton disclaimed the ability to define Poland, he knew that Poland was important. Indeed, on his trip he had written in the guest book of a Polish society of writers, "If Poland had not been born again [i.e., restored to existence after World War I], all the Christian nations would have died."

No doubt that sounds a little farfetched, for Poland is a small and weak nation, whose military would surely be utterly powerless to defend Christians nations, should any be able to be found, against most any enemy of any sort. Rather, is it not Poland that is said to need defending?

To answer those questions we might begin by recalling the epithet that was often given to Poland in the late Middle Ages and for some time thereafter, *antemurale Christianitatis*, that is, the rampart of Christendom or Christianity. Poland was really such a rampart for many centuries, against the Turks who had expanded their empire immediately to the south, and against Russia to the east, who although a Christian nation, on account of the unfortunate bitterness between Catholic and Orthodox, was too often a foe of the Catholic European order, and whose cossack warriors were not known for their mildness in waging war or their respect for civilian populations.

Probably Poland's finest moment in her career as *antemurale* came in 1683 when King John Sobieski's troops were the means for saving Vienna, besieged by the Turks, who doubtless hoped to triumphantly march through much of the rest of Europe after taking the seat of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Today, of course, Poland no longer lies on the border of the Christian world, if that expression can still be used. The Turks were long ago driven far to the south, and Russia has as good a claim to be considered a Christian state as any other in the West. Therefore is there any sense in speaking of Poland in our times as an *antemurale*, and if so, as a rampart against what? Well, as I said above, G. K. Chesterton thought Poland's presence in the society of nations was important indeed. And although no longer a rampart in the same sense, would Chesterton, and perhaps

can we ourselves, still see Poland in that role today?

These remarks may serve to introduce the past issue of *The Chesterton Review*, an issued dubbed the "special Polish issue." For those who are not acquainted with the Review, it is the journal of the Chesterton Institute, now housed at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Begun and still edited by Fr. Ian Boyd, C.S.B., it was published for many years in Canada, but migrated south of the border several years ago to enjoy some Yankee hospitality. *The Chesterton Review* is obviously devoted to the works and memory of Chesterton, and since this issue dealt with Poland, we can hope to find here some of why Chesterton thought Poland was important, and why we may think so too. Generally the Review begins with a few articles of Chesterton himself, then more articles about Chesterton or his friends and contemporaries, or about Chestertonian themes, then book and film reviews, and last the always interesting News and Comments, which gathers up Chestertonian tidbits from all over the world. This issue begins with Chesterton's 1927 essay, "The Enemy of Poland," followed by his poem, titled simply, "Poland." Other Polish-related pieces include Gregory MacDonald's "The Resurrection of Poland," Dermot Quinn's "In Search of Polish Anti-Semitism," Douglas Milewski's "The Mirror That is Poland," and several book reviews and excerpts from articles that appeared elsewhere, including contributions by Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Dawson.

To find Chesterton's opinion of Poland we look of course in the first place to his own essay, "The Enemy of Poland." In a way, this article is not about Poland, but about those who hate Poland. But from a man's enemies we can sometimes learn something about a man. Similarly in the case of a country. And Chesterton points out the two chief enemies of his time, Russian Communism and the recently defeated but still active spirit of Prussia. Now what do these tell us about Poland and her importance?

In the case of Communism it is very clear. Although Communism would never have existed had it not been for the overthrow of some of the most important elements of the hitherto Christian European civilization, especially the replacement of a Christian economic philosophy by the new outlook that saw the economy as a self-regulating machine and capitalism as its cherished offspring, still Communism embodied a hatred of Christianity and of the Catholic Church in particular, even though that Church had been the strongest barrier against the economic conditions that Communism claimed to be also against. And in hating Christianity, it naturally hated Poland.

Not many today, certainly in the U.S., realize that in the early 1920s the Red Army invaded and nearly conquered Poland, but was driven back by the Polish Army, with almost no assistance from other nations. And incidentally, that when the Soviet army was only seven miles from Warsaw nearly the entire diplomatic corps fled, leaving only the papal nuncio, Achille Ratti, afterwards Pope Pius XI, as well as the American, Italian and Danish ministers.

As to the other enemy that Chesterton saw, Prussia and those who supported her, it is more complicated and deserves a fuller discussion. Chesterton saw the Bismarckian German Empire as the conquest of the essentially European, mostly Catholic parts of Germany, by Prussia, a state that stood for little more than that Realpolitik with which it is often associated. And there is much truth to that view. Earlier Austria had been understood not only to be part of Germany, but the leading part, both politically and culturally. But already in the eighteenth century Prussia had begun a rather shameless series of power grabs on the road to making herself supreme in Germany, a position she finally achieved after the 1870 war with France when the Prussian King became German Emperor, but emperor of a Germany redefined to exclude Austria. And in excluding Austria this new Germany excluded or minimized many of

the most central traditions of European culture in favor of a culture based on military power, scientific technique and a kind of historical scholarship that too often seemed to want not to understand, but to dissolve the past.

Now there are perhaps exaggerations in Chesterton's view of Germany, especially in comparing Germany's conduct vis-à-vis her smaller neighbors with that of other countries, most of whom conducted themselves in similar fashion whenever they could get away with it. But still, Prussian-dominated Germany sometimes expressed her views on the rights of her neighbors with a frankness that lacked even that hypocrisy which is the homage that vice gives to virtue, as in the infamous remark of Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, in the summer of 1914 that the treaty of which Germany was a signatory guaranteeing Belgium neutrality and independence was merely "a scrap of paper." In the case of his own country, Chesterton was one of the strongest critics of England's conduct whenever England behaved in like manner with regard to small countries. So whether Chesterton exaggerated or not, he was no hypocrite who justified the misdeeds of his own nation while condemning those of her enemies.

But to return to Poland, Germany was also the enemy

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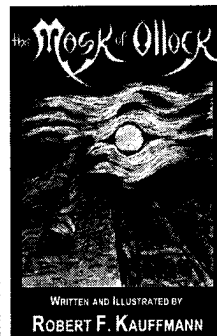
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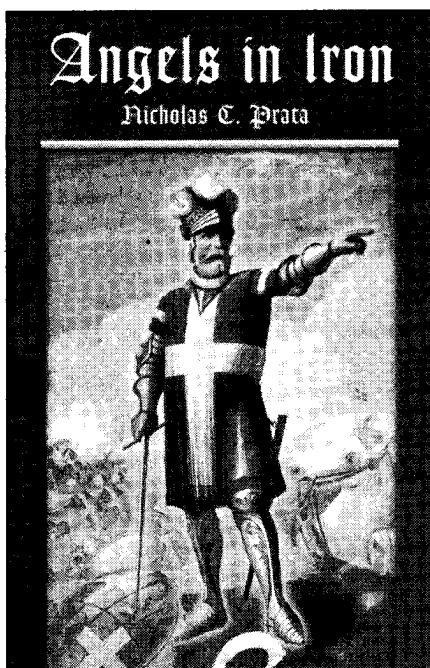
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of Poland, mostly because Poland was Germany's neighbor and Poland was not as strong as Germany. Everyone knows, of course, that World War II began with the German invasion of Poland, but German agitation against Poland did not begin with Hitler, nor, alas, did it end with him, as several items in this issue of *The Chesterton Review* note that some Germans expelled from Poland in the aftermath of World War II are demanding monetary compensation for the loss of houses or businesses. Of course, at the time that expulsion occurred, Poles were hardly free agents, as their country was occupied again, this time by the Soviet army. But nevertheless, these claims, brought by a small organization called the Prussian Trust, were actually presented to the European Court of Human Rights in 2006. One would want to see these German claims accurately compared against the compensation that Poland has never received for the Nazi aggression and occupation of 1939 to 1945, not to mention the earlier partitions of Poland at the hands of Prussia, Russia and Austria at the end of the eighteenth century.

But we have discussed Poland's enemies too much. It is time to talk of Poland instead. And a recent news item is enough to show that it is not only by her enemies that Poland's character may be known. Within the past year a group of members of the Polish parliament made a proposal that some might consider controversial or even

insane in our age. They proposed that Jesus Christ be declared King of Poland! This is not entirely without precedent in Poland, since several centuries ago the Polish King made a similar declaration making our Blessed Lady Queen of Poland. But when that happened European society did not consider such acts as either mad or quaint. Whether this latest proposal will succeed or not, I do not know. There is certainly reason to fear that it will not. (*In the event, it did not get very far. —ed.*) But whether it does or does not, I think it is the sort of wild and utterly romantic declaration that Chesterton would have wildly and romantically approved of. Moreover, I think we can see from this how Poland could stand again as antemurale Christianitatis, this time not against external foes, but as a rampart against that secularism that has eaten up the heart and soul of Christendom. At one time Catholics understood that their cultures and even their political arrangements must be brought under the banner of Christ the King. Nor has the Church's Magisterium abandoned this stance. The Second Vatican Council in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, stated, "The temporal order is to be renewed in such a way that, while its own principles are fully respected, it is harmonized with the principles of the Christian life and adapted to the various conditions of times, places and peoples" (no. 7), and *Gaudium et Spes* taught that it is the



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laity's mission "to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city" (no. 43). The Catholic faith can never be reduced to a merely private or familial affair with no implications for the social and political order. Only if such a conception of the Faith is widely regained, is there any real hope of preserving that civilization that the Church is so clearly the author of.

So if Poland does officially declare Jesus Christ as her King, she will be taking up again her old task as *antemurale*. And incidentally making an important claim in the question of the definition of what is Europe or what is the West. Most everyone, not only those on the Left, but many on the Right too, see the genius of European culture in its freedom from the tiresome religious certitudes that haunt Moslem lands and seem to inspire nothing but endless feuds and violence. But it is hard to see how anyone who really believes in the religion of Jesus Christ could assent to this notion of politics and culture. For the error of Islam is not that it is too religious, but that it is the wrong religion. We should admire Moslems for their rejection of secularism at the same time as we deplore their adherence to a false theology. Of course, to recover a Christianity which can "impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city" does not mean to slaughter one's opponents, but it does mean that God and the things of God must be taken seriously in all that we do, both as individuals and as political bodies. If we ever began to do this again, the result would be discomfiting to both liberals and conservatives, as both camps discovered that their favorite vices were suddenly no longer allowed under color of a notion of freedom that originated in Hell.

So, whether Poland officially proclaims our Lord as her King or not, at least by making the proposal, those parliamentarians are raising the question whether Europe could ever be a Christendom again.

And to understand this need to recover the sense of Christendom, an idea unfamiliar to most of us, may I recommend this special Polish issue of *The Chesterton Review*? For it is never too late to seek to start over again, a sentiment that I suspect Chesterton himself would have approved of.

NOTE: The Chesterton Review may be contacted by e-mail at chestertoninstitute@shu.edu or by phone, 973-275-2431. The "special Polish issue" is volume 33, nos. 1/2, and in addition to material on Poland, contains a short humorous play by Maurice Baring, articles by Joseph Pearce on the priest in modern fiction and by Sheridan Gilley on Cardinal Newman's two novels, several pieces by and about the American writer, Joseph Mitchell, as well as its usual book and film reviews.

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