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JAN HUS -- A HERETIC OR A SAINT ?

Prof. Stefan Swiezawski was interviewed by Anna Karon. The title of the articles was Stefan Swiezawski: "Jan Hus - Heretic or Saint?," Tygodnik Powszechny, 1986, no. 6. Marian Rehowicz: "Jan Hus," Tygodnik Powszechny, 1965, no. 52. This article appeared in the magazine WIEZ, January 1993, no. 2 (412) and was translated by Mrs. Alexandra Moravec.

Anna Karon: Prof. Swiezawski, when did you first become interested in the case of Jan Hus?

Prof. Swiezawski: While participating in the work sessions of the II Vatican Council, I was struck by the realization that Hus' ideas concerning the tenets of the Church--ideas that Hus died for and which were considered totally unacceptable in his time--were very similar to the theses being approved by the Council.

In 1985, while in Rome with my wife, I was often invited to breakfast with the Holy Father. I can remember one meeting very well. I was sitting beside Father Dziwisze and opposite the Holy Father, who appeared to be very tired and deeply absorbed in thought. At a certain moment the Holy Father asked me what I was working on. I replied that I was continuing with the history of fifteenth century philosophy, and I took the occasion to touch on the problem of Hus. "I am not a theologian," I said, "but since I deal with the history of philosophy, I often run into theological questions. It is my impression that the theses of Jan Hus are very close to those concerning the Church proclaimed by Vatican II. It is my opinion that special attention should be paid to Hus; the Hus case should be resolved and Hus' martyrdom honored."

The Holy Father reacted with lively interest to my words: "This is precisely what you scholars should do--bring such problems to me." Father Dziwisze immediately joined the discussion: "Prof. Swiezawski, kindly write an article for Tygodnik Powszechny. We shall see to it that it be published in Italian. This matter must first be cleared by the Ecumenical Commission of the Polish Episcopate, and later by the General Church Forum."

This discussion made a strong impression on me. Interest in the Hus case was clearly shown by the Holy Father. Immediately after returning to Poland I began to sort through all the material I had gathered on Hus, and I wrote the article for Tygodnik Powszechny. The editor published the article at once. The interest in the article was great. I received many letters from Poland and from abroad, both supporting and also sharply criticizing my approach to the fate of Jan Hus.

Anna Karon: Prof. Swiezawski, could you please review the main ideas contained in "Jan Hus - Heretic or Precursor of Vatican II," the article you wrote and now considered of historical importance. Please explain in particular why Jan Hus appears to be a precursor of Vatican II.

Prof. Swiezawski: Hus strongly upheld the belief that the Church is not only the clergy. He objected to the clerical and judicial views and opinions of his time: for example, one of Hus' enemies, Stanislav from Znojmo, defined the Church as consisting of the Pope and the cardinals only, excluding even the bishops!

Hus conceived of the Catholic Church as the Church of the People of God. This same concept of the Church is present in "*Lumen Gentium*." Hus sublimated the role of the Pope without, however, denying the Pope's primacy. He insisted that the head of the Church - in the truest sense - is Christ, and that the principal role of the Bishop of Rome is that of Primate of Service, that is, in Hus' definition, the "First in Virtue and First in Building the Church."

The same applied to the entire hierarchy. Hus strove for a profound reform in all areas of Church life. Hus' desire for an authentic return to the life of the Scriptures was perceived as a threat to the very foundations of the political set-up of the imperial monarchy and of the Church hierarchy as well as to the power of the Pope and - to a lesser degree - to the power of the bishops.

This advocate of increased sensitivity on the part of the Church to the needs of her people, especially those people considered less important, second-rate or marginal, such as the poor serfs, bore great similarity to the vows made by St. Francis to Our Lady of Poverty.

Anna Karon: The Rev. Karel Skalicky, professor of Theology at Lateran University in Rome, declared--in an interview about Hus on the BBC--that Hus died for the renewal of the Catholic Church.

Prof. Swiezawski: According to historical documents, Hus recited the Catholic "*Credo*" at the moment of death. He thus confirmed his understanding and acceptance of the basic tenets of the Faith in accordance with the teachings of the apostolic Church.

We need to comprehend the extreme complexity of Church matters in that era in order to fully understand why Hus' ideas represented a revolt against the then-existent *status quo*. They represented a revolution of the spirit. Hus, however, was neither the first nor the only one. He was a product of the reforming tendencies within the Czech Church. Among his predecessors we can mention: Milic from Kromeris, Konrad from Waldhausen, Matthew from Janov, Ernest from Pardubice, and Jacob from Stribir.

Hus' entire trial, as it was staged at the Council of Constance, is replete with events and episodes which evoke feelings of extreme disgust. The majority were cynical political tacticians disguised as defenders of the purity of the faith. The text of retraction (the revocation of heretical errors), given to Hus to sign, was unacceptable to Hus since it was filled with lies and incorrect statements maliciously ascribed to him. The organizers of Hus' trial took statements out of context, and in like manner they put together thirty quotes from Hus' writings (mainly from his *De Ecclesia* written in 1413). Theses and heresies which conflicted with both faith and morals were publicly exposed, together with Hus, in the most shameful of ways, totally disregarding the fact that Hus did not acknowledge them as his own. When we analyze Hus' ideas with care, we can only conclude that Hus was not a heretic, but rather a radical with regard to the clergy. Moreover, he was a Czech standing up to the dominance of the Germans in Prague. He antagonized two powers: the central ecclesiastical power which defended its institutions (considered an intrinsic part of natural church order) and the Empire which feared any and all emancipation movements within its member national kingdoms.

It would seem evident that these reasons--basically political in nature--were the driving force behind the violent reaction against Hus, and later his followers, the Hussites. In this conflict, the doctrinal rationale for incriminating Hus and the Czechs was developed and added on purpose to the already existent list of false accusations.

Anna Karon: Don't you think, professor, that this dispute between the political and mystical spheres within the Church continues today, although in a different form? Much can be clarified by using the excellent Maritain differentiation between the Church Person (Personae)--he who is holy and without sin--and the Church Executors (Personnel de l'Eglise).

Prof. Swiezawski: At this point I would like to mention the opinion of Bishop Rechowicz, whose article was published before mine in *Tygodnik Powszechny*. The bishop speaks about

the conflict between the *Corpus Politicum* and the *Corpus Mysticum*. When considered merely as a *Corpus Politicum*, the Church destroys her true name/essence. In the fifteenth century doubts began to surface about the authenticity of the myth regarding the donation made by Constantine the Great: the so-called "*Donatio Constantini*." Prior to then, documents circulated the story about Constantine's donation, that is, the bequeathing of all his powers as well as of the entire Roman Empire to the Papacy. Gradually--and particularly in the fifteenth century--it became evident that these documents were not genuine and that the entire tradition connected with the Constantine donation was merely a myth. As a result, the concept of the Church as a *Corpus Politicum* became shaky, and the process of purification freed the *Corpus Mysticum* from its political shackles. This was the conflict between papal and imperial power. On the one hand there was the desire to preserve temporal rule, wealth and political power. On the other hand there was the tendency towards a democratic up-rising within the framework of the Church. This tendency was well represented by St. Francis, St. Dominic, and later St. Catherine of Siena and St. Brigitte of Sweden. In fact, one of the defenders of this uprising was Hus.

Anna Karon: Beside some very positive reactions to your article, professor, there was also dissent, some of which was quite aggressive. Please allow me to quote from a letter written by Pavel Zahradnik from Prague: "More than half a millennium has elapsed since his (Hus') death, and most of those years have been marked by Church suffering, because some of her members--in the name of Hus--have murdered, tortured, exiled and persecuted others. I believe it to be no exaggeration to state that whenever in my country (the Czech Lands) we witness quarrelling, baseness, lies, and deceit against the Church, the name of that man is behind it all."

Prof. Swiezawski: What this letter considers a conflict between the ideas of Hus and Catholicism is really another problem. A tension exists between different concepts of the Church or Catholic religion and certain rigid, albeit respectable, expressions of Church life. Periodically these disputes come into the foreground, but they really have very little to do with Christianity. We need to distinguish between the ideas of Jan Hus and the Hussite movement, which often took a brutal forms (for example, the Taborites) to be categorized among the splinter groups. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, we have an entirely different approach to the problem of "heresy" and "schism."

In my opinion, the one-sided view of putting all the blame on the Hussites and freeing the Catholics of blame is exaggerated. Tension existed on both sides and produced a great deal of moral damage. I would like to take this occasion to stress that I do not consider myself a specialist in the history or theology connected with the trial of Jan Hus as well as with the Hussite movement. I began to take an interest in this matter in the course of my research on the history of fifteenth century philosophy. I do not wish to be considered an authority on the extremely complex historical disputes between the Catholic Church and the Hussite movement in the Czech lands.

The fact remains that the Council of Basel (1431-1449), which followed the Council of Constance where Hus was condemned, gave priority on its agenda to dialogue with the Czechs. The tragedy of those times (and also during the time of Luther) was that those participating in the Councils did not have a sincere desire to understand and to establish an authentic dialogue. A person of such great stature and intellect as Nicholas from Cussa tried to build understanding with the Czechs. However, his efforts were destined to failure from the start, and he was unable to defend his position on the matter. There are times when the *Corpus Politicum* completely suppresses the *Corpus Mysticum*, and such times generate people who totally block all dialogue. In my opinion, it was this type of situation, that is, the impossibility of arriving at an understanding with the Czechs, that was the cause of the tragedy of Hus' condemnation and of his burning at the stake.

Catholicism in the Czech lands was the object of policies similar to those applied in Spain, first with regard to the Moors and later with regard to the Americans. The Church was very closely tied to the throne. The power governing the Czech lands (let us call it the ideology of the German Empire, later of the Hapsburgs) had a solid understanding (truce)

with Catholicism. And it was this situation--the narrow area between two ideologies--that gave rise to the explosion of the most violent confrontations. The Czech Church structures were dependant on the Hapsburg's concept of Catholicism as well as on their political might, which rejected Czech national self-determination. The Hussite movement was a movement of national liberation. The Catholic religion and the Pillar of the Virgin Mary in Prague became the symbols of Hapsburg imperial power. The destruction of the pillar in 1918--when we attained independence--was similar to the destruction of the Russian Orthodox basilica in Warsaw.

It was also an act of vandalism. Many Czech Catholics interpreted it as an attack on the Mother of God, but instead it was really an attack on the aforementioned coalition which represented oppression. A parallel can be drawn with the Crusaders converting the heathen in the name of Christ and Cross or the Spanish conquistadors' murder of the Indians.

The case of Jan Hus presents ecumenical problems. We tend to judge people of other faiths as deceptive. In Polish the word "Hussite" has a negative connotation. Worse still, it was a Hussite sword--not that of a Swede--that scarred the face of the Mother of God in Czestochowa. We need to clean and heal deep wounds.

Anti-Hussite prejudice is wrong and non-ecumenical. It is in discord with the spirit of Vatican II which greatly stressed the importance of understanding underlying causes, for example, the causes behind the schism of Eastern and Western Christianity, the separation of the Anglicans from the Roman Catholic Church, and the tragedy of Luther's case. The history of Hus and the Hussite movement is only one of many dramatic events. There is, I believe, a lot of work for historians.

Anna Karon: In 1988 an Ecumenical meeting was held in Warsaw. The theme at that meeting was an analysis of the trial of Jan Hus. The result was a compilation of twelve questions which were sent to the Episcopate of the Ecumenical Committee and to Father Nossol. Since then no further progress has been made. What can the reason be?

Prof. Swiezawski: Perhaps we should look at these twelve questions:

- 1) What does reversing a condemnation mean?
- 2) To what extent can the decisions of universal councils be considered as not binding when such decisions have been made under evident political duress exerted by non-ecclesiastic groups (Constance, the threat from Emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg)?
- 3) What should be done in the case of Hus--liberate him from the accusation of heresy or continue in the direction of beatification (Joan of Arc)?
- 4) Was the document, accusing Hus and given to him in Constance, truly in disagreement with his ideas, and, if so, in what sense: were his words taken out of context or was the meaning changed through omission?
- 5) Were the accusations and sentence given to Hus agreed upon beforehand and if so, to what extent? (the position of the Germans, of Sigismund of Luxembourg, and of Jan Gerson)
- 6) Was the trial in Constance within the limits of "*lege artis*"?
- 7) Weren't Hus' theses from De Ecclesia changed and then used against him?
- 8) Was Hus' aversion for church power in his time sufficient reason for his condemnation?
- 9) To what extent was Hus influenced by the ideas of John Wycliffe?
- 10) Was not Hus a defender of the opposing extreme of Platonic realism?
- 11) To what extent is Hus' criticism of miracles and indulgences orthodox?
- 12) Is his idea that the Holy Scriptures are the only source of faith an orthodox one?

I admit that the answers to the above-mentioned questions are missing as a result of the caution exercised by the Vatican and the Roman Curia with regard to such matters. Perhaps Rome does not wish to take any steps that might alter the policies favored by the episcopates of given countries.

For many years there was a tendency in the Czech Lands to slow down any analysis or knowledge of Hussitism. In all probability this was the case because of various historical problems, among others the consciousness that Hus was wronged by Catholics. It is my impression that the current Czech episcopate has not changed its position in this regard.

Hus' case was strongly defended at Vatican II by Prague Archbishop, Cardinal Josef Beran. During the Council discussions regarding the declaration of the freedom of faith, Beran shocked everyone by bringing up Hus. Beran argued that a remorseful conscience is negative, even if it is meant to benefit the true faith. "It seems to me that the Church in my country has been painfully paying for the sins that were committed--at that time in the name of the Church--against the freedom of conscience." Cardinal Beran cited in particular the burning of Jan Hus at the stake among such sins. He also included the forced recatholicization of the Czech nation, carried out by the Hapsburgs in the seventeenth century. These (two) acts--according to Cardinal Beran--create serious impediments to spiritual growth in the heart of the nation, and provide arguments to the enemies of the Church.

It is my personal opinion that Hus should be proclaimed a martyr, and that a re-examination of his case--similar to that undertaken for Joan of Arc--be conducted. I am fully aware that reaching a positive outcome would require an enormous amount of work as well as great caution. But the marked difficulties of Hus' case do not alter the fact that everything possible should be done to arrive at a rapid solution.

Anna Karon: In order to attain the beatification of Hus, we need to re-evaluate some of the theses proclaimed by the Council of Constance.

Prof. Swiezawski: The case is intertwined with an unusually complex and difficult problem. It is vital to be able to differentiate between council decisions made freely, that is when Church representatives can act independently, and council decisions approved under political pressure. The latter is what actually happened in Constance where the main actors were politicians, such as Sigismund of Luxembourg. Let the historians and lawyers judge which theses of the Council of Constance may be considered eternal and universal and which should be overturned. This problem is truly fundamental, indeed, the key to the solution. Hus' case is not simply a matter of local interest. It is a matter of the utmost importance as it deals with the universal Church and her Councils.

Anna Karon: Do you believe that it would actually be possible to revoke council theses?

Prof. Swiezawski: I believe so, even though it will require a great effort, much work, and people capable of examining the heart of the problem in depth and with clarity. The time must be ripe. The mentality of the people in the Church must be changed.

Anna Karon: During his visit to Czechoslovakia, the Holy Father in Prague said the following about Jan Hus: "I remember Cardinal Beran, Archbishop of Prague, ardently speaking about religious freedom and tolerance during the II Vatican Council. He reminded us with sorrowful words of the fate of Jan Hus, the Czech preacher, and expressed deep sadness regarding the great misuse of power at that time and in later periods. The words of the Cardinal, Archbishop of Prague, have remained imprinted in my memory--words about this priest and preacher who played such an important role in the religious and cultural history of the Czech nation. It is now up to the scholars, especially up to the Czech theologians, to precisely define the place Jan Hus occupies among such famous medieval Czech Church reformers as Thomas from Stitny and Jan Milic from Kromeriz. No matter how we look at the theological experiment of Jan Hus, we cannot deny the integrity of his personal life or of the effort that he made to form and develop morality (moral values) in the Czech nation." In your opinion, Professor, may these words of the Pope be interpreted as the moral rehabilitation of Jan Hus as a person?

Prof. Swiezawski: "Rehabilitation" is not the right word in this case as in the case of Galileo. In reality we need to rectify the errors made by the Church representatives. We should look at it this way. The Church as a Person--according to Maritain's definition previously explained in our discussion--is holy and infallible. The people in the Church, however, are very sinful and apt to make terrible errors. It is important that we recognize the difference

between the two. Thus it is not so much a question of Hus' rehabilitation as it is a matter of self rehabilitation by and of the representatives of the Church. This is the way I see it.

But returning to the words of the Holy Father, I believe that in a certain sense he did accomplish the rehabilitation. On the one hand this is a great step forward, on the other hand it is only the beginning. I have a dream: the Holy Father travels to Constance, kneels before the stone commemorating Hus' martyrdom, and prays. At least that much.

Anna Karon: In your dreams, however, you go even further--to the commencement of the beatification of Hus . . .

Prof. Swiezawski: Yes, that must happen. Mrs. Condenshof-Calergis wrote very nicely about this in Die Furche. Her greatest desire is that the litanies of Czech saints - St. Wenceslaus, St. Agnes, St. John Nepomucene--should include Jan Hus so that the Czechs be able to pray for his intercession. After all, they considered him a saint.

Anna Karon: Do you mean to say that Hus was considered a saint?

Prof. Swiezawski: Yes, that is why his ashes were thrown into the Rhine after his death - the judges were afraid that the Czechs and the Poles present then in Constance might keep Hus' ashes as a relic. There was a struggle for the relics and against the belief that Hus was a saint. One other dreadful thing happened at the Council of Constance. All of the council participants had to sign their agreement to proclaiming Hus a heretic. Those who did not sign exposed themselves to the danger of death. Even though the Polish delegation was against proclaiming Hus a heretic, it was forced to sign anyway. The only one who refused to give in and sign was Hieronimus of Prague. That is why he shared Hus' fate, and perished at the stake.

Anna Karon: An assault on people's consciences . . .

Prof. Swiezawski: Appalling! The self-rehabilitation of the Church representatives must necessarily include an explicit rejection of all acts of the inquisition or similar. This, regrettably, has not yet been done in any important document. The times must ripen, so that such a step comes from deep inner convictions and not because of political manipulations.

Anna Karon: When I read your book, The Ecclesiology of the Late Middle Ages at the Crossroads, published By the Polish Theological Union in Cracow, I have the impression that Church history moves in a spiral: at times as a *Corpus Politicum* driven by human force--political and occasionally fanatical forces--and at other times as a *Corpus Mysticum*, bringing the light of the Holy Spirit and its witnesses, and replete with people capable of dialogue and understanding. I am left with the impression that these phases in Church history proceed in cycles, constantly revealing more and more the divine-human face of the Church. Am I not right in my interpretation?

Prof. Swiezawski: I wrote The Ecclesiology as an extension of the last two parts of Volume II of The History of European Philosophy in the XV Century, dedicated to political and international ethics. In this area Church structures are vital for understanding the structures of social order in different lands. At that time we could see the first gleams of international organization resulting from the break-up of the former Christianitas. A comparison can be made with the birth of the idea of the U.N. Here we can see a certain order in historical events. The federative trend was followed by something we can observe today: the disintegration into hundreds of small states.

Anna Karon: What must happen today in the consciences of Church representatives so that the Beatification process for Jan Hus may take place?

Prof. Swiezawski: Very much has to change. Deep and great moral and intellectual changes have to take place. A terrible anti-intellectualism has spread throughout today's Church. Knowledge and wisdom are not valued. Attention must be paid to the profound philosophical-theological changes as well as to widespread instilling of moral and theological values. Not much can be accomplished without such a process. A coalition between principal historical knowledge and deep philosophical-theological culture is absolutely necessary. This signifies uniting knowledge and wisdom.

Anna Karon: And what is wisdom, Prof. Swiezawski?

Prof. Swiezawski: It is the extension of thought in the direction of the deepest understanding of reality. Any attempt for deep understanding must rest on our intellectual observation of reality. Here we see an enormous need for contemplation. Wisdom is united in the closest way with contemplation, rendered so very arduous by today's fast pace of life.

Anna Karon: Today's pace of life also renders arduous a life based on values. Perhaps this is the reason for the great debate over whether or not to write the Christian values into the Constitution?

Prof. Swiezawski: I do not like over-using the term "Christian Values." Christianity begins with love. A life of love develops hand in hand with the growth of three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. If faith is shaky, hope vain, and love small, then Christianity itself becomes an illusion. Christianity exists where people live by faith, hope, and charity. These are the only Christian values. All other values are common to both Christians and non-Christians. They are common to all, rooted in a natural sense for justice and the wisdom of inborn ethics. The questions of abortion and of the indissolubility of marriage belong to the sphere of natural and inborn values. I wish to strongly stress that we accept these values on the basis of our humanity, not on the basis of our Christianity. The Ten Commandments are the codification of universal human morality. The Church must fight for universal human values, regardless of whether they are propagated by the followers of Islam, Buddhism, or Catholicism. The Church must recognize all these values.

Christian life is life in harmony with the Christian virtues given by the Holy Spirit together with the eight blessings of the Scriptures--it is only that. It does not surprise me when people belonging to other faiths become angry to hear that we call "Christian Values" what, in reality, are universal human values and not exclusively Christian ones. We need to return to the beginning, to the period before Constantine. We need to overcome almost two thousand years. This is precisely what Hus longed for: to cancel the era of Constantine and return to the original Christian unity. This would require substantial evolution. *Metanoia*. Changing the mentality of several generations, rearranging of priorities, healing of wounds, rather than continuing along the same lines. For this reason we need dialogue and the will to understand, and not the reinforcement of quarrels and arguments. Such *metanoia* was started in our XX century by the II Vatican Council--and for this reason this Council has been of priceless value.

Anna Karon: Prof, Swiezawski, I thank you for this interview.