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THE ECUMENICAL SITUATION IN POLAND*

by Zdzisław Tranda

Zdzisław Tranda was born in 1925 in Poznan. He studied civil engineering at Wrocław Technical University and theology in the department of Evangelical Theology at Warsaw. He worked as a pastor in a Reformed parish at Zelów. From 1955 he was a member of the Consistory of the Reformed Church. In 1978 he was elected bishop of this Church. He is a member of the Presidium of the Polish Ecumenical Council. He has published articles and sermons in evangelical journals in Poland. Below we are publishing an extensively edited text of a speech he delivered at the joint closed session of the Rheineland Church and the Polish Ecumenical Council. This was held in Muhlheim, Federal Republic of Germany, June 30-July 2, 1982.

1. I have been asked to present my understanding of the ecumenical situation in Poland. I would like to be as objective as possible. However, everyone sees things in their own way and I am no exception. Some general remarks need to be made at the outset. The ecumenical situation is being described here from two points of view: first, ecumenism among churches affiliated in the Polish Ecumenical Council, and, second, ecumenism in relation to the Roman Catholic Church.

2. The transformation which took place many years ago in relations between Protestants, Orthodox, Baptists, Methodists, Old-Catholics, etc., might be termed a breakthrough. It may also be said that there was a breakthrough in relationships between Roman Catholics and other creeds. This breakthrough came from the new impulse given to ecumenism in the Roman Catholic Church by Pope John XXIII.

3. There are difficulties, obstacles, and impediments in both the former and the latter forms of ecumenism. Ecumenical ideas penetrate very slowly into the minds of the people of the Church. Nevertheless, ecumenism is an idea from which there is no return, especially no return to a narrowly conceived confessionalism.

4. Some fear that through ecumenism, different Churches might lose their identity. I, myself, do not think it is bad when new ideas are greeted not only with admiration, but with some recognition that it is legitimate to have an attachment for one's own tradition and to the specific values individual Churches.

5. There is no doubt that in our country, Poland, there is a growing consciousness that without the Roman Catholic Church ecumenism cannot be complete. Ecumenism should encompass all of Christianity. The largest Christian Church cannot remain outside ecumenism and it also cannot exercise ecumenism solely within its own circle. It must be ecumenical in cooperation and coexistence with other Churches, regardless of their size.

Ecumenism within the Polish Ecumenical Council

There are eight Churches in Poland which make up the Polish Ecumenical Council. They belong to three ecclesiastical families: Orthodox; Old-Catholic, with two Churches--Polish Catholic and that of the Mariavites; and Protestant, with five Churches--Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Methodist and the United Evangelical Church. The Polish Ecumenical Council cooperates with the Christian Theological Academy, which through its rector is represented in the Council's presidium, and the Bible Society, also represented in the presidium by its director.

The Council is not something new in Polish history. It dates back to the years of World War II, when the Council was set up as a clandestine body and as the first national council of this kind in the world. For the moment, I would like to speak of what is new in the life of the Council.

There were new possibilities for joint ecumenical activity beginning in 1980. The first opportunity came when it became possible to broadcast religious services over the radio. The Gdansk Agreement, concluded on August 31, 1980, between the workers and the government, provided that the Polish Radio would broadcast Catholic Mass and the services of other denominations. In that same year, a commission for radio services was set up at the Polish Ecumenical Council. It prepared a plan and discussed various problems with the authorities. This took a
long time, and the matter was by no means easily solved. The issue at stake was the desire of the eight Churches affiliated in the Polish Ecumenical Council, as well as the Adventists and Jews, to have their services broadcast by radio. The first service was to be broadcast on December 20, 1981, but because of martial law, which was introduced just at that time, this was postponed until January 24, 1982. From that time, every first and third Sunday of the month, as well as on every holiday in the evening, there is a radio broadcast of religious services lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Each church has its services broadcast three to four times a year. This is an event of ecumenical importance, since not only were the negotiations on the matter carried out in an ecumenical manner, but also the coordination is ecumenical; moreover, members of the Churches listen not only to their own services, but also to those services prepared by the other Churches. I have to emphasize that this matter succeeded for the first time only now, in present-day Poland. For example, the first time the Lutheran Church tried to attain the right to radio services in 1932, it was to no avail.

Ecumenical cooperation is also very fruitful in the area of translating the Bible. Although the Bible (the New Testament was published in 1966 and both the New and Old Testaments were published in 1975) was translated by Lutheran theologians, a critical examination and review was made by all of the Churches. Subsequently, their requests and comments were accepted. Currently, a truly ecumenical commission is working on a modern, that is dynamic, translation of the New Testament.

In general, cooperation within the Polish Ecumenical Council is good. This cooperation takes place in a pluralistic context. Different Churches sometimes have different attitudes and different understandings of problems. There is also, however, the possibility of the confrontation of different views and arriving at compromises. Even the assessment of the present situation involves different points of view.

Ecumenical Relations with the Roman Catholic Church

What of ecumenical cooperation with the Catholic Church? The fact that the Roman Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement was something extraordinary, hardly imaginable before the pontificate of John XXIII. This fact introduced a number of new elements, new dynamics,
and received much publicity on the Catholic side. Among non-Catholics, on the other hand, it certainly aroused much interest, but at the same time it constituted a signal for great caution in ecumenical contacts, since it gave rise to fears about Catholic expansion in the area of other Christian denominations. Nevertheless, substantial changes took place at that time only in certain circles of Catholicism as well as only in certain circles of other Christian Churches. And even in those circles which had accepted ecumenism in some form, it was understood in various ways. Sometimes we are afraid of an improper ecumenism, which is merely a different "strategy."

Undoubtedly there are circles of Catholics and non-Catholics who properly perceive the idea of ecumenism and create a new climate as well as effect changes in relations between Churches. These people are also committed to their own denomination. Others, because of dogmatic differences, different traditions and customs as well as different religious rites as well as their view of the burdens of the past, will for a long time either remain cautious or passive in the face of the ecumenism which was created since the Roman Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement.

The awareness, however, is that we all face similar and frequently the same problems--be it on the world, national or local scale--and this awareness provides new prospects for cooperation. At the same time it is obvious that the road to unity is long and difficult. We lack the imagination to see such a possibility now. However, the road to friendly, fraternal cooperation is shorter and much easier than the road to unity.

In Poland the Protestant communities face a peculiar situation, which makes the problem of ecumenism very delicate and subtle. There is a vast disproportion: on one side the giant Roman Catholic Church and on the other a relatively small number of people of other creeds, a drop in the sea of Catholicism. On one side is the Roman Catholic Church with great possibilities of activity in various fields--publications, press, charity, and even educational possibilities in addition to purely ecclesiastical ones, with vast financial resources; on the other side are the small denominations, which have to wage an incessant struggle
against various difficulties, including finance and personnel.

What are the consequences of this state of affairs? First of all, it is clear that the Protestant communities do not constitute any threat to Catholicism in Poland, even if, from time to time, we attract persons from the margin of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the Catholic Church constitutes a threat to us wherever it is characterized by fanaticism or aggressiveness, even if this assumes a delicate form. That is why we are sensitized to all false ecumenical notes, to the notes of false ecumenism. This is what I have called ecumenical "strategy." That is why our caution does not follow merely from a minority complex, which undoubtedly is present, but first of all from our reckoning with reality.

I am personally very impressed by honest, friendly ecumenists from within the Catholic Church. Their number is constantly growing and they do not attach any importance to the size of the Church with which they are in contact and they take into consideration even the smallest Churches. It is obvious that conditions for cooperation must be created on both sides, and that much also depends on our attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church. Every anti-Catholic demonstration—if anything of the kind does take place—arouses not only anxiety but also opposition and criticism on the Catholic side.

From talks with many Catholics I know that there are people among them who have been impressed with the quality of Protestant sermons. Protestant ministers have had increasing opportunities for preaching or lecturing in Catholic Churches. The contacts between the Polish Ecumenical Council and/or the Churches affiliated in it and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as contacts established on a personal level, have brought credit to ecumenism.

The ecumenical contacts between the Polish Ecumenical Council and the Churches affiliated in it, and the Catholic Church, took a turn for the better at the end of the activity of Primate Wyszynski, whom Protestants have always regarded as a man having a rather reserved attitude towards ecumenism. Under the influence of the pontificate of John XXIII and Vatican Council II something changed in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.
Of great importance is the so-called Mixed Commission composed of representatives of the Polish Ecumenical Council and the Catholic Commission for Ecumenism. This Mixed Commission was set up in 1974. Originally, its task consisted of the preparation and assessment of the Week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians. Soon it also encompassed concern about the practical problems of coexistence and cooperation of Christians of differing denominations. It was the Mixed Commission which gave the impetus to the talks between the Catholic Church and other Churches on reciprocal recognition of baptism. These talks were undertaken in the early 1970s. Representatives of all sides in the Mixed Commission exchange information on major national and international events. In 1977 this same Commission issued a recommendation on undertaking cooperation in the matter of ecumenism between diocesan departments of the Roman Catholic Church and regional sections of the Council.

In 1977, a Sub-commission for Dialogue was established. It meets twice a year and its first discussion was on the document of the World Council of Churches on baptism. This discussion was followed by the release of a joint statement which stated that "the participants in the talks found nothing in the document which would be contradictory to the creed professed in our Churches"; what is more, we found with satisfaction the great wealth of common faith and theology. Recently a booklet was published which features the Accra document and the statement of the Sub-commission for Dialogue. Twenty thousand copies of this booklet were published, and, in the opinion of a Catholic bishop responsible for ecumenism, it is of the utmost importance since it will be distributed to all Catholic parish priests. For the first time they will see a document prepared and adopted in cooperation with different Churches. They will learn that baptism in a Church other than the Roman Catholic one is equally as binding as in their Church.

The second round of talks dealt with a very different problem, the problem of mixed marriages. We are of the opinion that in this matter the Catholic Church used to apply principles which discriminated against the non-Catholic partner. Discussion on this subject has not yet ended. The Commission for Dialogue discussed the instruction of the Catholic
Church on mixed marriages, and the non-Catholic side assumed a position on this instruction and the points where it thought discrimination took place. The Chairman of the Catholic Commission for Ecumenism informed me that many remarks of the non-Catholic Churches had been accepted and that numerous positive amendments had been introduced. Many bishops submitted their remarks but, according to the information we have, without any significant, substantial changes. We have not yet seen the amended instructions since the document is not ready. The opinion prevails in our Churches that the document will show how sincerely and seriously the Catholic Church wants to and will be able to deal with ecumenical problems. The Catholic side is convinced that it has made a big step and that considerable changes were introduced in the new instruction as compared with the old regulations. We hope that the work of the Mixed Commission and the Sub-commission for Dialogue will be continued and that the debates will bear fruit.

The death of Primate Wyszynski marked an end of a certain stage in ecumenical cooperation, a stage in which much was achieved but a period that was not free of conflicts. These conflicts included the appropriation of Protestant Churches in Masuria, difficulties in coexistence between the Orthodox and the Catholics in southeastern Poland, and tensions between Roman Catholics and Old-Catholics, very often the case of the Catholic Church discriminating against members of the Polish Catholic Church.

It must also be said that the climate favoring the development of ecumenism is not prevalent all over Poland. There are regions where ecumenism is an alien notion. It should also be emphasized that closer ecumenical contacts take place in large towns. But even in some small localities some progress in this field can be noticed. It happens wherever there is someone who has taken the idea of ecumenism to heart--either on the Catholic or on the non-Catholic side. In my own personal experience I know that in small towns, where members of different Churches live side by side, joint services and the exchange of preachers are accepted with gratitude and joy. I also know of an example that in a small town a combined Protestant and Catholic choir sang during the entire Week of Prayer. These initiatives concern not only the
Week of Prayer. For example, ecumenical evangelization took place in 1977 in Łódź with the participation of the Catholic Church. Protestant preachers were granted the possibility of preaching the Word of God in a Catholic Church. It was like that later, during Billy Graham's visit to Poland, and also last year, during the visit of another American preacher, Dr. Stanley Mooneyham. Both men preached in Catholic Churches.

Some very optimistic signs have appeared in recent years. The Churches make available their sacral buildings to other denominations for holding services. It happens on both sides—e.g., Catholics make their Churches available to the Orthodox, Baptists to Catholics, etc. The last issue of the Catholic Ecumenical Bulletin features an ecumenical correspondence between the Roman Catholic Bishop Nossol and the Orthodox Bishop Sawa; the letters concerned the possibility of having Orthodox services in a Catholic Church. The matter was settled promptly and positively; an entire chapel in a Catholic Church was made available to the Orthodox Church. Three years ago in the Opole diocese Bishop Nossol decided that Catholic priests were obliged to make it possible for non-Catholics to hold services in Catholic Churches in the case where non-Catholics had no Church of their own.

The Christian Theological Academy also plays an important role in our ecumenical life. This is a genuinely ecumenical school providing education for ministers of different denominations. The Academy maintains good contacts with the Academy of Theology in Warsaw and the Lublin Catholic University. Many a time experts have been exchanged for doctoral and habilitation studies. The Christian Theological Academy and the Academy of Catholic Theology also exchange professors for guest lectures.

It is also worth noticing the positive response of Catholics in connection with the efforts of the Churches affiliated in the Polish Ecumenical Council to obtain permission for radio broadcasts of services. We were met with words of support and assurances of prayers for this intention, and—when we eventually gained access to the radio—with congratulations and words of joy that not only Catholic services are broadcast in Poland.

For the past year, ecumenical prayer services have been held in the
Reformed Church in Warsaw. The intentions of these prayers are set according to the ecumenical calendar of intentions published by the World Council of Churches. The services, which were started at the initiative of two Catholic journalists, are held on a monthly basis.

We have observed a great interest on the Catholic side in the Bible and in Protestant publications. In addition, we are observing assistance in distributing foreign gifts. In many cases Protestant parishes gave some of their products to Catholic parishes. Both sides also assist the families of the internees and people dismissed from work, regardless of their creed. The Polish Ecumenical Council acts as an intermediary in transferring gifts from foreign Churches to the Episcopal Commission for Charity. All in all, it can be said that there are many examples of cooperation.

When the new Primate, Archbishop Glemp, was elected we all waited with great interest to see what effects this election would have on ecumenical contacts. It must be said that after several months of his service a new phase has really begun. The ceremony of the inauguration was attended by a comparatively large delegation of the Churches affiliated in the Council. On the day after the inauguration, he received, at his invitation, a delegation of clergy from those Churches. A month later he reciprocated the visit to the Council's seat. The attitude of the Primate augurs well for the future. We all hope that further contacts will take place.

Late in January 1982 Primate Glemp attended a service closing the Week of Prayer in the Orthodox Church in Warsaw. During the service he took the opportunity to deliver a sermon. That was an unprecedented event, which at the same time may portend further steps in the field of ecumenism by the Primate. It was the first time in the history of the Catholic Church in Poland that a dignitary of his standing came to an Orthodox Church.

Many Catholics positively assess the progress of ecumenism in Poland. They understand that progress in this field is not easy in light of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population is Catholic. Some commentators have remarked that ecumenism is part of the Church's structure; they are observing that the Catholic Church is
opening to ecumenism. A Catholic bishop told me that the Protestant Church is a *creatura verbi*—much may be learned from the Protestants. He also said that thanks to those ecumenical contacts, Catholics are now much closer to the Gospel than in the past. Today the first place on a desk of a Catholic priest is occupied often by the Bible and not, as it used to be in the past, the code of canon law. Thus, we are moving forward since we have the same goal in Jesus Christ. The bishop also told me: we have the Good News in the Gospel; in the past in its stead we voiced the Dead News or even the News of Oppression.⁶

The Catholics also stress the fact that the Pope is interested in the development of ecumenical cooperation and agreement. While still a cardinal he supported various ecumenical initiatives. The Catholic side is of the opinion that the election of the Polish Pope enhanced patriotic feelings although it did not cool down ecumenism in Poland. Thanks to ecumenical contacts, which have become deeper, there has been a growth of mutual confidence and understanding. In the opinion of Catholics, in the larger towns people are better informed and thus ready to undertake ecumenical initiatives. Ecumenical services during the Week of Prayer and also outside of it are attended by a large number of people. The Catholic side stresses the importance of the attitude of superiors—bishops, priests—on both sides. Some bishops assume a more doctrinal attitude and are less prone to accept ecumenism. In their activity one can notice considerable reservation towards ecumenical initiatives.

For myself, I hope that ecumenical contacts and cooperation will deepen and develop. I also hope that we shall have even more opportunities to disseminate the Word of God or present our views on various problems to Catholics—in parishes or in other circles. Of course, this will be possible only when we represent genuine and sincere ecumenism. The Catholics become open to ecumenism when they encounter openness on our side.

There is also one more element which raises my hopes. Among Catholics in Poland there are some relatively new movements of awakening faith—so-called "Oases" and "Agape." The Movement of "Oases" was initiated by Rev. Blachnicki.⁷ It has proved to be popular with many
young people. The movement organizes courses, meetings, and evangelization. The Bible occupies the first place in his work. The aim of Rev. Blachnicki is to transform the Roman Catholic Church into a living Church. It is hard to say how far he will succeed. I know that in various circles Catholics are observing these endeavors with reserve. The movement has contacts with Protestant circles abroad. It may be said that it is under the influence of those circles. However, the movement is not aimed at giving a Protestant character to the Catholic Church, but at evangelization by the Catholics themselves.

One other thing may be observed recently. Church services are attended by many more persons than in the past. I have in mind here the Churches affiliated with the Polish Ecumenical Council. In some parishes a growth of 50 or even 100 percent has been noted. Many persons are disillusioned and seek a strong foundation. They see the Church as a place where they can speak their minds. This provides an opportunity for the Church to win over people who so far have been on the margin.

Future Prospects and Potential Difficulties

My assessment of the mutual ecumenical contacts may be too optimistic. The future will show whether I am right or not. I am not free from fear, however. I am particularly concerned with three problems. There are still too few people with an ecumenical attitude in the Roman Catholic Church. Many persons give priority to false, ill-conceived pride. Many are still of the opinion that the Catholic Church is better, that it is the only true Church. The election of a Polish cardinal to the papacy enlarged that false pride even more. This is also a reality with which we live. This attitude can be overcome only when ecumenical contacts are lively, when we get to know each other better. The attitude of aloofness will get us nowhere; it can only increase isolation and alienation.

The second issue which concerns me is the fact that recently the idea of so-called messianism has been spreading among Polish Catholics. This is the notion that Poland is the Messiah of nations. The idea was born during the period of the partition of Poland in the 19th century. At that time it was very helpful in keeping national consciousness awake. This messianic idea consists of the assumption that Poland is
suffering as Christ suffered, but in spite of all sacrifices and sufferings Poland will rise from the dead. Today, the concept of messianism means something else. Like Christ saved the world, Poland is the savior of the world. The evil world can be saved following Poland's example. The Polish Pope will make a special contribution to this. The idea is extremely vexing since it tends to lead to unjustified national pride.

A digression here about the Pope's visit to Poland. In my opinion, he will not come to Poland this year. The authorities claim that the time is not favorable for his visit now. In our situation there would be such great difficulties and complications that no one would be able to control them. I know that a majority of the bishops also view this matter in realistic terms. I would very much like to see the Pope visit Poland again, but the matter of the date is still open. I also know of a letter sent by Primate Glemp to Premier Jaruzelski on this issue. Perhaps he will get the answer that at the moment the visit of the Pope is impossible. The bishops assume that this will be the solution of the problem.

The intensive development of the Marian cult in Poland constitutes the third problem which worries me. I think that nowhere in the world has the Catholic Church such a Marian orientation as in Poland. The bigger the Marian cult in the Catholic Church, the greater is the danger that we shall again be separated. Therefore, this is a certain threat to ecumenism. We cannot expect the Catholic Church to renounce the Marian cult, but this Church should understand that the Marian cult has no biblical grounds and that we shall not accept it, especially in the form it has been presented to us in Poland.

The ecumenical situation in Poland is not simple. There are positive symptoms, but there are also reasons for pessimism. We Christians should be optimistic and hope that what makes us anxious will eventually be overcome. In addition, we should pray for this.

I would like to conclude with the words of the message of today's service: "God sends us to fulfil His mission. He showed us with His life how we are to perform our tasks. That is why we should not fear sharing the suffering of the others, the hardships of fellow men. God sends us
to show concern wherever satisfaction makes people impotent, to awaken hope wherever resignation prevails, to bring peace wherever there is suffering."

Editor and Translator Notes*

1. For statistical data regarding these Churches see ChSS Information Bulletin, No. 10/1982.


4. R. R. Sawa, Ordinary Bishop of the Białystok-Gdansk Orthodox diocese.

5. The first meeting took place on September 25, 1981; the second on November 4, 1981.

6. Play on words in the German original: Frohbotschaft, Drohbotschaft, Fronbotschaft.

7. Rev. Franciszek Blachnicki, a priest in the Katowice diocese, who at present is staying abroad, was the organizer of the religious-educational movement called "Oases" (today: "Light and Life") which developed in some Polish dioceses. The movement extends to children and youth, and recently also groups of adults.

8. In the period of 1795-1918 Poland did not exist as an independent state, her territory being partitioned among Austria, Prussia and Russia.

9. On November 8, 1982, during a meeting between General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Archbishop Jozef Glemp, Primate of Poland, the date for the Pope's visit in Poland was set for June 18, 1983.

*The editor referred to here is the editor of the Information Bulletin.