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Rev. Prof. Bogumil Gacka

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# The Personalism of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński

REV. PROF. BOGUMIL GACKA

*Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University*

**Editor's note:** In what follows, Fr. Gacka presents a review of the life and philosophy of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, who was a great intellectual and religious force during the 20th century. The style in which the account is presented is unfamiliar to many professional philosophers since it adopts a highly traditional form of exposition. This form of exposition is, however, familiar and widely used in stating the philosophical principles of all the world's major religions, wherever traditionalist norms are still observed. Traditionalist norms do not separate the statement of philosophical principles from those of orthodox religious doctrine, and the task of the philosopher is to articulate orthodoxy for a given historical time and place. Innovation is not regarded as a virtue, except insofar as it is required for the successful presentation orthodoxy for its time and place. It is appropriate that *The Pluralist* should be open to this type of philosophical expression as much as it is to any other. Ed.

## Introduction

“THE FATE OF COMMUNISM will not be decided in Russia, but in Poland. When Poland becomes strong in her faith she will start to destroy communism and win a victory over it. The whole world will be grateful to Poland for that” (qtd. in Gacka 21). In 1953 this was the prophecy of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński (1901–1981), the Primate of Poland (1948–1981). John Paul II called Cardinal Wyszyński “the Primate of the millennium” (Poland’s Millennium of Christianity and Independence: Baptism 966–1966). In my paper on Cardinal Wyszyński’s personalism, I want to present the idea of the dignity of the human person and the dignity of the nation versus two totalitarianisms: Nazism and communism.

## Biographical Background of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński

Stefan Wyszyński was born on August 3, 1901, in the little village of Zuzela, Poland, now very close to Belarus. He was baptized in the parish church in Zuzela on August 5, 1901. In 1901, while Poland was not an independent state, the Zuzela region was occupied by Russia. In 1910, when Stefan was nine years old, his mother, Julianna, died. His father, Stanislaw, became the strongest figure in his life. From 1912 to 1914 he attended grammar school in Warsaw. From 1914 to 1917 he attended secondary school in the town of Łomża. From 1917 to 1920 he attended secondary school in Włocławek. In 1918, after the First World War, Poland regained its status as an independent country. In 1920 Wyszyński enrolled in the Roman Catholic seminary in Włocławek, near the Vistula River.

In 1924 Stefan Wyszyński was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Wojciech Owczarek in the Cathedral of Włocławek. On August 5, Reverend Wyszyński celebrated his first Eucharist in the Chapel of the Black Madonna at the Jasna Góra Sanctuary, the spiritual capital of Poland.

In 1925 Father Stefan enrolled in the Faculty of Canon Law and the social sciences of the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. In 1927 he received a licentiate in Canon Law. He was educated in the social doctrine of the church, and in 1929 he defended his thesis, *The Rights of the Family, Church and State to Schools* and earned a doctorate in Canon Law. In 1929 he traveled on a scholarship to Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany. Two years later he was appointed professor at the seminary in Włocławek.

After the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Wyszyński left Włocławek. He was designated to serve as chaplain of the Institute for the Blind in Laski, Poland. During the Warsaw uprising (1944), Fr. Wyszyński served as chaplain of the Kampinos unit of the Armia Krajowa Polish underground resistance army and as chaplain for the insurgents' hospital in Laski under the pseudonym Radwan III.

In 1946 he received the nomination to the Diocese of Lublin from Cardinal-Primate August Hlond. On November 12, 1948, Wyszyński was appointed Archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw—"the Primate of Poland" by His Holiness Pius XII. On January 12, 1953, he was created cardinal.

Cardinal Wyszyński attended the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) with Bishop Karol Wojtyła. On November 18, 1965, during the conclusion of the council debate, Wyszyński and the Polish bishops presented the "Address of the Polish Bishops to Their German Brothers in the Pastoral Office of Christ," in which they announced: "We forgive and ask for your forgiveness" ("Address" 9).

## The Dignity of the Human Person

According to Wyszyński, *person* is a *subsistence (subject) in relation*. Therefore, there exists an individual and a communitarian dimension to the human person. The individual dimension is subsistence—both objective subsistence (*hypostasis*) and subjective subsistence (*prosopon*). Objective subsistence means that man is “the only creature on earth which God willed for itself” (*Gaudium et spes* no. 24). Each human person is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1: 27). Subjective subsistence means that I recognize myself as a person and, as such, I am responsible for what I do; it means “I am conscious of consciousness.”

The communitarian dimension of the human person consists in a *relation* to God and to other people. The vertical relation to God is called a relation of faith (Hebrew *emuna*: “rely on the Rock, not on oneself”) or generally a religious relation. The horizontal relation to people is called a social relation. Hence, in the social domain Wyszyński’s personalism constitutes a golden bridge between individualism, fossilized or petrified in Western capitalism and liberalism, and collectivism, fossilized or petrified in Eastern communism or socialism. After his sufferings during the Second World War, the Primate of Poland strongly proclaimed that the communitarian dimension of the human person is most fully expressed in the Word of Life: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will live” (Luke 10: 27–28; cf. Deut. 6: 4–9, Lev. 18: 5, 19: 18). Jesus Christ fulfilled this Word (the *Shema*) on the Cross, through his death and resurrection, granting us access to the father in heaven, as well as to other people. Therefore, with all the might of the gospel, one has to acknowledge that with the help of the Holy Spirit every human person is capable of actualizing that relation to God and people, including sinners and enemies, as is taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Hence the Primate’s proclaiming to the German bishops, “We forgive and we ask for your forgiveness” (Wyszyński, “Address” 9).

Wyszyński stated that the dignity of the human person has a natural and a supernatural dimension.

### (a) *The natural dignity of the human person*

This is the natural dignity of every human being: he or she is an image of God. In Christ, “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1: 15), man is created “in the image and likeness” of the Creator. The image of God is present in everyone. Its special radiance, however, can be seen in a community of per-

sons, which arises in the likeness of the unity of the Divine Persons. Thus, the natural dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Catechism* no. 1700).

The human person, created in the image of God, is a unity of body and soul (*corpore et anima unus*; *Gaudium et spes* no. 14). The dignity of the human body derives from being created by God (Gen. 2: 7), from the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God as well as from the redemption of the body by Jesus Christ. The dignity of the human soul, in turn, derives from the direct act of its creation at the moment of that person's conception, from the uniqueness, rather than collectiveness, of every created soul, and from the soul's immortality. Therefore the whole of the human person, as a unity of body and soul, is from the moment of conception directed toward God and destined to everlasting happiness (*Catechism* no. 1703; 1711). Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person (*Catechism* no. 1706).

Consciousness, freedom, and love are in the human person "an exceptional sign of the divine image within man" (*Gaudium et spes* no. 17). They constitute the spiritual nature of man. God, however, did not create a solitary human being; he created them "male and female" (Gen 1: 27). The union constitutes the first kind of interpersonal communion, *communio personarum* (*Gaudium et spes* no. 12). A certain similarity between the unity of the Divine Persons and the unity of God's sons (*Gaudium et spes* no. 24) reveals that man is similar to God not only through his rational and free nature (i.e., his spiritual nature, capable of performing acts of reason, freedom, and love) but, above all, through the fact of personal being, of being a *person*: someone unique, the crown of reality, someone capable of relations. If so, the similarity of man to God results not only from the corporeal-spiritual human nature but primarily from the aptitude for a community, for relations with other persons, thanks to which a communion of persons can come into being.

Therefore, the manifestation of man's *social nature* is not only the political state but also various social subjects. The most original and fundamental community of persons is the *family*, established by the Creator in the very beginning. The family is a creation of God and a revelation of God as a Trinity of Persons. Other creations include the nation, which derives from the family, and international organizations.

*(b) The supernatural dignity of the human person*

We become adopted children of God in Jesus Christ: this is the supernatural dignity of the human person, according to Stefan Wyszyński. "To those who did accept Him, He gave power to become children of God, to those

who believe in His name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God" (John 1: 12–13). The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* no. 19 says: "The root reason for *human dignity* lies in man's call to communion with God." Thus, at the foundation of the supernatural dignity of the adopted children of God is a communion with God, a sharing in his life. God's life is eternal life. The Church asks at baptism: "What do you ask of the Church of God?—Faith. What does Faith offer you?—Life everlasting." Faith in Jesus Christ bestows on man a foretaste of everlasting life, the first fruits of the life of God. In the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus says: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6: 54).

How can one recognize the first fruits of eternal life? Eternal life, the life of God, can be known through its deeds. As an adopted child of God, the person is capable of fulfilling the will of God. The Church says that the sign of eternal life is the *justice of the cross*, when someone bears the sins of others and loves his or her enemies. The person has the power to give his or her life for God and other people.

Thus the supernatural dignity of the human person (i.e., the dignity of a Christian) expresses a *covenant* which assumes its shape, together with God's act of giving himself to man for salvation. If the natural dignity of a human person exists in the order of *creation*, his or her supernatural dignity emerges in the order of *salvation*.

According to Wyszyński's personalism, the human person, a participant in the life of God, becomes the temple of God: of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The dwelling of the Divine Persons within us makes us members of the *Church* as a supernatural organism.

## The Dignity of Nation

Wyszyński decided to sign an agreement with the communist government on behalf of Poland's episcopate on April 14, 1950, in Warsaw. In 1951 he was invited by the Polish president Boleslaw Bierut to talk about the Church administration in the Western and Northern Polish Territories on February 5. On January 12, 1953, during the consistory in Rome, Archbishop Wyszyński was created cardinal, but he was stopped by the communist authorities from attending Rome's consistory. The state authorities broke the agreement and granted themselves the right to appoint clerical posts in the Church hierarchy on February 9, 1953. On May 8, 1953, the Primate of Poland, on behalf of Poland's episcopate, sent the document called the *Memorial* to Boleslaw Bierut

(the first secretary of the communist party) and the Polish prime minister, in which Wyszyński strongly opposed this action. More precisely, he wrote: "We are not allowed to place God's realities on Caesar's altars. *Non Possumus!*" (Wyszyński, "Non Possumus" 50).

On June 4, 1953, at the solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, the Primate of Poland repeated *Non Possumus* in his solemn speech in front of St. Anna's Church in Warsaw. He said: "We teach to repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. But when Caesar is about to sit on the altar of the Living God, our response is brief and straightforward: *this is not allowed (Non Possumus!)*" ("Non Possumus" 48). On the night of September 25, 1953, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was arrested by the communist regime and imprisoned for three years. He was courageous enough to suffer in prison for the sake of the nation of Poland from September 25, 1953, to October 28, 1956.

In 1966 Wyszyński celebrated the year of the Millennium of the Baptism of Poland. On October 16, 1978, Wyszyński witnessed the election of John Paul II as the first Slavic Pope. On August 31, 1980, Lech Walesa, the legendary leader of solidarity, signed the Gdansk Agreement. Wyszyński saw his 1953 prophecy realized: communism had collapsed and *solidarity* had arisen, victoriously.

According to Wyszyński's personalism, the most original and fundamental community of persons is the *family*, established by the Creator in the very beginning. The family is a creation of God and a revelation of God as a Trinity of Persons. Other creations include the *nation*, which derives from the family, as do international organizations. Finally, there is the *Church* as a supernatural community which begets and gives birth to the adopted children of God.

In the great missionary mandate after his resurrection, Jesus Christ said to the eleven who went to Galilee, to the mountain to which He had ordered them: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations [*panta ta ethne*], baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28: 19). In 2000, the year of the Great Jubilee, over a hundred nations gathered with John Paul II on the Mount of the Beatitudes in order to celebrate the Eucharist. It was the hour of the nations (see Wojtyła's "Mount"). When the Son of Man comes in his glory for the Last Judgment, he will sit upon his glorious throne and "all the nations will be assembled before him [*panta ta ethne*]" (Matt. 25: 32). When in the Great Jubilee year of 2000, the nations of the earth climbed the Mount of the

Beatitudes at night by the light of torches, it really looked like a rehearsal for the Last Judgment.

For one hundred and twenty-three years (1795–1918), Poland as a state disappeared from the map of Europe, but the nation of Poland survived, thanks to God, the Church, and the native culture (the Polish language, traditions, music, and literature), according to Stefan Wyszyński. On January 8, 1918, US president Woodrow Wilson delivered his fourteen points speech to a joint session of the US Congress. In his thirteenth point he stated, “An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.” Poland is very grateful for this historical and courageous decision. On November 11, 1918, the nation of Poland came back to being an independent state and returned to the European countries.

## Conclusion

Stefan Wyszyński experienced violence against human persons and against the nations. In response he strongly proclaimed the dignity of each human person and the dignity of each nation. Thus his social personalism strongly proclaims these two dignities versus two totalitarianisms: Nazism and communism—two totalitarian systems which he experienced *personally* and *nationally*. As the Primate of Poland, he supported patriotism (loving one’s nation) against nationalism (placing one’s own nation above other nations, or *über alles*) and against communist cosmopolitanism (in which the nation is disrespected).

John Paul II (1920–2005) displayed the influence that Wyszyński’s personalism had on him when he proclaimed in his UN organization address, “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948, spoke eloquently of the rights of persons; but no similar international agreement has yet adequately addressed the rights of nations” (Wojtyła “Address” no. 6).

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