

Features

Editor says Polish Catholic Church, press thrive

By Lee Strong

In the fall of 1987, Father Aloyzy Orszulik, a spokesman for the Polish bishop's conference, wrote an article for *Tygodnik Powszechny*, one of Poland's leading independent Catholic weekly newspaper. The article stated: "All people have the right to form associations that serve the true good. This is one of the fundamental rights of the human person."

The Polish government's censorship office killed the article before it was published.

According to Marek Skwarnicki, editor of the Krakow-based weekly, what happened to Father Orszulik's article is representative of the difficulties faced by the Catholic press in Poland.

"This is a good example of censorship," Skwarnicki said, noting that the government censorship office reviews every issue before it is printed, and "sometimes they confiscate sentences, sometimes paragraphs, sometimes whole articles."

After nearly 30 years with *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Skwarnicki has become quite familiar with press censorship in Poland. During that time, he also came to know Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, who worked in Krakow as a priest, a bishop, an archbishop and a cardinal, and who was a frequent contributor to the newspapers from the 1940s through the 1960s.

As a correspondent for the paper, Skwarnicki, has since regularly traveled with Pope John Paul II on his many papal trips.

Skwarnicki was in Rochester October 11 to speak at St. John Fisher College about the papacy of Pope John Paul II on the 10th anniversary of his pontificate (October 16). In an interview before his talk, the journalist/poet/novelist spoke not only about the pope, but about the situation of the Church and the Catholic press in Poland as well.

He noted that in addition to such overt examples of censorship as cutting or suppressing articles, the Polish government also interferes with the Catholic press by delaying the publication of articles. Most recently, it delayed until October 2 the publication of Skwarnicki's August interview with Solidarity trade union leader Lech Walesa.

Another method the government employs to restrict the influence of independent periodicals is to restrict the number of copies they may sell, a move that frequently causes financial difficulties for the publications. *Tygodnik Powszechny*, for example, is limited to 80,000 copies, even though Skwarnicki estimated 200,000 copies could easily be sold. Government-supported papers, meanwhile, are permitted to sell 300,000 to 350,000 copies.

As a last resort, the government will simply close a publication, as it twice did to *Tygodnik Powszechny*: for three years from 1953 to 1956, and again from December, 1981 to June, 1982.

Despite the constant threat of censorship, the precarious financial situation and the personal sacrifices he has had to make, Skwarnicki remains committed to the newspaper.

"We are recognized as true people," he explained. "We can't say full truth because of censorship, (but) we do not publish anything that is untrue."

In addition, he noted, the paper has a reputation for printing the work of writers who would not otherwise be published in Poland. A typical issue of *Tygodnik Powszechny* might include not only news of the Church both in Poland and abroad, but also articles that examine Polish history; introduce new economic ideas; discuss such social issues as pollution, urban problems and the emigration of young

people from Poland. Poetry, fiction and reviews are also included.

"Our principal rule is to deliver to the reader all information and to cover problems he should know to (form his) own judgment," Skwarnicki said. The paper publishes the works of both Christian and non-Christian writers, but the content is "always from a Catholic perspective," he remarked. "We check (to) see if it is in agreement with Christian moral principles."

The paper has attempted to offer this variety of material since it was founded in 1945, but has been freer to do so in the last decade, the editor said. Although censorship continues to exist in Poland, it has decreased in recent years, and the lot of the Catholic press has improved in conjunction with the rise of the Solidarity movement. Since 1979, when Solidarity came to prominence, he noted, the number of Catholic publications in Poland has grown from five to 34.

The Solidarity movement, he said, has had a direct effect on the fortunes of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, influencing the government to allow the paper's circulation to increase from 50,000 to 80,000. Poland's Catholic press in general benefited when the movement pushed the government to enact a new press law that allows publications to indicate in parentheses where articles have been cut or entirely censored. Under this law, periodicals are also permitted to appeal instances of censorship to an administrative court in Warsaw. Although the appeals rarely work, Skwarnicki noted, his paper regularly makes them. "We do it just to keep pressure on them," he said with a smile.

The Catholic press is thriving in Poland not only because of the influence of Solidarity, but also because of the power and influence of the Church in Poland, Skwarnicki said. Although Poland has been under communist rule since 1945, the Church in that country has in fact grown stronger and in many ways healthier, Skwarnicki said, acknowledging that on the surface, such a claim might seem paradoxical.

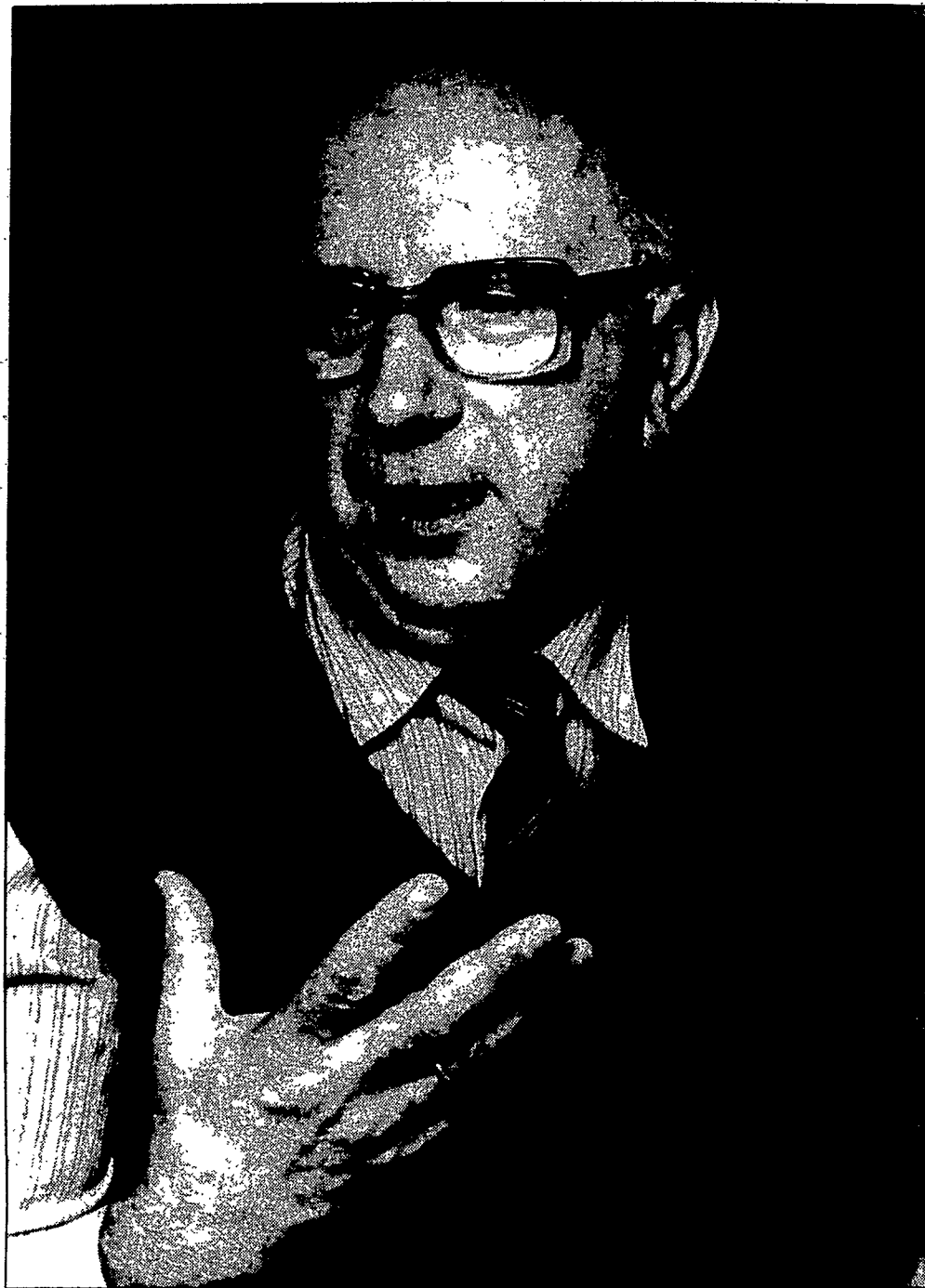
Before World War II, Catholic intellectuals were moving away from the Church, Skwarnicki explained. Repression of the Church under German and Soviet occupation, and the imposition of Communist rule in 1945, helped to revitalize the Church and reclaim intellectuals — including, in recent years, many former communists.

In fact, because leaders of Poland's communist neighbors fear the growing influence of the Catholic Church and the Catholic press in Poland, they restrict contact between Catholic groups in their nations and Polish Catholic groups. Polish Catholics, meanwhile, are involved with lay Catholic organizations in the West. Skwarnicki, for example, was a member of the Pontifical Council for Laity, and served as vice president of Pax Romana — the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs — from 1974 to 1978.

This contact with the West points up differences between the Church — including the Catholic press — in the East and the West. According to Skwarnicki, these differences are especially obvious to Poland's new generation of writers and editors, many of whom spent time in detention camps during the early 1980s.

"All these people (who) visit Western countries ... have (the) feeling of a gap that is widening and widening," he noted. "Priesthood of women, structure of Church, election of bishops — (these issues) are not existing in Poland, not because we are backward, (but) because our needs are more fundamental. We are fighting for life and human dignity."

In Poland, the trend in religion is to deal



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

Marek Skwarnicki is the editor of Poland's leading independent Catholic weekly newspaper, *Tygodnik Powszechny*.

more with such fundamental issues and to focus more on spirituality, he noted. "If the Church could be endangered, it is not from (the) power of communism, but if it could be weakened morally," he said.

Pope John Paul II, who was ordained a priest at the beginning of Poland's communist era, is a product of this ongoing struggle, Skwarnicki noted, suggesting, "it is perhaps much of the reason Pope John Paul is considered a conservative."

Skwarnicki contends, however, that people who view the pontiff this way fail to examine the pope's views in light of his background. "He's coming from his Polish experience, when we were forced to look at our line of thinking under pressure of Marxist ideology," he said.

The editor also pointed out that people who think the pope is conservative are not hearing what Pope John Paul II is saying. Skwarnicki noted that in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concerns), for example, the pope offered strong critiques of both the "consumer and Marxist concepts of labor."

Through his experiences in Poland, the pope also knows what can happen when Christians attempt to adapt Marxist ideas to Christian action, and this explains his criticism of some

forms of liberation theology, Skwarnicki said. "He's stressing the option for the poor as fundamental, but he knows what it means if a Christian starts to think of this only in Marxist terms," he remarked.

Pope John Paul II's pontificate has had a profound influence on the Church in Poland, and is in part responsible for the changes that have taken place in that country since he assumed the papacy on October 16, 1978, Skwarnicki said.

The link between Poland and Rome has allowed Polish Catholics to have more contact with the universal Church, which has helped to overcome a kind of claustrophobia that developed in the Polish Church during 30 years of communist rule, Skwarnicki said. Now, Catholics in Poland are not only aware of their own problems, but of the problems the Church faces in the rest of the world.

Karol Wojtyla's election as pope was also a source of pride and affirmation for the Polish Church, the editor noted.

"I think that for all of us, it was something we got as a gift for always suffering in history," Skwarnicki said. "People were crying in the streets because it was such an unexpected gift given to us."



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