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Book Review: Rev. Jacek Urban, Archidiecezja Krakowska w latach 1925-2025. Szkice historyczne [The Archdiocese of Kraków in 1925-2025: Historical Sketches]

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Rev. Jacek Urban, *Archidiecezja Krakowska w latach 1925-2025. Szkice historyczne [The Archdiocese of Kraków in 1925-2025: Historical Sketches]*, (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2026), 416 pages, 60 PLN. ISBN 9788383684239.

Reviewed by Filip Mazurczak (Jesuit University of Philosophy and Education Ignatianum)

Having produced numerous blessed and saints, including Pope John Paul II, and oftentimes the witness of some of the world's most consequential conflicts, the Archdiocese of Kraków has experienced a dramatic history like few other sees. While the Diocese of Kraków is more than a thousand years old, it became a metropolitan archdiocese only in 1925. On the centennial of this promotion, Father Jacek Urban, a Church historian from the Pontifical University of John Paul II, has published a collection of essays related to specific events and figures in the diocese's last century. Urban's volume may prove to be supremely useful to various specialists, including art historians and scholars of World War II.

The Archdiocese of Kraków in 1925-2025: Historical Sketches consists of fourteen essays, some of which have already been published, and one detailed timetable of the see's most important events, including beatifications and canonizations, papal visits, anniversaries, the construction of churches and monasteries, and installation Masses of bishops. The volume also features thirty high-resolution, beautifully restored photographs from some of the archdiocese's most important events.

One factor that makes reading Urban's study somewhat confusing is the seeming arbitrariness of the topics of his essays. They cover topics as disparate as the funeral of Marshal Józef Piłsudski at the Wawel Cathedral in 1935; a biographical sketch of the last staff to work at the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Theology before its closure by the communist regime; a detailed overview of the restoration of the Wawel Cathedral undertaken between 1967 and 1978; and the experiences of various Cracovian bishops

under communist rule. In his preface, Urban writes that his work is not a "systematic lecture on the archdiocese's history, but more than a dozen snapshots from its past" (p. 10) There is nothing wrong with such an approach, but the reader never learns why exactly the author included such seemingly unrelated topics in his study rather than others.

Notwithstanding, several of Urban's chapters merit attention. For instance, one essay summarizes the results of a 1945 survey that the Kraków Curia sent to its various deaneries about the damage (material and human) they experienced during the Second World War. It is often assumed that compared to other Polish cities, especially Warsaw, which by 1945 was a pile of rubble with half of its population dead, Kraków survived the war overall unscathed (except, of course, Kraków's large Jewish community, which was devastated during the Holocaust).

The results of the survey, however, demonstrate that many Cracovian priests were killed in concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, and Wawel Cathedral, while nowhere as devastated as the cathedrals of Warsaw and Poznań, experienced significant destruction during the January 1945 battle between the city's German occupiers and its Soviet "liberators" that required expensive restoration efforts. Meanwhile, many precious artifacts, such as the chalice of King Sigismund III Vasa, were plundered by the city's occupiers and never recovered.

A table featuring a summary of the wartime losses among the Kraków clergy and comparing it with other Polish diocese (particularly those in the western Polish territories directly annexed by the Third Reich; according to Jonathan Huener's study *The Polish Catholic Church Under German Occupation: The Reichsgau Wartheland, 1939-1945*, between a third and half of Polish priests in the Wartheland's diocese were murdered during the war) would be helpful.

In addition to National Socialism, the Polish Church suffered under the other totalitarian leviathan of the twentieth century: communism. Urban's book demonstrates how the Church and the Marxist-Leninist state viewed one another, once again challenging common perceptions.

One chapter deals with the files the communist Security Service (Poland's equivalent of the Stasi or Securitate) kept on Jan Pietraszko, the auxiliary bishop of Kraków in 1962-1988 and vicar of St. Anne's Collegiate Church. (Pietraszko was declared Venerable by Pope Francis in 2018, meaning he is two miracles away from formal sainthood.) The article inevitably brings to the surface the painful truth of some priests who were Security Service informants.

This chapter reveals that Pietraszko took a conservative approach to the anticommunist opposition, like many other Polish bishops fearing the spilling of Polish blood. Thus, the regime tried to pit Pietraszko against the more outspoken Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, although it never succeeded in breaking him. Furthermore, the Security Service grossly underestimated Pietraszko's tireless catechetical activity among the students and intelligentsia of Poland's oldest academic community; while he did not preach explicit anticommunism in his apolitical sermons, his evangelizing made many Cracovians immune to the communist ideology.

A related essay in Urban's volume deals with the ministry of Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, the beloved, modest (true to his namesake, Macharski, like the *Poverello* of Assisi, was born into a wealthy family but chose a life of humility and service of others), who led the Archdiocese of Kraków from 1979 to 2005.

A major theme of this essay is Macharski's response to martial law in 1981-1983. It is often believed that despite the strong support Pope John Paul II had for Solidarity, the Polish bishops were, with several exceptions, cautious towards the nonviolent movement. Yet Urban's chapter on Macharski shows

that Wojtyła's successor as Archbishop of Kraków provided very tangible and generous support to dissidents and victims of the regime.

Urban highlights that while avoiding explicit pronouncements on political issues Macharski formed the Archbishops' Committee to Aid the Imprisoned and Interned, which after the lifting of martial law in 1983 was renamed the Archbishop's Aid Committee. Macharski's committee provided legal aid to dissidents persecuted by the dictatorship; medical aid to victims of police violence; financial aid and food to the families of imprisoned Solidarity activists; and documented the crimes of the regime. Urban notes that similar committees were formed in many other dioceses and parishes across Poland.

Also of interest is the author's discussion of a report on the life of the archdiocese in 1969-1973 prepared for Cardinal Wojtyła. Rich in statistical data, the report reveals a vibrant see with many vocations to the priesthood and numerous initiatives of the laity, despite the regime's curtailing of the Church's activities, particularly in the areas of religious education and works of charity. The reader also learns of Cardinal Wojtyła's efforts to implement the reforms and teachings of the Second Vatican Council in his archdiocese.

Indeed, Urban is correct that his volume is not an exhaustive history but instead a collection of vignettes on specific aspects of the archdiocese's life throughout the past century. However, some of his research sheds important light on how the Kraków Church functioned amidst oppression. Urban's book is the first volume in the "Library of the Archdiocese of Kraków" editorial series; hopefully, this will be the first of many works providing insight on the archdiocese's rich and dramatic history.