

A POLISH DIOCESE.

THERE are 21 of them in the territory of the Republic of Poland, 21 of Latin rite besides three of Greek and one of Armenian rite. The diocese of Włocławek, of which I have been the Ordinary since 1929, does not differ much, in pastoral affairs, from its neighbouring dioceses of Eastern and Central Poland. Hence a brief survey of its history and of its state on the eve of the war, will give quite a good picture of the whole Polish Church.

The capital of the diocese, Włocławek, called in the Latin documents of the Middle Ages 'Vladislavia,' is situated on the left bank of the Vistula, at the place where the river has run a third of its way from Warsaw to the sea. At first the religious centre of this district (fertile Cuiavia) was Kruszwica, to-day a small town on the edge of lake Gopło. There Bishop Lucidus, native of Italy, developed his apostolic activity in the last decades of the tenth century, soon after the Poles had become christian. He and his 13 successors—called by the Polish annalist, Jan Długosz, 'bishops of Kruszwica'—were most probably missionary bishops, without a strictly specified territory. It was only in the thirteenth century that Michael Godziemba (1222-52), the first bishop of Polish extraction, left Kruszwica for the banks of the Vistula and founded (c. 1230) the See of Włocław, as Włocławek was then called. The foundations of the original Cathedral, which like all the castles in Poland at that time, was built of wood, can be still seen in the basement of a house on the bank of the river. This Cathedral was burnt down by the Teutonic Order in 1331, during one of the frequent incursions of these would-be knights of the Cross into Poland. Innumerable villages and towns, among others Leczyca, Sieradz and Gniezno, were turned to ashes, their churches burnt down, their priests killed. But on September 27th of that year King Władysław I. defeated the invaders at Płowce, about 15 miles to the West of Włocławek and expelled them from the country. Unfortunately the Teutonic knights attacked Poland again the following year and seized and held the fertile Cuiavia for a few years. They robbed Włocławek, burnt it to the ground, and not wanting it to be rebuilt, they ploughed up the ruins and forbade anyone to settle there. This was not only an act of hatred of the Polish nation; but it included also a secret, personal vengeance. For at that time the See was occupied by one of its greatest pastors, Maciej of Golanczew (1323-1365), friend and councillor of King Władysław, an indefatigable defender of Cuiavia against Teutonic greed. So the complete destruction of the epis-

copal town, on the lines of the present hitlerian 'ausradieren,' was the answer of the Order to the patriotic activity of the bishop. The Teutonic rule however did not take deep root in Cuiavia. Soon after the burning of his Cathedral and town, Bishop Maciej erected a small stone church under the patronage of St. Vitalis, whose relics he obtained from Rome. This church is still there, and, surrounded by the Seminary buildings, was serving till the last years as a chapel for the students. When at length a period of peace had come, it was time to think of a new Cathedral. And so in 1340, on the feast of the Annunciation, bishop Maciej consecrated the corner stone of the new church dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady, not on the original site on the bank of the Vistula, where there was a permanent threat of inundation in flood periods, but a little further up, on a hill dominating the town, then being rebuilt all around it. The new cathedral, partially finished by the nephew and successor of Maciej, bishop Zbylut of Golanczew, is one of the most beautiful monuments of the so-called Vistula-Gothic style on Polish soil. The harmonious proportions of the lofty nave, the slender arches of the vaults, the side aisles surrounded by a crown of chapels, point to the fact that both the Golanczews employed good architects. The lack of cut stone has created in Poland a new and different form of Gothic, known as the Vistula-Baltic style, whose kiln-fired bricks, especially when covered by the patina of centuries, take on a singular beauty. Such was until recently the cathedral of Wloclawek. To-day within its six-centuries-old walls lies desolation. Two weeks before the outbreak of war the cathedral was adorned with new stained glass windows. The valueless XIXth century German windows were replaced by the work of the best Polish artist, Professor Joseph Mehoffer from Krakow, who designed the famous stained glass windows in Fribourg cathedral, and whose cartoons of windows for the Philharmonia of Paris won the first prize. Whether the invader has left them intact, we do not know. But he understands the value of Mehoffer's art, for he has carried off into Germany several of the stained glass windows from the parochial church of Turek in the same diocese. The Germans have not, however, respected the artist himself, who at the age of 68 has been sent to a concentration camp at first with his wife, but later separated from her in a different camp.

The town of Wloclawek, which was the property of the bishop under his jurisdiction, was not destined to play an important role in the history of Poland. It lived quietly under the shadow of its cathedral. The bishops resided elsewhere—in the strong castle at Raciazek, at Ciechocink on the other bank of the river, at Wielborz, or at Danzig, which was also under their jurisdiction. At Wloclawek

itself resided the canons of the Chapter, which was, till the partition of Poland, one of the richest. At one time there lived with one of the canons a youth, showing great interest in astronomy, who constructed a solar clock on the walls of the cathedral. This young man was Mikolaj Kopernik, and his clock is still to be seen on the walls.

The last monument of the Gothic period is the tomb of bishop Peter Moszynski (1484-1494), the work of the famous sculptor Wit Stwosz (Stosz), who spent a great part of his life in Poland, and there, especially in Krakow, left several of his best works.

During the second half of the XVI century, a period of strong protestant influence, the See of Wloclawek was blessed with energetic bishops who did much to revive and consolidate the Catholicism of the people. The first of them is Stanislas Karnkowski (1567-1581), friend of St. Charles Borromeo with whom he corresponded and whose work of reformation he followed in his own diocese. Immediately after taking up the episcopal office, he founded in Wloclawek a diocesan Seminary according to the prescriptions of the Council of Trent. This Seminary, third in the Catholic world after Milan and Rome, and first outside Italy, reared a succession of priests, animated with the spirit of tridentine reforms and ready to oppose the threatening new currents. In 1581, the primate, Jacob Uchanski, died, surrounded on his death-bed by Lutheran practitioners and dominated by them, himself not quite clear in his belief. The Holy See could not have made a better move than that of calling to the first metropolitan See in Poland the valiant bishop of Wloclawek. For the next 22 years Karnkowski lead the Polish Church and secured its final victory over the new religion. His successor at Wloclawek was well worthy of him; but Hieronim Rozdrazewski (1581-1600) unfortunately died in his prime during a pilgrimage to Rome.

The frequent removal of its bishops to other more prominent posts did not favour the diocese. Thus in the XVII. century there were fifteen short-term bishops, who were usually transferred after a year or two to Krakow or Gniezno.

The partition of Poland put an end to the independence and freedom of the nation and brought great changes to the situation of the Church. The diocese of Wloclawek, which stretched down the left bank of the Vistula to the sea and comprised Cuiavia and the western part of Pomerania, lost the greater part of its territory, which under the German occupation was joined to the archdiocese of Gniezno and the diocese of Chelmno. Wloclawek itself has become part of the Kingdom of Poland formed after the Congress of Vienna and ruled by the Tsar. The diocese then acquired new and large territories separated from Gniezno by the new frontier and stretching

far South beyond Czestochowa. But from the material point of view the Church became poorer. The great estates of the *mensa episcopalis* and the chapter were lost and after the failure of the insurrection of 1863-64 the Russian Government took revenge for the patriotic attitude of the clergy by confiscating the benefice lands, leaving out of every parochial benefice only 3 hectares of land, including in that the church square and the cemetery. Aiming at lowering the authority of the clergy, the government issued a decree, by virtue of which every one with a certificate from the college could enter the Seminary. The certificate, granted after successfully completing 4 years at school, was the lowest standard required in any sort of profession. The bishops, to maintain the intellectual standard of the clergy, prolonged the studies in the seminaries, where along with the lectures in philosophy and theology the students were able to complete their general knowledge neglected in their unfinished secondary studies. The more gifted students were sent to the catholic academy of Petersburg, subject to the Polish episcopate. Studies abroad were not allowed by the Russian government. The oppression was specially violent between 1863 (the last Polish insurrection) and 1905 (the revolution in Russia). The bishops were not allowed to leave the confines of their dioceses without a permit from the Governor; the parish priests required a permit from the chief of the district to go out of their parishes. This led to absurdities, as when a parish priest to confess himself had to meet the other priest at the boundary of the two parishes and the confession had to take place over the border line. *Ad limina* journeys were out of the question.

Great in the work of the restoration of the diocese stands bishop Zdzitowiecki (1902-1927). Under his government the diocesan seminary has blossomed anew and its standard has become so high that when the Catholic University at Lublin was opened its first three rectors were former professors of the seminary of Wloclawek. A year before the present war a six year course of study was introduced, 2 years of philosophy and 4 of theology. Since the reconstruction of the Polish State only those holding the national certificate of secondary education were admitted to the Seminary. In 1908 bishop Zdzitowiecki founded a *petit seminaire*, and in 1916 the college of Jan Dlugosz for the education of a catholic lay intelligentsia. This college was thoroughly up to date in teachers and equipment, so that parents from all over Poland sent their sons to be educated there. At the Seminary, the indefatigable historian of the diocese, Fr. Stanislas Chodynski, collected a rich library, which included some 100,000 volumes and about 1,100 incunabulae. In 1936 the new building of the diocesan library, with its well provided reading

rooms, was opened. In the year 1925 the Concordat signed between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland brought changes in the frontiers of the diocese. The new dioceses of Czestochowa and Lodz took over some of its territories, and the number of faithful thus fell from nearly 2 millions to 936,000.

From the point of view of nationality the diocese was a unity. In only one parish was there an old German minority (about 20 per cent.), which was provided with a priest, who spoke their language fluently, and preached to them every Sunday in German. All other diocesans were of Polish nationality. There were however colonies of German peasants, who had come to Poland after wars or pestilences in the XVII. and XIX. centuries. They were, without exception, Protestant, always averse to the country which sheltered them, and considering themselves as advanced posts of the eternal Prussian 'Drang nach Osten.'

The last years before the war were marked by a splendid development of catholic life. In 1930 according to the intentions of the Holy Father, Catholic Action was organized throughout Poland. In nearly every parish there existed associations of youth, which were under uniform direction, and enjoyed a period of great social activity. The great part of these young people had made special retreats and followed courses of social studies. The more recent associations of men, and especially of women, were becoming more lively every year, finding a fruitful field of catholic work. Sodalties of Mary were formed among the intelligentsia. In Wloclawek, as in other dioceses, there was from 1937 an Institute of higher religious culture, which during the winter had lectures on theology for the laity, who could sit for examinations and obtain certificates at the end of the course. The triumphs of living faith were the Eucharistic Congresses: the diocesan Eucharistic Congress at Kalisz in 1931, the regional congress at Sieradz in 1934, and the first Congress held in a Polish village, at the famous Liskow, whose parish priest in 40 years had changed the declining village into a seat of economic progress visited alike by Poles and foreigners.

If we look at the activity of the Church in Poland during the 20 years of her recovered independence (1919-1939), we shall notice a continuous progress. Catholicism had ceased to be a merely national tradition, and was penetrating the soul of the nation. Especially among the youth a new life could be seen rising, based on religion. The Academic associations 'Regeneration,' 'Juventus Christiana,' and the very large sodalties of Mary were gaining young souls for Christ and the Church. Every year in the national sanctuary of Czestochowa at the miraculous shrine of the 'Queen of Poland'

innumerable crowds of all classes gave expression to their faith. The 'Academic Vows,' renewed every last Sunday of May by the Youth of Poland were uniting them in faith and love of their ideal.

The first of September, 1939, has stopped suddenly that line of development, which was so full of hope. Amid the western territories of Poland incorporated into Reich is the diocese of Wloclawek, the actual state of which can be characterised by two words: *religio depopulata*. Of the 507 priests of the diocese at the outbreak of the war, the Germans have left only 14, if the reports from Poland are correct. And those 14 can say only a Low Mass on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation. In Wloclawek itself, where there were about 50 priests, none is left. The innocent blood of peaceful people has soaked the Polish soil—the blood of priests also—priests who can justly be called martyrs of the faith. *Sanguis martyrum*. . . .

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THE POLISH DOMINICAN PROVINCE TO-DAY

THE Dominican map of Poland is a queer one. It is true that one can hardly find a town in Poland without a Dominican church and priory (the fathers numbered more than 2,000 and had about 200 houses at the first partition in 1772), but the churches do not belong now to the Order and the priories are being used as schools or prisons. For in the provinces occupied by Russia and Germany in 1772 and 1795, i.e. in 80% of the Polish territory, the religious life was proscribed and the monasteries confiscated. What we see now on the Dominican map is the result of this historical fact, combined with the striving of the new Polish Province to re-occupy its right place in Catholic life of the whole country.

So it happens that the bulk of the priories is situated in the south, in the former 'Galicia.' There the Dominicans had eleven out of their 16 houses which were flourishing in 1939—among them the venerable Monastery of Cracow, the great former 'studium generale' of Podkamien with about 300 cells, and the actual seat of the Provincial with its fine baroque church at Lwów. The other priories are small and unimportant relics of the time when the Austrian