

## **The Holy See, Poland and the Polish-Ukrainian Tensions in Eastern Galicia, 1921–1931**

### **Summary**

In my study I analyze the principles that guided the Holy See in problems generated by Polish-Ukrainian tensions during the pontificate of Pope Pius XI. My study provides the first thorough investigation of Polish-Ukrainian tensions expressly from the point of view of the Holy See and the principles that influenced its responses.

The geographical focus is in Poland where Pius XI had acted as apostolic visitor and nuncio only eight months before he ascended the throne of Saint Peter. In November 1918, having established its independence, Poland enclosed within its borders three million Greek Catholic Ukrainians living in Eastern Galicia, who, as the largest minority of the Republic, formed a serious domestic problem: the Ukrainians' reluctance to acknowledge Polish dominance over Eastern Galicia in addition to the government's aspirations to pressure them into being loyal citizens resulted in nationalist tensions that persisted throughout the interwar period. These tensions were also reflected in religious matters, occasionally causing the Holy See to become involved with the incidents between the Polish government and the Greek Catholic Ukrainians.

My study shows that the Vatican was guided by three main principles: the safeguarding and uncompromising defense of the rights of the Catholic Church and its freedom of action, adhering to the impartiality of the Holy See, and the promoting of peace between nations and preventing unrest.

The principle of defending the rights of the Catholic Church and its freedom of action was a central factor in the decisions of the Holy See, for instance, at the turn of the years 1922–1923. At that time, the local official authorities of Eastern Galicia arrested Greek Catholic priests in great numbers and trespassed into cloisters protected by the papal *clausura*. According to the Polish government, the arrests and cloister searches were aimed at apprehending anti-Polish Ukrainians, but the Holy See regarded the actions of the official authorities offensive to the Greek Catholic Church. The Vatican strongly objected to the arrests of the priests and made an official protest against the violations of the cloisters protected by the papal *clausura*. As the objections and the official protest were made on behalf of the Greek Catholic Church and not to defend the rights of the Ukrainians, the Vatican considered it was maintaining its impartiality.

The principle of impartiality was inherently connected to the pontiff's role as the supreme spiritual shepherd of the universal Catholic Church. Similar to his predecessors, Pius XI emphasized the equal benevolence he felt as the Holy Father of all Catholics towards both Roman Catholic Poles and Greek Catholic Ukrainians. In order to not offend either party, the Vatican could not interfere in the disputes between the Poles and the Ukrainians, which primarily were a result of conflicting national interests. The Holy See considered that to remain impartial it was required to abstain from taking a public stance in what it regarded as purely political issues. According to the Holy See, these issues included for instance the territorial dispute concerning Eastern Galicia.

Based on the source materials of my study, especially the Poles had difficulties in accepting this distinction. The Poles expected exclusive support from the Holy See considering the past of Pius XI as the nuncio in Poland and the diplomatic relations between Poland and the Vatican. For the same reasons, the Ukrainians suspected Pius XI and the nunciature of Warsaw of favoring the Poles. In the situations where the Poles and the Ukrainians did not receive the support they expected from the Holy See, they felt that the Pope had no interest in them or the affairs of their Church. This perception of indifference could also stem from the Vatican's policy of responding to the complaints and pleas for assistance through diplomatic channels invisible to the public.

The Holy See's principle of promoting peace between nations can be attested, for instance, in the Vatican's endeavor to guide nationality-conscious bishops and clergy towards Christian fraternity. The Holy See considered as particularly problematic the fact that the nationalism of the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic clerics inspired them to participate in nationalistic politics, and sometimes they seemed to pay more attention to politics than to saving souls. At the same time the national politics and enmity among the bishops and the clergy caused confusion in the parishioners and disrupted the amicable coexistence between the Poles and the Ukrainians. The Holy See instructed the bishops and priests to set an example by showing moderation and thus promoting peace in Eastern Galicia.

In my research I have focused on the two most difficult challenges brought forth by the Polish-Ukrainian tensions Pius XI faced during his pontificate, which aptly demonstrate the principles of the Holy See. The first of these cases was a dispute between the Holy See and the Polish government concerning the return of the Greek Catholic Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytskyi, considered as an enemy by the Poles, to Eastern Galicia from his extended journey abroad in 1923. In this case the emphasis was on the principles of ensuring the rights of the Church and promoting peace and preventing unrest between the Poles and the Ukrainians.

Pius XI thought it self-evident that the return of the metropolitan to his Archiepiscopal See of Lviv was permitted by the rights of the Church. For this reason, Pius XI announced already prior the whole dispute that the Holy See would not negotiate with the Polish government on Sheptytskyi's return. The Pope was, however, willing to compromise on the details of when and how the return would be arranged in order to prevent possible unrest.

Before the Holy See began negotiating with the Polish Legation, Pius XI listened to the advice of the apostolic visitor he had sent to Eastern Galicia. The visitor, appointed in early 1923, was tasked with gathering detailed information for the Holy See concerning matters relating to the Greek Catholic Church. In addition to retrieving information, the visitation served a symbolic purpose as an expression of moral support to Greek Catholics, whose priests had been arrested and harassed by the Polish official authorities since the previous fall. In other words, the Pope wished to present a visible and concrete sign to Greek Catholics that the Holy Father had not forgotten them. However, Pius XI felt it necessary to emphasize that the visitation was not about the Holy See offering any political support to the Ukrainians dreaming of independence.

When the return of Sheptytskyi to Eastern Galicia became imminent in the spring of 1923, Pius XI and the apostolic visitor began to plan the arrangements for the return. Every detail of the plan was to make sure that the metropolitan's return would not cause unrest in Poland or in Eastern Galicia. In regard to promoting peace, the most crucial decision by Pius XI was about the pastoral letter that Sheptytskyi would write in Rome before leaving for Poland. The Pope hoped that the conciliatory pastoral letter would encourage Christian fraternity between Roman Catholic Poles and Greek Catholic Ukrainians and thus promote peace in Eastern Galicia. Pius XI deemed it important that the metropolitan would direct his pastoral letter solely to the clergy and faithful of his own archdiocese in order to underline the ecclesiastic and not the national significance of his return.

At the end of the spring of 1923 it still seemed that the return of the metropolitan would pose no problems. The Vatican and the Polish envoy agreed upon the terms on which Sheptytskyi could travel to Lviv. These terms consisted of the metropolitan's conciliatory pastoral letter and a possible courtesy visit to the President of the Republic. In return the Polish government would guarantee his safe return to Eastern Galicia.

However, new problems arose with the change of government. The new center-right government found the metropolitan extremely unfavorable, as he had defended the right of independence for the Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia during his long journey abroad. When the Polish right-wing press and the majority of the government conforming to its agenda found out the foreign minister had assigned the Polish envoy to evaluate the contents of the pastoral letter and then to grant the necessary travel documents, the government demanded that the foreign minister rectify his error. However, the metropolitan was already on his way, so the center-right government changed tactics: it told the Vatican it was concerned about possible unrest in Eastern Galicia and wanted the Vatican to delay Sheptytskyi crossing the border until his pastoral letter could be published and the situation would settle down. Afterwards the government came up with another reason to postpone the metropolitan's return. It announced to the Holy See that the Polish envoy had made a clear mistake in approving the pastoral letter. For this reason, the government was forced to delay the publication of the pastoral letter until it was edited in a form acceptable to the government by Sheptytskyi. Furthermore, the metropolitan would also be required to visit the President of the Republic and sign a political statement in which he would unequivocally acknowledge Poland's dominance over Eastern Galicia.

Pius XI consented to those demands by the Polish government, which did not contradict earlier agreements. The Holy See emphasized on several occasions the responsibility of the government in moderating the unrest, but for the safety of the metropolitan and societal peace, the Pope chose to delay Sheptytskyi's return. At the same time he suggested that the metropolitan should visit the President of the Republic, who had declared himself as a devout Catholic. Pius XI regarded this as the previously agreed courtesy visit, not as a new condition for the return.

In regard to the editing of the pastoral letter and signing a political statement, Pius XI emphatically declined both demands of the government. His adamant position was a result of his disapproval of how the Polish government had violated the agreement between the Holy See and the Polish Legation. The Pope emphasized that the Holy See and the Polish Legation had both agreed on the contents and form of the pastoral letter, which had been one of the terms for the metropolitan's return. Thus, there was not a single sentence in the letter that could have offended the Polish government or the Poles. The resentment of the Ukrainians, on the other hand, was guaranteed, should the metropolitan publicly acknowledge Poland's dominance over Eastern Galicia. Pius XI regarded the demand concerning the political statement purely infeasible; firstly, this was a new stipulation for the metropolitan's return, which had not been accepted by the Holy See before Sheptytskyi had left Rome. Secondly, the metropolitan had given Pius XI his promise to abstain from any political comments. This promise was also given in writing in the pastoral letter, so the political statement demanded by the government would have clearly contradicted the pastoral letter.

The Holy See knew that the Poles and the Ukrainians would respectively interpret Sheptytskyi's return from a nationalist point of view. To the Vatican, instead, the metropolitan's return to his Archiepiscopal See was important in regard to the interests of the Catholic Church rather than as a matter of opposed national interests between the Poles and the Ukrainians. Therefore Pius XI did not perceive any problems with the Holy See requesting assistance for defusing the difficult situation from the Catholic Poles, namely the President of the Republic and the Roman Catholic Cardinal Archbishops of Warsaw and of Gniezno-Poznań. However, the Holy See, the president, the archbishops and the nunciature of Warsaw all failed in tempering the resistance of the government.

In the middle of September 1923 the government suddenly yielded in its tug-of-war with the Holy See. Its change of heart was a result of the propagandistic critique by the political opposition, which made the center-right government in its fourth month in power afraid of being toppled. For its own benefit alone, it allowed the publication of the pastoral letter and the metropolitan's return to

Eastern Galicia. I consider this case to be a good example of how the actions of the Holy See and its generally assumed influence may have no impact even regarding issues that the Holy See could be presumed to play a pivotal role in resolving.

The second problematical case arising from the Polish-Ukrainian tensions deals with the violent pacification of the Ukrainians in the fall of 1930 ordered by the Prime Minister of Poland Józef Piłsudski. In this case the decisions of Pius XI were notably influenced by the principle of neutrality of the Holy See as well as by the difficulties he experienced in appraising the reliability of the news concerning the pacifications in Eastern Galicia.

The pacification of Eastern Galicia was related to Poland's roiling domestic policy, or to be precise, to the intensifying opposition of Piłsudski's undemocratic regime and the sabotage carried out by the Ukrainian nationalist extremists in Eastern Galicia during the summer and fall of 1930. Piłsudski responded to these threats to his position and to the uniformity of the domestic policy of Poland by having the most prominent members of the opposition arrested and by sending police troops and army cavalry to pacify Eastern Galicia. However, the pacification was not limited to the search and punishment of the saboteurs, but according to the principle of collective guilt, the Polish troops also arrested and assaulted those innocent of the sabotage in addition to causing severe material destruction.

The Holy See's understanding of the reasons, goals and implementation of the pacification of Eastern Galicia was based on the reports of the secretary of the nunciature of Warsaw, letters from the Greek Catholic bishops of Eastern Galicia, memorandums and reports of the Polish Embassy, telegrams from the United States sent by Ukrainian immigrants, articles published by foreign newspapers, and photographs. Therefore the difficulties experienced by Pius XI in deciding what action the Holy See should take were not due to a lack of information. His problem was that he knew from experience that the enmity between the Poles and the Ukrainians sometimes brought forth completely baseless accusations, and he was unable to verify the news from the Vatican. Although Pius XI often sent apostolic visitors on location to gather reliable information, he could not resort to these means during the fall of 1930 due to the politically sensitive situation. The Holy See, conscientious in its impartiality, could not have convincingly justified the sending of the visitor for religious reasons, which means the Poles would have inevitably and with good reason interpreted the visitor as a political monitor sent by the Holy See. On this basis Pius XI decided that the Holy See would not act before the nuncio enjoying his holiday in Rome could verify the credibility of the news.

While waiting for the report from the nuncio, the Pope revised his plan of action. His decision was influenced by telegrams in which the Ukrainian immigrants pleaded for help, but also a letter from the Greek Catholic bishops that provided a detailed account of the pacification. The telegrams from the United States gave the Vatican leverage to apply pressure on the Polish government, which tried to protect its international image. The Holy See emphasized that the pacification of Eastern Galicia and maltreatment of the innocent hurt Poland's reputation among the Catholics of the world. To the Greek Catholic bishops Pius XI sent a letter of condolence in which he expressed his compassion and assured them that the Holy See would do everything in its power for "justice and truth." The Pope had composed his declaration so that it was in line with the principle of impartiality followed by the Holy See: he did not take a stance regarding the details of the pacification, name any parties responsible for the violence in the territory or pass judgment on the alleged crimes.

Pius XI was more disturbed by the photographs of severely abused people and destroyed buildings than he was of the written accounts. He considered these photographs as indisputable proof of the overreaction of the Polish pacification troops. During the audience he granted to the Polish Ambassador, the pope emphatically reprimanded the Ambassador for the violent pacification of

Eastern Galicia. At the same time he appealed against the Polish government's decision to confiscate the pastoral letter composed by the Greek Catholic bishops. According to Pius XI, the bishops had not spoken out against the Polish politics in their pastoral, only described the pacification operations, which had targeted innocent people in addition to criminals. Thus, the Pope considered that the bishops had done the right thing by getting involved in the pacification of Eastern Galicia with their pastoral letter, as it was their duty to defend their parishioners.

As the nuncio confirmed in February 1931 the overreaction of the Polish troops in Eastern Galicia, Pius XI felt that he needed to personally reprimand Piłsudski. Having a private conversation with Piłsudski would have been natural, as they had formed a cooperative and amiable relationship a decade earlier. Contrary to the rumors, however, Piłsudski did not visit Rome, or at least the Vatican, so Pius XI never got to convey his disapproval.

My study shows that during the period of time addressed in my research, the Holy See consistently followed in all its decisions its principles of defending the rights of the Church, promoting peace and the impartiality of the Vatican. For instance, Pius XI considered himself to be bound by the Holy See's principle of impartiality even at a time when he personally would have wanted to express publicly his resentment of the violence inflicted upon the Ukrainian populace.

The principles of the Holy See and the decisions it made based on them did not always correspond to the expectations of the Poles and the Ukrainians. In many cases, both of these parties hoped to receive unequivocal and public support from the Holy See. However, due to its conscious choice to remain impartial, the Holy See could not publicly choose a side and take a stand. Furthermore, the Vatican never utilized public statements as a commonplace method of dealing with problematic situations. Even when the Holy See deemed it necessary to forcefully defend the rights of the Church, it did so through the Polish Embassy or the nunciature in Warsaw.

My research corroborates the views of previous studies, according to which the preciseness of information and the efficiency of communication were highly valued during the pontificate of Pius XI. Acquiring sufficient, reliable and up-to-date information about the situation in Poland and in Eastern Galicia was essential, especially when the Holy See had to decide how to respond to various problems. Contrary to the view presented by the historian Neal Pease, who has studied the relations between the Vatican and Poland, Pius XI by no means relied solely on his own expertise on the matters regarding Poland. As my research shows, in forming his stance on problematic situations generated by the Polish-Ukrainian tensions, Pius XI made use of the whole administrative and diplomatic machinery that was available to the Holy See.