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#### **Polonia semper fidelis – a special mission of faithfulness**

**We have given aid in the past, and we continue to give it today. Relative to its population, Poland has the largest number of refugees in Europe. This year, 3.5 million refugees from Ukraine found shelter in Polish families, thanks to the support of the state and the Church.**

The beatification of the Polish family of Ulmas from Markowa village in southern Poland has a symbolic dimension. The family was executed by German gendarmes on 24 March 1944 for harbouring Jews. In December 1942, the Ulmas gave shelter to a Jewish family from Łańcut: Saul Goldman with his sons Baruch, Mechel, Joachim and Moses, and Chaim Goldman's two daughters and granddaughter: Gołda Grünfeld and Lea Didner with her daughter Reszel. The Germans learned about them through a denunciation and murdered Józef and Wiktoria Ulma along with their children: Stanisław, Barbara, Władysław, Franciszek, Antoni, and Maria. They also killed all the Jews sheltered by the Ulmas. In all, 17 people were murdered, including an unborn child whose birth had just begun. The execution was part of the anti-Jewish Operation Reinhardt. The assault in Markowa was commanded by Lieutenant Eilert Dieken. After the war, he worked as a police officer in Esens. He died in 1960 as a 'respected citizen' and has never been held accountable for his crimes. In 2013, his elder daughter wrote, 'From the letters, I know that he served in Łańcut during the war. To my great joy, I also know he has done a great deal of good for the people. I would have expected nothing else from him.'

Józef and Wiktoria Ulma sheltered the Jews despite a decree issued by the Germans on 15 October 1941, which imposed the death penalty not only on Jews 'who leave their assigned district,' but also on anyone who harboured them. The reason the Ulmas decided to risk their lives was their deep, traditional Catholic faith. 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend.' (J 15:13). Estimates show that during World War II between 300,000 and a million Poles aided in hiding Jews, with over a thousand facing the same fate as the Ulma family. Of the 120 Jews living in Markowa, 21 survived the war thanks to the help of the local population.

The Ulma family's beatification is unique as it will be the first time an unborn child is also raised to the altar. The reason for that is the fact that Wiktoria Ulma was in her seventh month of pregnancy. According to the teaching of the Church, this child received baptism by blood, which has the same benefits as baptism but is not a sacrament. The Church thus emphasises that the unborn child is entitled to human dignity and all the rights that come with it.

The beatification of the Ulma family reminds the world of the need to respect the life of every human being and defend values with unwavering commitment. In the secularised Western world, it may come as a surprise that parents risked not only their own lives but also those of their children to save people of different nationalities and religions. But this attitude is rooted in Christianity, which remains a characteristic part of Polish culture. This stance was also shared by other Polish saints: Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Blessed Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, Blessed Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, and Saint John Paul II. The Solidarity movement emerged from this same stem, ultimately causing the fall of communist totalitarianism and the end of the world's division into two hostile camps. This happened through the 'commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth' (St John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*).

Józef and Wiktoria Ulma took to heart the answer the scholar of the law received from Jesus, after asking Him 'And who is my neighbour?' (Lk 10:29). Jesus replied to him with the parable of the merciful Samaritan, which has become part of the canon of European culture. The Samaritan has no fear. He does not ask the man lying by the roadside who he is. He is not interested in his nationality, religion, views or social position. He breaks all barriers without even noticing them. The dying man's identity is so meaningless that Jesus gives the scholar of the law no detail that would allow him to guess it. We do not even know if he was a Jew. It does not matter, because every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and everyone is worthy of being treated as our fellow man.

Following the recent Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Poles have shown this Christian compassion by welcoming war refugees into their hearts and homes. Around 14.5 million people, mostly women and children escaping the war, have come to Poland since the conflict began; nearly 13 million of them have returned to their homes. At the peak, around 3.5 million Ukrainian refugees found shelter in Poland, with about 30% of them staying with Polish families. Others were accommodated by state, local authorities and church institutions. All this happened without the creation of refugee camps. In addition to humanitarian aid, Ukrainians were granted certain civil rights, such as the right to use the public health service, the right to enrol their children in Polish schools, the

right to certain social benefits and the right to work. Relative to its population, Poland has the largest number of refugees in Europe.

This identity also gives rise to the Church's long-established responsibility. *Polonia semper fidelis* – these words express our special mission of faithfulness. This was once the slogan of other nations as well. It is with this attitude that the Church in Poland intends to participate in the forthcoming Synod on Synodality, hoping to renew the Church in Europe by emphasising the essential values without which the Church and Christianity – and consequently Poland and Europe – would not be themselves. The Ulmas beatification is a reminder of the irrefutable value of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, a family open to having children and fostering an atmosphere where faith and values are shared and passed on. It also affirms the value of life from the moment of conception and reminds us of the commandment to love one's neighbour to the point of giving one's life for one's friends. The beatified spouses understood well the role of the laity in the Church and the world. They remind us of what is important in our mortal life and what must be done to achieve eternal life.

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Published in cooperation with the Polish monthly 'Wszystko co najważniejsze' as part of a historical project run jointly with the Institute of National Remembrance and the Polish National Foundation.