

LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II:
BICENTENARY OF ST. CLEMENT'S ARRIVAL IN WARSAW *

Reverend Father Provincial,

Along with the spiritual sons of St. Alphonsus and somehow with all Redemptorists who to-day bear witness to the Redeemer of the Universe in all of Europe north of the Alps, I feel obliged to be grateful to God, to the Church and to St. Clement Hofbauer himself, for his apostolic work which he fulfilled during 21 years in Warsaw, Poland's capital, which at that time was torn in pieces, suffering and bleeding.

It is 200 years this year since St. Clement, a son of Moravia, came to our country. That date also marks the beginning of a difficult and at the same time faithful presence of the Redemptorist Congregation in Poland and also in Central, Northern and Eastern Europe.

This jubilee — through its central celebration near the church of St. Benno in Warsaw on May 17th 1987 — offers an occasion for prayer and reflection, for a more profound approach to the person and work of St. Clement, and for undertaking with new enthusiasm the charism of the Congregation as the Third Millennium of Christianity approaches.

This charism is expressed first of all through Christ's words: « as you did it to one of these the least of these my brethren, you did it to me » (Mt. 25; 40), and also in the fullest answer given by St. Paul the Apostle to Christ's call: « Who is weak and am I not weak? » (2 Cor. 11; 29). It is really the living idea and programme of Vatican II.

To be with Christ, in Him and through the Holy Spirit with the Father, means at the same time being with all human beings limited by their conditions of time and place in the way Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary came himself into human history and geography.

* Translated from the original in Polish by A. WODKA and C. O'CALLAGHAN C.S.S.R.

In the 18th Century, one so difficult for Europe and the Church, and so tragic for our Polish history, St. Alphonsus became a vivid incarnation of this idea. His spiritual son, St. Clement Hofbauer was a faithful representative of it not only in our land but elsewhere.

Together with Fr. Thaddaeus Hübl and Br. Kunzmann, after much searching and many experiences, he came as a Redemptorist from Rome through Loreto and Vienna to Warsaw with the intention of going to Sweden. He stayed at the small church of St. Benno until that moment in which the Redemptorists were expelled from it and the church itself was closed.

His strength was drawn from an organic link with God's People in Poland at that time, who were in a situation of great difficulty. The partitions of our country were systematically destroying the population of the villages and cities and « Warsaw was forced into the role of a provincial city existing on the margins of the economic life of the Prussian State ». Along with the arrival of material poverty, a spiritual misery came also and St. Clement with his companions appeared as a man sent by Providence exactly for a situation like this. He does not get involved in political discussions. Instead he serves those most abandoned and deprived of religious care. He attends first of all to those being in need of protection. He preaches, along with his brothers, the love and mercy of God and the realization of the great plan of mankind's salvation in Jesus Christ. In St. Benno's church, in a city where hope of saving the State was diminishing, a kind of continuous mission was celebrated which bore witness through suffering with the people and participating in their grave situation. From the early hours of day Masses were celebrated, confessions heard and sermons preached in German, French and Polish. Along with these, sacramentals were celebrated, processions organized and the pastoral care of the lay people was carried out through various confraternities.

Fr. General Blasucci in his letter expressed his astonishment at the great number of sermons preached. Clement answered it:

« Most Reverend Father, if you saw with your own eyes the deplorable state of the Church in this our city which is so much corrupted... you would wonder that we do not work even more... The government authorities tolerate, if not quite support, the greatest public scandals as if they did not even see them. The bishop has his hands tied and can order nothing...

It is true that the number of the faithful who cling to our church is unbelievable and their number increases each year. » (15/11/1800).

Simultaneously, in the spirit of evangelical service, he took care of the most abandoned ones: the children and youth of Warsaw. Thus he founded an orphanage and also a school for boys and girls. The Redemptorists were the only ones who received « orphans and other poor children » giving them according to their resources « maintenance and clothing ». No wonder then, that St. Clement deserved to be called the Apostle of Warsaw, as similarly — after being expelled from Warsaw — he became the Apostle of Vienna.

This was a great programme for the victory of good over evil in the human soul and in society. It was a programme whose realization took place against a background of circumstances in which everything seemed to conspire against Poland and the Polish people. This was a programme that Redemptorists, faithful to Christ, fulfilled through the cross and in suffering, as Christ himself, who redeemed the Universe through his passion, death and resurrection.

The presence of St. Clement in the difficult history of our Church and of our country shows, how very true is the teaching of Vatican II that the Church « presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes » (LG 8), and that « it is ... only in freedom, that man can turn himself to what is good » (GS 17). Clement's presence in that history gives a proof also for the teaching of Vatican II regarding the catholicity of the Church in which « each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened » (LG 13).

In this spirit I think about this Jubilee of Redemptorists, about the history of salvation in general, and about the history of salvation in our country. In this spirit I also thank God for St. Clement's mission in the Church, in our country and in Europe.

I bless wholeheartedly all the sons of St. Alphonsus de Liguori and all the places where they continue St. Clement's work to-day.

I bless cordially all the participants in the celebrations of your jubilee.

Vatican City, 14 May 1987

JOHN PAUL II