

Severin Gawlitta, *'Aus dem Geist des Konzils! Aus der Sorge der Nachbarn!'. Der Briefwechsel der polnischen und deutschen Bischöfe von 1965 und seine Kontexte*, Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2016, 286 pp., Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung, vol. 37

The book under review is noteworthy despite the Pastoral Letter of the Polish Bishops to their German brothers and the latter's response having already been dealt with in a great number of works.<sup>1</sup> In writing the book, its author, an archivist from the bishopric archive in Essen, enjoyed the double advantage of a thorough knowledge of the German Catholic Church and the new source material he had found in the archival legacy of German bishops, especially from Cardinal Franz Hengsbach. Hengsbach was the first bishop of the diocese established in Essen in 1957. Because of his contacts with Polish Catholics in the Ruhr region, he became responsible for contact with the Polish Catholic Church. He participated in the Second Vatican Council.

Analysis of the discovered sources has allowed Severin Gawlitta to broaden our knowledge of the circumstances of the correspondence between Polish and German bishops, and the reaction it elicited. The author shows a good understanding of the Catholic clergy's motives and mentality, especially those who made up the German Episcopate (his understanding of the Polish Episcopate is more limited). He provides a valuable explanation of the German Episcopate's decisions' context and their link to German domestic problems. Gawlitta's interpretation is controversial insofar as he assumes that the German response remained unacknowledged and misunderstood by both contemporaries and later historians. That is why the word 'Briefwechsel' (exchange of letters), treated as the basis for the Polish-German reconciliation, and not 'Botschaft' (message), appears in the book's title.

Defined in reference to the event which became not only the founding myth of the Polish-German reconciliation, but also the symbol of reconciliation itself and appealed to both in later years and in other countries, the book's goals are naturally ambitious. The author is right in pointing out that the correspondence's history, and the effect it exerted is quite complex, and that initially it was referenced only with some restraint. Gawlitta aims to rectify what he considers to be misguided interpretations which have hindered the proper understanding of the issue. He declares his intention to offer a more detailed

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion opened with an important book by Edith Heller, *Macht Kirche Politik. Der Briefwechsel zwischen den polnischen und deutsche Bischöfen im Jahre 1965*, Cologne, 1992, and with, *Na drodze do pojednania. Wokół orędzia biskupów polskich do biskupów niemieckich z 1965 r.*, by Piotr Madajczyk, Warsaw, 1994. The beginning of the twentieth-first century yielded important publications co-edited by Friedhelm Boll and Robert Wysocki, and works by Robert Żurek. Documents of the communist Security Service were introduced into the discussion by Wojciech Kucharski and Grzegorz Strauchold, *Wokół orędzia. Kardynał Bolesław Kominek. Prekursor pojednania polsko-niemieckiego*, ed. iidem, Wrocław, 2009.

analysis of various meetings and conversations (although it should be noted that these had also been referred to in some of the previous publications). To use this kind of evidence is to adopt the perspective of the people who were directly involved in the events under discussion.

It is necessary to express some reservations regarding this means of analysis for the testimonies of specific historical agents. Generally it raises few objections. The differing life-experiences of Cardinals Stefan Wyszyński and Bolesław Kominek have already attracted the attention of Polish historians. However, the reader is under the impression that Gawlitta is uncritical of evidence which highlights the roles of particular people and their mutual contacts. Information testifying to cordial and open meetings of members of the Episcopates of Poland and Germany should not blind us to the fact that this cordiality had to give way to social and political reality.

Of crucial importance here is the Vatican's recognition of the validity of the 1933 concordat and consequent refusal to recognize Poland's western border. In discussing the socio-political background that determined the way in which the concordat was approached in Germany and the Vatican, the author includes in his narrative the German internal policy-related strand of the issue which has been omitted from works by Polish authors, noting the significance of the concordat as an agreement to which one undivided Germany had been party (p. 35). The agreement was used as an important argument against East Berlin's demands to fit the border of the diocese to the border between the two German states, and against the policy of limiting Church education in West Germany. The Vatican suggested, and actually threatened, that the West German authorities' non-compliance with the concordat's provisions regarding education would result in drawing the relevant Church borders along Poland's western border (pp. 52–55).

At the same time, the Church in West Germany became deeply engaged in social and charitable projects aimed mainly at displaced Germans as those most in need of assistance. Consequently, it had a part in shaping the narrative of the illegality of the forced expulsions of Germans and idealized the 1950 Charter of the German Expellees (pp. 47–49). According to Gawlitta, this involved the support not for the revision of the Polish-German border, as advocated by the organizations of German expellees, but for the latter's rights to return to the lands which they were made to leave. The Vatican also advocated restraint in dealing with the border controversy in question (pp. 50–51).

Gawlitta does not have a full understanding of the factors that determined Poland's approach to the issue of reconciliation. Although he indicates the instrumental use by communist authorities of the policy pursued by Pius XII and the difficulties Polish bishops faced in representing Poland's interests after Poland's termination of the concordat in 1945, some of his opinions (pp. 56–57) suggest that he considers the Polish Episcopate's efforts during the Second Vatican Council to obtain recognition of Poland's Western border to have been the result of pressure exercised by the communist authorities — a condition forced

upon representatives of the Polish Church in order to be allowed participation in the Council.

It is difficult to understand why Chapter 2 ('Aversion und Annäherung'), devoted to the Polish-German rapprochement and the role played by the German Catholics in bringing it about, offers no account of the efforts the Wrocław Curia and Bishop Bolesław Kominek had taken in this regard since the latter half of the 1950s. The description of changes occurring in Germany, including in Catholic circles (the press, organizations) and especially in the circle of German bishops (pp. 68–73), indicates that the author's knowledge of the situation in Germany is more thorough than his knowledge of the situation in Poland. The description of the German Catholic press' reaction to the change of tone in which the Polish press wrote about West Germany is particularly notable (pp. 75–76).

Gawlitta mentions, but does not include in his argument, the well-established interpretation that the Poles considered the recognition of the Oder-Neisse border to be an integral part of the agreement while its West German advocates, who believed that a reconciliation should precede the border's recognition in order for the German expellees to become a part of it, excluded this from their considerations. Both sides differed so much in their perception of the problem that intentions and expectations diverged and the long conversations and declarations of reconciliation were not accompanied by a true mutual understanding. Gawlitta's book concerns itself essentially with this mutual misunderstanding.

The book's strength lies in the analysis of German bishops' statements regarding German guilt and Polish-German relations. The author offers a precise account of how the climate of the dialogue arose and how mutual contact was established (pp. 94–97). He also recounts the process of overcoming the mistrust of the bishops from Poland and from other countries of the Eastern Bloc, suspected of acting in collusion with the communist authorities. The use of German Church archives allows him to add new details to our knowledge of the meetings and contact held by Polish and German Church dignitaries (pp. 100–06). His analysis also involves some lesser-known aspects of the Polish-German Church contact, such as the financial support the Polish Church received from the Church in Germany or the issue of copying the archival legacy, to be found in Poland, of Cardinal Adolf Bertram, Archbishop of Wrocław.

Gawlitta, as he himself admits, lacked the source material to clarify the motives that inspired the creation of the Pastoral Letter by Polish Bishops (p. 136). It is impossible to give any definite, unequivocal answers to the question of what impact, if any, the reconciliation mass celebrated to mark the conclusion of the 1963 German-French Treaty had on, for example, Bishop Kominek. The book provides no new findings regarding the role of the Pope. Polish domestic policy is not included in the analysis of decisions taken by Cardinal Wyszyński and Bishop Kominek.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I believe that the reason Cardinal Wyszyński delayed his decision to accept the

Gawlitta is rational in his claim that advocacy for the Letter of Reconciliation meant abandonment of the belief that Germany should plead forgiveness first, and the acceptance of Bishop Kominek's view that Poland should initiate change in Polish-German relations with an act of forgiveness that would force Germany to apologize to victims [of the Nazi policy] (pp. 143, 149–53). Yet Gawlitta underestimates the significance of Bishop Kominek's experience as Papal Administrator in Opole during the first and most brutal years after the war. The way in which Kominek's attitude is described reveals an interesting insight to the difficulties encountered by an author who, in writing about the relations between two communities, is required to step beyond the perspective of his own culture and tradition. Gawlitta considers the Polish bishop's way of thinking to be a combination of religious and political elements (pp. 149–53) that led him to the instrumentalization of the will for reconciliation towards the political goal of the Polish-German border's recognition, and rejection of the communist system. However, the tradition of the Catholic Church in Poland was one of representing the interests of a nation deprived of its sovereignty, and the recognition of the Polish border was for the Polish Church a Church problem concerning the existence of the nation. Using in this context the word 'instrumentalization' fails to understand this unbreakable bond.

The German response was officially given on 5 December 1965. The author is right to debunk the myth regarding the difficulties (and their significance) encountered in the delivery of the Letter (pp. 157–59). This part of the work also reveals a poor knowledge of the Polish domestic policy. However, one has to agree with the opinion that the content of the Letter's disclosure had the effect of pressing the German Episcopate to give a reply while the Vatican Council was still in progress (p. 162). Equally interesting is the account of the preparation of the response and divisions among the members of the German Episcopate (pp. 169–77).

Gawlitta's argument about the strictly religious character of the Pastoral Letter and a lack of expectation on the part of its authors to elicit any declarations regarding the border is unconvincing (pp. 153–57). The main point he makes is that Polish bishops did not expect the German response to include any reference to the border and that historians are guilty of blowing the matter out of proportion (p. 177). In Gawlitta's opinion, the issue was referred to in relation to Poland's internal policy, as a safeguard against the accusations of communist authorities. However, in order to prove this view, stronger evidence is required than one sentence in a brief note attached to the Pastoral Letter, stating 'we wrote it not only for the German but also for the Polish nation'. This remark, in my opinion, is indicative of the fact that the authors of the Letter aimed, among other things, to contribute to the transformation of the mentality and political culture of the Polish nation. According to Gawlitta, what also speaks in favour of his interpretation is the importance attached by Bishop Kominek to the rapprochement between

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Pastoral Letter was not a lack of alternative options (the opinion expressed by the author, p. 143) but his view of Poland's internal situation.

the two nations (pp. 179–80). This, however, does not conflict with striving for the border's recognition.

The intention to defend the position taken by the German bishops leads Gawlitta to advance some vague arguments according to which the German expellees were not the reason for the restraint with which the Germans responded to the Polish Letter. The authors of the response in question simply wanted to include the expellees, whom they knew to oppose the recognition of Poland's western border, in the reconciliation process. This is an important clarification, but it does not change the essence of the matter.

To claim that Polish bishops were not as critical of the German response as usually assumed rejects Edith Heller's interpretation of the Polish Episcopate's communiqué of 7 December 1965 (p. 213). In it, the German response was referred to by the restrained term 'positive', which Heller found to be an expression of a deeply negative view of the response. Gawlitta also downplays the significance of Wyszyński's and Kominek's later critical opinions, but he does not offer a convincing explanation<sup>3</sup> of their aim. He also contests two charges. Firstly, he does not agree with the opinion that German bishops failed to understand the Pastoral Letter's authors' intentions of emphasizing Poland's bond with the West. In his opinion, they discerned it but believed it counter-productive to the process of reconciliation to embark on a discussion of historical issues. Secondly, he rejects the view that they failed to understand the wider meaning of the Letter.<sup>4</sup> However, Gawlitta's line of reasoning indicates that he fails to understand what it meant in Poland in 1965 to ignore the existence of GDR in Polish-German discussions.

This part of the book (Chapter 5.1) leaves the reader under the impression that the author has failed to see that he was describing a strange dialogue in which both sides did not understand their mutual expectations. Arguing that the issue of the Polish-German border was not of key importance and citing German bishops' remarks on their positive reaction to the Polish bishops' response, he fails to notice that Cardinal Wyszyński's statement (p. 219), which he also cites, placed a special emphasis on the need to 'ensure Poland's existence within the existing borders'. Of particular note is the author's reference to the 1966 correspondence between the Cardinal and Bishop Kominek. This source material bears testimony to the high regard in which Kominek held the idea of the correspondence (p. 219). The question which arises here is whether Cardinal Wyszyński and Bishop Kominek differed from each other in their expectations regarding

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<sup>3</sup> The argument regarding statements made by Polish bishops on account of the communist authorities appears to be used in the book as an interpretative skeleton-key.

<sup>4</sup> It seems as if the author of the work, scholarly in character, found himself obliged to defend the honour of German bishops. This strikes a note of discord in the book. A critical view of the German response is in his opinion either *Unterstellung* (insinuation), or an accusation brought against these bishops that they displayed no deeper intellectual qualities (pp. 217–18).

the German response. I believe that this was the case, but further research is needed to answer this question.

Worth noting is an interesting chapter (5.2, 'Polenarbeit der deutschen Bischöfe') in which the case of the bishopric in Essen is used to illustrate the efforts taken by the Catholic Church in Germany in the latter half of the 1960s to advance the Polish-German reconciliation.

To conclude, Severin Gawlitta's book is a significant contribution to academic reflection on the exchange of letters between Polish and German bishops. It brings into circulation new church sources, especially those regarding Bishop Franz Hengsbach, and provides a new interpretation of German bishops' response to the Pastoral Letter and their view of the pursuit of Polish-German reconciliation. Without accepting some of the opinions expressed by the author, who has a better understanding of the German than of the Polish reality, it must be said that his book provides inspiration for further critical reflection on this fragment of Polish-German history.

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