

He Always Reaches for Jesus When Sinking: A Laudation for the Ceremony of the Presentation of a Medal of Merit of the Polish Theological Society to Archbishop Dr. Damian Zimoń

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In 1766, four years before his death, the famous French painter François Boucher painted a scene from the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew.

“Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. [...] Peter said to [Jesus] in reply, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how (strong) the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

Boucher’s depiction of this scene has all the traits of French rococo, the dominant style at the time. There are foaming waves, the disciples’ frightened eyes, their rapid movements, and the beseeching look of Peter as he tries to keep balance.

And the Lord Jesus is present amidst all this. He is completely different, looking youthful; His arms are open to embrace the sinking Peter. Jesus’ eyes are mild and He is smiling. This is a forgiving Jesus. It seems as if Jesus is glad that Peter can experience his weakness and understand that he can place his hopes only in Jesus...

My choice of this scene at the lake and of Peter sinking is not incidental. Today, we are not only honored to participate in the general meeting of the Polish Theological Society (I’m using the word “honored” because that is how it was expressed in the invitation: “participation in the meeting is the honor and right of each member of the society”). We have also gathered to present the Medal of *Merit of the Polish Theological Society* to Archbishop Dr. Damian Zimoń, the archbishop emeritus of Katowice. I am honored and privileged to

be able to present the laudation and thus authenticate this decision by saying a few words about the recipient of the medal. Today, I would like to alter this image of the great French painter. Today, I would like Peter's face in the painting I referred to earlier to bear the likeness of Archbishop Damian. This is by no means incidental. The laureate himself said this about himself in the book-length interview with him that bears the same title: *Ciągle tonę i chwytam Jezusa* ("I Always Sink and Reach for Jesus"). Of course, at this moment I can't omit the fact that the co-author of this book is Rev. Prof. Szymik, who is present here today, and whose speech will follow mine, as he will give us a lecture soon.

"I Always Sink and Reach for Jesus..."

The society that today presents a medal of merit to Archbishop Damian has existed for more than ninety years. Its aim is to develop Church studies, especially theology. Since the laureate has made contributions to the society that wants to distinguish him, this means that he must have made contributions to Church studies, especially theology. Naturally, the location of our meeting is not incidental, as it played a crucial role also in the laureate's intellectual development. After all, it was in Krakow, at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology, where he defended his doctoral dissertation.

There are probably many ways in which we can discuss his accomplishments. For me, the best way is through the imagery of the waves of a stormy lake, the loving Peter's reaction, and the smile on Jesus' face.

The Waves of the Stormy Lake

Trying to explain why a stormy lake is a good metaphor for the laureate's service is like explaining that the sun shines and that rain is wet. No one can have doubts about that!

If one is born five years before the outbreak of World War II, finishes high school under communism (I would like to recall that he graduated from high school the same year when the Polish bishops sent a letter to Poland's communist government protesting against the persecution of the Church and interference in its internal matters and criticizing the limits placed on

publishing Catholic magazines and forcing priests to swear their allegiance to the state); experiences the forced closing of the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Theology during his studies; serves as a vicar and parish priest in Tychy, Pszów, and Katowice, also under martial law, shortly after which he is nominated to be the bishop of a diocese when he is under the surveillance of the communist secret police, then one must be detached from reality in order to not see that our laureate's entire life was not only a very stormy lake, but also caused him to make many sacrifices.

Recalling his episcopal service and asked about the choice of his episcopal motto ("We Preach about the Crucified Christ"), Archbishop Zimoń referred to the scene in which Jesus met Peter at the lake. He said: "Naturally, with the passage of time everything becomes natural, even routine. However, reality always surprises us somehow. Perhaps the point is to be like in the scene with St. Peter, who sees Jesus walking on water, runs towards him, and walks across the waves, but immediately realizing that this is a suspension of the laws of nature, starts to doubt and begins to sink. And Christ grabs him by the hand. 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' I think that both priests and bishops need to sink in order to summon Christ anew and believe. In Poland, the function of a bishop is tied to certain honors, prestige, and public trust. You're always in the front row; you wear a mitre and carry a crosier. And so you can believe that you've been anointed. Naturally, we are anointed, but we can start to believe in these signs of greatness, which can cause unease. That's why a situation in which we start sinking is necessary; it causes us to reach for Christ and choose Him anew. God allows us to sink and tests our faith so that we can see the other bank of the river, the other side of the coin, God's plan, and the second side of the embroidery. I don't see it, but God does."¹

Indeed, the signs of greatness in the case of Archbishop Zimoń, whom we are honoring today, did put him in the front row. When discussing Archbishop Zimoń's life, we can't fail to mention the fact that he was the chairman of the Commission on General Ministry for the Polish Episcopal Conference for many years. He also served on many other commissions, although I cannot mention them all for the sake of time. In 2007, he also received an honorary doctorate pursuant to a decision of the University of Silesia for his contribution to the culture of Upper Silesia and promotion of the dignity of the working

1 *Ciągle tonę i chwytam Jezusa*, z abp. Damianem Zimoniem rozmawiają Alina Petrowa-Wasilewicz i ks. Jerzy Szymik, Katowice 2002, p. 153.

class. I'd like to emphasize that the waves on the lake did not calm after the transition to democracy. Naturally, it led to long awaited national liberation. However, it also led to new challenges, such as unemployment, which was the greatest challenge to a priest who ministers to the working class. Like Peter, Archbishop Zimoń dove into the waves of the lake.

The Loving Peter's Reaction

It is not incidental that I am referring to love and not to faith. I'm not talking about the reaction of Peter, who wants to believe or not. We knew very well that a thousand failures to believe are not as painful as a single failure to love. When asked about what faith is by Father Szymik in the interview under discussion, Archbishop Zimoń replied in an unambiguous manner: "Faith has to affect our everyday behavior. Ordinary love for an ordinary person is always apostolic. In Silesia, love is of a social and charitable nature. [...] It is faith that commands us to respond to human poverty, to one's neighbor."² It is telling that right after this reply the professor of theology asks another question: "Is believing therefore loving?" Archbishop Zimoń replied: "Yes. You have to show your faith through love." Then he added: "I think that the strongest expression of love is service."³

Our laureate was a leader in serving others. I'm intentionally using a word that makes one think of the Silesian term "face" [Polish - "przodek"] as part of a pit in a mine. Drilling takes place in the face or in its immediate vicinity. In such a face, one of the principle activities is rock mining. My mining-related associations therefore go in the direction of serving the working man, but also of excavating the hard reality from the nascent system. "The Catholic Church in Silesia and Unemployment" is an important and deep analysis of a multi-faceted problem. Our laureate writes the following: "We thank God for the gift of regaining our freedom and are glad we can live in a democratic country. However, in addition to many positive aspects, the social changes that are occurring in our country are leading to many unsettling, if not to say frightening, phenomena. It is with concern that we see more and more areas of social life causing valid concerns that human dignity is threatened and the

2 *Ciągle tonę i chwytam Jezusa*, dz. cyt., p. 240.

3 Tamże.

person's comprehensive development is in peril.”⁴ Next, he adds: “It's not the system, but the social sphere of moral reference points that is the space where the tragedy of unemployment is born.”

For Archbishop Damian, this sphere of moral reference points was the area of encounter with the person. These face-to-face encounters were with both individual persons and with crowds, especially during the pilgrimages to Piekary that the archbishop cherished so much, both in May (the men's pilgrimage) and in August (the women's pilgrimage). Despite so many changes, the pilgrimage to Piekary did not lose its place in Silesian piety, about which our laureate has spoken and written extensively.

Archbishop Damian's encounters with the person took place on many levels. However, he always had the same enthusiasm and zeal and was always aware that all areas of serving the person require the appropriate preparation, formation, and professionalism. Thus he first served as the vice rector of the Silesian Seminary in Krakow. In later years, Archbishop Zimoń served at the Faculty of Theology and played a leading role as the great chancellor.

I have already mentioned that he was a direct witness to the closing of the Faculty of Theology at the Jagiellonian University, where Silesian priests previously studied. When asked to give a lecture about the beginnings of the periodical *Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne* (“Silesian Historical and Theological Studies”) published in Katowice, Rev. Prof. Remigiusz Sobański once referred to a difficult moment. He recalled a well-known and often quoted principle for the formation of future pastors: *non doctores sed pastores egemus*. He said that: “Lecturers need to be employed in the seminary. That meant that, at least from a long-term perspective, there was a need for them to be recruited from among the diocesan clergy. The principle *non doctores sed pastores egemus*, which was rather convincing when the didactic staff of the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Theology was responsible for the intellectual formation of the clergy, was gradually amended. Thus priests with doctorates became necessary; it was from their ranks that lecturers of the Silesian Major Archdiocesan Seminary were recruited.”⁵

Non doctores sed pastores. Many years passed. In the meantime, many changes took place in our homeland; the Faculty of Theology of the University

4 Abp Damian Zimoń, *Kościół katolicki na Śląsku wobec bezrobocia*, Katowice 2001.

5 R. Sobański, *Pierwsze lata „Śląskich Studiów Historyczno-Teologicznych”*, „Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne” 42 (2009) 42 no. 1, p. 8.

of Silesia was established in Upper Silesia, and its great chancellor, whom the Polish Theological Society is honoring with a medal today, would return to this saying in one of his statements. He said: “We need to be in the opinion-forming milieu, at the universities that in general play a decisive role in Silesia’s future. If we were not there, we would not fulfill our vocation with respect to the local population. That’s why it’s so important to deepen our knowledge of theology. Today I say: *pastores et doctores*, and even *doctores et pastores*.⁶

This sense of time, awareness of increasingly rapid changes, and updating – as we would put it technically – are the traits of a pastor who loves his sheep more than his own life. And he knows that they will make use of his labor even when he himself passes...

A Smile on Jesus’ Face

This is the last part of my speech. This is the laudation for the Archbishop of Katowice, Metropolitan of Upper Silesia, and recipient of an honorary doctorate, who today will receive another honor, the *Bene Merenti* of the Polish Theological Society. Speaking on the occasion of our laureate’s eightieth birthday, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki of Poznań said: “A bishop’s jubilee is not only an occasion to eulogize a person, but rather one to praise God, Who allows weak, human persons to serve in a very responsible capacity in the Church... [...] How is Archbishop Damian Zimoń’s ministry in the Katowice diocese different from the work of any other bishop in any other place? The difference is that it requires exceptional sensitivity.”

I would like the word “sensitivity” to be the leitmotif that concludes this reflection. It would be difficult to assume that someone who is not sensitive could have made such contributions to theology. I have already said much about the laureate’s sensitivity to others’ suffering. However, while speaking of theology, we cannot forget Jesus’ sensitive look at Peter, that smile in the French master’s painting. This is the relationship between the pastor, often referred to as the “archpastor,” and Jesus the Pastor, Who is the Pastor not only of His flock, but is also the Pastor of the pastors. And that was very apparent, not only to his flock. In an interview for the Catholic magazine *Gość Niedzielny*, Archbishop Damian said: “We have to believe that everything is

⁶ *Ciągle tonę i chwytam Jezusa*, op. cit., s. 182.

in God's hands. I'm looking to the future with confidence, and I put my trust in God's mercy. When I look back at my life and ministry, I see more and more that God has been leading me according to my episcopal motto... I preach the crucified Christ to myself first. Everyday I learn to carry my cross. If I could, I would choose the same life."

Your Excellency! The tempest in the lake did not frighten you enough to discourage you from throwing yourself into the lake. From what you've said, it is clear that this was a reaction of love. Only you know how Jesus looks at you. Only you know the warmth of that smile.

Today, when you are presented with the Medal of Merit of the Polish Theological Society, please let us conclude this laudation with a brief "thank you." We want to thank you who always reaches for Jesus. And Jesus Himself!

Your Excellency, may God bless you!