Behind The Scenes of a Mysterious Meeting: Romanian And British Diplomacy on the 1983 Meeting Between Pope John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa

Gabriel Stelian Manea
Faculty of History and Political Science
Ovidius University, Constanța
Aleea Universității nr. 1, Campus, Corp A, cod 900470,
Constanța, Romania
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0150-5604
Email: manea.gabriel@univ-ovidius.ro

Abstract:

Negotiations for organizing Pope John Paul II's second visit to Poland in 1983 were marked by controversies regarding a possible meeting between the Pope and Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarity. The Vatican considered the meeting essential, while the Polish government rejected it, fearing its political impact. For months, intense negotiations took place involving the Vatican, the Polish government, and the Episcopate. The research uses diplomatic documents from the archives of Romania and the United Kingdom, supplemented by reports from the Western press. The visit, initially planned for 1982, was postponed due to political tensions. Eventually, a compromise allowed a private meeting between the Pope and Wałęsa, but it did not fully satisfy the involved parties. The events highlighted political tensions and underscored the symbolic role of the visit in supporting Solidarity's ideals. The meeting, lasting about 30 minutes, remained confidential but was considered a symbolic gesture of support for Polish workers and Solidarity's ideals. However, subsequent articles in the Western press speculated about an agreement between the Vatican and Jaruzelski's regime, suggesting that Wałęsa was marginalized to facilitate national reconciliation. The controversial editorial in *L'Osservatore Romano* highlighted Wałęsa's sacrifice, generating criticism towards the Vatican.

Keywords: Pope John Paul II; Lech Wałęsa; Solidarity; Catholic Church; Communist regime; Poland

Introduction and Methodology

During the tripartite negotiations between the Vatican, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, and the Polish government for organizing Pope John Paul II's second visit to Poland in June 1983, perhaps the most delicate issue was a potential meeting between the Pontiff and Lech Wałęsa, the man who embodied the efforts, hopes, and ideals of freedom cherished by the Polish people in recent years. When the Roman Curia made a formal request for such a meeting—considering it a primary condition for the papal visit—the Polish authorities began to assess and worry about the public relations disaster such a meeting could provoke. What followed were several months of negotiations from nearly irreconcilable positions, during which even the Pope's arrival was called

into question. These negotiations, as captured in diplomatic circles, are the subject of this study. Seeking a balanced approach to the topic, we have proposed an evaluation of how Romanian diplomacy, representing a socialist state, and British diplomacy, from the opposite ideological and geopolitical sphere, reported on, perceived, and analyzed the various stages and episodes of these negotiations over several months.

This methodological approach also determined the selection of sources used. Our focus was directed toward documents housed in the Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, primarily diplomatic notes sent by the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Romania in Warsaw between November 1982 and July 1983. These were complemented by analyses from Romanian diplomats accredited in Poland regarding the general political situation. The second set of sources consulted came from The National Archives in London, specifically documents contained in the *Records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and predecessors* collection. These sources are more varied in typology and include standard diplomatic notes sent from Warsaw or the Vatican, as well as political analyses and press reports. The research was further supplemented with press sources. In this case, the Romanian press of 1983, as expected, allocated only a few lines to the papal visit to his native Poland, merely highlighting the first meeting Pope John Paul II had with General Wojciech Jaruzelski on June 17. By contrast, the press from the United Kingdom and the United States, such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *International Herald Tribune*, followed every detail of the events closely, as did Radio Free Europe.

The premise of this study is that the negotiations regarding the possibility or feasibility of a meeting between Pope John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa at the end of the 1983 visit began from irreconcilable positions. The Pope and the Vatican considered it indispensable, while the Polish government deemed it unacceptable. In the middle stood the Polish Episcopate and the Catholic Primate, Józef Glemp. Over the course of several months, the positions remained firm: ultimatums were issued, arguments were presented, emissaries were sent, and by the start of the visit, nothing was certain. Ultimately, the compromise reached—a meeting that was not only private but outright conspiratorial—satisfied no one and even faced sharp criticism in some quarters.

A Turbulent and Unstable Political Context

At the beginning of the final decade of European communism, relations between the Church and communist governments were far from cordial. As religious sentiment grew stronger and Marxism-Leninism declined throughout the Soviet bloc, authorities became increasingly sensitive to this issue. In July 1979, shortly after Pope John Paul II's first visit to Poland, a conference of communist parties held in East Berlin expressed concerns that the Vatican's policy toward socialist countries had become increasingly active and that the Catholic Church might emerge as a center of political opposition. The dissatisfaction of Eastern Europeans with the atheist governments, which they viewed as imposed by a foreign occupier, was evident. This helps explain why the Church became a focal point for preserving strong national traditions with histories far longer than the few decades of communist rule (*The Times*, 9 May 1983, 11).

The second visit to Poland by Pope John Paul II was scheduled to take place in August 1982 to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the inauguration of the Pauline monastery of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa, which also houses the highly venerated icon of the Black Madonna. A place which, according to Timothy Garton Ash, who witnessed the events, represented for the Poles both Westminster Abbey and Windsor Castle (Ash 1997, 52). However, the political situation in Poland was still volatile, and the proposed date coincided with the second anniversary of Solidarity, which led to the visit being postponed and the jubilee celebrations being extended for an entire year.

After the signing of the "Gdańsk Agreements" on August 31, 1980, and the establishment of the Autonomous and Independent Trade Union "Solidarity" (NSZZ "Solidarność") in mid-September 1980, the map and boundaries of relations between the state and society fundamentally changed. The union offered a political alternative, effectively nullifying the political monopoly of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP), which was a serious issue not only for Polish communists but also for other socialist countries, Poland's ideological "sisters," who now feared this precedent and the potential replication of a phenomenon they could not control. On the morning of December 13, 1981, the national television station broadcast General Jaruzelski's speech announcing the establishment of the Military Council of National Salvation-WRON (Constantin 2007, 500) and the imposition of martial law in Poland (Filip-Afloarei 2023, 141). The reasons, as outlined in the speech, stated that the country had reached the edge of an abyss and was threatened by chaos, demoralization, and criminality. Poles were informed of the limitation of certain civil rights, such as personal freedom and the inviolability of their homes; restrictions on travel outside localities, and a curfew banning street movement between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM (Constantin 1997, 501).

Immediately after the proclamation of martial law, the implementation of the established plan transformed Poland into a veritable military and police dictatorship, terrifying the population. The decreed measures paralyzed society: strikes and demonstrations were banned, and enterprises were militarized; telephone communications were cut off, gas stations were closed, and access to foreign currency accounts was blocked. The activities of professional associations and mass organizations were suspended, and any kind of meeting, gathering, or demonstration was prohibited. Correspondence was censored, and the publication and circulation of the press were drastically restricted. Borders and civilian airports were closed, and patrols began appearing in train stations and crowded places. (Constantin 1997, 502).

The military regime established a climate of terror that affected all social categories, from workers to intellectuals. The repression against the press was massive, resulting in hundreds of dismissals in both print media and radio and television, the suppression of dozens of youth and cultural publications, and their replacement with others that were, predictably, obedient to the regime. Teachers were also targeted, being required to sign declarations of loyalty to the regime, with those who refused being dismissed, harassed, or even detained. Judges who sympathized with Solidarity were removed, arrested, or threatened, while lawyers who defended cases involving violations of martial law were disbarred. (Filip-Afloarei 2023, 157-158).

It is interesting to note that the introduction of martial law in Poland fundamentally altered the typical structure of a communist regime, with power shifting from the Party to the Army. It has been said that December 13, 1981, marked "the official death of Polish communism, as the Party moved into the background," while a general and the Army assumed full responsibility for defending the regime. Party organizations at various levels fell into the background, replaced by military commissars and officials. (Constantin 1997, 502). This might be one of the reasons why the initial victory of the military regime was eventually perceived as a defeat—not just for the workers, but for the Party and the entire "socialist order."

The official announcement of the papal visit was made public on November 8, 1982, following a meeting between the Catholic Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, and General Wojciech Jaruzelski. The final date for the Pope's arrival was set for June 16, 1983, and the full program of the visit was announced through a simultaneous communiqué from Warsaw and the Vatican on May 17, 1983 (Open Society Archives-OSA 14 Jun. 1983, 1). However, in the months leading up to the visit, Polish authorities consistently claimed that protests by Solidarity posed a threat to its successful organization (*The Times*, 20 Apr. 1983, 1).

Indeed, the visit was to take place in a domestic climate marked by political and social tensions, an economic crisis, all compounded by Western pressures and messages demanding respect for human rights and the easing of martial law restrictions. In May 1983, the most recent clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement, Western pressures, or the authorities' repressive actions against Polish cultural figures such as Andrzej Wajda, cast doubt on the very possibility of the visit, even though government assurances were given that the Pope would be received in Poland. General Jaruzelski had proven incapable of restoring economic and social stability. Economic production was declining, as was the standard of living. Nevertheless, Jaruzelski claimed that Poland was on the path to normalization (*The Times*, 4 May 1983, 15).

Pope John Paul II, however, was not coming to Poland to maintain a dubious and unsustainable balance between the state and the Church, nor was his goal to preserve an appearance of cooperation. How could the Supreme Pontiff protect an atheistic regime that violently suppressed the just aspirations of Poles? He was coming to Poland on a pilgrimage and as a shepherd tending to his flock of believers, not merely as a head of state. For these reasons, it was possible that the authorities would organize a program to minimize his encounters with the public or with Lech Wałęsa (*The Times*, 15 Jun. 1983, 15). The same authorities, concerned and even worried about the prospect of the visit, drafted a document in February 1983 titled "Political and Organizational Premises for the Pope's Visit to Poland," intended for the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. According to their estimates, the Supreme Pontiff, fully aware of the internal and international climate of the moment and feeling obliged to fulfill a moral duty to Polish believers, intended to go beyond the strictly religious aspects of the visit, precisely to avoid betraying the hopes with which he was awaited and, according to the authors of the document, to "avoid losing his prestige in opposition circles." Furthermore, Party leadership speculated that even the distinguished guest faced

a dilemma: he did not aim for his presence in Poland to be used against the authorities but also did not wish to contribute to their credibility. Consequently, the visit's agenda was to include meetings with state officials limited to the minimum protocol requirements. (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486)

Moreover, from the British Embassy to the Holy See, the picture painted was even more intriguing, portraying a Curia far from united in ideas and strategies regarding the Communist East, including Poland. Peter Nichols, *The Times* correspondent in the Vatican, described to the British ambassador a "state of war" between the Pope and Cardinal Casaroli, with the latter sidelined and a true "Polish mafia" orchestrating and preparing a confrontation between the Church and Communism. According to Nichols, the Pope's reason for going to Poland was not because he was Polish or because he was determined to attend the celebrations in Częstochowa, but because Soviet authorities were content to ignore him when he spoke from Rome or elsewhere, yet it was entirely different if he spoke in a Slavic language, right at the Soviet borders (The National Archives, Kew 6 Jun. 1983, 38). The same Nichols had also met with Monsignor Capovilla, former secretary to Pope John XXIII, who believed that John Paul II's policy towards the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact states was confrontational and thus completely different from that of his predecessor. This transformation was at the root of the conflict with Cardinal Casaroli. Other Church cardinals had a more accommodating vision when it came to relations with Communism, such as the late Primate of Poland, Stefan Wyszyński, or László Lékai from Hungary, but ordinary citizens in these countries preferred John Paul II's approach. Peter Nichols was critical of the current Supreme Pontiff and his decision to follow the path of confrontation with Communism, arguing that other high-ranking Curia officials were also sidelined when it came to Poland or other Communist countries (The National Archives, Kew 6 Jun. 1983, 38).

During this period, Solidarity, although clandestine, intensified its activity to the extent that even Wałęsa met with Zbigniew Bujak and other underground leaders. Consequently, the Political Bureau of the Polish United Workers' Party discussed the issue in an April 1983 meeting and acknowledged that, being more focused on economic problems, it had neglected the "fight against counter-revolutionary forces" and the "exposure of their actions." Within the Party's leadership, the idea of arresting Wałęsa was even analyzed, but it was abandoned to avoid turning him into a popular hero and antagonizing the Church. However, this time the Political Bureau issued a direct accusation against the Church, claiming it supported Solidarity's activities and encouraged its illegal actions (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1487). As evidence, the now-traditional protests on the 13th of each month had, in April, once again started from the Church.

On the other hand, the opposition's activity was invoked by the government as a possible reason to cancel the visit. Moreover, and very significantly, the Church was perceived by the political leaders in power as being behind the opposition—supporting it, encouraging it, and even participating in anti-state actions through certain priests labeled as reactionaries. Such actions were recorded, for example, immediately after the first appearance and public speech of Primate Glemp

on February 13, 1983, following his elevation to the rank of cardinal. On that occasion, several thousand believers attended, and at the end, many—especially young people—attempted to organize a demonstration "inspired by extremists in Solidarity." Authorities were forced to intervene forcefully to prevent it. For the authorities, this was proof that the underground union was beginning to implement a new action plan involving protests and demonstrations (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486). Alarmed by such situations, Party leaders, such as those in Wrocław—one of the cities most affected by such unrest—issued threatening messages toward the Church, which they suspected of supporting the opposition. Thus, if protests were to escalate, the regime was prepared to initiate a public polemic with the Church, expose the anti-state actions of certain priests, and bring them before prosecutors. "It must be made clear that the Church cannot do as it pleases without facing consequences" (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486).

Despite the authorities' concerns, clandestine Solidarity still called for order and calm during John Paul II's visit. Zbigniew Bujak, Solidarity's underground leader, who had been sought by authorities since 1981, gave an interview to the illegal publication *Mazowsze*, associated with the union, in which he urged calm. He argued that a peaceful visit would demonstrate Solidarity's ability to organize the masses and, obviously, its prestige among them. A similar statement was made by Wałęsa on June 6, who saw the Pope's presence and the possibility of meeting him as a chance to reactivate Solidarity under legal conditions (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486). However, in the government's eyes, such appeals did little to alleviate concerns. At pilgrimage sites in Warsaw, such as Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's tomb, opposition activities were intensifying. Flower-laying ceremonies, an increase in anti-socialist and anti-state posters, and passionately sung songs attracted more and more people, particularly young individuals (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486).

The Negotiations

The sensitivity of the visit and its preparation is demonstrated by the periodic briefings that PMUP, even members of the Political Bureau, gave to the ambassadors of socialist countries in Warsaw, with the general tone being to reassure them and convey that the regime was in full control of the situation. For instance, on February 28, 1983, Kazimierz Barcikowski and Miroslaw Milewski, members of the Political Bureau, assured that following negotiations with the Church, during the visit "there will be no attempts to meet with representatives of illegal organizations, the Pope will not ask to visit those interned, or members of the former 'Solidarity' organization" (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486).

Even more delicate was the issue of a meeting between the Pontiff and Lech Wałęsa, a subject of negotiation within the Government, the Episcopate, and the Vatican until the day of the actual meeting. This point of the negotiations and the disagreement regarding it was immediately noticed by Western observers and diplomats who never failed to report to their capitals news about the

possibility of such a meeting. From this perspective, the British Embassy in Warsaw followed this issue with particular attention from the beginning of March (*The Times*, 4 May 1983, 15).

It is true that Wałęsa had long ceased to be a notorious and relevant figure only in Poland, having become an international figure whose statements, interventions, and visits were reported by the entire press. Therefore, when an intense negotiation for his meeting with John Paul II was underway, the London press also reported a possible assassination attempt on the Polish union leader. Thus, Ali Agca, who had committed the attack against the Pope in 1981, also admitted to preparing a plot against Wałęsa when he was in Rome in January 1981. The revelations were confirmed by an Italian trade unionist, Luigi Scricciolo, who was also imprisoned on charges of espionage for Bulgaria. Agca claimed that he was ordered to assassinate Wałęsa either at a press conference or at the "Victoria" hotel where he was staying, a hotel of an Italian union where, on the same days, four Bulgarians who received all necessary information from Luigi Scricciolo were also staying. Therefore, Agca's theory was that the Bulgarians were behind both assassination attempts (*The Guardian* 11 Mar. 1983, 1). Given that this first meeting between John Paul II and the leader of the Polish union further boosted and morally legitimized the actions of Solidarity, the Soviets' fury was at its peak, so, in all likelihood, the Bulgarian special services, in collaboration with the KGB, could resort to the solution of an assassination.

As the preparations for the visit progressed, in the second half of April, the negotiations became increasingly complicated when a deputy of the Polish Minister of the Interior arrived at the Vatican to discuss the details regarding the Pope's security. The most decisive request of the Pontiff was to meet, during an intimate lunch, with Wałęsa and his family. Obviously, at this point, no agreement or decision was reached, as reported to a British diplomat by Monsignor Luigi Poggi, the Vatican's itinerant envoy for Eastern Europe (The National Archives, Kew 25 Apr. 1983, 23).

In parallel, marking an important tactical shift, Wałęsa appealed to the government to initiate negotiations to overcome the internal crisis. The leader of the free union considered that the demonstrations at the beginning of May 1983 were a success for the opposition and that the authorities had no other way but to recognize the existence and social and political relevance of Solidarity and to initiate negotiations. The government gave no indication that it would respond to such an initiative (The National Archives, Kew 4 May 1983, 26).

At the beginning of May, other important details became available to the interested public. For instance, the English press wrote, based on sources from the Vatican, that one of the fundamental conditions John Paul II set for this visit was that the government should not restrict in any way the private visits the Pontiff would wish to make, so that he could meet with anyone he wanted. The Vatican was careful to include a day of free time at the end of the visit, in Krakow, for the Pope's personal and private wishes, without the authorities being able to dictate with whom he could or could not meet. Therefore, at the Vatican, a private meeting with Lech Wałęsa was not excluded if he received permission from the authorities to leave Gdańsk, a city not included in the official visit route. However, for the time being, this authorization was quite unlikely (*International Herald Tribune*, 8 May 1983, 2).

However, again, nothing was certain a month before the visit began. This was acknowledged by the Primate of the Catholic Church in Poland, Cardinal Glemp, in a meeting with the British ambassador in Warsaw on May 13. The issue of the Pontiff's meeting with Wałęsa was uncertain and still under negotiation, as the government strongly opposed it, accusing the union leader of ties with the clandestine opposition. On the other hand, Wałęsa was a very popular figure and a symbol in Poland, and there was a sense of anticipation among Poles for such a meeting. Cardinal Glemp believed it was the duty of Vatican diplomacy to resolve the issue, but he thought compromises could be found, such as a privileged, prominent place for Wałęsa at one of the meals or general meetings of the Pope with Polish believers (The National Archives, Kew 13 May 1983, 3).

To further increase the pressure on the Polish authorities, not only did the Pope want to meet with Wałęsa, but Wałęsa himself had made a request in this regard. On May 14, 1983, Wałęsa addressed a determined letter to John Paul II: "We refuse to live in the past, to founder in misery and regret. Our faces are turned toward our country's future. It is in the name of my country, Holy Father, that I permit myself to ask you for an audience" (Wałęsa 1987, 277).

Around the beginning of June, Polish diplomats in Moscow were trying to assure that this would not happen, relying on "the wisdom of John Paul II," believing that he should avoid talks with "extremist elements who have discredited themselves not only in Poland but also more broadly" (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1486). Therefore, for the moment, the working plan was the old one of a private meeting between the Pope and Wałęsa on the last day of the Pontiff's presence in Poland, a day deliberately left free in the schedule for his personal needs. The government was totally against a public meeting with the former Solidarity leader (The National Archives, Kew 3 Jun. 1983).

The situation could have been unblocked and a solution advanced during the discreet visit from May 30 to June 1, 1983, of Archbishop Achille Silvestrini, an important diplomat of the Holy See who even met with General Jaruzelski. However, the information is contradictory. The Romanian Embassy informed Bucharest that the Polish leader insisted to Silvestrini that the Pope abandon the idea of meeting with Wałęsa or other representatives of the political opposition because such a meeting would not contribute to stabilizing the internal situation in the country but would encourage clandestine movements (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1487). On the other hand, the British Embassy had a different version, according to which Silvestrini obtained a principle agreement from the authorities for a meeting at the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa after the mass on June 19 (The National Archives, Kew 9 Jun. 1983). This possibility was also confirmed by the British ambassador to the Holy See, who reported a conversation with Archbishop Martinez Samalo from the Secretariat of State. The Catholic prelate unequivocally stated that for the Vatican "it was inconceivable that the Pope would not meet with Wałęsa," despite the Polish authorities' efforts to find a solution with minimal political impact (The National Archives, Kew 13 Jun. 1983).

Even under these conditions, the meeting was not certain. On June 14, the Romanian ambassador

in Warsaw, Ion Cozma, assessed that the last meeting between Cardinal Glemp and Jaruzelski a few days before the visit marked the completion of preparations, especially the political ones, and informed Bucharest that the Primate of the Catholic Church had given up the request for the Pope and Wałęsa to have a meeting. It is hard to believe that Glemp could make such a decision on behalf of the Pontiff, who, according to Polish authorities, had not yet given up the idea. Despite the firm message transmitted through Archbishop Silvestrini, namely "that we do not want any meetings or talks with representatives of 'Solidarity' or other intellectuals 'declared enemies of the regime'," the Vatican's insistence continued. In parallel, Wałęsa himself was preparing for a meeting, requesting a few days off from the shipyards in Gdańsk during the visit (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1487). According to the union leader's memoirs, on the eve of the Pontiff's arrival, he was informed by the militia commander that he was to meet with John Paul II (Wałęsa 1987, 278).

On the other hand, on the very day of the Pope's arrival, the issue of the meeting with Wałęsa was not resolved, reported the Romanian ambassador in Warsaw. In his telegram to Bucharest, Ion Cozma assessed that all the political details of the visit were established except for this one, as the Vatican continued to insist while the authorities viewed such a possibility with concern, seeing it as moral support for 'Solidarity' (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1487).

On June 17, the second day of the visit to Poland, at the Belvedere Palace, (Open Society Archives-OSA 14 Jun. 1983, 10) ohn Paul II met with political authorities Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Henryk Jablonsky, the Chairman of the Council of State (Scînteia18 Jun. 1983, 6). That same evening, two members of the Party's Political Bureau, Mirosław Milewski and Jozef Czyrek, hurried to inform the ambassadors of socialist states. Reporting the meeting to his superiors in Bucharest, Ambassador Ion Cozma noted that the Pope raised the issue of Lech Wałęsa and a meeting with him three times, to which Jaruzelski responded bluntly that the former union leader was not what he seemed, that the facts showed he "was just a puppet in the hands of socialism's adversaries." The Pontiff's arguments, however, were more varied. Firstly, he emphasized that the Vatican was under considerable pressure from some Western countries, where socialists and even communists were in government, such as France, Italy, and Spain, to meet with Wałęsa during the visit. Secondly, he invoked personal sentimental reasons, showing that he had met with him when he led Solidarity at the Vatican, and now, in Poland, he could not avoid receiving him. The Pope found such a scenario outright immoral and therefore requested that the authorities not hinder him. At this point, Jaruzelski resorted to a bit of blackmail, presenting the Pontiff with two perspectives: one in which the visit would be understood as a real contribution by the Pope to the internal normalization process, or one that would mark the beginning of a new stage of confrontation between the authorities and the Church. Everything depended on a possible meeting with Wałęsa, and the government did not intend to forbid any meeting, but John Paul II had to carefully weigh the consequences (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1487). Finally, the Polish government's spokesman, Urban, declared that the Pontiff would receive Wałęsa along with

his family. However, he made it clear that the meeting would take place at the Pope's request and strictly for humanitarian reasons, and that the authorities' attitude towards him had not changed, considering him a man prone to political confrontations. He did not, however, provide details about the location and timing of the meeting (The National Archives, Kew 18 Jun. 1983, 56).

The Compromise

The meeting between the Pope and Wałęsa finally took place on June 23, at the end of the official part of the visit, in an area at the foot of the Tatra Mountains, near the border with Czechoslovakia. Wałęsa was brought there with the cooperation of the authorities, despite their initial opposition to such a meeting. This was not included in the official program, reflecting the regime's concern about the Pope being seen as a supporter of Solidarity over the government.

The meeting took place in a mountain cabin in the Chochołowska Valley, which had been prepared in advance by security forces. The entire area, part of the Western Tatra Mountain range, was heavily militarized under the pretext of military maneuvers. Tourist access was prohibited, the few permanent residents along the route were removed, leaving only a few employees at the Polana Chochołowska cabin and a few shepherds. Later, after the event, eyewitnesses reported that two army divisions, a missile unit, and numerous security troops descended from the mountains. A few months later, it was revealed that even an anti-terrorist unit of women had been deployed in the area. All these forces, some disguised as shepherds or mountain rescuers, had filled the forests, waterways, and mountain paths about a month in advance (Piętka, Kwaśniewski 2023).

Wałęsa was brought to the meeting place under escort, along with his wife and four children. Despite efforts to avoid any contact, he was recognized by a stray passerby who immediately made the 'V' sign of victory, much to the dismay of an escort member. The Pope, on the other hand, arrived by helicopter (Sala 2017).

A special room was designated for the meeting in the Polana Chochołowska cabin, equipped with listening devices. However, the two protagonists, sensing the possibility of being overheard, preferred a table in the cabin's hall, much to the consternation of the security personnel (Sala 2017). It was one of the strangest meetings imaginable. It is rare for the leader of a clandestine opposition in a communist state to meet, with the authorities' consent, with the head of a state, even if it is the Pope, with whom Poland did not have diplomatic relations, under conditions of strict secrecy.

The content of the meeting, which lasted no longer than thirty minutes, was never made public. From subsequent statements, it was concluded that it was an opportunity for the Pope to thank the union leader for his services and efforts in supporting Polish workers and to learn about his vision for the future, how the ideas of Solidarity, appreciated by the Pope during the visit, could be preserved, promoted, and applied (*The Times*, 24 Jun. 1983, 1). At that time, Wałęsa refused to declare anything concrete about the meeting he had with John Paul II. He limited himself to remarking, in a conversation with Western press correspondents, that the meeting "strengthened him spiritually" and that he would have to seriously think about the discussions he had with the Pope (Open Society Archives – OSA 8 Jul. 1983, 12).

It was evident that after the meeting, the same communist authorities tried to minimize it, diverting public attention and press questions away from its significance, and diplomats from communist countries accredited in Poland followed this direction. Ilie Ivan, the chargé d'affaires of the Romanian Embassy, reported to Bucharest that the meeting between the Pontiff and the union leader was just a courtesy gesture by the Pope and not an occasion to discuss concrete issues. In this sense, he noted that the meeting lasted only 20 minutes, during which John Paul II blessed Wałęsa's family, his wife, and children, without having time to address other issues (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1487).

The day after the meeting, in Rome, the conclusions of the pontifical visit to his native Poland were not discussed, but rather a very controversial article published by *L'Osservatore Romano* under the signature of a renowned and experienced journalist, even the deputy director of the publication, Virgilio Levi. He portrayed Lech Wałęsa not just as a simple and typical union leader, but as one animated by a profound, sincere, and especially manifest religious conscience. In most available images, he was seen wearing the image of the Black Madonna of Jasna Góra on his jacket like a badge; in August-September 1980, he signed agreements with government representatives using a pen with the image of the Virgin Mary; he placed a cross at his workplace at the Gdańsk shipyards. Therefore, he showed that the inspiration and strength that religious faith provides played a fundamental role in the fight for workers' rights. Perhaps this is why he had already been received at the Vatican in January 1981, along with his closest collaborators (Levi 1983, 1). But now, in 1983, the Pope received him privately and somewhat secretly, away from the eyes of Poles eager to see them together, which, in Virgilio Levi's opinion, equated to accepting that "he did not have a role in the present stage of the history of his country (...) Sometimes a sacrifice is called for from awkward people for the good of the community. Wałęsa seems to have entered into this spirit." It seemed like a thinly veiled accusation against the Vatican, the Pope, and the Polish Church for reaching some understanding with the regime led by Jaruzelski to neutralize Lech Wałęsa (Levi 1983, 1). However, Levi wrote, "history teaches us that people, whom everybody believed to be definitely marginal, reappeared one day as authentic saviors of their people." What he did for Polish workers could not be undone. The ideals he fought for in the early days of Solidarity could not be forgotten; on the contrary, they could be enriched and carried forward, especially in the very difficult conditions in which Polish society found itself. Receiving him only in a private audience was not enough; it betrayed the intention not to disturb the official effort of national reconciliation, and Poles could not be satisfied. "And they will suffer from it. But it was because of force majeure. It remained everyone's duty to honor this sacrifice of Wałęsa. It is a great lesson for all land, even in sorrow, it is a reason for hope" (Levi 1983, 1).

The day after the article was published, Virgilio Levi resigned, and the press and diplomatic world began to ask questions. From Rome, the British ambassador, Mark Heat, did not understand how a journalist with Levi's experience could publish such an article, how he did not understand its implications, and the fact that it put the Pontiff in a very bad light, especially at the end of a visit negotiated with great difficulty. The diplomat could not say for sure if there was an agreement

between the Polish government and the Vatican regarding Wałęsa that was disadvantageous to him, but he suspected that "there may have been a price to pay." He also invoked the assessments of the BBC correspondent who was in Poland during the visit and who believed, in agreement with several observers, that a certain modus vivendi had been agreed upon by the Pope and Jaruzelski, especially after their first meeting (The National Archives, Kew 28 Jun. 1983, 76).

On June 28, at a meeting of the heads of mission of the European Economic Community in Stuttgart, Levi's article was also discussed, one that was hard to explain, believed the Italian representative. The editorial was not authorized and dealt with a subject "which was strictly the Pope's own." It was clear that the internal mechanisms for verifying and authorizing editorial contributions had not worked, but there was also the possibility that Virgilio Levi wanted to leave *L'Osservatore Romano* with such a blow (The National Archives, Kew 28 Jun. 1983, 112).

However, a possible understanding made some analysts and observers think right then, immediately after the end of the pilgrimage; something seemed suspicious in this good collaboration, the partnership worked without hiccups during the visit, and the parties seemed satisfied with the result. Specifically, it was speculated that the regime made certain concessions to the Catholic Church, allowing it a wider space for affirmation in the desire to overshadow Solidarity and its leader, Lech Wałęsa. A secret agreement was suspected, which the Pope might have made with the political authorities, from which the Polish Church emerged strengthened, but Solidarity and Wałęsa were sacrificed. The term betrayal was even used at the end of the visit because the details of the meeting between the Pope and the union leader were not made public, and all these speculations were fueled by the fact that Wałęsa appeared very worried in the following period, and the papal Curia seemed divided on what results and conclusions of the visit to offer the public. Given that for months the Polish government opposed a meeting between the two, it was speculated that the solution of a simple private audience was the maximum concession Jaruzelski could make, and the Pope accepted it (Perrone 2012, 40).

Such analyses were made by serious publications that had closely followed not only the Pope's visit but the entire Polish epic of recent years. *The New York Times*, also picked up by *The Times*, was extremely harsh regarding the Pontiff's and the Vatican's performance, accusing them of undermining Wałęsa, Solidarity, and the cause of freedom. In the early days of the visit, the Pope's message reached the hearts of people around the world. He publicly condemned martial law in his first televised appearance; he stated that union activity is a natural right; he publicly defied the communist hosts by repeatedly using the word "solidarity." Thanks to his presence, Poles had the opportunity to gather and rediscover a sense of unity in the face of the oppression of Soviet puppets. Later, however, something unexpected happened. Perhaps the Pope felt he had overstepped; perhaps his advisers thought he was insisting too much on secular issues during a visit that was meant to be a pilgrimage; perhaps this vigorous initial rhetoric was the prelude to a very pragmatic understanding between the State and the Church.

The deliberate uncertainty, confusion, and lack of transparency that enveloped the meeting

with Wałęsa, the man who personified the martyrdom for Polish freedom, were suspicious. He was made to wait, almost publicly humiliated, and when the meeting took place, photographs were forbidden. Later, Wałęsa canceled a press conference that had been scheduled and declared that he needed to seriously meditate on the discussion he had with the Pope. In contrast, the second meeting with Jaruzelski, hastily arranged, showed only smiles and handshakes. The Pope understood perfectly the impact of public appearances, how they could be used, even calibrating his facial expression for such moments, and the impression left at the second meeting with General Jaruzelski was that an agreement had been reached (*The Times*, 28 Jun 1983, 10).

Shortly thereafter, as we have seen, the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* announced in a front-page editorial that Wałęsa had lost the battle, stating that sometimes inconvenient people must be sacrificed for the higher general interest of the community. The author of the editorial, an experienced journalist, committed the cardinal sin of crossing the official line and revealing an uncomfortable truth. He probably wrote at the initiative of that faction of the Curia that was concerned about Soviet threats and was later dismissed by the other faction of the Curia or even by the Pope, making the whole episode somewhat strange. The Vatican newspaper was traditionally very well-informed and accurate in its analyses, and finding a scapegoat in the person of a deputy director could be evidence of the Vatican's indecision regarding Wałęsa (*The Times*, 28 Jun 1983, 10).

The editorialist was very candid when he wrote that Wałęsa was one of those uncomfortable people whose courage could shake entire institutions; a stubborn individual who could not be threatened, blackmailed, silenced, forced to comply, or cooperate. For the communists, such an unconquerable soul was a threat, and for the Church, he was not entirely controllable, as was the case with the clergy or journalists of Catholic publications. This was the cause, these were the reasons why the Pope tried to be the sole symbol of Polish freedom, which suited the communist leaders in Poland and reassured those in the Vatican who feared that a resurgence of Solidarity would cause a severe reaction against the Church or even a Soviet invasion of Poland (*The Times*, 28 Jun 1983, 10).

However, this calculation by the Church was morally unfair. The Pope's actions seemed to undermine Wałęsa, which did not do him honor. At the limit, the Church sometimes had to make deals with the totalitarian regime, but it was unjust to weaken the position of those seen as leaders of Polish freedom by usurping their role. "For the individual, obedience to God does not imply obedience to tyranny. The Pope should support and protect Wałęsa, not try to take his place." For a truly glorious week, the whole world believed that the communists had made a terrible mistake by allowing the Poles to gather and greet the Pope, but in the end, "it was the Pope who made a mistake" (*The Times*, 28 Jun 1983, 10).

The Times wrote that "neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the Polish Government has the right to sacrifice Lech Wałęsa as inconvenient and usher him from the political scene." The aspirations of the Poles, which Solidarity expressed, "cannot be ignored in any bilateral agreement between church and state," because the Church was no longer the sole center of national resistance. Even if the Church's calls for the lifting of martial law and the release of political prisoners were

entirely legitimate objectives, even if the Vatican's diplomatic efforts to make the Church's message more accessible to millions of believers in communist countries had to continue, "principles should not be sacrificed to expediency, nor should Wałęsa be asked to leave the battle in which he has come to symbolize the aspirations of most Poles. In the circumstances, the Vatican owes him some public words of support." (*The Times*, 28 Jun 1983, 10)

A week after the end of the Polish visit and the publication of the article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the uncertainty had not dissipated. Many questions about the political future of the clandestine resistance movement and even Wałęsa's future persisted in diplomatic circles (The National Archives, Kew 30 Jun. 1983, 48).

Certainly, a few months after the meeting with John Paul II, Wałęsa remained in the spotlight not only in Poland but also internationally, and his prestige was set to grow even more. A significant image boost for Solidarity was achieved on October 5, 1983, when Lech Wałęsa was announced as the winner of the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize in Stockholm. The award ceremony, held in the presence of the union leader's wife and son and broadcast in dozens of countries, drew the world's attention to Poland. On this occasion, Wałęsa declared that the true winner of the prize was the Polish people "who suffer from the humiliation they are subjected to." In contrast, the communist authorities were dismayed by this decision, especially since they had organized an extensive campaign to discredit the laureate. They reacted with a very harsh diplomatic note of protest, accusing interference in internal affairs, which further compromised them (Constantin 2007, 520-521).

The awarding of the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize to the Polish union leader deeply worried and irritated the authorities in Warsaw, especially considering the prize's motivation, "for non-violent struggle for free trade unions and human rights in Poland." The regime-controlled press launched a furious attack against Wałęsa and the Nobel Committee's decision, accusing that the laureate "practically did nothing for peace. On the contrary, his irresponsible actions led to strained relations between East and West, which implicitly contributes not to strengthening peace but to undermining it." Zbigniew Tempski, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Przegląd Tygodniowy*, was convinced that the decision was strictly political but created a very delicate situation for the Polish authorities, considering that the laureate now became an international personality, could receive foreign journalists, make statements, and gain a certain untouchability that could not be ignored even by the Polish communist government (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1485).

In his new capacity, Wałęsa began to be visited by Western diplomats, as happened, for example, with a counselor from the Italian Embassy in Warsaw, who arrived in Gdańsk in November 1983 to convey a congratulatory message from the Italian president. Following the meeting, Marco Maresca concluded that the union leader still strongly believed in the ideals and values he had promoted in recent years, but it was noticeable in his speech the absence of the advisors he had in the past (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Romania 1983, File 1485).

From this prestigious position, Wałęsa requested the United States and other Western governments to lift economic sanctions on Poland as a first step towards improving the material situation and supply

for Poles. Indeed, in the following months, the sanctions began to be lifted (Constantin 2007, 521). The Washington government canceled the ban on the Polish fishing fleet and then the ban on LOT flights from Poland to the United States. Additionally, it ceased opposing Poland's membership in the IMF.

Conclusions

As seen, the Pope repeatedly requested the authorities to allow and facilitate a meeting with Lech Wałęsa at least at the end of his 1983 pilgrimage, which was not easy for the regime leaders to accept. They repeatedly rejected it, arguing that it could "contribute to complicating the political situation." For them, Wałęsa was just a private person, a former leader of a former union; but for the public, he was certainly more than that. He represented a living symbol of society's desire for self-determination, embodying in 1980-1981 the only successful workers' movement autonomous from state control. Perhaps for these reasons, the government emphasized through its spokesperson that Wałęsa was not, in any case, a possible partner in the dialogue between the authorities and the nation (Open Society Archives – OSA , 8 July 1983, 5).

Negotiations on this aspect of the visit, conducted between the Vatican, the Polish Episcopate, and the Warsaw Government, highlighted a total disagreement and it was speculated that it could have even caused the cancellation of the 1983 visit. The Pope's insistence was based on the enormous expectation from Polish believers to see the two people towards whom their hopes for freedom were most directed together. The message that John Paul II had repeatedly conveyed in recent months, from the Vatican or even from Poland, that association in free unions is a fundamental human right, would have remained inconsistent and merely rhetorical without a meeting with the one who symbolized this aspiration to the highest degree. Finally, the Pontiff's policy of countering communist regimes by promoting Christian values such as freedom, solidarity, and the courage of resistance also necessitated a meeting with Wałęsa. The meeting with Wałęsa and the visit as a whole were not intended to create a major political breach but to consolidate a "habit of dignified, solidary, and honest behavior," to encourage everyone to "call evil and good by their names," (Ash 1997, 64), to awaken consciences because only they could prevent the "normalization" desired by the regime, meaning a return to Soviet norms.

On the other hand, the government led by Jaruzelski had to prevent such a meeting. It tried to argue that the former Solidarity leader was a private person and even one irrelevant in the Polish context of 1983; it invoked a disruption of efforts to normalize the internal situation; it conveyed to the Pope that it would be an unfriendly gesture to meet with representatives of clandestine, illegal, "counter-revolutionary" formations. The meeting would have confirmed and exacerbated the gap between the political system, its institutions and values, and the population. This was known, but it was highlighted by the Pope's statements during the visit and, moreover, by the public's reactions to these statements, spontaneous reactions of people who displayed posters, sang hymns, made gestures associated with Solidarity, openly showing their distance from the principles of the officially prescribed political and social order. Therefore, and above all, the government feared an image in which John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa together would show Poles that there were hopes for a path other than communism.

In the end, the meeting took place as an expression of a compromise still not fully elucidated and especially contested then and later. The conditions under which it took place, as a strictly private audience, the conspiratorial nature in which it was shrouded, made it the target of speculations and accusations difficult to manage at the Vatican. There were speculations that, in exchange for the repeal of martial law and a possible amnesty for political prisoners, the Church would be willing to collaborate more closely with the authorities. Even from within, it was discreetly conveyed that the regime was prepared to make a "corporatist compromise," (Ash 1997, 64), granting broad areas of religious and cultural autonomy and even offering certain social and economic responsibilities to the ecclesiastical authority. Even within Cardinal Glemp's entourage, some were seduced by this perspective, but the Pope's visit tempered them. From the Pontiff came a categorical NO because he understood that any authentic dialogue with society had to involve authentic unions.

Romanian and British diplomats in Poland, Moscow, or the Vatican tried to inform their respective foreign ministries with as much accuracy and promptness as possible about all these matters. They gathered information from Polish government officials, discussed with high-ranking Catholic prelates, consulted with journalists, and transmitted their own assessments regarding the stage of negotiations, their outcome, and implications for the future.

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