

How to Raise a Saint and a Martyr: A mother speaks



Interview With the Mother of Polish Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko

Rome, May 07, 2013 (Zenit.org)

Adapted by SCTJM

Here is the first part of an interview with Marianna Popiełuszko, the mother of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko. She was interviewed (in Polish) by Włodzimierz Redzich. ZENIT will publish a translation of the interview in parts over the coming days.

Marianna's eyes are weary; weary with her 92 years, with more than 70 years of hard work in the fields and at home; weary with the tears shed for her departed loved ones (the Russians killed her youngest brother during the Second World War; her little daughter Edvige died in her arms at the age of two; the secret services of the communist regime killed her son, a priest, in 1984; her young daughter-in-law too died unexpectedly, leaving three children, whom she raised as a second mother; her husband died after 60 years of marriage in 2002).

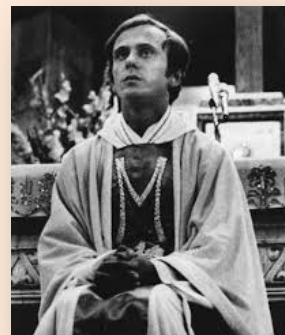
Yet, in the eyes of this minute, apparently fragile, but strong spirited woman there is no despair. On the contrary there is peace and serenity originating from the conviction that – as she says with resolution – joy and pain are allowed by God and He knows what is best for us. Despite her old age she is not afraid of death because with death, “life does not end, but is transformed.” This simple peasant has lived her long life and faced all her personal dramas and problems with the extraordinary evangelical wisdom coming from her deep faith. She has lived as though she had adopted as her motto a nursery rhyme she learned in her childhood: “Loving your neighbour, loving God: this is the way that leads straight to Heaven. Love with your heart, love with your works: this way you will be like the angels of Heaven.” (these lines rhyme in Polish).

To meet this woman, nowadays most known as the mother of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko, one has to travel to a remote corner of Poland, close to the Lithuanian border, about 200 kilometers from Warsaw. Marianne Gniedziejko, this is her maiden name, was born there, in a small village called Grodzisko, situated in the boundless plain in Central Europe (this is where cartographers have located the geographical centre of our continent). The Gniedziejkos were patriots, deeply religious and devoted to the Church and their traditions. Even when attending elementary school, Marianna had to help her family in the fields. She married Władysław Popiełuszko in 1942 and went to live with him in the nearby village of Okopy. The Popiełuskos were farmers. Unfortunately, when the communist regime was established at the end of the Second World War, the life of farmers became difficult: the communists forced each family to hand part of their land to the state, so, as Marianna says, even though the Popiełuskos did not suffer hunger, they had to reduce their requirements to the bare minimum.

Their third child, the future Blessed Jerzy, was born in his father's house at Okopy in 1947 (Teresa was their first born and Józef their second born child). It is just from this memory that my conversation with Marianna begins.

Do you remember how Fr. Jerzy was born?

Certainly, I do. Childbirth started when on 14 September in the evening – it was Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross – I went to milk the cows. However, I managed to return home on time and, luckily, my mum, who had arrived in order to deliver the baby, was at my home. The childbirth was not hard, but afterward I had a bad headache and I lost my eyesight for a few days. Therefore I could not go to church for my baby's baptism.



In the baptism book of the parish church in Suchowola there is a registration which says that the future Father Jerzy was given the name Alfons at the baptism...

It was me who had chosen this name for him. During my pregnancy, I started looking for a name for my baby so that he would have a good patron. I had chosen this name in May when we were having the May divine service at home and in one of the reflections, it described the life of a saint-priest Alfons Liguori. My son used this name till the first years of seminary and at home this is what we called him, using his diminutive name – Alek.

Why did your son as a cleric changed his name into Jerzy?

In Warsaw, where he studied, the name Alfons was badly associated – the word 'alfons' was used to define a person who deals with procurement, prostitution. Therefore, with the permission of superiors of the seminary, he changed his name to Jerzy. I did not protest either, because he was an adult.

However, let's move back to childhood. What was Alek like in his youth?

He was a slim and delicate boy. I did not have any troubles with him, because he was obedient, hard-working and patient. He liked people and he was open-hearted. He preferred reading to working in a field (our children attended school and had to do homework, but they also helped us with housework). He was a good student and brought prizes from school. Once a parish priest said to me: 'Mother, this boy may grow up to be the best or the worst man. Everything depends on your upbringing'. Therefore I was trying to bring him up as best as possible. Besides, the most important thing in life is to give God to children.

How was the vocation to the priesthood born in him?

We are a very religious family. Every morning, after waking up, and in the evening, before going to bed, we would say prayers on our knees. Besides, in our house we had a small chapel, where the whole family prayed. On Wednesday we prayed to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, on Friday we prayed to the Heart of Jesus Christ, and on Saturday we prayed to Our Lady of Częstochowa. In May we all used to sing the Litany of Loreto, in July we used to sing the Litany to the Sacred Blood of Christ, and in October we used to say the rosary. Three times a week, on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, I cooked Lent meals, without meat, because man must know from childhood that renunciations are necessary in life, that not everything is like one wants. He grew up in this atmosphere but I knew that he also took care of himself, too. He went to confession and Holy Communion, and when he was older he prayed by himself. Later he became an altar boy – he got up early to be at seven o'clock sharp in church and everyday he walked five kilometers through a forest. No matter what season it was, whether it was raining or snowing or cold. And it was like this from his first years of the primary school to his last year of secondary school.



Raising a Saint and Martyr (Part 2)

Interview With the Mother of Polish Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko

Rome, May 08, 2013 (Zenit.org)

Here is the second part of an interview with Marianna Popiełuszko, the mother of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko. She was interviewed (in Polish) by Włodzimierz Redzioch. ZENIT is publishing a translation of the interview in parts.

In the communist times such a religious devoutness among children was not well-perceived...

It is true. Once one of the teachers called me to come to school. I was surprised because my son was a good student. And she told me that my son attended the church too often and she would lower a mark of his behavior. But maybe the Holy Spirit inspired me, because I answered that in Poland there is freedom of religion. And that was that.



Father Jerzy was characterized by great patriotism. Was he taught to love Homeland in his family home as well?

At our home children knew the history of family and Poland. They learnt to love Poland from patriotic literature. Apart from that, my brother was of the partisan army in the National Army and was killed by the Soviets in 1945. Children knew this history and understood what freedom of homeland meant.

When did your son confess to you that he wanted to go to a seminary?

I will tell you that when I was pregnant with him, I was praying for the grace of the vocation for him. I was praying to God, so that if the child was to be a son, he would become a priest, or a nun if the baby was to be a daughter. All in all, I had sacrificed my child to God even before his birth. However, I never told him about it. But he found his way on his own and he discovered his vocation, because he was attracted by books and God. He did not tell anyone about it till his secondary school graduation exam. Probably he kept this all in secret, because in the communist times young people who intended to go to a seminary were harassed by the Security Services. Not earlier than June 1965, when he returned from a school farewell prom, he said that he was going to a seminary, got on a train and went to Warsaw, where he was accepted to the High Metropolitan Seminary.

Why did he go to the diocesan seminary and just to Warsaw?

When he was a little boy, he used to read 'A Knight of the Immaculate' at his grandma's, edited by St. Maximilian Kolbe, therefore he dreamt of joining the Franciscans. However, later he decided to go to a seminary in Warsaw, because his colleagues from Suchowola were studying there, and besides, in Warsaw there was Primate Wyszyński who impressed him a lot.

Did you experience any emotions when your son left home?

Certainly, but nobody has a child for themselves. He had to leave for the world, in order to fulfill God's will. However, I was worried how he would adapt to living in Warsaw. He was brought up in the countryside and he never traveled far. It was the first time for him to travel by train. Besides, I knew it was not as difficult to make the decision as to endure in the vocation. Therefore, I prayed a lot for him.

Was he doing well with studies in the seminary?

He did not have any difficulties with studies and he passed all exams. After the first year of his studies, he came home on holiday. He helped us on the field a little and attended the Holy Mass regularly. And, first of all, he told about what was happening in the world and in the Church.

The year 1966 was very important for Poland, because it was the time when the 1,000th anniversary of the baptism of Poland was celebrated...

My son told us about sermons preached by Primate Wyszyński on this occasion, about millennium celebrations at Jasna Góra monastery, and about the fact that the authorities did not allow for the arrival of Pope Paul VI in Poland.

In the communist times, clerics had to undergo a hard, two-year military service, during which they underwent not only indoctrination, but they were also bullied physically and psychologically. And this all was in order to force them to reject the seminary. Did you know how much Jerzy suffered in the army?

Jerzy said nothing to me about it. Only later I found out from his colleagues how he had been bullied in various ways. Among other things, they used to throw him into a swimming pool, although he could not swim; they ordered him to stand bare-feet on snow as a punishment that he had been saying rosary, he was chased up and down stairs in full gear. And his health was destroyed, and after the military service he had to go to hospital.



Jerzy was ordained a priest on 28 May 1972 in the cathedral in Warsaw. What emotions were you experiencing on that day?

I was proud that I am the mother of a priest. Especially a moment was emotional for me, when the ordained priests were lying on the floor, especially that the priestly ordination were given by Primate Wyszyński – it was the first time I had seen him close. The Primate asked for a continuous prayer for our sons – priests. And I fulfilled this request, I always supported him in prayer. After the ceremony, I, my husband and Father Jerzy went to the seminary for dinner.

And later there were the first Holy Masses celebrated in family villages...

There is a custom, that after priestly ordain, a priest celebrates the first Holy Mass in his family parish church. It was a great day for family, all people from the parish and acquaintance priests. At that time, I gave Father Jerzy a bouquet of flowers, which I have kept at home till today. After the ceremonies, Father Jerzy left for his first parish in Ząbki. I gave him to the Church and from that time on we met very rarely, because I had to look after the household and he had his duties. He did not even have time during summer holidays because he went on summer camps with altar boys.

In 1975 it was decided that father Jerzy would move to the parish in Anin near Warsaw, and then to the parish of Infant Jesus in Warsaw...

I did not go to him, but when he was in these parishes. I visited him, when in 1978 he started working in the academic church of St. Ann.

Work with students, the future intellectuals of the country, must have been very demanding...

Jerzy did not tell me about it, but one of the priests told me then that if he worked in the academic church, he must have been very clever.

His former protégés from the academic group remember that Father Jerzy was not only a spiritual leader for them, but also a confidante and a friend...

He was a good pastor, because he wanted to bring God close to everybody, he enjoyed hearing confessions and he was also open to people and he liked giving small gifts to everybody.



Raising a Saint and Martyr (Part 3)

Interview With the Mother of Polish Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko

In the same year something improbable happened – Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected pope...

It was difficult for me to believe it, that the Pole had become Pope. Just after that, I went to the church in order to participate in the thanksgiving Holy Mass. It did not come to my mind that one day I would meet him personally and I would talk to him.

Whereas, in March 1979, you received a sad message: Father Jerzy had bad anemia and had gone to the hospital, the Institute of Hematology...

I was very worried then, but I could only pray for him. However, I was glad when, after being released from hospital, he came home on holiday. Then I could enjoy his visit home and feed him better. However, I did not like his departures; tears filled my eyes, because I never knew when I would see him again.

In 1979 John Paul II visited Poland for the first time. Was Father Jerzy engaged in preparing for the papal visit?

He told me that, as a chaplain for doctors and nurses, he was asked to organize medical help during the pilgrimage.

The next year was a special year in the history of Poland. Let me cite historical facts, which had in influence on the life of every Pole, including Father Jerzy. On 1 July 1980, the communist authorities raised the prices of food, which caused a wave of strikes. There were strikes among railway men, shipyard workers in Gdańsk and Szczecin, as well as blue-collar workers in Warsaw. Could you tell us about the activity of Father Jerzy in that dramatic period of our history?

At that time, Father Jerzy was residing at the church of St. Stanisław Kostka on Żoliborz. He was very worried when protests of workers started. When workers of the steelworks Warsaw went on strike, he went to the steelworks in

order to celebrate Holy Mass, which was the beginning of his pastoral work among the strikers. Later he visited other groups of strikers: students of the Medical Academy and the High Fire School, but he did nothing more than fulfilling his duty as a priest. Especially he did not do anything without informing his parish priest, Fr. Teofil Bogucki who was for him like a father.

At that time the fate of every Pole was inseparably connected with the historical event which was the establishment of the first independent labor union in the communist bloc 'Solidarność' on 17 September 1980, later stifled after introducing martial law on 13 December 1981 by Gen. Jaruzelski. Were you worried about your son?

I knew that Father Jerzy was not safe in Warsaw, so I prayed more.

People used to say that on Christmas, Father Jerzy gave away food to soldiers who were stationing in front of the parsonage and encouraged people to give warm meals to soldiers...



I taught him how to be good to everybody. He wanted to overcome evil through good and he could not behave in any other way.

Father Jerzy helped the persecuted and their families a lot. He also went to the court for judicial trials of the activists of 'Solidarność'...

He helped as much as he could and whom he could. Every time, when I visited him at his house, there were always a lot of people. I could never talk to him calmly and I was worried about him more and more, but I knew that God had a plan for him and would guard him.

During martial law, Father Jerzy became famous for the so-called Holy Masses for the Homeland. Did you take part in these Holy Masses?

Holy Masses for the Homeland were initiated by a parish priest, Bogucki, whereas he started celebrating them on 17 January 1982. They were attended by a lot of people; the church was not big enough. Thousands of believers stood outside. I went for such a Holy Mass with my son Józef only once. When Father Jerzy saw me in Warsaw, he got worried because it was a dangerous time, but later he was glad of our visits. I listened to the Holy Mass for Homeland on radio Free Europe. I listened to my son's words on the radio and I was happy. I was happy because I knew that a lot of people experienced conversion during these Holy Masses.

All people understood his sermons, both blue-collar workers and professors. What kind of sermons were they?

Father Jerzy prepared himself for Holy Masses very well. I was given his notes to read, which he had prepared before preaching every sermon. They included a lot of quotations of Primate Wyszyński and John Paul II.

Did your son come home during the martial law?

He rarely visited home, but I understood it. Especially that at that time he was being persecuted.

Did you speak about your problems, about the fact that he was being harassed, that there were attempts to assassinate him, that he was constantly being bullied or tapped?



He did not want to worry me, so he was trying to speak only about what was good.

On 14 May 1983, militia attacked a 19-year-old Grzegorz Przemyski, son of an opposition poet Barbara Sadowska. Your son was one of the organizers of his funeral, which was attended by 60,000 people...

Father Jerzy told me about this funeral. My heart ached with grief, when I was looking at a photo of my son, who was supporting the murdered boy's distraught mother. I was really sorry for her.

Security Services had your son as their target more and more. In order to accuse and discredit him, they also went for provocation in his relative's flat left for him in a will....

We had a cousin in the States who wanted to return to Poland for her old age. However, she could not buy a flat officially, because she had American citizenship. So, Father Jerzy bought the flat and it was under his surname. The authorities entered the flat by force, and left explosive materials and illegal published texts. Later they conducted a search and arrested Father Jerzy.

Raising a Saint and Martyr (Part 4)

Interview With the Mother of Polish Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko



Did you wonder why the communist authorities were persecuting your son so much?

In the Holy Scripture it is written that when a pastor is attacked, his sheep will get dispersed. Communists were fighting against the Church and its pastors. They were persecuting Father Jerzy, because they thought that when they frightened one priest, then others will be scared of them.

Thanks to the intervention of Bishop Bronisław Dąbrowski your son was released from prison after two days...I heard about Father Jerzy being freed on the radio. Everybody

spoke about it. He was also slandered on the radio and accused of having a double life, of deceiving people and the Church.

Did you ask your son, when meeting him, to be sensible in what he was doing?

He was an adult and knew what he was supposed to do. He entrusted himself to God in prayer all the time and he trusted Him. And, besides, I thought that as God's priest he had help from the Holy Spirit. So, I think that he was sensible even when his priestly duty ordered him to do that for which he was later persecuted. He was persecuted for Holy Masses for the Homeland till the end, but I think that these Holy Masses were necessary, especially for the young generation, in order to remind about the need of love of God and Homeland.

When did you last see your son?

It was in September. He arrived home unexpectedly. He did not say anything about himself but I knew that he was still being persecuted. Cars of the Security Services were even seen through a window. But he was brave, although he was physically weak. At that time he brought me his cassock to sew, saying: 'I will take it back next time; or mum will have it as a remembrance'. And saying farewell to us, he said: 'In case I am killed, please, do not cry about me.' I was petrified, because he had never spoken so.



When did you find out that something terrible had happened with your son?

On 20 October, in the evening, I was watching the news, during which a presenter read out a message about the kidnapping of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, which had taken place on the 19th near Toruń. Nobody knew that my son was no longer alive, therefore the ecclesiastical authorities and ordinary people undertook attempts of searching for Father Jerzy. Everybody was praying for him everywhere, I was also praying at home.

On 30 October there was information about the finding of the corpse of Father Jerzy in river Vistula...

I found out about it on TV. My husband was crying and yelling and I was silently sitting motionless. In the early morning Father Gniedziejko, my nephew, arrived to us and took us to the church of St. Stanisław Kostka in Warsaw, where there was Holy Mass celebrated for my son. Next day we had to go to Białystok, where the autopsy had been done. My son Józef and priests from the Warsaw curia entered a mortuary. I was not present at identifying the body, because my heart would not have endured it. But I knew that, finally, I had to see Father Jerzy. I and my husband entered and started crying – it was my beloved son. I kissed his legs and hands because I felt unworthy of kissing his face. Then I felt the relationship with Mary – she also saw her dead Son and was suffering, but she agreed with God's will. So did I agree with suffering.



Did you think that your son, who had become a priest, might die as a martyr?

Of course I didn't. But today I think that if he decided to become a priest, he must have known that he might become a martyr, because it is inscribed in the priestly vocation.

Why did you agree to have Father Jerzy buried in Warsaw, far away from your family home?

He had worked in Warsaw, loved people and suffered with them, and people, who loved him were there, therefore he should be with them. I gave him to the Church in Warsaw so that he would serve it, and he belonged to it. My son was to be buried in the graveyard in Powązki, but he was buried at the church where he had served, at the request of many people.

Do you visit your son's grave?

I used to visit it every month and there were always a lot of people, flowers and grave lights there. Now I rarely go there.

Father Jerzy was acknowledged as a martyr for the faith. Do you perceive him in this way?

Since his death, my son has been considered as a martyr for the faith, for the cross and love of Homeland. In my opinion, the murderers were fighting not against my son, but against God. It was an expression of hatred of the faith and the Church, and my son was a victim of this hatred.

At your son's grave you started meeting powerful people of this world, prime ministers, presidents...

That's true, but the most important thing for me was meeting with John Paul II, when he arrived on his pilgrimage in 1987. The Pope was praying at my son's grave for a long time, and later he kissed the plate of the grave. Later he cuddled me and kissed me on my head and said: 'Mother, you gave us a great son'. I answered him that it was God who had given him to the world through me. After that I fell onto my knees, kissed the Holy Father and asked him for a prayer for Father Jerzy.

What did the pope say to you?

He assured me that he remembered him. I was moved and glad because the Pope convinced me that my son had chosen a right way in his life. I do not want to judge anybody, as God will judge the murderers by himself. I would be glad the most, if they experienced conversion. I have already forgiven them.

At the end of the year 1984, the judicial process was started, against functionaries of communist security services, the murderers of Father Jerzy. Were you watching this process?

My doctor forbade me that because of my heart problems. Especially that at that time I had to take care of my daughter-in-law, who was pregnant and I had to look after the household, because my sons were taking part in the process. Anyway, I do not want to judge anyone, as God will judge the murderers one day. I would be glad the most if they were converted. I and my husband have already forgiven them.

Since the moment of his death, people have considered Father Jerzy as a martyr who had given his life for faith; he was surrounded by the so-called 'glory of holiness'. Many people declared that they had experienced graces through his intercession and asked the ecclesiastical authorities to begin the beatification process, which started in the year 1997. Did you testify in the process?

When the process started I was very happy. I was testifying for a few days. I was asked about everything from the life of Father Jerzy – about his childhood, youth and seminary years. When the diocesan process in Warsaw finished, I was very grateful to God and I thought that if God allowed, I would be able to live till the beatification.

And you have been able to live to the beatification of your son - on 19 December 2009, Benedict XVI promulgated a decree concerning the martyrdom of God's servant Jerzy Popiełuszko, and the beatification took place in Warsaw on 6 June 2010. Before the Holy Mass you presided over the Rosary with people gathered on the Square of Piłsudski (there were 150,000 of them, including 100 bishops and 1600 priests)...

It was a great day for me. I was emotionally moved by the words which were said by Archbishop Amato from the Vatican. And later, the primate of the Czech Republic, Archbishop Dominik Duka came up to me and asked me for blessing. I was emotionally moved, because at that time I really felt I was the mother of the blessed.

Do you pray to Blessed Father Jerzy?

I pray to God. We can ask the saints and the blessed only for their intercession. I have experienced many graces through the intercession of Father Jerzy.

What is the most important message of Blessed Father Jerzy in your opinion?

'Overcome evil by good.' If people implemented these words in life, they would be better and the world would be better.

You repeat that you have had 'a good life'. Where do you get this optimism?

I am always glad because all is good as it is. Our life is in God's hands, and God knows what he is doing. In our life there is also suffering, but every suffering makes sense if you devote it to God. It is impossible to get to Heaven without the cross – he who is sowing in tears, he will reap in joy.

"He learned everything from our mother. Patience, faith, closeness with siblings and neighbors. Like our mother, he never used the force of the hand to get his point across, he only used words."

Sister of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko



“Solidarity is a constant concern of our country; its interior freedom is defended even in conditions of slavery. This means that we need to conquer fear by defending our dignity as sons and daughters of God and courageously give witness to what we believe and carry in our hearts.”

(Bl. Jerzy Popieluszko)

“The truth we owe to man is, first and foremost, a truth about man. As witnesses of Jesus Christ, we are heralds, messengers, and servants of this truth. We cannot forget it or betray it.”

(JPII in reference to the martyr Fr. Popieluszko)