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Aleksander Usowicz, C.M. (1912-2002) ¹

A Priest, Professor and Scholar Who Was a Living Legend

by Wojciech Paluchowski, C.M.

Province of Poland

In one of his articles, "Golden Legend and Reality," Fr. Aleksander Usowicz, while pondering over the relation between mythical account embraced in legend and reality grounded in facts, wrote: "Poetry can be more philosophical and much more meaningful than historical account." A similar relation occurs between legend and truth when it comes to a depiction of such a remarkable personage as Fr. A. Usowicz was. The essence of his life and deeds, as a passionate servant of the faith, committed educator and scholar, has been indeed difficult to capture as it even inspired myths and legends about him during his own lifetime. In this case, however, myths and legends about Fr. Aleksander Usowicz are deeply grounded in reality and they contain a rich lode of truth. The purpose of this article is to introduce us to the life of this extraordinary follower of St. Vincent de Paul.

From Lithuania to Poland

Fr. A. Usowicz was born on 14 July 1912 in Drublana Wileńskie, Lithuania. He attended elementary school in Dukszta Pijarskie located about 30 kilometers from Vilno, now Lithuania, where he moved with his parents after World War I. In 1924 he entered the

¹ We had thought at first to publish in this issue of *Vincentiana*, on the subject of "lesser-known" confreres, an equally brief biography of Fr. Konstanty Michalski, C.M., Polish (1879-1947). However, Fr. Jan Telus, C.M., whom we asked to write the article on that distinguished confrere, informed us that *Vincentiana* had published his article: XXII (1978) 57-62, and suggested that we present another figure, no less important, related to Fr. Michalski, like that of Fr. Aleksander Usowicz, C.M. This seemed good to us. We thank the author of the present article for his kindness in accepting the proposal (editor's note).

Classic Gymnasium in Vilno run by the Vincentian Fathers where he completed a four-year educational program in three years. This was the place where his life-long fascination with St. Vincent de Paul captivated his heart and mind. He continued his studies in Kraków, Poland, first at the Vincentian Gymnasium and, after receiving a secondary school degree, he enrolled in the Vincentian Institute of Theology. He formally entered the Congregation of the Mission on 15 June 1928 and made vows two years later on 2 July 1930. Already as a deacon, young Usowicz was sent to Rome to pursue his studies. In the next two years he received his licentiate and doctorate degrees in philosophy from the Angelicum. His first doctoral dissertation was written in Latin: *De Aristotelis circa definitionem doctrina commentatorum sententiis illustrata*. In 1935 Usowicz was ordained a priest.

Upon his return to Kraków Fr. A. Usowicz taught philosophy at the Jagiellonian University where he met his future promotor and professor, Fr. Konstanty Michalski, C.M., who at the time held the chair of Christian Philosophy at the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University. K. Michalski was also rector of the Jagiellonian University and became famous as an historian of medieval philosophy. Under the direction of Fr. Konstanty Michalski, in 1945, Fr. A. Usowicz completed his second doctorate, this one in theology, presenting as a thesis: *Układ cnót i wad u Arystotelesa i św. Tomsza z Akwinu w związku z życiem uczuciowo-popędowym* (*The composition of virtues and vices in the works of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas in regard to human passions and appetites*). The following year Fr. Usowicz presented his qualifying thesis on *Tomistyczna sublimacja uczuć w świetle nowożytnej psychologii* (*The sublimation of sense appetites in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in light of contemporary psychology*). Those two works grounded his position as a philosopher interested in Thomism; however, Thomism opened toward a dialogue with contemporary development of philosophical and scientific thought.

In 1947, after the death of Professor K. Michalski, Fr. A. Usowicz was appointed to a professorship of the Department of Christian Philosophy at the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University. He held the chair until the Faculty was shut down by the Polish communist regime in 1954.

Between 1961 and 1964 he was Visitor of the Polish Vincentians. On several occasions he took part in the General Assemblies in Rome and contributed to the work of editing numerous documents in Latin. He also acted as superior of the Kraków Provincial House and two-term rector of the Vincentian Institute of Theology (1963-1964 and 1978-1979).

On 20 October 1997, Fr. Usowicz was honored as an outstanding and erudite scholar with the *Bene Merenti* medal issued by the

Pontifical Academy of Theology, Kraków. In a eulogy delivered by Professor Mieczysław Markowski, a renowned philosopher and medievalist, can be found (among others): *Professor Usowicz's merits as an academic teacher, philosopher and historian of philosophy become above all conspicuously evident in his 60 years of teaching authentic philosophical knowledge among generations of young seminarians preparing themselves for theological studies. Prof. A. Usowicz is one of the gigantic figures of a scholar whose life left an indelible mark, not only on the development of philosophy, but also on theology as well, in Kraków's academic circles.*

In Fr. Usowicz's self-ironic response one can trace down his well-known sense of humor: *In my tender thanks to Professor M.M. for the praise just heard I must say that he found so many virtues honoring my person I can hardly recognize myself. But, I guess, I must agree with this statement since it was said with the authority of a member of the Polish Academy of Science, and, at the same time, the vice-chairman of an international committee working on editing a monumental work of Aristoteles Latinus.*

Prof. A. Usowicz passed away suddenly on 8 June 2002 on his way to a sweet shop to buy treats for his upcoming 90th birthday. "He went out to buy sweets and landed in heaven" Archbishop Tadeusz Gocłowski concluded in his funeral sermon, pointing out one of Fr. Usowicz's characteristics, a constant willingness to endow others with gifts and treats.

The funeral Mass was concelebrated on 13 June 2002 at the Vincentian's Seminary Church in Kraków. The presiding celebrant was Marian Jaworski, Cardinal of Lwow (Ukraine), along with several bishops and a multitude of priests. The funeral ceremony started with the presentation of a letter of condolence from the Holy Father John Paul II by Professor and Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, Rector of the Pontifical Academy. In his letter, John Paul II indicated several times that he considers himself to be a grateful pupil of Professor A. Usowicz. Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, the Metropolitan of Kraków, led the funeral procession to Rakowicki's Cemetery.

Lecturer, Professor and Master

Soon after his arrival in Kraków from his studies in Rome, in 1936, Fr. A. Usowicz started lecturing philosophy, beginning in seminaries, which he held in high esteem throughout his whole life. He strongly believed there is no other educational institution like a seminary, which is able to transform both the hearts and minds of young people in such a radical way. His students immediately recognized him as zealous instructor, a thorough professor and a

genuine master. He began teaching at the Vincentian Institute of Theology in Kraków on 11 September 1936 and remained there as a faculty member throughout his whole life with two exceptions: when he worked at diocesan seminaries in Gdańsk-Oliwa (1959-1961) and in Gorzów (1971-1978).

During World War II, while Poland was under Nazi occupation, Professor A. Usowicz maintained lecturing underground at the Częstochowa Seminary (1939-1943) and at the Salvatorian Seminary (1940-1945) in Kraków. These underground classes continued the teaching program of the closed-down Theological Faculty of the Jagiellonian University.

In 1947, after the death of Prof. K. Michalski, he undertook teaching philosophy at the Theological Faculty of the Jagiellonian University, a post he held for the next seven years, until the eradication of the Faculty by the Polish communist government.

Despite all the difficulties in the post-war situation and communist oppression of the Catholic Church in Poland, Fr. Usowicz embarked on intense teaching in the various diocesan seminaries of Gdańsk, Gorzów, Kraków, Kielce, Sosnowiec and the Silesia region. He also taught at the seminaries of the Capuchin and Salvatorian Fathers and that of the Order of St. Paul.

As a result of his extraordinary commitment to teaching he managed to educate several thousand priests and missionaries. Now, therefore, his former students are scattered all over the world and they carry on the mission on almost every continent.

The scope of the subjects and topics he taught was vast and most impressive. It included all areas of philosophy, many fields of theology and other disciplines such as Church history, didactics, pedagogy and bibliology. In regard to the last, it was a well-known fact that the library was his favorite place to be. He knew the seminary's 200,000-volume collection of books to such an extent that he was able to find almost every book in that collection without using the library catalog.

Some philosophical topics, such as metaphysics, history of philosophy and psychology he treated with a special interest and consideration. While listening to his lectures one could easily sense the presence of an open mind not confined to one discipline but an outstanding scholar. His great knowledge of philosophy and theology included as well almost all topics and subjects.

Professor Usowicz's interest in contemporary social and political life, however peripheral to his major interest in philosophy, was still strong and dedicated. For many years he held monographic lectures at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków. The topics of those lectures were dedicated to various problems of the dignity of the

human person, such as human rights, freedom, problems of peace and war. He was also actively engaged in opposition to the death penalty. On many occasions Fr. Usowicz presented his in-depth analysis of social democratic doctrine as a better (in opposition to the totalitarian regime) way for citizens to exercise their political liberty, tolerance, and right to privacy and social justice. However, in his analysis, he did not underestimate both the shortcomings and potential perils of democratic social doctrine. He strongly believed that exposing and stressing goodness is the best way to win over evil, since our priority should not be the “weeding out the darnel” but wise cultivation of soil so it can bring about an abundant harvest.

It is interesting to note Fr. A. Usowicz’s original way of lecturing. All his lectures were scrupulously prepared in the form of textbooks of which he left behind over 50. They covered not only all the philosophical disciplines but also a significant amount of theology. However, while lecturing he never used his notes and was able to cite by heart even reference sources and bibliographic citations. For that reason alone generations of his students were deeply impressed with his style of teaching and he himself became an endless topic of student’s stories and legends.

In his modesty, he would never use phrases like “I did it” or “in my opinion” but instead he would say “we have referred to,” “we decided upon” and so on. This attitude reflected his deep conviction that what is taught *ex cathedra* incorporates the heritage of all the past generations and not necessarily the opinion of the lecturer.

Work of Writer

In spite of his heavy load with didactic and instructive activities, Fr. A. Usowicz was able to find spare time for writing and publishing. His literary output published in the form of books, articles and reviews includes several areas of studies.

His two most important works analyze the Aristotelian problem of definition as a part of his formal logic (“De Aristotelis circa definitionem doctrina commentarium sententiis illustrata,” in *Collectanea Theologica*, XIX, 1938, 273-317; “De partitione definitionis apud Aristotelem,” in *Divus Thomas*, XLII, 1939, 114-119). In his next works come to light the professor’s new interest in the philosophy of man (*Układ cnót i wad w związku z życiem uczuciowo-popędowym u Arystotelesa i św. Tomasza z Akwinu*, Kraków 1939; *Tomistyczna sublimacja uczuć w świetle nowożytnej psychologii*, Kraków 1949).

A very special chapter of Fr. Usowicz’s writings explores the legacy of Professor K. Michalski, the man whose life inspired and fascinated him. He wrote numerous books and articles in which

he discussed and presented the life, deeds and works of K. Michalski. As a co-author with Fr. Kazimierz Kłósak and Fr. Franciszek Bima, C.M., he compiled and published a complete biography (*Książki Konstanty Michalski 1978-1947*, Kraków 1949) and bibliography of his writings ("Bibliographie," in *Die Philosophie im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert. In memoriam Konstanty Michalski, 1879-1947*, Amsterdam 1988).

To the very end of his life he worked on compiling all of Fr. K. Michalski's works. They were published as the complete works of K. Michalski in the monographic series: *Studia do dziejów Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego (Studia res gestas Facultatis Theologicae Universitatis Jagellonicae illustrantia)*, vol. V: *Filozofia wieków średnich*, Kraków 1977, 636 pages; vol. IX: *Nova et vetera*, Kraków 1998, 678 pages; vol. XI: *Histoire de la philosophie*, Kraków 1999, 594 pages and vol. XV: *Dilatato corde*, Kraków 2002, 655 pages.

The latest book was dedicated to Fr. A. Usowicz in honor of his 90th birthday and the 70th anniversary of his writing work. One cannot overlook the fact that Fr. Usowicz was a highly respected reviewer and critic of theses, dissertations and papers for licentiates. The number of his reviews of works submitted for higher university degrees is uncountable. Nevertheless, it turned out that at least one of his reviews of a qualifying thesis had historical meaning. It was in 1953 that Fr. Usowicz was a member of a three-man committee at the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University who accepted the qualifying thesis of John Paul II, then Fr. Karol Wojtyła.² Soon after that the Faculty was closed, and it turned out that Fr. K. Wojtyła's thesis was the very last submitted and defended at the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University.

A very special chapter in Fr. A. Usowicz's literary output is deeply rooted in Vincentian spirituality. That theme was the prevailing subject matter of his articles published from 1932-1938 in the *Meteor*, a magazine of Vincentian students. They also reflected the high ideals of the youth. In one of those articles he analyzes what

² It is John Paul II himself who mentions this fact in his most recent autobiography: "Much time later, Fr. Różycki proposed to me the topic of the thesis for becoming a lecturer which dealt with the work of Max Scheler: *The formalism of ethics and the material ethics of values*, which I translated into Polish while writing the thesis. It was a new turning point. I defended the thesis in November 1953; the co-supervisors were Aleksander Usowicz, Stefan Świeżawski and the theologian Władysław Wicher. This was the final qualification for the teaching chair in the theology faculty of the Jagiellonian University before it was suppressed by the Communist authorities." Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Alzatevi, andiamo!*, Mondadori, Milan, Italy, 2004, p. 76 (editor's note and translation).

love meant in St. Vincent's life, pointing out that, in fact, it was the center of his life and the very source of charity and self-giving to others. St. Vincent, he writes, was a genius of charity and altruism ("Wielki Święty wielkiego wieku," in *Meteor*, XXIV, 1932).

His remarks are valid to these days:

Without hope, and especially without love, our faith will be fruitless. St. Vincent possessed all three of these theological virtues, and that is why he was so successful in founding a worldwide web of orphanages, hospitals and other charitable institutions. That is why to continue St. Vincent's deeds means to accept Christian values. It is an illusion that one can use St. Vincent's ingenuity and at the same time abandon the core of Christianity. Such an effort will only produce false philanthropists who, in fact, will be more concerned about themselves than about others, and in the best scenario they will soon lose heart for working in the fallow of a human nature deprived of God's grace.

In the *Meteor* one can also find a series of six articles written by Fr. Usowicz in the form of a philosophical dialogue under the common title *Athalos*. In the preface one can read a short description of the series: "Athalos personifies a restless mind and an immortal soul in a never-ending quest for truth and true happiness [...] Great souls will appear on the scene to discuss being mysteries." Indeed, through the series of the articles *Athalos* continues his discussion with the souls of, among others, Socrates, Voltair, Miriam (Mary) and Savonarola. But, most importantly, it is Fr. Usowicz himself, as *Athalos*, who marks his presence through the series of articles and he is in fact one of the Great Souls of the Polish Province of the Vincentian Fathers.