

Summary

The Diocese of Elk was established in 1992, in the third year of rebuilding the sovereignty of the Republic of Poland. It was established by Pope John Paul II with the papal bull "Totus Tuus Poloniae populus" on March 25, 1992. On the same day, Archbishop Jozef Kowalczyk, Apostolic Nuncio to Poland, announced it by an executive decree. In the Diocese of Elk, two areas with a different history, tradition and even a model of piety were combined. The eastern part of the new diocese belonged to the Diocese of Lomza, and the western part to the Diocese of Warmia. For centuries, the Lomza part was inhabited mainly by Poles of the Roman Catholic faith, while the Masurian area was for centuries associated with German statehood and Protestantism. It was only after 1945 that these areas were settled by Catholics, mostly Poles displaced from the eastern borderlands of the Second Polish Republic. The combination of Suwalki, Augustow and Sejny traditions with the specificity of post-war Masuria was an extremely difficult task. The strategic goal of each diocese is to create a community of believers. For this purpose, general diocesan ceremonies were organized in the Diocese of Elk, e.g. harvest festivals in individual localities of both subregions, pilgrimages to diocesan shrines, peregrinations of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima and the image of Merciful Jesus. This was the purpose of transferring parish priests and vicars between parishes of both parts. Integration was fostered by great religious ceremonies, such as the celebration of the millennium of the death of St. Adalbert and St. Bruno, and the visit of Pope John Paul II in both parts of the diocese (1999). In 20 years full integration of the two parts of the diocese has not been achieved, although much has been done

Another difficulty in creating the new diocese was staffing and institutional shortages. Before 1992, there was no state higher education institution in the area of the Elk Diocese. There was no human resources for a Higher Seminary. Similarly, it was difficult to find properly educated lawyers for the Bishop's Court. The organization of an efficiently operating church administration (Bishop's Curia) required people, rooms and equipment. It turned out after a few years that the difficulties could be overcome. For the establishment and organizational development of diocesan institutions, the fact that the relevant procedures are clearly described in the provisions of canon law proved to be a favourable circumstance. A diocese is not only an institution, territory or community, at the beginning it is primarily a legal construction that is realized in specific realities. At the beginning, it seemed that the fate of the Elk Diocese was mainly influenced by negative conditions: poverty and low level of education of the inhabitants, unemployment, too few churches in the cities, large distance to churches in the countryside, etc.

After twenty years, the achievements of the Elk Diocese include the efficient organization of basic institutions: the Bishop's Curia, the Theological Seminary and the Bishop's Court. The symbol of development was the appointment of Fr. Dr Antoni Skowronski for the chancellor of the Curia in 2004. A similar symbol was the appointment Fr. Dr. Andrzej Jasko for the rector of the Higher Theological Seminary in Elk in 2010. After twenty years, in 2012, all the most important functions in the Elk Curia were occupied by the graduates of the WSD (the Higher Theological Seminary) in Elk. Diocesan Caritas, headed by Fr. Dariusz Kruczynski, a graduate of the Higher Theological Seminary, worked very well.

One of the difficult and risky decisions of Bishop W. Ziembra, the first bishop of Elk, is the establishment of the Bishop's Court in Elk. At the beginning, this court did not meet the requirements set for this institution. After 20 years, the Bishop's Court in Elk was an efficient institution with appropriate staff.

In 2012, there were about 150 parishes in the Diocese of Elk. The depopulation of these areas is a major threat to rural parishes. In many parishes in the countryside, fewer than 1,000 people live. Maintaining rural parishes of less than 1,000 inhabitants may prove impossible in the next several years. Another problem is the low number of vocations. The number of candidates for the Higher Theological Seminary in Elk is systematically decreasing.

During the 20 years of the existence of the Diocese of Elk, it turned out that two factors were the most important for its development: active, committed people and good, precise law. Observing the creation of this diocese can be a useful lesson for people building new institutions and organizations.