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Papal Bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*. Origin, Resolutions, and Effects

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Abstract

In over a thousand years of Polish history, there have been several reforms related to territorial changes in the Roman Catholic Church. One of them took place in 1925. This article is an attempt to present the circumstances of the creation of the papal bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*, promulgated on October 28, 1925. The origins of this document are shown, both in the ecclesiastical and political context of the Church in Poland after World War I. In addition, the issue of the important work related to the preparation for the reorganization of church structures is explained. And finally, the provisions of the bull are discussed as well as the new organization of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland established in 1925.

Keywords: Papal bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*, Polish metropolises, Polish dioceses

Bulla *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*. Geneza, postanowienia, skutki

Abstrakt

W ponad tysiącletniej historii Polski miało miejsce kilka reform związanych ze zmianami terytorialnymi Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego. Jedną z nich miało miejsce w 1925 r. Artykuł stanowi próbę przybliżenia okoliczności powstania bulli papieskiej „*Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*” promulgowanej 28 października 1925 r. Ukazana została geneza tegoż dokumentu, zarówno w kontekście kościelnym, jak i politycznym Kościoła w Polsce po I wojnie światowej. Poza tym poruszono kwestię kluczowych prac związanych z przygotowaniem reorganizacji struktur kościelnych. Finałnie zaś omówiono postanowienia bulli i zaprezentowano nową organizację Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce powstałą w 1925 r.

Słowa kluczowe: Bulla papieska „*Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*”, metropolie polskie, diecezje polskie

February 2025 marks the 100th anniversary of the promulgation of the concordat concluded between the Holy See and the Government of the Second Polish Republic on 10 February 1925.¹ Among its many effects, it is worth noting and mentioning Pope Pius XI's bull of circumscription, *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*, promulgated on 28 October 1925. Under this legal act, a new church organization was established, and its borders were adapted to the independent Polish state.² On this anniversary, it is worth recalling the origins, circumstances, as well as the ecclesiastical and political context, and explaining the content of the provisions contained in the bull and its consequences for the Polish Church.

The Ecclesiastical and Political Context of the Bull's Creation

In November 1918, an independent Polish state was established, the final borders of which were determined in 1921³ after three years of struggle and fighting. This state of affairs, as well as the constitution of the Second Polish Republic, which came into force on 17 March 1921, placed the Church in Poland in a completely new situation. The Holy See and the Polish Episcopate were faced with the problem of organizing church administration and pastoral care under the conditions of an independent Polish state.

The political borders of the Second Polish Republic did not coincide with the administrative network of Polish dioceses. In ecclesiastical terms, Poland at that time included three entire metropolitan sees (Gniezno-Poznań, Warsaw, and Lviv) and part of the Mogilev metropolitan see,⁴ including four archdioceses, twelve dioceses, and parts of three other dioceses.⁵ The situation was as follows:

- the metropolitan see of Gniezno and Poznań, had two archdioceses: Gniezno and Poznań, and the diocese of Chełmno;
- the metropolitan see of Warsaw contained the archdiocese of Warsaw and the dioceses of Kielce, Włocławek (i.e. Kalisz), Lublin, Płock, Janów (i.e. Podlasie), Sandomierz, and Augustów (i.e. Sejny);

¹ W. Wójcik, *Konkordat polski z 1925 roku. Próba oceny*, in: *Kościół w II Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. Z. Zieliński, S. Wilk, Lublin 1980, pp. 17–21.

² M. Banaszak, *Historia Kościoła Katolickiego. Czasy najnowsze 1914–1978*, t. 4, Warszawa 1992, pp. 133–136; T. Frasiak, *Historia Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce*, Kraków 2021, pp. 587–592; J. Kłoczowski, L. Mullerowa, *W niepodległej Polsce (1918–1980)*, in: *Zarys dziejów Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce*, ed. J. Kłoczowski, L. Mullerowa, J. Skarbek, Kraków 1986, pp. 292–334; B. Kumor, *Historia Kościoła*, part 8, Lublin 2001, pp. 380–427.

³ A. Nowak, *Czas walki z Bogiem. Kościół na straży polskiej*, part 4, Kraków 2011, pp. 9–41; G. Kucharczyk, *Polska. Dzieje państwa i narodu*, Warszawa 2022, pp. 233–250.

⁴ A. Kozyska, *Mohylewska metropolia*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 13, ed. E. Gigilewicz, Lublin 2009, coll. 43–45.

⁵ B. Kumor, *Projekty zmian w organizacji metropolitarnej i diecezjalnej w Polsce (1918–1925)*, in: *Kościół w II Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. Z. Zieliński, S. Wilk, Lublin 1980, p. 53.

- the Lviv metropolitan see contained the archdiocese of Lviv and the dioceses of Przemyśl and Tarnów;
- from the metropolitan see of Mohylew, the Diocese of Vilnius, a smaller part of the Diocese of Lutsk-Zhytomyr, and a large part of the Diocese of Minsk;
- the Diocese of Kraków;
- part of the Wrocław diocese (part of Upper Silesia and most of Cieszyn Silesia).
- part of the Samogitian diocese (Braslaw district).
- part of the Spisz diocese (parts of Spisz and Orava).⁶

The former boundaries of some dioceses were bisected by political boundaries. Part of the Archdiocese of Poznań found itself in the Republic of Germany, and part of the Diocese of Chełmno within the borders of the Free City of Gdańsk and Germany. From the Archdiocese of Lviv, Bukovina became part of the Romanian state. The greater part of the Lutsk-Zhytomyr diocese and part of the Minsk diocese found themselves in Soviet Russia, and part of the Augustów (Sejny) and Vilnius dioceses were within the borders of the newly established state of Lithuania. In addition, the political borders of the Second Polish Republic included: part of the Diocese of Wrocław (Upper Silesia and Cieszyn Silesia), the Braslaw district from the Diocese of Żmudź, and parts of Spisz and Orava from the Diocese of Spisz.⁷

During World War I, there was already an awareness and a need to reorganize the church administration in Poland. In 1916, bishops from the former Congress of Poland began discussions on this topic and appointed Father Adolf Szczęsny from Płock to be responsible for the work. After regaining freedom, during the deliberations of the Polish Episcopal Conference, which took place from August 26–30, 1919 in Gniezno, detailed rules for the reorganization of the former church structure were developed.⁸ Their goal was to correct the boundaries of existing metropolitan sees and dioceses, create new church units, and transfer some episcopal seats to cities centrally located in the dioceses. The final and specific project concerning the regulation of church administration in Poland was to be prepared by Bishop Henryk Przeździecki with the assistance of Bishop Roman Jałbrzykowski.⁹

Regardless of the above-mentioned actions, a number of decisions were taken in the first years after Poland regained independence which led to the establishment of new dioceses in the years 1920–1922.

⁶ P. Stanko, *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas z 28 października 1925 r. Geneza, znaczenie, dzieje, edycja*, Katowice 2015, pp. 46–48.

⁷ B. Kumor, *Projekty zmian...*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁸ H. Wyczawski, *Organizacja kościelna*, w: *Historia Kościoła w Polsce*, ed. B. Kumor, Z. Obertyński, t. 2, part 2, Poznań–Warszawa 1979, p. 26.

⁹ W. Jakubowski, M. Solarczyk, *Rzymskokatolicka administracja kościelna na ziemiach polskich*, Warszawa 2007, p. 29.

In 1918, Pope Benedict XV had already appointed three new bishops for the dioceses that had been abolished by the partitioning authorities as part of the repression for the January Uprising. Under an agreement in 1882 with the Holy See, they were granted the status of apostolic administrations. Thus, the Pope restored the church organization in Kamieniec Podolski, Mińsk and Janów Podlaski, and the dioceses were governed by the following: Bishop Piotr Mańkowski in Kamieniec Podolski, Bishop Zygmunt Łoziński in Mińsk and Bishop Henryk Przeździecki, initially in Janów Podlaski, but from 1924 in Siedlce.¹⁰

The same pope established the Diocese of Łódź with the bull “Christi Domini que sese bonum pastorem” of December 10, 1920. The request to establish this diocese was submitted by Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski and supported by the then Apostolic Nuncio to Poland, Achille Ratti. The Diocese of Łódź was created from the five deaneries of the Archdiocese of Warsaw – Łódź City, Łódź suburban area, Kłodawa, Łęczyca, and Brzeziny – and was subordinated to the Metropolitan of Warsaw. Father Wincenty Tymieniecki became the first bishop of this diocese in April 1921.¹¹

A very important problem, not only from an ecclesiastical, but above all political perspective, was the situation in Upper Silesia. Cardinal Adolf Bertram of Wrocław established an episcopal delegation with headquarters in Katowice for the areas of the Wrocław diocese that had become part of the Polish state. The Cardinal entrusted his subordinate Vicar General, Father Jan Kapica, with the responsibility for its organization and administration. The Polish government authorities protested against this act, as they did not agree to a church representative from another country administering in Polish territory. Under these circumstances, in November 1922, Pope Pius XI established an apostolic administration in place of the former episcopal delegation and entrusted its management to Father August Hlond.¹²

A similar problem arose in the region of Cieszyn Silesia, part of which was arbitrarily assigned to Poland by the Council of Ambassadors at the conference in Spa on July 28, 1920. Cardinal Bertram established a commissariat that encompassed four deaneries and entrusted its administration to Father Jerzy Kolek. In 1925, this commissariat became part of the diocese of Katowice.¹³

As part of the preparations for sorting out the organizational situation of the Church in Poland after regaining independence, the issue of regulating the institution of primacy was also raised. After 1918, there were two primates: in Gniezno the “Primate of Poland” and in Warsaw the “Primate of the Kingdom of Poland.”¹⁴ The first nuncios in Poland, Achille Ratti and Lorenzo Lauri, were in favor of retaining this

¹⁰ W. Jakubowski, M. Solarczyk, *Rzymskokatolicka administracja...*, op. cit., pp. 29–30.

¹¹ M. Budziarek, M. Wrzeszcz, *Łódzka diecezja*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 11, ed. E. Ziemann, Lublin 2006, coll. 555.

¹² B. Kumor, *Historia Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 393.

¹³ P. Stanko, *Vixdum Poloniae*, op. cit., pp. 51–52.

¹⁴ J. Kopiec, *Prymas*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, ed. E. Gigilewicz, t. 16, Lublin 2012, coll. 577–579.

office for the bishops of Warsaw. In February 1925, the Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs of the Catholic Church issued a decree approving the title of „Primate of Poland” for the archbishops of Gniezno and the title of „Primate of the Kingdom of Poland” for those of Warsaw. At the same time, the Congregation abolished the former jurisdiction of the Archbishops of Gniezno for the Church in Poland. Thus, the title of primate became an honorary title. Neither the concordat nor the papal bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas* returned to this issue.¹⁵

Preparatory Work for the Issuance and Promulgation of the Bull

The question of developing a general project for the reorganization of the Polish metropolitan sees and dioceses was sent in a survey addressed to bishops in 1920.¹⁶ It posed the following questions: What new metropolitan sees and dioceses should be created in Poland? What adjustments should be made within the boundaries of existing metropolitan sees and dioceses? Which episcopal sees should be moved to a more convenient location?¹⁷ Of the nineteen diocesan bishops, fifteen expressed their views on this matter, ten of whom requested the maintenance of the existing metropolitan sees, and five (Tarnów, Kielce, Mińsk, Kamieniec Podolski and Włocławek) proposed the establishment of one or two metropolitan sees in Kraków and Vilnius.¹⁸ The project of reorganizing church administration was discussed during three conferences of the Polish episcopate in 1921, 1922 and 1924. During one of them, which took place on July 2 and 3, 1924 in Częstochowa, the following principles were adopted regarding the reorganization of dioceses and metropolitan sees in Poland: when creating new dioceses and delimiting old ones, the religious and civic needs of the faithful had to be taken into account first and foremost; it was noted that the previous administrative structure of the Church in Poland was imposed by the partitioning powers, which meant that episcopal sees, with the exception of Warsaw, were located on the edges of the dioceses; the population should range between half a million and one million; in the city of the Uniate bishop there should be a Latin bishop; When establishing the boundaries of the diocese, the partition boundaries should be erased. These principles were to constitute the basis for a new division of the territorial structure of the Church in Poland.¹⁹ The final reorganization plan, known as the “Prepositum Deliminationis”, was sent to Rome in August of 1925. It is worth noting that the plans for the new organization did not include the Uniate dioceses.²⁰

¹⁵ P. Stanko, *Vixdum Poloniae...*, op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁶ L. Adamczuk, W. Zdaniewicz, *Kościół katolicki w Polsce 1918–1990. Rocznik statystyczny*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 104–106.

¹⁷ B. Kumor, *Projekty zmian*, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁸ *Kościół katolicki*, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁹ B. Kumor, *Projekty zmian*, op. cit., pp. 56–60.

²⁰ H. Wyczawski, *Organizacja kościelna*, op. cit., p. 27.

The direct legal basis for the final regulation of the church organization in Poland was the concordat concluded between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland on February 10, 1925. The ratification documents were exchanged in Warsaw on June 9, 1925, and the text itself was promulgated on July 18, 1925.²¹ Article 9 of this agreement emphasized that no part of the Republic of Poland would be dependent on a bishop based outside the borders of the Polish state. The concordat even specified that the administrative structure of the Church in Poland would be organized as follows:

- the province of Gniezno-Poznań would contain the archdiocese of Gniezno-Poznań (the original text of the concordat uses the term “archbishopric”) and the dioceses of Chełmno and Włocławek;
- the Province of Warsaw would contain the Archdiocese of Warsaw and the dioceses of Płock, Sandomierz, Lublin, Podlasie and Łódź;
- Vilnius Province would contain the Archdiocese of Vilnius and the dioceses of Łomża and Pinsk;
- Lviv province would contain the Archdiocese of Lviv and the dioceses of Przemyśl and Lutsk;
- the province of Kraków would contain the Archdiocese of Kraków and the dioceses of Tarnów, Kielce, Częstochowa and Silesia.

The concordat also provided for the establishment of the province for the Greek-Rusyn rite within the Lviv province as well as the Archdiocese of Lviv of the Armenian rite. In addition, it was agreed that the Holy See would not make any changes to the adopted structure of the provinces and dioceses without the agreement of the Polish government.²²

In these circumstances and on the basis of these findings, Pope Pius XI, in the bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*, reorganized the administrative structure of the Church in Poland on October 28, 1925.²³

Provisions of the Bull

The bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas* of 1925 established a new administrative division of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, consisting of five metropolitan sees:

²¹ W. Jakubowski, M. Solarczyk, *Rzymskokatolicka administracja...*, op. cit., p. 31; W. Kujański, *Straty terytorialne diecezji włocławskiej w następstwie bulli cyrkumskrypcyjnej Vixdum Poloniae Unitas z 1925 r.*, „Teologia i Człowiek” 19 (2012), nr 1, p. 260.

²² *Konkordat pomiędzy Stolicą Apostolską a Rzeczpospolitą Polską, podpisany w Rzymie dn. 10 lutego 1925 r.*, Artykuł IX, in: Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z 1925 r., nr 47, item 324, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19250720501/O/D19250501.pdf> (accessed: April 15, 2025); J. Wiśłocki, *Konkordat polski z 1925 r.*, Poznań 1977, p. 92; W. Jakubowski, M. Solarczyk, *Rzymskokatolicka administracja...*, op. cit., pp. 31–32; see: H. Olszar, *Kościół w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym (1918–1939)*, „Symposium” 8 (2004), nr 1, pp. 24–25.

²³ M. Konieczny, *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, t. 20, ed. E. Gigilewicz, Lublin 2014, coll. 106.

- the metropolitan see of Gniezno and Poznań included the Archdiocese of Gniezno and Poznań and the dioceses of Chełmno and Włocławek;
- the metropolitan see of Warsaw contained the Archdiocese of Warsaw and the dioceses of Płock, Sandomierz, Lublin, Siedlce (Podlasie) and Łódź;
- the metropolitan see of Vilnius included the Archdiocese of Vilnius and the dioceses of Łomża and Pinsk;
- the metropolitan see of Lviv held the Archdiocese of Lviv and the dioceses of Przemyśl and Lutsyk;
- the metropolitan see of Krakow contained the Archdiocese of Krakow and the dioceses of Tarnów, Kielce, Częstochowa and Katowice

Boundaries were shifted in all of the metropolitan sees, some deaneries or parishes were excluded and others, both old and newly established, were included. Pope Pius XI included the entire church administration within the political borders of the Polish state.²⁴

These activities were complemented by the establishment of the Gdańsk diocese on December 30, 1925, separated from the Chełmno and Warmia dioceses. It covered the territory of the Free City of Gdańsk and was directly subordinate to the Holy See. Later, a military ordinariate was also established, with Father Stanisław Gall becoming its first bishop.²⁵ This bishop had jurisdiction over the entire Polish army, including the families of officers and non-commissioned officers. The territory of Poland was divided into ten military deaneries, and these in turn into parishes. In addition, it was established that the bishop held the rank of general, the dean (the priest in charge of the deanery) a colonel, the parish priest a major, and the chaplain a captain. Greek Catholic parish priests and chaplains were subordinate to the bishop.²⁶

The circumscription bull also raised the issue of the boundaries between the newly established dioceses, where the border was the Vistula River. It sometimes demarcated former pastoral posts. In this case, it was decided not to recreate the old parish boundaries, but to assign them to each of the newly established dioceses. The only exceptions were towns located on islands. In such cases, they were to remain in their current dioceses, i.e. those from before October 28, 1925.²⁷ An example of this type of change was the then Diocese of Sandomierz, the towns which were located on the right bank of the Vistula River were separated from it and transferred to the Dioceses of Lublin and Siedlce.²⁸

²⁴ P. Stanko, *Vixdum Poloniae*, op. cit., pp. 59–60.

²⁵ B. Kumor, *Historia Kościoła*, op. cit., p. 393; W. Jakubowski, M. Solarczyk, *Rzymskokatolicka administracja*, op. cit., p. 32.

²⁶ H. Wyczawski, *Przygotowanie do studiów w archiwach kościelnych*, 2nd edition, ed. T. Moskal, A.K. Sitnik, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska 2013, p. 74.

²⁷ P. Stanko, *Vixdum Poloniae*, op. cit., p. 93.

²⁸ *Dekret wykonawczy J. E. Nuncjusza Apostolskiego w Warszawie o nowych granicach diecezji sandomierskiej z 11.11.1925 r.*, „Kronika Diecezji Sandomierskiej” 18 (1925), nr 12, pp. 291–293.

The final text of the papal bull addressed the issue of archival materials. It was decided that the newly established dioceses would receive documents and records relating to clerics and the faithful, which resulted in the separation of existing archival collections dating back to the Middle Ages.²⁹

Conclusion

Pursuant to the provisions of the Papal bull *Vixdum Poloniae Unitas*, one of the most significant organizational changes in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland took place in 1925. The administrative structure of the Polish Church after 28 October 1925 consisted of five metropolitan sees and included twenty-one archdioceses and dioceses of the Latin rite. Two of these metropolitan sees (Gniezno-Poznań and Lviv) dated back to the times of the First Polish Republic, one had its beginnings during the partition period (Warsaw), and two were established in 1925 (Kraków and Vilnius). The Vilnius diocese had the largest territory, and the Katowice diocese was the smallest in this respect. The Archdiocese of Warsaw had the largest number of faithful Catholics, while the Lutsk diocese had the fewest.³⁰

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Elaborations

Banaszak M., *Historia Kościoła Katolickiego. Czasy najnowsze 1914–1978*, t. 4, Warszawa 1992.

²⁹ *Bulla Vixdum Poloniae Unitas. Reprodukcyjne stron. Tekst łaciński. Tłumaczenie na język polski*, ed. P. Stanko, Katowice 2015, p. 31.

³⁰ B. Kumor, *Projekty zmian*, op.cit., pp. 61–62.

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