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Review:

Fr. Waldemar Cisło, “Imigranci u bram. Kryzys uchodźczy i męczeństwo chrześcijan XXI w.” (Immigrants at the gates. The refugee crisis and martyrdom of 21st century Christians). Interviewed by Paweł Stachnik, Biały Kruk: Kraków 2017, pp. 230

Fr. Waldemar Cisło's book „Immigrants at the gates” is a series of interviews conducted by Paweł Stachnik on various topics varying around the scientific interests of the Professor of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and, above all, his activity as director of the Polish Section for Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). Fr. Cisło shares his rich experience and results of his reflections, which he has been gathering for many years as a man actively involved in helping Christians all over the world, and as a scientist analyzing social and religious phenomena. It is a book with a message, therefore the editing and the presentation of the content is aimed at reaching the widest possible audience. It is a kind of manifesto in the form of an interview, which poses very important questions, warnings and precautions against specific ideologies. It leads to getting involved in the fate of persecuted Christians and engaging in helping them. The cover is already very telling: the dominant red colour clearly indicates the blood, and the picture of young men raising the battle cries clearly indicates their intentions. The title refers to the Latin phrase *Hannibal ante portas* and, in the author's intention, shows the threat of uncontrolled immigration to Europe. The subtitle makes it clear that this is an intellectual

combination of two issues: the refugee crisis and the persecution of Christians in the 21st century.

The book is very well published by the Biały Kruk publishing house, which publishes, among others, albums. It contains many photographs coming mainly from the archive of ACN as well as the publishing house itself and the well-known Polish photographer Adam Bujak. The photographs illustrate the theses touched upon in the text, sharpening them even further. They depict painful scenes characteristic of Christians persecuted in various parts of the world, including icons which have been shot at, destroyed churches, victims of assassinations, and on the other hand, we see military groups of Islamic extremists, blasphemous performances of pseudo-artists, etc. The introduction is written by Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski, Cracow Metropolitan. In it he points out the necessity of giving a voice to Christians persecuted for their faith in various parts of the world in the 21st century. The Church in the twentieth and twenty-first century has, once more, become a Church of martyrs. Their suffering, however, often does not make its way into the main media message. Relative peace in Poland does not release us from the love of our neighbor for the persecuted brothers around the world. The whole structure of the book consists of 11 chapters. They begin with a historical perspective of Christianity at the meeting point of three continents (the most detailed text and a very good introduction to the others), further we have the contemporary persecution of Christians in various places: in Arab countries, in Africa, in the Far East; the sources of persecution; discrimination in Western Europe; the effects of the Enlightenment; the situation in Poland; Islam and the West and Islamic terrorism. The book opens with the prayer of St. John Paul II for the peoples and nations of the Middle East, and ends with a presentation of the activity of Aid to the Church in Need and of the figure of the author, Fr. Waldemar Cisło (from which we learn more details about this character: passion for books, for the English language, connections with Lublin, his professors of theology and more than twenty years of activity in the ACN).

The language is very communicative and convincing due to its practical character and the interview form used. The author likes and knows how to tell stories, uses many stylistic techniques with the characteristics of spoken language and better expresses emotions. Despite the fact that the critical apparatus is not included in the text, we find a lot of detailed data revealing the scientific and source context of the whole work. Prof. Cisło also refers to important authors and their work (e.g. philosopher Robert Spaemann, Thomas Carlyle, Rodney Stark, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann) for the data. In general, he is

characterized by high erudition, he shares numerous thoughts and reflections on complex phenomena. He does not refrain from his own judgments expressed in the form of certain insinuations or rhetorical questions.

Fr. Waldemar Cisło is a fundamental theologian. That is why the notion of the credibility of Christianity appears in the text: the search for *fides et ratio*, showing weak points of Islam or of questioning religion in general. He often asks questions, wants to reach the listener and discover his rationale and his presuppositions. He also shows the uniqueness of Christianity in comparison with other religions (p. 30 peoples conquering Rome converted to Christianity, even though the victors usually impose their religion). The greatest argument for the truthfulness of Christianity in this book is the martyrdom for faith in Christ, which both at the beginning of history and today is an unusual phenomenon and a great motive for credibility. The easiest way to respond to hatred is by the same act, while bishops in places of persecution reject this temptation and oppose military solutions because they destroy the essence of Christianity (e.g. in Nigeria p. 116, 134). In the face of Islam, he calls for an open and tolerant interpretation of the Koran and to take into account its historical and cultural context.

The author tells, in a very interesting way, the history of Christianity in the East, sometimes called the third lung of Christianity. It is the churches of Antioch and Nestorian provenance. For centuries these Christians lived under the rule of peoples of other religions (Sasanians and later of Islam) and had no contact with Latin and Byzantine Christianity. The lack of mutual relations made these forms of Christianity and the Christians themselves unknown, and their current discovery brings with it many new theological and historical threads. They often use Aramaic liturgy (the Syrian language is the Aramaic dialect), the language of Christ himself. Poetry is an important vehicle of theology there. They have a different monastic tradition of leaving people taking their vows in the world and they have an extraordinary depth in looking at the human soul. They treat the Sacrament of Penance above all as a healing agent, as opposed to the penitential character in the West. The Eastern churches have never manifested forms of ecclesiastical triumphalism, but they have always been suffering and persecuted. Fr. Cisło is familiar with the denomination complexities of the Eastern Churches: Maronic, Chaldean, Melchic, Coptic, not only from the historical but also from the contemporary point of view because he keeps in touch with individual hierarchs (Bishop Tewfik from Egypt, Cardinal Louis Sako).

Christians in the Middle East are an inseparable, although minority element. They must not be missing, as the Muslims themselves testify, according

to Benedict XVI, who ask Christians not to abandon these lands, because they are an element of enrichment, reconciliation and solidarity for the other peoples living there. In fact, from a historical point of view, Christians have been living in these lands practically since the beginning of Christianity, i.e. for almost 2000 years. From their fate we learn about Christian-Muslim relations during Muhammad's time and later, the political conditions of the Byzantine Empire, the history of Islamic conquests and the Crusades. The history of the creation of various Arab countries at the beginning of the 20th century is described in detail, together with the political and ideological context. In all this, Christians learned to live and function in conditions of minority. They are characterized by a great attachment to the faith and concern for the good education of their children, because in this way they can continue to be the intellectual elite in their countries. For many centuries they have been relatively tolerated and might even hold some state and military positions. Only contemporary extremist movements, which paradoxically arose as opposition to the spread of democratic ideology, turned against them. Christians in the Arab countries have become innocent victims of conflicts because they are a minority that is not defended by anyone and identified with the religion of the invaders, so they are an easy target for all fighting parties. The radicalisation of Islam also means the expansion of the Pan-Arabic idea, which aims to take over new territories for Islam. Migration movements are seen by Muslims themselves as an invasion into the West and a way to defeat „crusaders” in their lands.

When the author speaks about persecuted Christians, the style of expression changes, becomes sharper. He describes their torments openly and sometimes in detail. You can see that it is not something distant, theoretical, but something close, eye-catching and painful. He gives testimonies, thus becoming the voice of the persecuted, who have no chance to be heard elsewhere. Hence there appears not only general information about the persecution of Christians, but also detail about taking over the property of Christians by means of threats: „leave this house or we will kill you,” rape, treating Christian women as war loot for sale, kidnapping Christian children for ransom and killing them (p. 66), marrying the kidnapped girls to Muslims, and slitting their throats. The analogies to the situation of the first Christians are very clear: „In the past it was lions who ripped the Christians apart, now rifle bullets...” (p. 21) Historical forms of persecution are also recalled: expulsion to the desert without food and water, burning alive. The Turks formed an army of Janissaries from kidnapped Christian children, who were forced to convert to Islam and were later characterized by exceptional

cruelty. At the beginning of the 20th century Christians constituted a significant percentage of the Middle East population, e.g. in Turkey there were 24%. This was followed by the Armenian Holocaust. Currently, as a result of the persecution of Christianity, it is in danger of complete disappearance from the area (in Iraq before the war in 2003 there were about 1.5 million Christians, now only about 300 thousand). Cisko draws attention not only to the killing of people, but also to the destruction of churches, paintings and figures (p. 89) and burning of books (p. 22, 57, 61). In the book there are many examples of persecution and martyrdom of the Church in the world: bishops, priests and laymen (the famous case of Asia Bibi – p. 129, Fr. Douglas al-Bazi – p. 81 or the murder of Fr. Hamel in France). What is even sadder is the persecution of Christians in refugee camps, where 88% of them suffer some form of discrimination and where even informal attempts to introduce Sharia law are made. The story of throwing out Christians overboard from the pontoon on which they sailed with Muslims to Europe was recalled (p. 77). According to various calculations about 170 thousand Christians per year are killed, that is statistically every 3 minutes one Christian gives his life for the faith, and this number is constantly growing. The followers of Christ are also persecuted in the Far East, North Korea, China, India and Africa. In some places a price is set for the head of a priest or nun. There are places in the world where quarrels between neighbors of different religions often lead to accusations of blasphemy, profanity, and lead to self-judgement.

Another important topic in the book is the attitude of the West towards Christianity after the Enlightenment. The world's current struggle with the Church is the fruit of 18th century ideas. The triptych faith, hope and love has been replaced by the triptych liberty, equality, fraternity, which meant introducing anthropocentrism instead of theocentrism (p. 157). Man became a god, and religion was gradually removed or pushed into the function of entertainment, consolation and healing. This was politically represented in the first Catholic genocide in Vendée in 1793. Muslims see Western states participating in wars on their territory as „crusaders”, an attack by Christians, while these states themselves have little in common with Christianity. There are more and more examples of discrimination against Christians in countries where until recently Christianity was the foundation. In Poland there are successive blasphemies (e.g. „The Curse” or the artistic activity of Nergal). The boundaries in offending religious feelings are shifting. Fr. Cisko gives more general thought to the Christian condition of Europe which, renouncing its roots, became an easy target for Islamisation. Therefore, he calls for the defence of one's own civilisation and

the enforcement of the law, because Muslims use the rights and achievements of civil liberties to destroy Western society. They do not integrate with it at all or learn the language. However, Europeans themselves seem not to see this problem because they apply double standards to crimes committed by Muslims, interpreting them by their cultural code, although Europeans are no longer able to read their cultural codes. An important element of this struggle should be the concern for demography, because the aging Western societies are unable to compete with Muslim families. According to the words of Pope Francis, Europe is an old woman who is unattractive, unable to give birth, and is self-confident. When young people look for some values, they often turn to Islamic fanaticism. The processes of Islamisation and de-Christianisation are not only the result of some historical events. Since the 1960s there has been a Marxist march through institutions in Europe, which further marginalises Christianity. Muslims coming to Europe are not guided by a similar tolerance towards Christians in their homelands. In Saudi Arabia there is no church or Christian clergy. In Iran, the Church is persecuted, pushing it into underground activities. The rise of Islamic extremism was not spontaneous either, but Bin Laden and the Mujahedin were trained by American troops during the fighting in Afghanistan. The very creation and growth of the Islamic State is mysterious. If it is sustained by oil revenues, then who buys it, Cisło asks (p. 76). He reveals the shallow ideology that brings democracy as an excuse for military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. He evokes the testimonies of the inhabitants, who ask bitterly: does the profit of participating in elections once every four years balance the loss of security and peace. He does not share the naive faith that brings democracy upon the barrels of tanks. Fr. Cisło bitterly states: in Syria, instead of the legal power of Assad, there is a civil war, the growth of ISIS and the recent Russian intervention – “How do the champions of Western democracy feel about it?” (p. 82).

The book also brings a very positive element of solidarity and faith. It reminds Christians in Europe of the strength of faith and the witness of living in completely unfavorable conditions. Christians in many countries do not hesitate to give their lives for their faith, which provides a strong impulse for it in secularizing Western societies. They also mobilize their brothers and sisters to see the Christian community through their call for material and moral support. This is part of the activities of associations such as Aid to the Church in Need. ACN is a link between persecuted Christians and their churches and the West. On the one hand, it provides information about the sufferings and their scale,

and prepares reports, while on the other hand, it encourages financial support for aid programmes, usually provided on the spot. ACN operates in more than 140 countries and has 20 national offices (p. 218), which also provides feedback on the humanitarian and religious situation in the countries concerned. This allows it to monitor the situation and react on an ongoing basis. For example, they were the first to talk about the humanitarian tragedy in Syria, indicating that there are 7.2 million internal refugees, 2 million fled to Lebanon and several million to Europe. The warring parties ordered a blockade of cities, which resulted in a shortage of medicines and food. This makes the work of the ACN unique, because immigration as such does not solve the problem of conflicts, which ideologists in the European Union and international organisations do not want to recognise. These people want to live on their land, and often only need a little support. The ACN gives its support through church institutions, because in times of danger they are the only chance to give further help, not only to Christians. Where priests stay, people come back after the war and organise themselves around the parish again. Hence the association maintains and educates numerous priests all over the world, because in Africa, for example, a priest is the man for everything: he will build a hospital, a school and a church.

The interview „Immigrants at the gates” is therefore a very valuable publication both in terms of information and science as well as in terms of religion and praxis. The author succeeds in making the reader curious and aware of the importance of the topics raised. Moreover, it is a very topical exposition, one can say that it touches the events from the front pages of the newspapers, although it explains the historical and theoretical aspects of the issues. The author reveals his steadfast attitude and opposition against injustice and persecution of Christians, yet despite everything he abounds in optimism, sense of humour, provides many anecdotes, curiosities and indicates paradoxes. It is worth recommending it to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, because it rebuts many myths and stereotypes of Christians, and introduces the subject of persecution, migration, interreligious relations and humanitarian aid in a professional manner.