

Andrzej Kiciński*The John Paul II Catholic University
of Lublin* 0000-0003-3076-6878***Piotr Tomasz Goliszek****The John Paul II Catholic University
of Lublin* 0000-0002-3821-0439***Miroslaw Chmielewski****The John Paul II Catholic University
of Lublin* 0000-0002-6903-479X***Dariusz Wadowski****The John Paul II Catholic University
of Lublin* 0000-0001-8936-9557

DOI: 10.15290/rtk.2025.24.02

Testimony of Faith in the Battle over Crosses at School – Miętne 1984. A Catechetical Perspective

The article is a successive stage of research on the unprecedented event of the defence of the Cross by students of the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne n. Garwolin (Poland). The present analysis aims to demonstrate the theological dimension of the events, the students' testimony of faith in their struggle for the presence of the Cross in the public sphere, and to indicate the attitude of the youth from Miętne as a source for contemporary catechesis. Based on a critical analysis of source materials from a catechetical-theological perspective, the research findings are presented in the four sections: (1) Testimony, (2) Faith, (3) Testimony of the Language of Faith, and (4) Conclusions, covering research findings and recommendations for catechetical practice. In terms of methodology, the study is inspired by J. Cardijn's paradigm of "See – Judge – Act".

Key words: the battle over crosses in school, testimony of faith, catechesis, Miętne.

The Minister of Education has unilaterally reduced the number of hours of instruction of Religious Education in schools to one from 1 September 2025 and has introduced measures marginalising this school subject (Journal of Laws 2025, item 66). Firstly, it is discriminatory to place religious education lessons before or immediately after the compulsory educational classes. Secondly, the actual legislative process on the part of the Ministry of Education and the regulation itself took place without consultations with the Churches and denominations authorised to teach it. This is a departure from the practice of a democratic country well-established for approximately 34 years. Thirdly, legal opinions emphasize that “a thorough analysis of the 2024 regulation, and in particular: the actual procedure for its establishment, the content of the justification for this act, a number of detailed provisions contained in its normative part, the highly probable social effects of its entry into force, and finally: the public statements accompanying its preparation by the head of the legislative body – the Minister of Education – justifies the position that the act in question is inconsistent with Article 25 (2) of the Polish Constitution, i.e. with the principle of impartiality (neutrality) of public authorities in matters of religious, ideological, and philosophical beliefs. The 2024 Regulation indicates the legislative body’s (Minister of Education’s) aversion to religion in general” (Borecki 2024, p. 151)¹. It can therefore be stated that the “leftist” leadership of the Ministry has returned to old, definitely undemocratic crusades against all religions, each starting with simulated actions. These contemporary efforts to exclude religion from public life invite reflection on the testimony of faith given by the community of students at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne n. Garwolin in 1984.

The events in Miętne in 1984 are connected with the de-crucifixion campaign and the so-called Jaruzelski Crusade (1980–1990). This followed Bierut’s earlier crusade against the Cross and religious instruction in Poland during the Stalinist period (1944–1956), and Gomułka’s crusade, which resulted in the removal of religion from schools (1956–1970). The theological and pastoral study of the testimony regarding the struggle for the crosses at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne represents a return to an experience of faith that has, until

¹ P. Borecki, *Opinia Prawna w sprawie zgodności z odpowiednimi postanowieniami Konstytucji RP, Konkordatu polskiego oraz właściwych ustaw Rozporządzenia Ministra Edukacji z dnia 26 lipca 2024 r. zmieniającego rozporządzenie w sprawie warunków i sposobu organizacji nauki religii w publicznych przedszkolach i szkołach*, “Studia Prawa Publicznego” 3 (47) 2024, pp. 131–152, DOI: 10.14746/spp.2024.3.47.6.

now, been approached primarily from a historical perspective² and as presented in the media³. The first attempt to develop a catechetical perspective on the events in Miętne was offered by P. Goliszek in a work which focuses on the desk study of the archives of the National Remembrance Institute⁴. The article was written upon the publication of the research outcomes of the Department of Detailed Catechetics and Contemporary Forms of Conveying Faith at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin compiled a comprehensive *status quaestionis* of research from various academic disciplines devoted to the student strike at the school in Miętne. The sources gathered during these studies, both existing and newly produced, help to continue the analysis of this event. This article attempts to answer the question of what was the testimony of faith in the struggle for the crosses at the school in Miętne and to what extent this stance can serve as a source for contemporary catechesis. The article is inspired by J. Cardijn's paradigm of "See – Judge – Act", which in this case refers to a scientific model⁵.

Testimony

Responding to the question of what the term "testimony" means, Paul VI referred to a legal opinion indicating that testimony is a statement proving the truthfulness of something. Furthermore, the pontiff stressed that besides all that we have validated ourselves, our entire knowledge relies on the testimony of other people. In theological terms,

² J. Żaryn, *Miętne, czyli Wrzesnia najmłodszego pokolenia "Solidarności"* (grudzień 1983 – kwiecień 1984), in: *Nauka o miłości, odwadze i Krzyżu. 40. rocznica obrony Krzyża w Zespole Szkół Rolniczych w Miętne*, ed. A. Kiciński, Kielce 2014, pp. 117-134; A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy o walce o krzyże w szkole w Miętne*, in: *Nauka o miłości, odwadze i Krzyżu. 40. rocznica obrony Krzyża w Zespole Szkół Rolniczych w Miętne*, ed. A. Kiciński, Kielce 2014, pp. 21-116.

³ M. Chmielewski, Ł. Drożak, *Obrona krzyża w Miętne w prasie amerykańskiej*, in: *Nauka o miłości, odwadze i Krzyżu. 40. rocznica obrony Krzyża w Zespole Szkół Rolniczych w Miętne*, ed. A. Kiciński, Kielce 2014, pp. 143-176.

⁴ P. Goliszek, *Obrona krzyża w Miętne w archiwach IPN. Perspektywa katechetyczna*, in: *Nauka o miłości, odwadze i Krzyżu. 40. rocznica obrony Krzyża w Zespole Szkół Rolniczych w Miętne*, ed. A. Kiciński, Kielce 2014, pp. 247-275.

⁵ B. Przywara, A. Adamski, A. Kiciński, M. Szewczyk, A. Jupowicz-Ginalska, 2021. *Online Live-Stream Broadcasting of the Holy Mass during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland as an Example of the Mediatization of Religion: Empirical Studies in the Field of Mass Media Studies and Pastoral Theology*, "Religions" vol. 12, no. 4: 261, pp. 6-7, DOI: 10.3390/rel12040261; M. Chmielewski, M. Nowak, P. Stanisław, J. Szulich-Kałuża, D. Wadowski, *Komunikacja Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce w okresie pandemii Covid-19. Raport z badań interdyscyplinarnych*, (Edukacja – Media – Teologia), Kraków: Wydawnictwo "Scriptum" 2022, pp. 12-13.

testimony is a transmission of the Christian message. According to the Holy Father, the Christian testimony contains three major elements. Firstly, it includes a personal conviction that a given thought, words, and deeds are truthful and serve the truth. Secondly, it arises from a properly formed conscience, one capable not only of distinguishing good from evil but also of listening attentively to the Word of God, which continually reminds us that it is God's will for people to be witnesses. Importantly, as emphasized in this pastoral discourse, such a testimony is not merely conventional or external, nor is it simply a repetition of what has already been verified in history. Rather, it is situated within the Christian economy of salvation, which concerns the fulfilment of God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ, Who, in His final earthly instruction, told His disciples: "You are witnesses of this" (Lk 24: 48). Thirdly, testimony is meant to awaken faith⁶.

All three elements are present in the history of the struggle over the Christ's Cross at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne. When analysing the presence of the Crucifix in the Polish history, Jan Żaryn places the events in Miętne as a consequence of Pope John Paul II's second pilgrimage to Poland in 1983 and the 1980 workers' strikes, which took place under the sign of the Cross, a symbol of Christian values. Indeed, in the autumn of 1980, the students of the school in Miętne hung crosses in all classrooms. The author notes that the Cross, "beyond its obvious religious aspect, often symbolized the nation's aspirations for independence, expressed the longing for the rule of justice, and ultimately constituted proof and testimony of the gratitude of a free nation"⁷. According to the author, this was a time when "prayer accompanied the organisers of the trade union structures, religious and patriotic rallies, and successive strikes taking place within the 16 months of existence of legal Solidarity"⁸. The presence of the Cross and prayer in a prestigious agricultural school, which was yet administered by the communists, was by no means self-evident. The position adopted by the young people was courageous. Analysing the chronology of the students' strike at the school, the first and foremost question concerns the Cross itself, followed by the testimony of faith expressed in the hymn *We Want God*. Here is an excerpt from the organizers' description of one of the initial episodes in the struggle for the crosses in Miętne:

⁶ Paweł VI, *Trwajcie mocni w wierze*, vol. 2, Kraków 1974, pp. 393-396.

⁷ J. Żaryn, *Miętne, czyli Września*, p. 117.

⁸ Ibidem.

19 December 1983 (Monday). The Student Council, acting on behalf of the students, presents the headmaster with a written statement requesting answers to the following questions:

- Who, and upon whose orders, removed the crosses?
- What legal basis was this decision taken on? Does the headmaster possess a directive in this matter, and by whom is it signed?
- Why was this decision not consulted with the students, given that the crosses had been officially hung with the consent and approval of the school administration?
- Why is it forbidden for crosses to hang in Miętne, while in other schools they remain in place?
- Where are the removed crosses now, and may the students have them returned?

The letter from the Student Council was read aloud during the assembly by Headmaster Domański, who gave the following responses:

- the crosses were removed in order to restore legal order;
- the school is a secular institution, and the state is tolerant in accordance with the Constitution (he quoted and interpreted Articles 81 and 82 according to his own discretion);
- the crosses had been hung during the period of “Solidarity” activity, when various decisions were imposed upon the authorities;
- in other schools, the crosses will likewise be removed in the near future.

These explanations could not satisfy the students. Their reaction was to refuse to disperse to their classrooms. For one and a half hours, the youth remained in the assembly hall, singing religious hymns, e.g. *We Want God*⁹.

This testimony, provided by several students from the student council, was supported by the signatures of 256 students out of the 600 enrolled at the school. Each signature represented a personal profession of faith, affirming that their words and actions were truthful and served the cause of truth, despite the arrival of the prosecutor, who threatened the youth with reprisals, expulsion from school, and the severe consequences imposed by the communist regime of the time. One of the school headmaster’s initial reactions only served to confirm the religious motivation underlying the students’ testimony.

9 January 1984 (Monday). At the morning assembly, the headmaster announces his decision: in a secular school such as the Agricultural Technical School in Miętne, there is no place for religious forms or content. The outraged students gather in front of the school building

⁹ A. Kiciński, *Kompedium wiedzy o walce o krzyże w szkole w Miętne*, in: *Nauka o miłości, odwadze i Krzyżu. 40. rocznica obrony Krzyża w Zespole Szkół Rolniczych w Miętne*, ed. A. Kiciński, Kielce 2014, pp. 24-25.

and sing religious hymns for fifteen minutes, after which they calmly disperse to their classrooms. Discontent grows; discussions continue. A spirit of rebellion begins to foment among the youth¹⁰.

Catechetics

The students of the school in Miętne blazed a previously unknown path of faith. Attuned to the voice of their conscience, they fought for the crosses in their school despite the external threats. Their testimony of faith was straightforward and courageous. They became participants in the struggle for the restoration of a sovereign and democratic state at a time when fundamental freedoms and human rights were being violated in Poland. Above all, through their public profession of faith, they became intrepid witnesses to their devotion to Christ's Cross.

10 January 1984 (Tuesday). From 1:00 to 5:30 p.m., the students carried out a protest strike. After posting a quotation from Mickiewicz: "Only under the Cross, only under this sign, is Poland Poland, and a Pole is a Pole", the students chanted slogans: "Give us back the crosses", "We want the crosses", "We demand the crosses," while singing religious hymns. Accompanied by five teachers, the headmaster tried to confront the demonstration. The students closed their ranks, the older ones encouraging the younger, shouting: "Do not be afraid," "Stand firm," "We Are One"¹¹.

The purpose of testimony is to awaken faith. Faith is a gift from God, born deep within the soul as the fruit of grace and as a free response to the call of the Holy Spirit. Over the years, the youth of Miętne often reflected on the state of their own faith. Jerzy Rusak, a student fighting for the crosses, posed a question and provided an answer as follows:

Whether the protest arose from deep faith in everyone, I do not know; at any rate, even if someone had other motivation for joining the strike, it is certain that once they became involved in the protest, that faith was awakened¹².

At the research stage of "seeing," it was noted that the striking youth, their parents, and the teachers who stood in defence of the Cross of Christ were laypeople serving the truth revealed by Christ. They became witnesses to what the Church continually teaches, yet they were open and engaged in what the Holy Spirit directs the Church to

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 25.

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 25-26.

¹² A. Ilczuk, *Biskup Jan Mazur a strajk młodzieży szkolnej w Miętne w 1984 r.* Warszawa 2003, [typed manuscript], p. 13, Master's thesis written for the Church History seminar under the supervision of Tadeusz Krawczak, PhD., at the Pontifical Theological Faculty, John the Baptist Section, Warszawa.

embrace, allowing this small community of faith to experience it under those difficult circumstances.

Faith

Catechetics

Faith is an act of the human person entrusting oneself to God. It is an act with an interpersonal structure, grounded in trust directed towards a personal God, as emphasized by *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed” (CCC 150). It is an interpersonal event initiated by God who reveals Himself, whose call is recognised by man and responded to with a personal decision. In this way, faith becomes a whole-person act of life in the Community of the Persons of the Triune God and an event leading towards the ideal of man, “to the perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4: 13). In its essence, faith is a decision and attitude of man that creates and enriches his person (only a person is capable of faith), because faith reveals and realises the person and defines the personal “I”. Faith develops the person and energises them through aspirations, will, and decisions arising from faith and relating oneself to God and people. Since faith is an act of the whole human person (*actus humanus*), through faith a person expresses their entire world, which towers above temporal reality, transcends its capacities, giving it a supernatural meaning, reaching values that are not visible in immanent reality. Therefore, developing faith in human life is the creation and shaping of human personality, authenticity of life, self-awareness; it is the subjectification of life and action, it is the creative activation of the human person in the religious sphere, in the area of their vocation, in cultural creativity and in social engagement. When education in faith in the family, school, and parish promotes the growth of faith understood as an act and attitude [“trust in God (*fides qua*) and loving consent to all He has revealed to us (*fides quae*)”¹³], it on the one hand fosters the process of upbringing to Christian life, and on the other hand makes upbringing personalistic, i.e. universal. The effort manifests itself mainly in the responsibility for man and in religious, moral, existential, personal, and socio-cultural growth¹⁴.

¹³ Papieska Rada ds. Krzewienia Nowej Ewangelizacji, *Dyktorium o katechizacji*, Kielce 2020 [= DK], no. 9.

¹⁴ Cf. P. Goliszek, *Personalistyczny wymiar katechezy*, Lublin 2017, pp. 296-297.

The young people who took up the fight to defend the crosses removed from classrooms at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne demonstrated religious and social maturity as well as patriotism and moral values, professing their faith and bearing witness to it. The defence of Christ's Cross organised by the students was not only a protest in its historical narrative, but also an act of confession of faith, a "deed of faith", since "faith without deeds is dead" (James 2: 26). The struggle to have the crosses reinstalled in school classrooms was, on the one hand, a public profession of faith and, on the other, a manifestation of patriotism, which in Poland stems from "the truth of the Gospel and the Cross of Christ, as well as from the mystery of the individual and the 'community person' represented by the family, the nation and the Church"¹⁵. The events taking place in Miętne were a manifestation of the faith, which in theological terms marks the fulfilment of the entire human person, since "faith transforms the whole person" (LF 26)¹⁶, "For it is with the heart that one believes to be put right with God, and it is with the mouth that one confesses to be saved" (Rom 10: 10).

Through their resolute stance, the students who stood up for the proper place and respect of the crosses in the school were telling a story about their faith, but in an essential sense, they were also expressing the truth about themselves, i.e. who they are as believers and what kind of citizens of Poland they are. The defence of the crosses was, in a way, a defence of Christian-national identity, of faith and religiosity, and of human dignity along with its inalienable personal, humanistic, cultural, and patriotic freedoms. Their public testimony of faith and dialogue with all the offered assurance and called upon others to be courageous, as emphatically underscored by Bishop Jan Mazur in his statement:

The March days of 1984 made an indelible imprint not only on the hearts of the school students of the Agricultural Schools Complex in Miętne, but also echoed far and wide in Poland and the world. People admired the students' stance in defence of their most sacred religious sentiments, in defence of the symbol of the Cross, their patience and the peace and trust rooted in their religious beliefs. In defending their ideals, the youth relied on God and the Church, providing all of us with both an example and an encouragement to adopt a similar attitude in the effort to renew individuals and the Nation in the present moment¹⁷.

¹⁵ P. Goliszek, *Personalistyczny patriotyzm narodu polskiego*, in: *Wychowanie patriotyczne*, ed. P. T. Goliszek, Sandomierz 2018, p. 69.

¹⁶ Francis, Encyclical letter on faith *Lumen fidei* (= LF).

¹⁷ A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy...*, p. 38.

Because faith develops and energizes the human person through aspirations, decisions, and the orientation of oneself towards God and others, it constitutes a creative impetus for the human person in religious terms, within the sphere of one's vocation, in cultural creativity, and in social engagement. It is precisely this faith, which shaped their spirituality, human personality, and the authenticity of their lives, that became the central theme of life and action in this historical testimony of faith. One may say that faith was the force, the motivation, the content, and the event that created the historical reality of the defence of the crosses at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne. Historical reality is always the history of a human being, a concrete individual; it is also history within the human person. Therefore, there is no history without man, nor man without history. There is the human being and there is history¹⁸. There is a very significant note of 8.05.1984 marked as "confidential", concerning the conflict at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne; it was exchanged between the interdepartmental committee of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party and the Provincial Office of Internal Affairs in Siedlce:

The School's Teachers' Council have in practice lost their influence over the young people. On March 6, the young people did not take part in lessons but sang religious songs in the lobbies. In the afternoon, the students would in large numbers take part in religious services and marches in the streets of Garwolin. On March 7, the protests of the same nature continued. (...) At the same time, relevant action was taken by the services of the Interior Ministry¹⁹.

The account of the young people's fidelity to God, their unshakeable faith and determined attitude in the face of persecution are equally significant:

6 March 1984 (Tuesday). The students refuse to attend classes, praying together from morning until 2 p.m. Only a dozen or so people, led by the chairwoman of the Union of Socialist Polish Youth, do not take part in the protest. However, students on sick leave come to school. Students hang a plaque with the words of Romuald Traugutt on the bust of the school's patron, Stanisław Staszic: "We were faithful to God in days of victory and glory, we will remain faithful to Him in days of persecution and defeat. God shall not forsake us"²⁰.

¹⁸ Cf. Cz. S. Bartnik, *Historia i myśl*, Lublin 1995, p. 17.

¹⁹ Archives of the National Remembrance Institute, file no. BU 1585/1272, *Materiały przekazane przez KC PZPR, Informacja w sprawie naruszania zasad świeckości szkoły*, sheet 208.

²⁰ A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy*, p. 28.

In the context of facts and descriptions, it should be clarified that, fundamentally, history does not so much present events and facts as it asks questions about people, speaks about them, and expresses in words the truth about individuals or groups of people who make up a given community and culture. The meaning of history is to embrace and understand the world of a person, all the past experiences of a human being separated by time. It is about the history of the whole person, not just fragmentary or isolated facts. In this way, history acquires its subjectivity, or personality. Then it is no longer a cognitive relationship between phenomena and things, but ultimately a relationship between persons²¹. Defending their faith and the sign of the Cross, through their attitude and testimony, the students at the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne internalised their faith in personal communion with Jesus Christ, Whom they had come to know at home and in their parish, participating in the liturgy and receiving the sacraments. It can be said that in this way they evangelised the history they left as a legacy and proof of their fidelity to God, the Church, and mankind.

Therefore, the discovery of the truth about the past by human beings is an encounter with a reality that originates in bygone time. Yet this reality is not created by them; it exists and also persists in one form or another in the present, demanding acknowledgment. In historical narrative, what was once subjective and objective becomes actualized and impact both the present and the future; it is both general and individual²². Thus, the faith of the youth from the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne, expressed in their defence of the Cross, exerts a tangible influence on attitudes towards current challenges related to the removal of Christian symbols and signs of faith from the public sphere.

History is what presents itself, and in a sense even carries a new history of the future, either by warning against mistakes attested by the past, or by pointing to exemplary attitudes as a model for the future. It is understood that history contains an ambivalence of good and evil, truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, meaning and nonsense. One can also speak of an upward current of history (good), which guides humanity toward truth and goodness, leading individuals to higher values, and even to the virtue of heroism, elevating them above themselves. Conversely, there is a downward current of history (evil), which leads to destruction, annihilation, and depravity, guiding humans toward bestiality. This does not refer to the ordinary level of

²¹ Cf. P. Goliszek, *Personalistyczny patriotyzm...*, p. 72.

²² Cf. Cz. S. Bartnik, *Osoba i historia*, Lublin 2001, p. 62.

human existence, but rather to a morally degenerate course in a particular sense. History moving towards nothingness, anti-values, and transience becomes a historical tragedy, a degeneration, and an anti-personal process²³.

Such phenomena are best illustrated in the following account:

PS. – a note from July 1984. As was to be expected, neither the administration of the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne, nor other authorities felt obliged to honour their commitments:

- Contrary to the agreement, Headmaster Domański opposed the re-admission of certain students, and even entire classes, to the school. For example, 18 students from the third class of the Agricultural Technical School were not accepted on the pretext that there were too few of them to form a class, whereas in another instance only six students were sufficient;
- Under the pretext of reorganization, which in some cases involved increasing the number of students per class, seven teachers were threatened with transfer to other schools and locations, without regard for housing, commuting, or their professional ambitions and specializations. These included older teachers, especially those who had significantly contributed to the establishment of the school in Miętne. Some were even prohibited from entering the school premises;
- On the day of the school year's conclusion, students were not allowed to enter the library, where the Cross they had fought for was displayed;
- Shortly after the school year ended, the militia approached some graduates, suggesting that they do military service in the Motorized Reserves of the Citizens' Militia (ZOMO). They of course refused, though it is unclear whether this was a "proposal not to be refused"²⁴.

At the methodological stage of "judging": history is the pursuit of understanding the past for the sake of the future. Knowledge of the past must yield such an understanding of past events as to better comprehend the perspective of present occurrences and even anticipate the future. History teaches the understanding of all that exists in time and, consequently, cultivates understanding and responsibility for current and future existence. Lives enlivened through historical narrative offer guidance and cautionary lessons. History, therefore, constitutes an essential dimension of every human being's existence. It generates spiritual identity. There can be no ethos of a nation or homeland

²³ Cf. K. Michalski, *Między heroizmem a bestialstwem*, Częstochowa 1984², pp. 107-140.

²⁴ A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy...*, p. 32.

without history, which must always be understood not merely as the past, but as a shared future²⁵.

Catechetics

The value of the historic testimony helps to understand the present and sheds light on the future, as stressed by Holy Father Saint John Paul II in his homily during the Holy Mass in Siedlce during the apostolic journey to Poland 5-17.06.1999:

The Cross gave them strength to bear witness to Christ and His Church. They showed forth the truth of Saint Paul's words (...): 'If God is for us, who is against us?' (Rom 8: 31). (...). In Poland, a countless number of people suffered for the Cross of Christ and bore the greatest sacrifices for it. Often in its history, our nation had to defend its own faith and endure oppression and persecution for fidelity to the Church. The post-War period in particular was a time of especially intense struggle against the Church, waged by a totalitarian system. The attempt was made then to forbid the teaching of religious education in schools; the public display of faith was made difficult, as was the building of churches and chapels. How many sacrifices had to be made, what courage was needed to keep our Christian identity intact. Yet no one succeeded in removing the Cross, that sign of faith and love, from personal and social life, because it was deeply rooted in the soil of people's hearts and consciences. For the nation and for the Church it became a wellspring of strength and a sign of unity among people. The new evangelization needs true witnesses of faith. It needs people rooted in the Cross of Christ and ready to accept sacrifice for the sake of the Cross. An authentic testimony to the life-giving power of the Cross is given by those who, in its name, overcome in themselves sin, egoism and every evil, and want to imitate the love of Christ to the very end. As in the past, the Cross must continue to be present in our lives as a clear pointer to the path to follow and as a light which illumines our whole being. May the Cross, the very form of which unites heaven and earth and men among themselves, flourish in our land and become a great tree laden with the fruits of salvation. May it bring forth new and courageous proclaimers of the Gospel, who love the Church and take responsibility for the Church, true heralds of the faith, a breed of new men. May they be the ones to light the torch of faith and to carry it burning brightly across the threshold of the third millennium.

Cross of Christ, to you be praise.

*We hail you in every age,
from you there spring power and strength,
in you our victory! [Siedlce 10.06.1999]"²⁶.*

²⁵ Cf. P. Goliszek, *Remembering the Past, Shaping the Future*, RPK 5 (2013), pp. 204-208.

²⁶ A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy*, pp. 114-115.

The testimony of faith is invariably a response to God's action. However, time and place change, and this must be taken into account at the stage of the pastoral paradigm of "judging". The faith of the students who fought for the Cross in Miętne was primarily ecclesial in form. Although the contemporary situation regarding religious education in schools in Poland bears many analogies to the one described, the criteria of faith are well established. The criterion of the ecclesial nature of faith reflects the faith of the entire People of God: the faith of the apostles, the faith of the martyrs, the faith of the saints and blessed, the faith of pastors, the faith of teachers, the faith of children and youth, the faith of parents, and the faith of those responsible for organizing catechesis. The faith transmitted by the Church is one and possesses its own specific language, which requires consideration of its own dynamic response to God and to people in the present time and place.

Testimony of the language of faith

When scrutinising the question of the testimony of faith in catechesis, in the "seeing" – "judging" – "acting" paradigm, Franciszek Blachnicki noted that in the New Testament we deal with two forms of a testimony. One, typical of John, is evident in the message of the Divine Word: "Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, Who is life – this is our subject. That life was made visible: we saw it and we are giving our testimony, telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we are telling you so that you too may be in union with us, as we are in union with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1: 1-3). The other testimony is of Paul's type. Paul was not able to say that he saw with his own eyes, watched and touched Him with his own hands. The other type of a testimony was not historical, like the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. It was the consequence of a mystical encounter on the road to Damascus, where he met the risen and glorified Jesus. Paul's subsequent preaching is filled with the testimony of that encounter, a testimony of faith. These two types of testimony form a unified whole and must occur together. Subsequently, Blachnicki offered his recommendations for catechesis in Poland, most of which remain relevant to this day²⁷.

²⁷ F. Blachnicki, *Świadectwo wiary w katechezie*, "Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe" 5 (1981), pp. 83-97.

The youth who stood by the Cross in Miętne in 1984 embodied many of these elements, certainly those who did not desert. At first, they lived through the events historically and can say that their eyes saw, their ears heard, and their hands touched this reality. Secondly, they received the grace of forming a faith-filled environment in which their Christianity matured. Perhaps their narratives focus too much on the chronology of historical events and, in a way, on the justified attempt to reconstruct everything in minute detail.

In their case, scientific reflection, such as that of Flavio Pajer, can be helpful. At the stage of “acting”, he emphasizes the language of testimony, which should be the language of the contemporary catechesis. Incidentally, the language of catechesis should itself be the language of testimony. According to Pajer, the language of catechesis, essentially one of testimony, is triple-coded and includes the narrative code, the explicit code, and the explanatory code²⁸.

The extant sources feature a “narrative code”, which can be described as local, despite the worldwide attention to the events. This observation regarding a specific narrative code in no way diminishes the students’ position. The students came from villages or small towns of the former Diocese of Siedlce, e.g. Podlasie. They demonstrated diligence, attachment to the land, honesty, and, above all, obedience to their parents and to the Church. Some of them lived closer to the Church, others were farther away, yet, their fidelity to the values inherited from their families and learned in the Church was inherent to their “genetic code”. Their specific narrative code was deeply rooted in their hearts, and they were unaccustomed to doing anything for applause or show. Among themselves, they chose individuals from among the ones of urban origin, educated or capable of clearly expressing their ideas. This is well reflected in old photographs which show e.g. all of them kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in the church, holding the crosses removed from the school or with those gifted to them by Bishop Jan Mazur, the then-ordinary. This narrative language, proper to the defenders of the Cross, was aptly theologically decoded by the current Bishop of Siedlce, Kazimierz Gurda, who observes:

We give thanks to God for the 40th anniversary of the defence of the Cross by the youth of the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne near Garwolin. This event, which took place four decades ago, revealed how the Lord worked in the hearts of the students, their parents, teachers, and catechists during a period of trial in their faith. Their openness to

²⁸ F. Pajer, *Świadectwo*, in: *Słownik katechetyczny*, ed. J. Gaevart, K. Misiaszek, Warszawa 2007, pp. 889-890.

the action of God's grace gave them the courage to profess their faith in Jesus Christ, Who suffered, died on the Cross, and rose again for our salvation. They endured a difficult period of persecution for standing up for the presence of Christ's Cross in the classroom. These events continue to strengthen us today in our fidelity to our Saviour²⁹.

The young people from Miętne included their own poetry in the narrative code which recalls the historical events at the root of holding on to Christ's Cross. They would likewise include the poetry by other authors, with a clear theological message:

Christ, We Shall Not Abandon Your Cross

Our voice of protest rings afar,
Awake, dear countrymen, take your stand.
The modern Judas took down our Cross
As once he did, to have silver in hand?

Let trumpet sound and hearts incline,
To bear the witness of our faith.
Miętne knows how to love the Sign
Of Christ; the young showed its glorious grace.

Behold their honour, see their might,
The very salt of this blessed land.
They proved the Cross's sacred worth,
Poles know it and understand.

Glory to you! Hail, faithful and strong,
The Cross brings us honour, it rights every wrong.
Through thorny paths, through trials we've gone –
Christ's holy Cross we'll never abandon!" (18 March 1984, youth of the Parish of Parczew)³⁰

Decoding the theological message of the striking students in Miętne, we must not lose sight of their own narrative and autobiographical language. In the contemporary catechesis, there is a clear renaissance of the narrative, "not only as a linguistic tool, but above all as a path through which a person comprehends oneself and the surrounding reality, and also as a means of making one's experiences meaningful"³¹. The Church community increasingly understands that faith is expressed more in stories than in doctrines. This is evident in the Bible, in which we find grand narratives about the creation of the world and

²⁹ K. Gurda, *List pasterski Biskupa Siedleckiego na Wielki Post (2024)*, L.dz. 155/2024, Siedlce 15.02.2024.

³⁰ A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy...*, pp. 37-38.

³¹ DK, no. 207.

accounts of ancient leaders who guided the people entrusted to them on paths along mountains and deserts. The piety of the students from Miętne is a fruit of the inculturation of faith among the People of God living in this part of Poland and it constitutes a precious treasure of the Diocese of Siedlce.

The second “explicit code” interprets, in the present time, the life situation arising from the recounted historical event and concrete life attitudes. The key interpretative elements of the explicit code are, firstly, the observable ethical qualifications of the youth, qualities inaccessible to the opposite side of the conflict. Secondly, the students’ autonomy. Before receiving support from priests and the community in Garwolin, they relied on one another for basic necessities, such as food, and for crucial strategies of action. Together with some teachers, they determined the boundaries of risk and put forth realistic demands. They protected their leaders and pursued their goal consistently. At every stage, they took into account the possibility of expulsion from school. There was always something more. For example, once they uncovered the falsehood of slogans about a secular school, their fervour in prayer directed to God, asking for guidance and deliverance, intensified.

The high ethical qualifications of the students allowed their faith to be characterized as healthy and mature – or rapidly maturing due to persecution. They listened to the Word of God at Mass and during frequent catecheses. The “explicit code” also contains several components and rules. It relates not only to social significance but also to the testimony of faith, which is of particular interest. Even the extant social sources contain Christian values such as humility and truth. Here is an example:

The Agricultural School Complex in Miętne near Garwolin is by no means an exceptional school. It is located on the periphery of Mazovia, in a predominantly agricultural area, with no significant cultural centre. Yet the truth of those days is remarkable: it turns out that the students of this otherwise unremarkable school had achieved such a level of political awareness that a high-ranking provincial official, cornered by them in a debate, referred to them as “political actors”³².

What is more, the “explicit code” is imbued with clear moral dilemmas related to the Christian conscience and the heart of the Gospel about the commandment of the love of God and the fellow man. A leader of the school strike, Jarosław Maczkowski, offered a testimony of faith which is as topical as ever:

³² A. Kiciński, *Kompendium wiedzy...*, p. 39.

How to overcome the hostility of those who protested in favour of the crosses in Miętne towards those who defended... well, it is unclear whether they defended Marxism or their personal positions within the PRL system...? And how can the hostility of the latter towards the former be brought to an end? This is the question today, six years later, after everything that has happened in the meantime, especially in the past year. It must be brought to an end. This is precisely what the Cross that they fought for obliges us to do.

In various conversations with the former opponents of the crosses in the school, they often propose a conciliatory approach: Let us mutually admit that we all erred in inflating insignificant matters, rooted in the realism of life, to exaggerated proportions. A Christian cannot accept this proposal. For him, the primacy of the spiritual over material values must be something real in his life.

Only one solution remains: without obscuring the essence of the dispute, stop reproaching anyone for having once adopted a mistaken stance. Forgive them. Then, they too may come to realize that they had been in the wrong. In any case, conditions will be created for good, harmonious coexistence, something urgently needed today in Poland³³.

Catechesis echoes the kerygma and emphasizes the propositional character of its message. In the cited testimonies of faith from the students of Miętne, there is a narrative, emotional, and existential quality. Despite the overt threats and persecutions directed at the young people, their attitude and message are purely evangelical, oriented towards a relationship with God, His Church, and even with their opponents. Their testimony also contains an “explanatory code.” According to Pajer, this code is necessary in a testimony of faith, because every testimony may provoke questions from the interlocutor and thus demand clarification. From these distinguishing features of the language of testimony, the author highlights its specific functions in relation to the education of faith. This is, fundamentally, a prophetic function³⁴. The headmaster of the school in Miętne was convinced that he had the backing of the party authorities and would be able to make the students abandon their struggle for the crosses. Furthermore, he was confident that if he could not overcome the young people, he was equipped with strong administrative arguments (e.g., expulsion from the school) that would persuade parents to influence their children. The events, however, took on a prophetic character, as the parents, through their closely intertwined words and actions, supported their children, demonstrating that the students could not withdraw from

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ F. Pajer, *Świadectwo*, p. 890.

what they had been taught at home. Moreover, their attachment to faith and to the Church had a salvific dimension, as they endorsed their children in the struggle for the crosses. Only 8 out of 124 parents signed the so-called loyalty declaration regarding the school's secular character, and a clear prophetic sign was the withdrawal of documents from the school by approximately 330 students.

The testimony of faith in the struggle for the crosses at the school in Miętne did not end in 1984; from a catechetical perspective, it continues to this day. Certainly, in various contemporary ecclesial contexts, there are aspects of catechesis which, while they are expressed in a different language, constitute a testimony of faith in which the action of God can be recognized. The stage of "acting" must be interpreted as the current challenge of defending anthropological, cultural, and religious values in the diverse languages of faith. This is intrinsic to the fulfilment of the Church's salvific mission, particularly the prophetic function, whose source is the Cross of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of humanity.

Conclusions and recommendations

Where did the young witnesses of faith from the school in Miętne, together with their teachers who defended the Cross in the public sphere, often at great personal cost, draw their inner, spiritual courage from? Their fortitude was rooted in the truth about Christ and in the Christian system of values they had been brought up on. The vast majority of the youth at that time not only heard about the fundamental principles of moral life but also practiced them in their daily existence.

Contemporary culture, with its rapid development of communication technologies, causes Christians of all generations, not only the younger demographics, to live in a state of continual re-evaluation of ethical and moral principles. The so-called traditional (social and personal) foundational values seem invalidated (cancel culture). This results in a profound ethical disorientation, spanning from extreme ecological ideologies to concepts such as global depopulation. In this climate of chaos and flight, prominent among the younger generation, guided by algorithms and AI, another destructive factor has emerged in the Polish educational system: the unlawful removal of religious education (not only Catholic) from public schools, coupled with the absence of a mandatory subject of ethics. Students at various educational levels float in an ethical vacuum. This deepens the crisis of both national identity, rooted in the Western and Christian culture, and personal identification at its most profound layers.

In light of the testimony of students and teachers from Miętne, both the Church and other institutions responsible for the education of the young generation today have the task to: (1) Educate teachers as witnesses of fundamental, universal human values; (2) Raise witnesses of Christian faith who, in the current digital culture, will be able to communicate the experience of their faith in Christ and His Cross in a three-dimensional code of personal expression: narrative, explicit, and explanatory.

The testimony of faith of students, parents, teachers, and priests in the struggle for the Cross is intertwined with patriotism, understood as love of one's homeland, reverence for culture and tradition, intergenerational solidarity, readiness for service, willingness to sacrifice for the national good, love of neighbour, solidarity, attachment to and care for family, responsibility for the weakest and the needy, generosity, and the capacity for self-sacrifice³⁵. These phenomena of patriotism should be recalled, discussed, and, above all, shown in terms of how they are nurtured, developed, and manifested within families and the Church. Education for patriotism entails understanding both personal and social freedom, as well as providing an example and model for the entire national and European community.

Finally, it should be emphasized that during the research for this article, new testimonies of faith were collected from those who did not participate directly in the school strikes in Miętne but formed a broader environment defending the Redeemer's Cross. They most often gathered in churches in larger or smaller towns and villages, where they too faced harassment from the authorities. Another direction for theological research is the need to document the testimony of living faith of priests who supported the youth during this time in various aspects of life. Many of the existing testimonies regarding priests may sound somewhat rhetorical; a deeper theological analysis is required of the steadfast stance of Fr. Dr. Władysław Zwierz and the engagement of Msgr. Stanisław Maksymowicz. Testimonies of teachers' faith are another field of research.

The ultimate testimony of faith in the struggle for the crosses in the school in Miętne in 1984, from a catechetical perspective, was certainly the *Appeal of the Youth Fighting for the Cross of Christ of the Agricultural School Complex in Miętne near Garwolin to Believing Youth in Poland and the World*, which reads in full as follows:

³⁵ Cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Chrześcijański kształt patriotyzmu*, Warszawa, 14 March 2017, no. 1-2.

After long struggles for the Christ's Cross in our school, invariably steadfast in our religious convictions in the face of school authorities who sought to deprive us of this Cross of Salvation, we were expelled from the school, denied the possibility of continuing our education. Compelled by these circumstances in the Year of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Redemption, we call upon the youth of all Poland and the world, the young people who hold Christ's Cross to be precious, the Symbol of Salvation and the Triumph of the good over deceit, of freedom over oppression, of justice over injustice, of love over hatred, of life over death. We call upon you, Friends of the Christ's Cross, in the name of our faith and humanism, to stand shoulder to shoulder with us at the Cross, whether it is present or will be placed in your schools or universities, and to express solidarity with us through your protest, your prayers, and your witness of life³⁶.

Certainly, the testimony of faith of those who fought for the Cross in Miętne, preserved and passed on in the local Catholic community, contributes to the growth of Christ's disciples and is a life-giving source of contemporary catechesis.

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