

Stanisław Bylina

THE SACRED SPACES OF RURAL SOCIETY TOWARDS THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The deliberations presented below are devoted to the rural Christian society which lived and moved in the sacred spaces which were organised for it by the Church, or which they created or co-created themselves.¹ I will speak about sacred buildings, their surroundings and the roads leading to them, placing chief emphasis, however, on their worshippers, users and observers. I will deal mainly with the peasant inhabitants of the countryside. The representatives of the gentry, that is landowners and church patrons, will appear only sporadically here, while those of the clergy, mainly the rural parish priests, will be given some more attention.

While trying to reconstruct the principal outline of the sacred spaces in the Polish countryside in the late Middle Ages, we have to take into consideration their various conditioning factors. We have to note the overlapping of the sacred space with the differentiated space of the natural environment; topographic differentiation matters also at the parish level. The distribution of old and new settlements was also significant. It affected the density of the network of rural churches, the size of parishes and the number of settlements they embraced. Many other things cannot be left out of account, either: for example ownership relationships and the resulting form of patronage over the parish churches. Finally, a factor of a special character was tradition,

¹ Here I refer to Bronisław Geremek's fundamental work, 'Poczucie przestrzeni i świadomość geograficzna', in *idem* (ed.), *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej XIV-XV w.* (Warsaw, 1997), 628-68. In the present study I refer many times to the content of my book *Chryścianizacja wsi polskiej w późnym średniowieczu* (Warsaw, 2002), chap. I and VII. Some issues I deal with were also taken up by Grzegorz Myśliwski, *Człowiek średniowiecza wobec czasu i przestrzeni. Mazowsze od XII do poł. XVI w.* (Warsaw, 1999).

local or transplanted by incomers, in the sphere of attitudes, beliefs and various habits of the rural population.

I

THE PARISH CHURCH IN THE OPEN SPACE

The sacred space of the Polish lands was defined by several thousand sanctuaries of various rank, size and purpose. Most of them were parish churches, sometimes with chapels subordinated to them, and the second in number were monastic churches. We shall be concerned with in the first place the parish churches, the centres of the Christian worship and the religious life of the rural population, the goals of Sunday and feast-day wanderings of people trained in their fundamental duties towards God and Church.

In comparison to the number of parishes in the developed countries of Western Europe, the total number of 6,000 parishes in the Polish dioceses towards the end of the 15th century, when seen in proportion to the areas concerned, was not large. However, such comparisons have little value if they do not take into account the local conditions and many factors that can give us an idea of the actual degree to which the country was supplied with sanctuaries. This is especially important with regard to the Christianisation of the countryside. It was characteristic of Poland that the parish districts here each embraced many, sometimes more than a dozen, or even dozens of, at that time very small, settlements.² One must also remember that parish villages, which were most often at the same time the centres of the gentry estates, were the most populous agglomerations in a multi-village parish. One-village parishes prevailed only in certain areas, actually in a few deaneries. The Oświęcim and the Nowy Targ deaneries, and partly the Wieluń arch-deanery may here serve as examples.

The ties linking the parishioners to the parish church and the quality of their religious life largely depended on the size of the parish

² For the issue of the parish network in medieval Poland, the size of parish districts and many matters concerning rural parishes, of fundamental value are the results of research by Edward Wiśniowski, 'Rozwój organizacji parafialnej w Polsce do czasów reformacji', in Jerzy Kłoczowski (ed.), *Kościół w Polsce*, 2 vols. (Cracow, 1968–70), I, 237–372, and its extended version: *idem, Parafie w średniowiecznej Polsce. Struktura i funkcje społeczne* (Lublin, 2004). There is also a significant study by Jacek Wiesiołowski, 'Środowisko społeczne wsi', in Geremek (ed.), *Kultura Polski*, 117 ff.

district and the situation of the settlements belonging to it, or, more simply speaking – the distance that divided them from the church. There were attempts to present this situation, largely differentiated in the Polish lands, by using many eloquent examples.³ These surveys frequently show the prevalence of a two-, three-, or several kilometre distance (in a straight line). Longer distances, that also occurred, were arguments for applications addressed to the diocese ordinaries for the foundation of new parishes, the division of the old, or correction of their boundaries. Sometimes the erection of chapels subordinated to the local parish church was a solution that met the religious needs of the believers who lived too far away, and the ambitions of the gentry – their owners.

The phrase *raro vel nunquam*, encountered in foundation documents, referred to distances considered as long, and eloquently described the situation of parishioners who either visited the church very rarely, or simply did not take part in services, and consequently did not receive sacraments. This formula should not be ignored – it reflected upon the reality of many large parishes with far-flung settlements. In a few cases we know of, the formula *raro vel nunquam* referred to the distance of 10 kilometres in a straight line, and even longer.

The attempts to improve the situation reflected in documents depended directly on the will and the financial possibilities of persons who could found and maintain the parish church or a chapel subordinated to it. Where the difficulties presented by the area were too large, the situation did not improve in the later centuries, either.

The literature of the subject frequently confirms the dispersal of the parish network (that is the gradual enlargement of parish districts) in the direction from West to East of the Polish Kingdom. This was, however, only a general tendency, from which there were exceptions. There were vast parishes in the East, embracing more than 150 kilometres square, in the Lublin arch-deanery, but also in the Radom arch-deanery, situated more towards the centre of the country. Another thing to be noted is the fact that most of the area of

³ The factors conditioning the ties linking the rural population with their parish churches have been discussed by Wiśniowski (in both works cited in note 2), and Bylina, in *Chryścianizacja wsi*, 15 ff., as well as by Izabela Skierska, *Obowiązek mszalny w średniowiecznej Polsce* (Warsaw, 2003), chap. II (a work of value also in relation to other detailed questions I am touching on).

some very large parishes was occupied by woods or marshes, which were either uninhabited, or inhabited by very small groups of people. Hence, the accessibility to Church services cannot be always measured by the size of a parish district.

Of decisive importance, apart from distance, were topographic conditions, and among them the extent of forest areas, the type of soil and the watercourse network. These factors must be added to the state of roads, which was essential. Under the conditions where forests and woods still covered a large part of the country, the parishioners who went to church often used the roads running through the wood, and sometimes had to avoid the places difficult to cross.

The large belts of marshes and swamps in Masovia and in the borderland with Greater Poland divided the populated areas and were, of course, impossible to wade through. The obstacles in the form of smaller marshy patches of ground (today impossible to reconstruct) made the way to church from some localities longer. The necessity to cross bigger rivers occurred sporadically, since they seldom crossed a parish district. A more serious and frequent obstacle consisted of periodic floods of small rivers, or even streams. The ecclesiastical authorities considered flooding as a fundamental impediment to the steady contact of parishioners with their church. For example, the document of the Gniezno suffragan who established the church at Łagiewniki shows how difficult it was for the local people to reach the parish church (because of those floods), with the result that children died there un-baptised, and the adults did not receive their Last Sacraments.⁴

The initiative of establishing a parish church at Masovian Łęg (1309), which served 18 villages, was justified both by a big distance to the existing parish church and by the flooding of roads as well as the obstacles characteristic of winter season. Another new parish, in the Pułtusk arch-deanery (1377) in Masovia, was to embrace the population who previously, in order to reach the church at Pułtusk, had to go a long way, during which they were exposed to the cold, snowfall or rain, and last but not least, threatened by the attacks of Lithuanians.⁵

⁴ Antoni Gąsiorowski and Tomasz Jasiński (eds.), *Kodeks dyplomatyczny Wielkopolski*, viii (Warsaw and Poznań, 1989), no. 418, year 1401.

⁵ Irena Sułkowska-Kuraś and Stanisław Kuraś (eds.), *Nowy kodeks dyplomatyczny Mazowsza*, vols. ii-iii (Warsaw, 1989, 2000), ii, no. 122, pp. 119–20; iii, no. 188, pp. 203–4.

We must, however, take into consideration that foundation documents for obvious reasons inform us only about the difficulties the parishioners had to overcome to participate in services. These difficulties need not have generally been so great. We also know of the means applied in order to enable or at least to make easier for the parishioners the fulfilment of their basic religious obligations.

Only a small group of population encountered conditions that in practice barred their relatively systematic contact with the parish church. Apart from those who lived in the most distant villages, this concerned some inhabitants of small iron smelting settlements or forest tar workshops. Individuals or families who lived in almost completely deserted villages could also find their contact with the church difficult, which was, however, an aspect of their general underprivileged situation. In the Lubasz parish in Greater Poland, which was defined as 'in toto deserta', there was still a miller who paid the *missalia* (a church tax). In another village, defined as 'fere in toto deserta', there still remained five peasants.⁶

The fact that parish districts in the Polish lands usually embraced many settlements, had significant consequences. We must note that the old Polish word *osada* (settlement), a synonym of a place inhabited by people, when relating to a village, designated a parish village, more distinguished than others.⁷ Hence one of the above-mentioned consequences was an informal but significant division of the country population into the privileged inhabitants of parish villages, and those of more distant settlements, deprived of various opportunities. The former found it easier to follow services, religious ceremonies and ecclesiastical customs, and had an easier access to the parish clergy, etc. Some of them, very few, of course, could achieve a dignity accessible even to rustics: finding favour with the parish priest or the landowner they could obtain the prestigious function of church administrator (*vitricus ecclesiae*). Much more often than their co-parishioners who lived farther away, they sent their sons to parish schools, not without a hope for their future career in the Church. Those who lived farther and whose contact with the church was not so regular, and periodically, in unfavourable conditions, only sporadic,

⁶ Józef Nowacki (ed.), *Księga uposażeń diecezji poznańskiej z roku 1510* (Poznań, 1950), 81–2. See also many examples of deserted villages.

⁷ See the entry 'Osada', in *Słownik staropolski*, v, 8 (Warsaw, 1969), 632.

were generally removed from such and other opportunities and from the events of religious life. It can be assumed that they usually also represented a lower level of religious consciousness and knowledge.

A separate type of parish was the urban-rural one, that is such in the center of which was a church in a town, but which embraced also the adjoining villages. I will dwell on this subject a little longer both because of the specificity of such parishes and their large number; it is estimated that in Greater Poland about 20 per cent of the rural population belonged to that type of parishes. These were frequently large parish districts, both in respect of area and the number of villages they embraced. We know the examples of middle-size towns which as parish centres embraced more than ten, or even 20–30 villages; smaller parishes, of course, occurred as well.

Due to belonging to an urban-rural parish (I leave aside those whose centre was a small town), the inhabitants of villages had access to a richer, and more cultivated religious life. This related both to religious education (permanent exposition of the Bible in sermons-lectures) and to the more frequent participation in services and a more developed and decorative Church ritual. Coming to town they came in contact with various liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations that they could not encounter in the rural parish churches. The best opportunity for that was offered by visits to monastic churches.

While admitting that this category of rural parishioners were privileged in their access to a higher, urban quality of religious life, we should also perceive some limitations. Being formally members of the urban-rural parish community, they were outsiders to the urban one, they could not identify with the town and its specificity, also expressed in the worship.

Let us come back to the typically rural parish reality, which will be the main thread of my deliberations. For all the inhabitants of the country parishes the local church was an extremely significant landmark, incomparable with any other. In many villages it was situated in the centre, and adjoined a square that was the focus of all life not directly connected with farming and housework. In this way, in contrast to the gentry manor-house, which was usually situated outside the village, the church could be permanently seen by all the inhabitants. Let us note that these villages were not usually large, and numbered much fewer than two hundred inhabitants, or, as is estimated, not more than from ten, up to twenty families on average.

The church building, exceptional and distinguished in its surroundings, was well-set in the landscape of the village. Even when situated on flat ground, it towered over it by its size; this impression was enhanced when the church stood on a hill. Then its silhouette could be seen by people from other, not too distant settlements.

The silhouette of the church was certainly something that linked the country parishioners. They were also linked by the sound of the bell that summoned them to Mass, to prayer at fixed times of the day, and transmitted important intentions and information. It was the voice both of their small, parochial community, and the larger, Christian one: only the Church spoke to the people with the help of its sanctified bells. The Church authorities perceived the significance of the parish bells, and the priests were required to possess them and use them. In the rural parishes the voice of the bell in what was usually their only church, strengthened collective piety, encouraging the believers to pray also outside the sanctified premises, and at the same time instilled in their memory the texts of prayers, learned and systematically repeated at church. In the Płock diocese (statutes of 1398, 1423) a bell ringing at night, after sunset, summoned the people to say The Lord's Prayer for the intention of peace and Hail Mary in praise of the Mother of God.⁸ Even about a century later a negligent priest was admonished to observe ringing *ad vesperas, ad matutinas et pro pace*, that is three times a day, in his church.⁹

The sound of the bell informed of a parishioner's death and accompanied him on his way to the cemetery. The inhabitants were thus informed of this event and at the same time summoned to prayer for the intention of the departed. In case of danger, the bell united people in their prayer for its aversion, and even staved the evil off with its very sound. When it was ringing at the time of storm, so dangerous for houses, farms and crops, the parishioners, while listening, should beg the Lord for mercy. At such moments – some author of sermons said – the bell was also rung 'so that the devils hovering in the air

⁸ Jakub Sawicki (ed.), *Concilia Poloniae: Źródła i studia krytyczne* (hereafter: Sawicki, Conc. Pol.), vi: *Synody diecezji płockiej i ich statuty* (Warsaw, 1952), 250: the Synodal Statutes of Bishop Jakub of Korzkiew.

⁹ Bolesław Ulanowski (ed.), *Acta capitulorum necnec iudiciorum ecclesiasticorum selecta* (hereafter: Ulanowski, AC), 2 vols. (Cracow, 1894, 1902), ii (*Acta iud. ecl. Gneznensis*), no. 691, p. 324, year 1490.

should not do us harm, since the bells are the trumpets of Christ, the Lord of Heaven'.¹⁰

The multiple power of a church bell, however, was limited. It can be accepted that in one-village parishes the sound of the bell usually reached everybody, but in larger parishes its range depended on many factors: distance, shape of land, atmospheric conditions.

In a brick-built church what struck the eye was its material, rarely encountered in the country, the unusual silhouette, as well as equally unusual architectural elements: portals, windows and the towering steeple. Such churches, as we know, were few in medieval Poland, where wooden architecture prevailed also in sacral buildings. It has been computed that in Lesser Poland brick-built churches made up one fourth of the total of its rural parish churches. In other parts of Poland the predominance of wooden churches was even greater.¹¹

Hence, while looking at the way of Polish parishioners to the door of their church, we must remember that after crossing a short distance, sometimes of a few scores of paces, or a longer and more difficult one, most of them faced the entrance to a small wooden church. Despite the once large numbers of such structures, very few of them have survived, and besides, not only their furnishings and decoration, but many architectural details, have changed over the ages.

II

THE CHURCH – AN ENCLOSED SPACE

In contrast to the churches in towns, those in the Polish countryside were as a rule small, or even quite little. This relates especially to the wooden churches which, as we have mentioned, were incomparably

¹⁰ *Sermones discipuli de tempore et de sanctis cum Exemplorum Promptuario* (Venetiis, 1606), 410. Stanislas of Skarbimierz admonished the believers not to raise high crosses to prevent a thunderbolt, 'pulsare tamen campanas non est superstitiosum'; *idem, Sermones sapientiales*, ed. Bożena Chmielowska, 3 vols. (Warsaw, 1979), ii, 93.

¹¹ For the architecture of rural parish churches see respective parts of the collective work: Teresa Mroczo and Marian Arsyński (eds.), *Architektura gotycka w Polsce*, 4 vols. (Warsaw, 1995), i; as well as monographic works by Ryszard Brykowski, e.g. *Drewniana architektura kościelna w Małopolsce XV wieku* (Wrocław, 1981). We must also take into account the information contained in Wiśniowski's work, *Parafie w średniowiecznej Polsce*.

more numerous than those made of brick, since the latter were much more expensive. Computation shows that the most frequent in the villages of Lesser Poland were those with an area of 70–100 metres square; of course, there also occurred bigger ones, but such as could be considered relatively large, only sporadically. Rural brick-built churches had a larger area, most of them over 100 metres square, and sometimes even much larger.

Gothic brick churches and their contemporary wooden ones were better designed to meet the needs of the local parish (that is, above all, the number of its inhabitants) than earlier churches. The country people, many of whom sometimes set out beyond their own parish and visited near by towns, had a chance to see bigger churches than the local one. Nevertheless, we may suppose that when they faced the door of their local church, they did not feel it was small. Though the dimensions and appearance of those entrances might have varied, they were always imposing, two-part structures, strengthened by iron fixtures of unusual shapes; their dignity was enhanced by an ornamented portal. The portals of wooden churches were, of course, relatively plain; this was not only due to the quality of material, but also to the limited funds designed for their construction.

The country people must have been impressed by the considerable height of the church's inner space, usually incomparable with any other interior they knew. This impression was created not so much by the walls, but by the gable roof which gave the wooden churches their characteristic, slender shape. A country parishioner entered a space that might seem to him great, majestic and beautiful also because of its colours. The paintings on the walls representing the figures of the saints and various biblical scenes, as well as their ornaments were shimmering with various hues. 'We know the favourite juxtapositions of the Polish Gothic: vermilion, dark blues, light and vine greens, saffron yellows and deep brown', wrote a Polish researcher, while characterising the interiors of Polish churches in the later Middle Ages.¹²

On crossing the door of his little church, the rural parishioner could easily take in its interior with one sweeping glance.¹³ He left

¹² Tadeusz Trajdos, 'Pomniki sztuki gotyckiej w Polsce', in Geremek (ed.), *Kultura Polski*, 776.

¹³ About the church as an enclosed space see especially: Eugeniusz Wiśniowski, 'Kościół parafialny i jego funkcje społeczne w średniowiecznej Polsce', *Studia*

behind him everything he was used to in his everyday life and entered an enclosed sacred space. The church interior aroused admiration and special respect as a place of Communion with God, of solemn ceremonies and rituals, of the common prayer said by the whole parish community together with the priest. It was well known that a man who sought refuge in the House of God, also in a little rural church, would not be reached by the revenge of his enemies and persecutors, or by the arm of the law, if he was not an evident evil-doer, murderer, highway robber or destroyer of crops (*depopulator agrorum*).¹⁴

The patron-saint of a parish church enhanced its sacredness. This saint was spiritually present in the church bearing his name, and this presence could be felt. The parishioners came to know their holy patron during the Sunday exhortations or sermons. They knew his relics were laid in the altar and took part in great numbers in the annual celebrations of His Day (kermis).

Eugeniusz Wiśniowski's computations embracing all the urban and rural parishes of the Cracow and Gniezno dioceses¹⁵ have confirmed, side by side with the obvious primacy of the Virgin Mary as the patroness, the dominant position of St Nicholas and All Saints (in both dioceses), followed by St Catherine, St Martin, St John the Baptist, St James the Apostle and St Stanislas. The analysis of rural churches alone does not show any significant differences from this result.

The old tradition of the Church, based on the interpretation of the Bible, required that the chancel be orientated eastwards, that is towards the part of the World from which Christ will come on the Day of Judgement. While directing his paces towards the high altar situated near the eastern wall, the believer was gradually approaching the most dignified and sacred sphere. Here the Mass was performed by the priest with its impressive moment of Elevation, here the priest read mysterious, for incomprehensible passages from the Scriptures, and near the altar, in the side wall of the chancel the Holy Eucharist was preserved. In accordance with the local custom, under the stone or wooden floor of the church might find their rest its founders,

Theologica Varsoviensia, vii, 2 (1969), 187–265; *idem*, *Parafie w średniowiecznej Polsce*, chap. 4.

¹⁴ Jan Fijałek and Adam Vetulani (eds.), *Statuty synodalne wieluńsko-kaliskie Mikołaja Trąby z r. 1420* (Cracow, 1951 [1952]), 77.

¹⁵ Wiśniowski, *Parafie w średniowiecznej Polsce*, 225–7.

some members of their families, as well as parish priests and other distinguished persons from the parish.

The places nearest to the altar were reserved for the patrons of the church, the local owners of the landed estates together with their families. The patrons' pew designated for them was, apart from the seats for the clergy, the most privileged place. In a natural way the attention of the country parishioners was directed to it. They observed the behaviour of the gentry at church, the way they showed their piety and reacted to the words of the priest. At Mass, the folk were standing in the nave, men and women apart on both sides. However, this division of the church space according to sex was not generally established for the whole Church in Poland.

The place in the nave closer to the chancel was probably reserved for the manor officials and the petty gentry, if they lived in the parish. As regards the remaining space, we can suppose that it was subordinated to the internal country hierarchy. The places more in the forefront were probably reserved for peasants who enjoyed more prestige than others.

In the urban-rural parishes the interiors of the churches were 'privatised' by the families of patricians, guilds and fraternities,¹⁶ and the space designated for the country people was distant from the chief as well as the side altars. If – in contrast to the country churches – they possessed pews, they were certainly not designed for the peasants.

In a country church, despite the above-mentioned lack of pews for the congregation at large, and the lack of confessionals, which became popular only in early modern times, the nave was not empty. The interior was highlighted by side altars, in a country church usually two, dedicated to the chosen saints.

The believers standing in the nave were facing a big, centrally situated Cross with the figure of Christ. The Crucifix, supported by a rood beam that divided the nave from the chancel, towered over the congregation and directed their thoughts towards the Passion of the Saviour. The light, both natural and artificial, allowed the believers to see the details of the interior decoration. Thus they could see the religious paintings on the walls which, as may be concluded

¹⁶ Halina Manikowska, 'Religijność miejska', in *eadem* and Hanna Zaremska (eds.), *Ecclesia et civitas. Kościół i życie religijne w mieście średniowiecznym* (Warsaw, 2002), 26.

from the few surviving buildings, were a consistent element of the ornamentation of the rural, especially wooden churches. The wall paintings, like all the other elements of the decoration, were executed for the glory of God, but at the same time for the instruction and religious elevation of the people. However, if the clergy did not care to explain the meaning of these pictures to the parishioners, then their perception must have been incomplete and superficial. Indeed, although the most popular Christian themes must have been clear to everybody (especially those well-known from other forms of religious teaching, like the central moments in the lives of Christ and Virgin Mary), still the hagiographic cycles composed of many scenes, required explanation.

An outstanding expert on Gothic wall-paintings has observed that their basic, most popular cycles in Polish rural churches were those presenting Sin, Redemption and Last Judgement.¹⁷ To us her most essential statement is that just as

there were no strict rules concerning the choice of paintings that would illustrate the chief themes, so there were no fixed places in the church where they were presented ... For example the Last Judgement used to be displayed on the inner western wall, on the wall above the chancel arch in front of the spectators ... or on the northern wall and that of the choir ... Christ as Judge also used to be painted on the ceiling ... Places were chosen according to which could show best the themes that were thought important. For example the upper part of the eastern wall of the choir in the church in Strzelce (near Sobótka in Silesia) presented a picture of the condemned in Hell, among whom there was a man who played dice, a miser and a woman who did not want to pour more beer from a barrel.

Thus the paintings of special significance from the point of view of mass religious didacticism in the rural churches

were placed in front of the entrance, on the eastern wall of the choir, or on the rood arch, so as to focus the attention of those who entered, by imposing on them the presented theme.¹⁸

¹⁷ Alicja Karłowska-Kamzowa, 'Nauczanie obrazowe na ziemiach polskich w XIV i XV w. na przykładzie malowideł ściennych', in Teresa Michałowska (ed.), *Literatura i kultura późnego średniowiecza w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1993), 262–3.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

In the 15th century the rural parish churches displayed more and more statues of saints sculpted more often in wood than in stone. Crucified Christ and Pensive Christ (the latter type of the Saviour's figure became very popular in later times), Madonna and Child, Mater Dolorosa and Pietà were – side by side with the statues of male and female saints – the prevailing motifs of figural sculptures in the parish churches. Some images, especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary, could be especially familiar to the country people due to their resemblance to normal women they met every day.

The impression made on the parishioners by the interior of a church building, sometimes became so habitual that it faded away. This, probably, rather than the lack of room in the church could be the reason why on summer Sunday afternoons at Mass many men used to stay outside, in the churchyard. This was an offence to the unforbearing authors of sermons.

III CHAPELS

The establishment of chapels was to enable or make easier for some sections of parishioners the participation in services. The foundation documents usually invoke arguments similar to those we come across in the case of parish churches (long distances separating some villages from the sanctuary, difficulties in reaching it, etc.).¹⁹

The functioning of chapels depended on the conditions, possibilities and customs characteristic of a given parish. Obviously, of considerable significance was who was employed there. Usually the pastoral functions were performed by curates, either commuting to them on fixed days, or living on the premises permanently. The services they rendered depended largely on the income of the parish priest who was bound to maintain a permanently resident curate. Sometimes, especially when only one clergyman had to serve the parishioners, the parish priest himself came to the chapel.

The fact that there was a permanently operating chapel in the neighbourhood certainly changed the rhythm of religious life and

¹⁹ Jan Łaski, *Liber beneficiorum archidiecezyi gnieźnieńskiej*, ed. Jan Łukowski (hereafter: Łaski, LB), 2 vols. (Gniezno, 1880–1), i, 113, 115, 125, 127, 145, 151, 155.

the mobility of parishioners. However, by establishing new chapels the Church did not intend to exclude the majority of parishioners from the common parish life or to slacken their ties with the mother church; though the weakening of those ties must have been taken into account. According to the widespread regulation of this problem, though some numbers of parishioners could hear Mass on Sundays and some minor feasts outside their parish church, they had to visit it on the chief festivals (that is Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi and two festivals of the Virgin Mary). Also the basic sacraments (Infant Baptism, Easter Confession and Holy Communion) had to be received in the appropriate parish church. Other solutions either increased the pastoral autonomy of the chapel, or on the contrary, reduced it.

Unusual events connected with the chapel could distinctly, or even rapidly raise its prestige, so that it even overshadowed that of the parish church. Thus various miracles (*miracula varia*) that took place due to the intervention of St Ann renowned the wooden church in the Rajsk village in the Kalisz arch-deanery. Also the miraculous events supposed to occur in a little St Ann's Chapel in the Zalesie village in Greater Poland brought to this sanctuary crowds of pilgrims at the beginning of the 16th century. The church official, who did not give credit to the unconfirmed miracles, having heard the witnesses, ordered the chapel to be pulled down and burned, to prevent idolatry. We do not know whether the cult of this miraculous place was suppressed in this way.²⁰

Usually, however, the collapsing of chapels was not caused by unusual situations and was less dramatic and slower. The reasons might be very simple: lack of means for their maintenance or insufficient care on the part of parish priests, and sometimes also the depopulation of the villages that surrounded them. The results of these phenomena are evidenced in many records of the Gniezno archdiocese inventory book: *oraculum ruinosum*, *oraculum in toto ruinosum*, *oraculum in toto desolatum*.²¹ If the local cemetery was attached to the chapel, it also underwent a gradual devastation.

²⁰ Source references can be found in my article: 'Cuda we własnej parafii. Trzy wielkopolskie kulty pielgrzymkowe ze schyłku średniowiecza', in Wojciech Brojer (ed.), *Zródło. Teksty o kulturze średniowiecza ofiarowane Bronisławowi Geremekowi* (Warsaw, 2003), 168 and *passim*.

²¹ Łaski, LB, i, among other places 144–5, 151.

IV CEMETERIES

The burial place that surrounded the church was second to it in importance in the hierarchy of sacredness in a parish village or district. Just like the majority of rural sanctuaries, it was also usually small.²²

It seems that in the new parishes that arose towards the end of the Middle Ages the size of the cemetery was better adjusted to the population size. The church sources do not mention the problem of lack of places for the dead.

The sacredness of cemetery was confirmed by ecclesiastical statutes, visitation questionnaires and other source texts to which I will refer. The burial *locus sanctus*, just as the church situated in its area, was consecrated by the bishop, and just like it, it could be a refuge for the persecuted people. Being buried in a proper parish cemetery helped the soul of the dead man, while a pious contact with this place helped the living to correct their ways. The bishops promised indulgence to those who coming there would piously kneel down and say the designated prayers.²³

It happened that more wealthy persons, especially members of the gentry, chose their last resting-place outside their own parish. We know of the situation decided by the ecclesiastical court where the peasant population was buried in the local cemetery, while the owners of the estates in a neighbouring parish.²⁴ For the peasants, the churchyard was the only suitable and honourable burial-place. The rare cases of burying them 'in the fields and forests' (resulting from the distance separating their settlements from parish churches) were combated by the Church, as relics of paganism. The simple village-dwellers could not dream of being buried within the church, under the floor, which was the privilege of its founders and their progeny.

²² No works discussing comprehensively the subject of the late-medieval parish cemetery have appeared so far. Consequently, we have to consult Walenty Wójcik's article, 'Prawo cmentarne w Polsce do połowy XVI w.', *Polonia Sacra*, xix, 2 (1958), 165–218. Some important information may also be found in Alfons Labudda's work, *Liturgia pogrzebu w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1983). The late-medieval cemetery (mainly the urban one) is discussed by Hanna Zaremska, 'Człowiek wobec śmierci. Wyobrażenia i rytuały', in Geremek (ed.), *Kultura Polski*, 501 ff.

²³ Fijałek and Vetulani (eds.), *Statuty synodalne wieluńsko-kaliskie*, 58.

²⁴ Ulanowski, AC, ii (*Acta iud. eccl. Warsoviensis*), nos. 1849–50, pp. 873–4, year 1448.

In the cemetery, there was also a hierarchy of resting-places. The most prominent were those near the church, by its southern wall. Those near the fence were the worst, though they were still situated in the consecrated earth.

The sacredness of a parish cemetery was augmented by the liturgy performed in its area. The cemetery was the last stop of a procession that escorted the deceased to the accompaniment of the bells. At the grave the priest made his obsequies, usually in the presence of a large group of parishioners. The Church insisted on emphasising the solidarity of the living with the dead, encouraging the country people to participate in the funeral of their closer or more distant neighbour.

On All Souls' Day services were held in the cemetery for all the departed parishioners. The priest together with the believers raised prayers for the souls of those 'whose bodies are resting ... in this cemetery' as well as of those whose bodies, not found by their family and consequently not buried, were forsaken in some unknown, awe-inspiring places: 'on battlefields, or in waters'.²⁵

The memory of the dead was connected with the images of their life in the other world that the Church depicted, and with the places on earth where their bodies were buried. In this context the parish cemetery, well-known and familiar, was a good place.

The sacred character of cemeteries was connected with the religious processions conducted in their area on some festivals and – depending on the circumstances – also on ordinary Sundays. The way that surrounded the church, paved in the cemetery, was designed mainly for them. The participation in a parish procession was considered to be a good deed, and the gravity of a person's sin was lightened also when, immersed in prayer for the Church and peace, he walked round the cemetery alone.

The *sacrum* of cemeteries was guarded by ecclesiastical law that forbade burying the excommunicated dead and some categories of sinners un-reconciled with God. The Synodal Statutes of Płock (1398, 1423) forbade burying in the consecrated earth evident usurers, heretics, men killed in tournaments, who died under torture, those

²⁵ The end of the 15th century text of a prayer for the souls in Purgatory, in Wojciech Rzepka and Wiesław Wydra (eds.), *Chrestomatia staropolska* (Wrocław, 1984), 30.

who were excommunicated or guilty of gravest crimes, as well as the condemned who before the execution did not make their Confession or receive the Holy Communion.²⁶ The synod of the Gniezno archdiocese (1407–11) associated the profanation of a cemetery with homicide, shedding of blood or sperm, as well as a burial of an excommunicated person in its area.²⁷ We know an example of a bloody fight between hot-headed gentlemen in the cemetery of a Masovian village, watched with interest by peasants who rested in the shadow of a tree near the church on Sunday.²⁸

The Church authorities required the parish priests to surround the cemeteries with a fence, so that they would not be destroyed and could be easily distinguished. The cemetery should be enclosed by a wall, fence or moat, so that, according to an eloquent formula of a visitation document ‘what is sacred could be distinguished from what is not.’²⁹ Some injunctions issued from time to time show an effort at sustaining the sacred character of parish cemeteries and counteracting neglect in this respect. Naturally, especially glaring neglect could be observed in the cemeteries attached to the churches – not only affiliated ones – that were deserted or ruined. The inventory book of the Gniezno archdiocese, which notes the deplorable state of some forgotten burial place, contains, however, also some praises regarding a few cemeteries: *cimeterium septum*, *cimeterium circumquaque bene septum*.

While the dead representatives of the gentry were always buried in coffins, not all peasants could hope for such a privilege. The bodies of the poorest were merely wrapped in a shroud and laid in the earth on a wooden board. The graves were not marked with crosses; only one Cross common to all the necropolis was raised. On All Souls’ Day services were held at its foot.

The parish cemetery was sometimes the scene of a ceremony of public penitence. The *casus* of four peasants accused of beating the parish priest from Opatów in the Ostrzeszów deanery, and then subjected to the public penitence, speaks for itself. Stripped from

²⁶ Sawicki, *Conc. Pol.*, vi, 240–1.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, v, 268.

²⁸ Ulanowski, AC, ii (*Acta iud. eccl. Warsoviensis*), no. 1886, p. 895, year 1492.

²⁹ *Ordo visitationis z XV w.*, ed. Stanisław Librowski, in *idem*, ‘Wizytacje diecezji włocławskiej’, *Archiwa, Biblioteki, Muzea Kościelne*, 101 (1965), 200.

head to waist, with rods in hands, they had to follow a cart loaded with a pile of birch rods along the cemetery way around the church.³⁰ This humiliating ceremony took place in the presence of parishioners assembled in the churchyard. While carrying a warning, it was also extremely spectacular: everything was taking place in the open space near the church, well-known to the parishioners, on consecrated earth, which gave a special significance to all gestures and words. If the peasants from Opatów died in a state of excommunication (administered precisely for the active offence of a clergyman), then they could not be buried in the consecrated area of the cemetery. Those who died excommunicated, the sinners of the above-mentioned categories and suicides were buried without a priest, *absque cimeterio*, in un-consecrated earth. Also if an interdict was declared on a village, the people who died in its period were buried outside the cemetery.³¹ We do not know much about this unholy area of burials. Few departed people must have found there their resting place; suicides, threatened by the Church with an eternal punishment in Hell, were not the order of the day, while excommunication, which was not rare (for it was an instrument of pressure, especially in litigations concerning tithes) was frequently lifted in the sinner's lifetime. When excommunication was lifted posthumously or when the interdict finished, the families of the dead could exhume their bodies and move them into the appropriate parish cemetery.

The resting-places of the people excluded from the religious community were an ominous part of the rural space; they inspired awe and resentment, and perhaps even contempt. The country people were taught by the Church that their relatives or neighbours who were buried there did not find Salvation, and consequently their souls were sent to eternal Gehenna or were suffering an endless torment in Purgatory. This was associated with archaic folk beliefs regarding those who were not buried according to the ritual or in the right place as unfriendly, or even dangerous to the living. In the rural space there were many places, usually outside the borders of a settlement, whose names commemorate somebody's violent death

³⁰ Ulanowski, AC, ii (*Acta iud. eccl. Gneznensis*), no. 396, p. 137 ff., year 1442.

³¹ Waldemar Bukowski, Franciszek Sikora *et al.*, *Słownik historyczno-geograficzny województwa krakowskiego w średniowieczu* (hereafter: Bukowski and Sikora, SGHKrak.), iii, 4 (Cracow, 1994), 773.

or suicide: the places of shady deaths and the presence of bodies which together with their souls cannot find peace and rest.

The researchers who write about medieval cemeteries have noticed an ambivalence in the attitude of the living to the resting-place of the dead.³² Certainly the place that was so closely connected with the church was surrounded with respect. Besides, for the country population, for many generations settled in one locality, the parish churchyard was the resting-place of their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers. The graves of the family, usually situated in the centre of the village, visited without difficulty, if only on the occasion of Sunday Mass, were for a certain time part of the family community, while the cemetery as a whole was part of the parish community. This situation, however, did not last long, since the existence of the graves as places that can be recognised was short. Having no signs or protection against the work of time and changing weather, they gradually crumbled and were washed away. At any rate, after a certain time the buried bones were dug out and thrown into a common hole, to make room for the next bodies. This process was slower than in the urban cemeteries, but still 'the rural cemetery was the place of a constant migration of the remnants of the dead, where the ancestors made room for their descendants'.³³ It seems, however, that this factor weakened the ties of the parishioners with their cemetery only to a little extent. To support my thesis I may cite the dissatisfaction and resistance of the local population when as a result of changes in the structure of parish districts the Church authorities ordered to bury their dead in another settlement.

The cemetery, although enclosed, was not separated from the life of the village; people met here not only before Sunday Mass or after it. The proximity of the school, houses and other presbytery buildings introduced to it the element of the *profanum*.

However, the familiarisation with the cemetery was not complete. The ancient fear of the dead, whose souls the folk imagination usually connected with their bodies, was an integral part of mass beliefs and images.

³² See esp. Geremek, 'Poczucie przestrzeni', 647.

³³ Zaremska, 'Człowiek wobec śmierci', 505.

V
CHURCH ROADS, MASS PATHS

The obligatory participation in Sunday and feast-day Mass was a mobile, cyclical element of religious life of the rural parishioners who regularly went along their usual way from home to church. I have already mentioned the differences in the distance covered by the rural parishioners and the different conditions, changing depending on the season and natural phenomena, they encountered on their way. The well-known and frequently used paths and roads changed into pathless tracts when covered by snow or springtime waters.

The types of roads of this era are known to us mainly from their description connected with the delineation of the local boundaries. While going to Mass, people used also the old roads, neglected and partly overgrown, though still recognisable and more convenient for walking than pathless tracts. If distant settlements and parish villages and towns were lying near the highways (known also as public ways), which, apart from exceptional situations, could be expected to be free of obstacles and in good repair, people used them. However, the roads used most often were the local ones, that is those that led from the village to the places important for its dwellers, that is a neighbouring village, the closest town, a market place, the mill and the church. Specialists in historical cartography usually give only their hypothetical shape, while emphasising their seasonal character, which need not have been a rule.³⁴

The roads by which people reached the church came from various periods, and were sometimes very ancient. At Kleczanów (between Sandomierz and Opatów) the road running along a gorge, in ancient times led the pagans to their place of cult.

Where the gentry (more rarely, ecclesiastical) landowners made such provisions, the local people were allowed to use the roads running along a designated tract, usually from the manor-house to

³⁴ For the results of cartographic works essential to this study see the volumes of *Atlas historyczny Polski w drugiej połowie XVI wieku* (part 1–2): *Województwo lubelskie* (Warsaw, 1966), *Mazowsze* (Warsaw, 1973), *Województwo sandomierskie* (Warsaw, 1993), *Województwo sieradzkie i województwo łęczyckie i Łęczyca* (Warsaw, 1998). Consideration should be given to the commentaries to individual volumes, especially those concerning the character and size of settlements (by Irena Gieysztorowa, Anna Dunin-Wąsowicz and Krzysztof Chłapowski) and those concerning the network of roads (especially by Henryk Rutkowski).

the appropriate parish church. Church roads had a special, privileged status (a situation characteristic not only of Poland). In Poland (and not only there), the roads leading to churches were called Mass paths (*drogi meszne*, or *ścieżki meszne*).³⁵ This was also the name of the road that connected the manor-house with the church within the borders of one village. This name of church roads, encountered most frequently in Lesser Poland, but used all over the country, emphasised the significance of the people's participation in Sunday Mass in their own parish, and at the same time sacralised the space usually lying outside the settlements, as if including it in the orbit of the worship. The language of documents confirms the prestige of a Mass path, also in strictly religious terms: the possibility of using such a path by the local people was termed as *laudabilis consuetudo*.³⁶

Mass paths were part of the local collective spatial consciousness. They are encountered in documents, we may surmise their presence in colloquial speech, from which probably derives the phrase a 'road leading to Mass' (*ad messam*). Familiarity with a Mass path, its course, was helpful, for example, in describing the situation of the fields. It could be said that in the desired direction one goes 'per viam pronam missalem dictam *mesną drogą*'.³⁷ Reference to the course of a Mass path was indispensable while drafting an agreement concerning the use of some common (*exitorium*), for example that situated 'ex utraque parte vie *Włodzislawska* incipiendo a via *meschna*'.³⁸ Mass roads and Mass paths used to be treated as certain, well-known designators of local boundaries. In his description of the division between two villages: Modliborzyce and Gołoszyce, the Chamberlain of Sandomierz wrote that the parties to this act

³⁵ Bylina, *Chryścianizacja wsi*, 37 ff. For the issue of the peasants's participation in pilgrimages, see esp. respective parts of works: Aleksandra Witkowska OSU, *Kulty pątnicze piętnastowiecznego Krakowa* (Lublin, 1984); Jacek Wiesiołowski, 'Funkcjonowanie poznańskiego kultu w kościele Bożego Ciała (kon. XV – pocz. XVII w.)', *Kronika Miasta Poznania*, 3–4 (1992), 128–59; Marek Derwich, *Benedyktyński klasztor Świętego Krzyża na Łysej Górze w średniowieczu* (Warsaw and Wrocław, 1992).

³⁶ See the entry 'Meszny', in *Słownik staropolski*, iv, 1 (Warsaw, 1965), 20. References to most sources invoked or cited in the present text are given in my book: Bylina, *Chryścianizacja wsi*, 37–8.

³⁷ See Ulanowski, AC, iii, 1 (*Acta iud. eccl. Plocensis*), no. 177, p. 68, year 1499.

³⁸ Stanisław Kuraś (ed.), *Zbiór dokumentów małopolskich* (hereafter: ZDM), 8 vols. (Wrocław, 1962–75), iv, no. 1098, year 1391.

went from the middle of a muddy road down to the bank, the one on the right, and here they raised a cairn on the bank near an oak, then they went between a meadow, the bank and the field to the path leading from Gołoszyce to Modliborzyce to Mass, that is to a Mass path (*ad missam alias to meszney scieszki*).³⁹

What we know of Mass paths usually emerges in the context of disputes where, according to one party, their course infringed the right of ownership. In the dispute between the Benedictine abbot from The Holy Cross Monastery on Łysa Góra (Bald Mountain) and the owner of a near by village, the matter in question was the road traced out between the fields, along which one could 'go or ride to Mass' to the above-mentioned Modliborzyce, a village belonging to the abbey. We also know of a case where a landlord that was in charge of a church road established by himself forbade his neighbour using it.⁴⁰ In general opinion the Mass path enjoyed the privilege of infrangibility. An active breach of this rule, for example ploughing it up, was condemned by the local community, and the offender had to reckon with an adverse court decree.

The cases of litigation between landowners or between landowners and parish priests concerning the closing of roads leading to the parish church were also decided by ecclesiastical courts. Such an offence aroused protests especially when a Mass path had been used for a long time, and it was suddenly closed to those who went to hear the Word of God. People invoked then its old origin, a serious argument also in other cases, for example those concerning the shape of boundaries 'since this road has not been created anew, but is and was as of old'.⁴¹ To support this argument, the number of years was cited, big enough to be eloquent. In some dispute between two landowners one of them argued that in the village in question the Mass path had been used for over forty years ('a quadraginta annis et ultra'). At the Masovian Wroniska village the parish priest reminded the local landlord that the road leading to the church *ex antiquo*, had been rendered for the

³⁹ Franciszek Piekosiński (ed.), *Kodeks dyplomatyczny Małopolski*, 4 vols. (Cracow 1876–1905), iv, no. 1511, year 1449.

⁴⁰ 'Łaganów', in Bukowski and Sikora, SHGKra., iii, 4 (Cracow, 1994), 786, year 1450.

⁴¹ Jan K. Kochanowski (ed.), *Księgi sądowe brzesko-kujawskie 1418–1424* (Teki Pawińskiego, 7, Warsaw, 1905), no. 3356, p. 341, year 1423.

use of parishioners by the then landlords, and this laudable custom was also recognised by all the later landowners.⁴²

The Mass paths, when they led in a parish village from manor-house to church, were naturally used mainly by the owner of the estate, his family and his employees (one of the earlier-cited sources says: 'ipse et sui homines ambulare consueverunt').⁴³ A good custom rendered them accessible to others as well, although, as we have seen, it was not always the case. The roads leading from more distant villages to the parish church, were used, usually without obstacles, by the whole rural community. Their standard, situation in the country, and other features can be only defined approximately, or even merely surmised. Certainly, they must have by-passed marshy ground, mires and thick undergrowth, and in some places, where it was indispensable, probably required laying the foot-bridges or covering the wet road with branches. We know a little more, although also only roughly, about their length – 2.5–3.5 kilometres (in a straight line), but in conditions of a very dense parish network, for example in the central part of the Cracow arch-deanery, the roads concerned were definitely short ones: about one kilometre long, or even shorter.

These roads, traced out mainly in order to enable or make easier to the parishioners the regular fulfilment of the Mass obligation, also served other aspects of collective religious life (apart from the aims of everyday secular life). It was along these roads that children were carried to be baptised, or loaves of bread and cakes to be blessed at Easter; they also led to church the future couples who wanted to be married *in facie ecclesiae*. The Mass paths were the last roads of the dead escorted by their family and neighbours to the parish cemetery. And before the parishioner's departure from this world, these roads were used by the parish priest or the curate who visited him or her with the viaticum.

VI

THE ROADS OF RURAL PARISH PRIESTS

The roads of the rural parish priests, everyday and festive, short or longer, straight or tortuous, were designated by the liturgy and the para-liturgical celebrations, by the authorities' orders, Church and

⁴² Ulanowski, AC, iii, 1 (*Acta iud. eccl. Plocensis*), no. 177, p. 68, year 1499.

⁴³ *Ibidem* (*Acta iud. eccl. Gnezniensis*), no. 492, p. 179, year 1452.

social customs, and finally the needs of life and the priests' own likings. Regardless of the ecclesiastical-legal and subjective factors, as well as those imposed by custom, a considerable role was also played by the material conditions of the parish and the economic status of its priests. The size and topography of the parish also mattered: in some circumstances and situations the parish priest was obliged to reach all the inhabited corners of his district. Another factor was the number of clergymen available (one or two curates) who could replace the parish priest in some of his burdensome duties.⁴⁴

Church authorities restricted the mobility of the parish clergy. They strongly emphasised the principle of the priest's residence near the church entrusted to him, and the clergymen who stayed away from their parish without a justified reason were threatened with a loss of their benefice. The Synodal Statutes of Płock compared pictorially the union of the parish priest with his church to the indissolubility of marriage.⁴⁵ Usually the priest's non-residence near the appropriate church, in Poland less frequent than in many other countries of Western and Central Europe, was connected with his holding of some more lucrative prebends and was less frequently caused by his wilful travels.

A special category of the clergy consisted of the priests, treated by the Church very severely, who often changed the parishes in search of permanent or temporary occupation. These *clerici gyrovagi*, or *clerici peregrini*, were thought to be burdened with a wicked, sometimes even vicious past, they were supposed to be notorious ignoramuses as well as disseminators of offences to and errors in the faith. Peregrinating priests had little chance of assuming the charge over a parish and had to satisfy themselves with ancillary functions; some of them obtained the office of curates.

The steady, and shortest roads of the parish priests led them from the presbytery through the cemetery to the church. In addition to some special occasions, resulting from the rhythm of the liturgical year, every Friday a parish priest celebrated a procession around the

⁴⁴ About the parish clergy, also rural, see Wiśniowski, *Parafie w średniowiecznej Polsce*, 57–87; Jacek Wiesiołowski, 'Środowiska kościelne i kultura', in Gremek, *Kultura Polski*, 257 ff.; Izabela Skierska, 'Pleban w późnośredniowiecznej Polsce', in Wojciech Fałkowski (ed.), *Kolory i struktury średniowiecza* (Warsaw, 2004), 153–63.

⁴⁵ Sawicki, *Conc. Pol.*, vi, 234–5.

cemetery, always with a definite supplicatory intention. When there was no curate on duty and the priest was the only clergyman in the parish, on some, fixed feast-days (less frequently on all Sundays and feast-days) he set off to the affiliated church, sometimes quite distant. At church the priest blessed the mentioned Easter cakes brought by the country-folk. The prohibition of blessing cakes outside the church did not embrace the manor-house of the patron, who, according to custom, was personally visited by the priest. Usually this road was short: the manor-house, the centre of the estate, and the church with the presbytery were usually situated in the same village. In very big parishes with far-flung settlements, when during springtime floods the believers could not reach the churches with their cakes, additional places were designated where the parish priest or the curate were bound to come. In the Wąwolnica parish in the Lublin district, three villages had to be reached,⁴⁶ each lying a few kilometres away from the church.

To bless the crops, the parish priest led a procession with a cross beyond the sacred space of the church and the cemetery into the fields. Church rectors were advised to organise pilgrimages to the neighbouring parishes on the days of church-fairs connected with the dedication of their churches, or their patron-saints' days.⁴⁷

The parish clergy were obliged to offer religious ministrations to the parishioners who were seriously ill. Ecclesiastical legislators emphasised this duty, insisting on the suitable form of the ritual of carrying the Body of Christ beyond the consecrated space and setting off with it abroad. On this way the parish priest should be accompanied by a group of parishioners. Synodal statutes established the processional character of the way to the sick: the priest with the Host should be preceded by a proper person with a bell, carrying the smaller church banner and a candle or another source of light. In Polish conditions what mattered was the considerable distance from the parish church to some settlements. In such a situation 'propter parrochie latitudinem vel longitudinem', the priest was allowed to ride on a horse.⁴⁸ The principles of such a ride were adjusted to its conditions and the fact of carrying the Host. The priest

⁴⁶ ZDM, iii, no. 839, pp. 326–7, year 1450.

⁴⁷ Sawicki, Conc. Pol., iv, 161.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, vi, 248–9.

could not stop at the homes of laymen, he could not take his rest or stay for the night anywhere. The legislators, solicitous for the worship of the Eucharist, wanted to prevent the temptation, confirmed by the sources, of stopping at an inn.

While discussing the journeys to which the parish priests were obliged by their state and function, we have to take into account also those that led them to diocesan synods. It seems that although the ordinaries of the dioceses did not give up the principle of the participation of all parish priests in the synods, in practice they agreed to their representation by delegates. This related especially to the priests of the village parishes most distant from the capitals of dioceses. We know that some of them were accompanied by deans who were obliged to come to the synods. Rudolf of Rüdesheim, the bishop of Wrocław (1468–82) knew well that coming to the synods entailed for some parish priests too much cost and hardship, especially if they were held every year.⁴⁹ Few rural parish priests may be found among the participants in the synod held several decades earlier (1418).

In the case of such journeys, ecclesiastical legislators took into consideration the need for taking rest and stopping for refreshment at an inn. They made a reservation, however, that the priest had to observe moderation in drinking,⁵⁰ and completely forsake any pleasures, for example playing dice.

Let us come back to the rural parish, to see the roads and paths followed by the priests in their endeavours to provide for the basic needs of their church, and their own well-being. This relates mainly to the poor priests in poor parishes. We know that both the endowments of churches, also rural, and the real income of the parish priests varied greatly. Side by side with wealthy parishes one could encounter such where the priest's income hardly sufficed to cover his basic needs. The Church, while allowing the parish priests to visit their parishioners and collect offerings at Christmas time, combated the clergy's mendicancy as unbecoming their status.

The itineraries of the parish priests designated by their likings, their wish for entertainment and other temptations were generally not very diversified, and followed a routine of many years spent in the presbytery. The Church authorities, while learning of them, treated

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, x, 496.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 397–402.

the habits connected with them either indulgently, or more severely, condemning them. Among the first there were the roads leading to the forest, for hunting. A definitely ill-famed road, however, was that leading to the tavern: it was forbidden both by synodal statutes, the authors of pastoral treatises and of sermons for the clergy.

VII

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OUTSIDE THE CHURCH: PRAYER, PROCESSIONS AND PILGRIMAGES

The worship practices of the believers have so far been associated mainly with the parish church and in part with its cemetery. Here was the focus of the worship; however, some of its symptoms went beyond the consecrated space. Still, lacking good evidence, we may doubt whether everyday prayer was present in the homes of the rural parishioners. This does not mean that nobody ever prayed individually. The image of a man who venerates a cross standing in a rural landscape probably was not completely unreal. The Church fought against using magic formulae, so women prayed in the meadows and border strips while collecting medicinal herbs which should never be lacking in a country cottage.

There are some examples of a spontaneous, un-memorised prayer, that is a supplication for rescue from misfortune and oppression. These prayers-invocations directed to the saints were expressed in the believer's own words that certainly differed more or less from the texts recorded in the lists of miraculous favours that had always been edited.

The most authentic seem to have been the short and simple prayers, while the least genuine those containing a developed and very correct eulogy of the saint and his sanctuary. To us their most important aspect is that they were expressed in different places, both in the churches and the parishioners' homes (sometimes on the death-bed) as well as in the open space, in places of the unfortunate accidents of familiar persons, for example over the rivers, ponds or pools where some children drowned.

While discussing the multiple role of the church bells I mentioned that they summoned the people to say their well-known prayers (Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary) with a definite intention. It can be assumed that this practice was not neglected, and not only in the presence of others. Although abstaining from it was not threatened by

severe consequences to be suffered by individuals who openly ignored the collective morning, evening and sometimes also noontide prayer in towns, it can be accepted that this religious practice was quite effectively inculcated on the rural people. We also should remember that the bishops, on the strength of synodal acts, reminded the parish priests of their obligation to ring the bells for *Angelus*. Nevertheless it should be regretted that we do not possess such evidence as the reflection of a dignitary of the Bohemian Hussite Church who remembered that in his childhood and early youth, at the sound of the parish bell everybody, wherever they were found, at home, in the street or town square, on the rural road or in the field – knelt down in prayer.⁵¹

Processions, which figured prominently in the late-medieval liturgy, enlivened the static participation in the religious practices. Involving a smaller number of people and less spectacular than in towns, also in the rural churches they assembled most participants in Sunday or feast-day Mass, since, in accordance with the bishops' recommendation – they either preceded it or took place right after it. As far as it was possible, Sunday processions were organised not only in parish churches, but also in the affiliated ones. The regulations of the Płock diocese said that a parish procession for the intention of peace, solemnly celebrated with banners and antiphon singing, should be led on each Friday.⁵² As was already mentioned, processions went along a cemetery road round the church, all the time remaining in the sacred space. They left the consecrated space very seldom. This happened in springtime when they went from the church to the fields with the intention to secure successful crops. Such processions, where the priest followed by the parishioners blessed the fields, going round them along roads and border strips, continued an archaic pre-Christian custom. Another relic was the custom of picking leaves of grass and medicinal herbs by the participants, whenever the procession stopped on its way. While Christianising the old rite, the Church retained its approximate date, identical with the time of the growing of cultivated plants. What distinguished springtime

⁵¹ *Postilla Jana Rokycany*, ed. František Šimek, 2 vols. (Prague, 1928–9), ii, 385, 804.

⁵² Sawicki, *Conc. Pol.*, vi, 249–50. See also Jakub Sawicki, *Statuty synodalne krakowskie biskupa Jana Konarskiego z 1509 r.* (Cracow, 1945), 49 ('processiones pro bono statu Regni huius'); Sawicki emphasises the connection between the above intention and the expedition to Wallachia, prepared at that time; *ibidem*, 38 ff.

processions from other para-liturgical celebrations was their universally understandable aim, vitally important to all the agrarian community. This was the reason why rural parishioners were so much attached to rogational processions, and why they were so displeased when the priests neglected them.⁵³

Any moves towards the sacralisation of uninhabited space, even if it was cultivated by man, encountered objections on the part of the Church. This concerned not only spontaneous processions round the fields with a cross (but without the priest), but also including in them the Eucharist carried by a clergyman-celebrant. We are inclined to think that such a prohibition found in the Synodal Statute of Prague (before 1395)⁵⁴ was not only of a local character. This attitude seems to be the reason for the caution with which the solemn procession on Corpus Christi was led out of the church area into the streets of the town, as well as for the long absence of such a rite from the rural parishes.

Another type of movement was the collective excursion of parishioners headed by the priest to the neighbouring parishes on feast-days connected with a church-fair. It had to be very solemn and therefore can be regarded as an intermediate liturgical form between processions and pilgrimages.

So we have reached the issue of pilgrimages, of their very nature the most mobile form of revealing collective piety. At the same time it differed from taking part in processions, for it was connected with going along the road leading to a sacred aim, and not with going round a closed circle. I will only touch on some aspects of this issue, the ones that are most pertinent to the main thread of my deliberations.

According to research carried out so far, there was only limited participation of the rural population in pilgrimages leading to miraculous places, though it differed depending on the individual *loca sacra*. One of the exceptions was the Poznań Corpus Christi sanctuary, visited by as big crowds of peasants as of burghers and little town dwellers.⁵⁵ Let

⁵³ Ulanowski, AC, iii, 1 (*Acta iud. eccl. Wielunensis*), no. 801, p. 334 ff., year 1514.

⁵⁴ Stanisław ze Skarbimierza, *Sermones sapientiales*, ii, 85; the Synodal Statute of Prague: Zdenka Hledíková and Jaroslav V. Polc (eds.), *Pražské synody a koncily předhusitské doby* (Prague, 2002), 263.

⁵⁵ Wanda Karkucińska, Anna Pawlaczyk and Jacek Wiesiołowski (eds.), 'Księga cudów poznańskiego kościoła Bożego Ciała (1493–1604)', *Kronika Miasta Poznania*, 3–4 (1992), *passim*.

us add that the examples based on surveys reveal a predominance of the dwellers of parish villages among the totality of rural pilgrims.

It can be accepted that the peasants who went on pilgrimages did not distinguish themselves as a group by any specific behaviour either on their way or at its destination. Probably they tried to follow the behaviour and rites generally accepted by pilgrims. However, the motivations for setting off were frequently connected with the specificity of rural life and the dangers presented by the natural environment. The misfortunes and troubles that induced to take a vow of pilgrimage include frequent drowning of children in rivers or other water reservoirs, being bitten by poisonous snakes, hurt by wild animals and finally – a sporadic example – being struck by lightning during work with a plough. The realities of rural existence also involved the intentions concerning the recovery of sick farm animals, especially cows, sometimes the only feeders of poor people.

The country people – as has been shown by research into the cult of the Cracow saints in the 15th century – usually did not take up pilgrimages to very distant places. This concerns individual pilgrimages, with one's own supplicatory or thanksgiving intentions (that realised a vow taken earlier), and, probably even more, those to universally worshipped sanctuaries, taken up on the occasions of some celebrations. I cannot size up the latter participation: the country parishioners merged with people from other milieus, creating one community. However, we cannot doubt of the considerable participation of people from villages situated on both sides of the Świętokrzyskie Mountains in the pilgrimages to the famous relic of the True Cross. The news of all miraculous events, especially those that happened nearby, in one's own parish, was accepted with belief and great emotion, without waiting for their official, ecclesiastical confirmation. The Church, however, was distrustful of any new cults connected with pictures or sculptures, warning the priests against sustaining them, and even threatening them with sanctions, in case they did not obey this instruction.⁵⁶

Let us come back to the cults connected with an unfamiliar space. Pilgrimages were made to some unusual signs, the so-called 'God's

⁵⁶ See, especially Bishop Conrad's Synodal Statutes of Wrocław of 1446, in Sawicki, *Conc. Pol.*, x, 455, as well as the Statute of the Poznań Synod: *ibidem*, vii, 146–7.

feet' imprinted on stones, to the stones from which sprang a stream of health-giving water, to the places of miraculous visions experienced by some villagers. The rural natural environment favoured the experience of the *sacrum* in unforeseen places and the phenomena of religious cult that it aroused. However, these experiences were seldom supported by the ecclesiastical circles higher than the parish clergy.

VIII

SYMBOLS AND RITES IN UNFAMILIAR SPACES

It was a great concern of the Church that a man who left the inhabited area should not lose physical contact with what was to remind him of the Christian *sacrum*. The Mass paths, discussed above, realised some part of those endeavours. There are records in the sources that testify to the presence of Christian signs outside the inhabited area: crosses with images of Christ and statues representing the saints. Of great value to us are the official descriptions of boundaries dividing the property belonging to the secular and ecclesiastical owners of villages. The way-side crosses, frequently called in the sources 'Passio Christi alias *Boża Męka*' are mainly documented by them;⁵⁷ being made of wood, their life must have been short. A Franciscan chronicle of the beginning of the 16th century includes a story of a simple, pious layman who installed crosses along a road running across the wood near Bydgoszcz.⁵⁸ There is a small number of surviving way-side stone figures representing the saints venerated by the Church, or images of Crucified Christ. The documents mention them as *ymagines Christi*.

The Christian signs helped to define the situation of fields under crop ('circa cruce[m] alias *u krzyża niwa*'; 'signum passionis Christi, usque ad agros ville Burow'). Sometimes we learn that the consecrated objects stood outside the village (*extra villam*). When they were more distant, cairns were raised near them, signed, for example *U krzyża* (At the foot of the Cross). As I have said, crosses and figures were most frequently placed near the roads, more seldom at the cross-roads. A well-preserved figure on a stone socle near the

⁵⁷ Antoni Gašiorowski *et al.* (ed.), *Słownik historyczno-geograficzny województwa poznańskiego*, iii, 4 (Poznań, 1999), 885, year 1449.

⁵⁸ Jan z Komorowa, *Memoriale Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, ed. Xawery Liske and Antoni Lorkiewicz, in *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, v (Lwów, 1888), 229.

highway running from Radłowo to Opatowice was a kind of model landmark, perfectly visible and attracting attention. 'The big and imposing stone with the image of Crucified Christ and two [other] images' of holy women must certainly have been admired.⁵⁹ Hence we learn of the crosses and figures in a, so to say, technical context, when they were helpful in the legal-ritualistic action of designating or correcting the boundaries.

However, these materialised symbols played an important role in the work of Christianisation. A man who set out beyond his native village, or to his work in the field, as well as a strange wanderer, were reminded by them of the basic tenets of the faith and the holy persons of whom they heard during parish teachings. A pious Christian, while passing by a cross or a figure, was bound to say his prayer or at least to make the sign of the cross. At the same time the mentioned symbols protected people from evil spirits, alien to Christianity and yet firmly rooted in folk beliefs. The evil mythological beings or un-named fears were usually associated – I will discuss this later at more length – with uninhabited places, distant from human settlements, and especially with borderland, 'empty' areas, roads running across the wood, border strips between the fields, or with the cross-roads.

The country people felt a need for the sacred signs in the uninhabited space. They found them on big stones, lying outside the village in the fields, meadows and waste lands, on which they recognised the concavities whose shape resembled human feet. They were attributed to the Virgin Mary who rested on her way, together with Jesus, or to the saints, for example the patrons of the local church (as was testified by the cult of St Florian in the Kujawy district).

The Church expressed its opinion about the signs under discussion when their cult went beyond the local area. In Bohemia the archbishop of Prague forbade pilgrimages to the stone with an imprint of two 'feet of St Wolfgang', arguing in vain that his feet could not differ in size.⁶⁰ In the syncretistic folk piety in Poland the devotion to a stone with 'God's feet' found expression both in Christian gestures (for example in kissing the sacred signs) and in very archaic attitudes: for example presenting offerings in kind. But this was also

⁵⁹ Franciszek Piekosiński (ed.), *Kodeks Dyplomatyczny Małopolski*, 4 vols. (Cracow, 1876–1905), iv, no. 1519, p. 502 ff., year 1450.

⁶⁰ Josef Macek, *Víra a zbožnost jagellonského věku* (Prague, 2001), 281 ff.

a transposition – a spontaneous one – of the sacral element into the distant space, not cultivated by man.

The ritualistic designation of local boundaries brought the Christian *sacrum* closer not only to the roads, fields and meadows, but also to the undergrowth, the fringes of woods, the valleys of rivers and streams, and the borderland of marshes and mires. The formulae of sacred oaths and invocations were pronounced in places that could not be reached by a procession setting out to the fields and which were by-passed by a priest going with the viaticum to a sick man in a distant settlement. The boundary rites were very solemn, and combined legal elements (with a large share of common law) with the sacral ones: ‘The physical round along the boundaries is a kind of procession that goes round a circle’,⁶¹ and this character of the rite was confirmed by the oaths taken by its participants near the corner cairns.

The designation of a boundary required the establishment of an unquestionable and timeless truth, based on human knowledge and memory. Its exponents were the oldest people in the area, whose testimony was accepted with belief and respect. When an obliterated and forgotten boundary was renewed, people resorted to the help of an old man. *Homo antiquissimus* was an invaluable witness – ‘had he died a day earlier, nobody would have been able to establish this boundary’ – we read in the record of the visitation of the Gniezno archbishopric estate.⁶²

The value of decisions concerning the shape of boundaries was all the greater, because they contained the element of perpetuity. Documents used such terms as *in perpetuum*, or even more telling: ‘in evum perpetualiter et eviterne’, ‘debent stare et robur firmitatis habere perpetue et in ewm’.⁶³ This was the basis of the importance of cairns and other objects chosen as guards of boundaries: lonely stones, natural hills, oak-trees – the symbols of longevity. It was not only an offence, but also a mortal sin to ruin a cairn, move or damage a stone that designated a boundary, that is to willfully infringe the sanctified

⁶¹ Geremek, ‘Poczucie przestrzeni’, 641.

⁶² Bolesław Ulanowski (ed.), *Wizytacje dóbr arcybiskupstwa poznańskiego i kapituły gnieźnieńskiej z XVI w.* (Cracow, 1920), 348.

⁶³ See for example Leon Białkowski (ed.), *Liber succamerarii terrae Lublinensis saeculi XV* (Lublin, 1934), 38, 121.

reality. The preachers' *exempla* presented terrifying descriptions of torment in Hell suffered by sinners who in their lifetime moved some landmarks (in order to enlarge their own fields).

When designation of a boundary concerned a larger area, a land official together with the owners of the estate and summoned witnesses rode round it on horseback. The solemn establishment of a boundary between the Chełm and Lublin Lands required an even more scrupulous ritual. It involved the participation and the swearing of an oath by the landlords, representatives of the gentry and knights, boyars and old peasants (*sex antiquos viros*) from each of the two districts. Stopping in the designated place on the bank of the Wieprz River, all of them said:

So let God and All the Saints help us that indeed on the right there is the Lublin Land and on the left the Ruthenian Land, up to Dobrzyńowo.

Then, in another place, the participants in the rite dismounted from their horses and knelt down, to say:

So let God and All the Saints help us that we have come here and sworn the truth that on the right there is the Lublin Land and on the left the Chełm Land and it is there that have for ever been Starogony and Barcie.⁶⁴

The participants in the act of boundary designation moved with a dignity and solemnity becoming a procession, and kneeling on the ground they swore a solemn oath invoking God and the Saints, having – according to what the document records – considered its subject in their conscience. The rite was celebrated in a landscape of meadows and marshes, near rivers and forests, where people coming in other circumstances did not pronounce sacred words or make Christian gestures.

Sometimes the participants in the rite of boundary designation came close not only to strange, but also fear-inspiring places that were thought to be haunted by evil powers. These were old pre-Christian cemeteries, which were also adopted as landmarks. The easily recognised necropolises were called 'pagans' tombs' (*tumbae paganorum, sepulchra paganorum*), and the kurgans (*tumuli*) were called *mogily*, or *mogilki* ('in cumulo dicto *mogilny*'). The rite under discussion tended to by-pass these places, and only from time to time stopped by some

⁶⁴ ZDM, iv, no. 961, p. 115, year 1359.

special barrows, as important landmarks, worth recording. We might think that they were ‘tamed’ in this way, or at least their evil power was thus weakened.

People who took the oath ‘So let God and the Holy Cross and All the Saints help us, since we know and testify’,⁶⁵ were conscious of its gravity and probably avoided telling a lie. It happened, however, that they withheld the truth without giving any evidence. Then, in the presence of the bailiff they shouted: ‘We ask you, for God’s sake! Come, who knows better!’⁶⁶ The boundaries were endowed with an unusual character by two elements – that of ownership and sacredness. At the same time the *sacrum* introduced deeply into the natural environment by the rite of boundary designation, by the words of prayers and oaths, was not permanent and had few witnesses. When the rite was over and its participants went home, then the banks of the rivers, the borders of marshes, the wastelands and old cemeteries again became the haunts of archaic forces of Nature and creatures of folk mythology.

transl. Agnieszka Kreczmar

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 35.

⁶⁶ Kochanowski (ed.), *Księgi sądowe brzesko-kujawskie*, no. 2408, pp. 242–3, year 1421.