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## **Ulma Family Godliness: Merciful Love and Martyrdom**

At first glance, Wiktorja and Józef Ulma were no different from the other spouses in the village of Markowa. They were faithful to each other in marriage, hospitable, hardworking, and active in their local community, where they grew a peaceful and happy family. Even their deep piety came across as nothing exceptional in the area they lived. Like so many of their neighbours, they regularly attended the church, confessed their sins, had their consecutive children baptized and said their daily prayers in the morning and in the evening. In the younger days, before Wiktorja and Józef got married, they had both been active in the Catholic Youth Society (SKM), an organization grouping Catholic and vibrant community activists at Markowa.

What evidenced the extraordinary character of the Ulma couple and the heroism of their faith was their martyrdom. The whole of the Ulma family died while attempting to save eight Jews from death at the hands of the German nazis. This very event makes one observe the Ulmas' life and piety in a light altogether different.

When referring to martyrdom the Roman Catholic Church uses the Greek word "martyrs" meaning "witness" (or "testifier"). Bearing this in mind and in line with the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2437) "the highest testimony of faith" takes precedence over "passion".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By this we mean that bearing witness to the faith through the way a future martyr lives his or her life takes precedence over the enormity of pain suffered when a martyr has his or her life taken.

Although the currently binding definition of martyrdom comes from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the spirit of this late definition was true for the way Christians have understood martyrdom since the early centuries of Christianity. Accordingly, Christians recognized as saints those men and women who were killed for their refusal to renounce their faith or give up attitudes associated with that faith. Such saintly individuals were remembered with reverence by the faithful attending Liturgies and were set as role models to all Christians. There was a widespread belief that there could be no greater testimony of faith than the sacrifice of one's earthly life in the imitation of Jesus Christ himself. The description of the very first martyrdom, i.e. the stoning of St. Stephen with the vision of opening heavens (Acts, 7 55 -56) presents an early Christian belief that the person of a martyr would undoubtedly get his or her eternal life.

Upon their death, Christian martyrs can see the Almighty directly and stand up for the living in need of God's help. Consequently, there existed and continue to exist three fundamental forms of the cult of Christian martyrs: reverence for Martyrs expressed in Liturgies (among other events), setting them as role models to the faithful, as well as prayer for the mediation of Martyrs in favour of the living. The condition for martyrdom was that the affected individuals had not become victims of persecution through a twist of fate, that their death was linked to a religiously motivated attitude, consciously embraced by such Christians as their own, on the one hand, and that martyrdom was not a consequence of suicide by an individual who had consciously sought death, on the other hand.

The stance taken by Wiktorja and Józef Ulma provided an exact testimonial of such faith. In-depth research of all the circumstances of the Ulma family's death pointed to the fact that their motivation lay not in the need for any human, material gain. Their motivation included compassion for the tragedy of Jews, a feeling that was present in the hearts of so many good people, but it also transcended compassion. When accused by his neighbours of

taking excessive risks Józef Ulma replied: “Don’t judge and you will not be judged”. It is a fragment of the *Sermon on the Mount* from *The Gospel of Luke* (Luke 6:37). It is worth noting that these words make up a part of a longer statement. In the following lines, Jesus adds: “Give and it shall be given unto you [...] For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again”.

In this same *Gospel of Luke*, we find the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, a story of a man who selflessly took good care of an ambushed and badly beaten Jew (Luke 10:30-37). In the copy of the *Gospels* found in the Ulma household this very fragment was circled in pencil...

Józef and Wiktoria Ulma read their *Gospels*, and quietly, without publicity, considered the word of God and lived by even the most demanding “Evangelical counsels” that flowed from the Eight Beatitudes of Christ’s *Sermon on the Mount* (among others they exercised mercifulness, righteousness and meekness).

Not only the Ulma family death but also the over one-year-long caretaking of eight endangered people - the caretaking of whom brought a number of sacrifices and a risk proven deadly – confirm that the Evangelical Counsels were practiced by the Ulmas at a level considered *heroic* by the Catholic theology.

Beatification understood as declaring a person “blessed”, entails the acceptance and encouragement for reverence and prayer through the mediation of this person at a specified location. Canonization, i.e. conferring the status of “saint” to a “blessed” person, extends the cult of the saint to the whole world. Put simply, the act of canonization does not entail a higher degree of virtues. It determines that a holy person is meant to be remembered in Liturgies on a specific day around the world and not in a dedicated and limited area only, as is the case with the “blessed” (or “beatified”). Notably, the Catholic Church does not claim that other

individuals who possibly embraced similar attitudes were not saintly. However, the Church does confirm that in the instance of specified individuals, the evidence corroborating the saintliness of these individuals has duly been gathered, as is the case with the Ulma family.

In the days of ancient Christianity, the graves of martyrs represented privileged locations for conducting the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus, i.e. Eucharist. This practice transformed into a custom of moving tiny fragments of the remains of the saints (the so-called relics) and placing them on altars. This form of cult is practiced today as well, as represented by the relics of St. Maksymilian Maria Kolbe. An important fact connects this saint to the Ulma family. For the first time in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, in the case of Kolbe, this Man's mercifulness and not his faith formed the basis for acknowledging his martyrdom. The very same exception has been applied in the course of the beatification of the Ulma family. Their history was acknowledged as a history of heroic love, in line with the following words of Christ: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)

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