

Fr. Tadeusz K. Oblak, S. J.
A Canon Lawyer with a Tender Heart
Francis Britto, 2006

The Farewells

Very few have the rare opportunity that Fr. Oblak had of formally bidding farewell to their loved ones several times before meeting their unforeseen death.



On July 16, 2006, the last Sunday of his life, Fr. Oblak said his weekly Polish Mass in the Kulturheim Chapel, attended by about 50 members of his Polish Pastoral Center. He baptized the 50th baby of his 'parish' that day and preached a moving homily touching upon his forthcoming trip to Poland. After Mass there was a farewell party, in which he referred to his favorite scripture passage, 2 Tim 4:5-8, and expressed his feelings of fulfillment and joy.

His Polish flock insisted on his coming back to Japan, some even telling him to cancel the trip to Poland, given his age and tired look.

July 17th was a Monday, a national holiday in Japan to honor the blessings that the sea bestows on humanity. It was also a day of recollection at S. J. House to formally conclude the long retreat in daily life that the Jesuits had made. The morning session included a general assembly in the S. J. House recreation room, where Fr. Oblak, very uncharacteristically, stood up and spoke. “The retreat was a wonderful experience for me,” he said. “I thank Fr. Provincial and all the organizers and groups for having made it a great success. There was an extraordinary atmosphere of prayer in the community. It really refreshed me, and I am very thankful to everyone.”

The same evening, the S. J. House community honored Fr. Oblak with a special *kanpai* to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his arrival in Japan. The exact date of the anniversary was July 20, but since he was leaving the next day for Poland, the celebration was held that evening. On this occasion again, Fr. Oblak spoke from the heart—briefly and to the point. “I had a dream of coming to Japan as a missionary since I was very young, and I entered the Society of Jesus hoping to realize it, and by the grace of God, that dream has been realized. I am filled with joy and gratitude to God and to the Japanese people for what they have given to me. It was a marvelous experience for me to be in Japan and to be with all of you. You were all very good to me, and all I can say is, Thank you, Thank you. *Domo arigato gozaimashita.*”

Tuesday, July 18th, at 7:00 AM. Fr. Oblak was ready at the east entrance of S. J. House with his luggage, which included even some episcopal ‘homework’ he

planned to do while in Poland. After more farewells, he entered the house car and was driven to Hakozaki Tokyo City Air Terminal by Fr. Arturo Martin. At the terminal, before boarding a bus for a two-hour ride to Narita International Airport, he expressed some concern about his health, thanked Fr. Martin, and said he was looking forward to completing the journey and returning to Japan.

Probably God blessed him with so many farewells to prepare him for the lonely death he was to face in a foreign country, as a traveler in transit, still on the way to his destination, with no familiar face around him. On Wednesday, July 19th, early in the morning, a curt announcement on the S. J. House notice board reported the tragic news: “Fr. Oblak died last night at Milan airport.”

The Man

Fr. Oblak was about 182 cm tall, and, in his later days, slightly rotund so as to appear a bit shorter than he actually was. Mostly bald, with a horseshoe of gray hair crowning his head, he had the look of a cold and unemotional East European stereotyped in spy movies. Perhaps to compensate for his dour appearance, whenever he met anyone, he always made it a point of bowing gracefully and putting on a big, friendly smile that at times seemed labored. Still, those who didn't know him personally may have failed to detect the extreme cordiality and kindness that he had concealed in his heart. Although he walked vigorously, he appeared a bit stooped, as if his head jutted out of a slightly humped back. Perhaps what especially struck those who met him for the first time was his tinny voice that somehow didn't seem to match his girth.

At S. J. House, his home, he always preferred casual clothes; but when he was on religious business, he

wore a well-pressed black suit with a Roman collar; and when on secular business, he wore an elegant dark suit with a necktie. He was not a fancy or fastidious dresser, and he was not given to pomp or luxury. He was very honest about his humble origins and preferred to live a simple life. He used to tell the Polish community, “I was born in a very small village. It’s God’s grace that led me to become a Jesuit priest and a missionary in Japan.” He was quite economical when it came to spending money on his own person, and even boasted occasionally how he was able to buy a shirt or tie for a remarkably cheap price.



When it came to dealing with others, however, he was generous to a fault. Whenever he invited his students or friends to a meal at a restaurant, he always insisted on paying for them. He used to profess a special devotion to St. Joseph, who miraculously filled his wallet with cash. The Polish parish remembers him as a Santa Claus of Sundays. Not only at Christmas, but also on other days when he celebrated Mass, he often took with him gifts of fruit, cakes, or cookies to present to the faithful, especially to the children. He also took pains to organize the gift-giving party during Christmas, and offered to supply funds to his lay collaborators if they needed extra money. He especially wanted to see the children very happy. On the eve of his final departure from Japan, he gave one of the employees of S. J. House a sophisticated CD stereo system with

professional speakers. The employee could barely restrain his tears when he heard the next morning that Fr. Oblak had died. He kept saying to every Jesuit, “Fr. Oblak gave me a fantastic gift. He was a very generous Father. The component he gave me is very professional and very expensive.”

Fr. Oblak was a tender-hearted man with great fondness for flowers, birds, animals, children, and young people. One of his regular pastimes was to sit on a stone bench near Sophia University Building #2 around 5:30 AM and feed breadcrumbs to sparrows, pigeons, and even crows. One of his favorite movies was *Hachiko Monogatari*, the true story of a faithful dog, which waited for its master’s return at a train station for eleven years after the death of the master, until its own death! Loyalty was a virtue he held in high esteem. He was always thrilled to receive postcards with cute animal pictures, and his last request to an Australian fellow-resident, who was about to leave for Australia, was that he send him a koala-bear postcard.

Fr. Oblak was a very shy and retiring man within the community, though occasionally he opened up to his friends—just a little. It was not that he was secretive. Rather, towards the end of his life he was so physically exhausted from work and work-related travels that he could hardly show any interest in learning new things, or reading contemporary literature, or engaging in casual banter. He seemed to have just enough time for saying his daily prayers, doing pastoral duties, and fulfilling the demanding tasks he received from the bishops. Most of his conversation, therefore, was related to pastoral commitments, and he often kept quiet or walked away silently if people around him spoke of “worldly matters,” most of which he found unimportant and uninteresting.

His great sensitivity also led him to be quiet most of the time. When asked why he rarely expressed his opinions, he would say, “Because my opinion counts for nothing. Who cares about what I say?” He always followed proper procedures, and conveyed his ideas to those he considered competent to do something about them. But, if the persons concerned didn’t do anything, which was often the case, he kept quiet without pushing the matter any further. Being conservative in his views, he found most current trends not to his liking, and keeping quiet was the best way he found to deal with matters that were likely to provoke heated debate. When the topic was spiritual and edifying, however, he actively took part—especially when it related to devotions, Papal teachings, catechesis, and homilies.

There was one non-spiritual area that he was enthusiastic about sometimes—sports, especially baseball, soccer, and sumo. Japanese and Americans were surprised at the extensive knowledge he had of baseball teams, players, and plays, since Poland is not internationally known for playing baseball. During the sumo seasons and World Soccer seasons, he took pleasure in finding out the results via radio, TV, or the Internet and announcing the scores to others. He probably had pastoral reasons also for his interest in sports, since he was eager to mingle with the Japanese, and sports gave him an opportunity to show his awareness of their culture. As he was not fanatic about any team, sports also provided him a harmless and non-confrontational topic for conversation. Generally a happy and cheerful person, he laughed heartily and had a sense of humor. He never minded others, especially his students and parishioners, kidding him, and he liked to complain jovially how his students often put him down.

Fr. Oblak was a man of talents. Apart from pastoral, social, and academic skills, he possessed a great sense of beauty, a refined taste for classical, especially choral, music, and an uncanny ability for fixing electric devices. Whenever he got a mechanical gadget, he tested it extensively, and spoke to others about his discoveries with childlike satisfaction. When he bought his first personal computer—quite reluctantly, and only when he found that word-processors were no longer being sold—he began almost immediately to prepare Mass-related handouts in Polish for his congregation. Even without much training, he produced an attractive handout, with meticulously selected fonts and font-sizes and aesthetically laid out lines and paragraphs. He made his own professional-looking, bilingual visiting cards, which impressed all who received them. When he got a color printer for the first time, he printed out beautiful photographs and showed them to others with much pride in his accomplishment.

He took great pleasure in fixing radios, TVs, CD-players, and sundry electric goods. He often scavenged for discarded gadgets, repaired them, and gave them to those in need. Many persons, both inside and outside the Jesuit communities, have benefited by his largesse. Because of his reputation, people consulted him when they wanted to buy clocks, watches, speakers, and audio/video components. Whenever he could, he gave them a recycled gadget or advised them about the best bargain; and in some cases even went with them to Akihabara or bought for them whatever they wanted. Sports and machines were the only things that he indulged in as distractions from his whole-hearted dedication to missionary work.

Fr. Oblak was an accomplished polyglot. Fluent in Polish, Japanese, English, and Italian, he was competent in Latin, German, and Russian as well. Like most Jesuits of his age, he had also studied Greek and Hebrew. He felt more comfortable in Japanese than in English, but he used both in everyday life. He spoke both languages with a thick Polish accent, enunciating every syllable and *vee*-ing all the *w*'s. He was very competent in writing and delivering lectures and exhortations in Japanese. He scrupulously prepared his oral presentations and wrote most of them down. He was in great demand among bishops and congregations of Sisters, partly because of his linguistic competence, which enhanced his reputation for authoritative knowledge of Canon Law and familiarity with ecclesiastical protocols.

He enjoyed good health all his life, or at least so it seemed. He was no hypochondriac. On the contrary, even when he consulted doctors, he felt embarrassed to talk about his condition. No one remembers him being hospitalized for any length of time. He never spoke specifically of any health problems and never sought the help of other Jesuits to accompany him to hospitals, though he often said that he was dying and growing too weak to work. He took care of his health almost entirely by himself, causing no trouble to anyone. He was never seen to have a special diet or consume capsules and pills on a regular basis. For several months before his death, he tried to lose weight, and around July he was about nine kilograms lighter than he used to be.

The Priest

As Jesuits go, Fr. Oblak was ordained very soon, within eight years of his entrance into the Society. Due to political circumstances, he not only entered the Society late

(aged 23, at a time when most entered before 19), but also hurried through formation. He lived nearly 53 years as a priest, 50 of them in Japan. Since his studies in secular disciplines were limited and since his own interests were pastoral, he always wanted to be a simple priest in a remote parish, spreading the Good News of Jesus. When the needs in Japan demanded that he become a Canon lawyer, he had to sacrifice his personal preferences by teaching many hours and fulfilling his professorial duties. He was able to work full time in a parish for only about one year, just before he took up his teaching assignment. Perhaps he found satisfaction in knowing that even though he himself could not be active in a remote parish, he was able to educate six future bishops, several provincials, and a large number of priests, nuns, and lay students, who were doing remarkable pastoral work in different parts of Japan.

In spite of his numerous academic commitments, he always found time to do pastoral work. He visited different parishes, as demands arose, for saying Masses and hearing confessions. He also went regularly to certain convents and Catholic schools to give retreats, triduums, and exhortations. He was active until his death in these extra-parish pastoral duties. Some of the Congregations that he served for extended periods of time are: the Pauline Sisters of Chartres, *Seishin Aishi-kai* [now *Mi-kokoro no Fukyo Shimai-kai* 'Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart'], and the Congregation of the Providence of God. He visited the Fujisawa *Mi-kokoro no Fukyo Shimai-kai* every other week until 2004 to say Mass and hear confessions. He also went there for conducting the Holy Week liturgies almost every year, until 2006. Between 1973 and 1983, every year he gave an intensive course in philosophy at Akita Misonogakuen Junior College, often concluding it with the

Christmas Mass. Although he stopped teaching there in 1983, he continued with the Christmas liturgies until as late as 2005. He regularly visited St. Joseph's Home for the Aged in Karasuyama, especially from 1973 to 1986, where, besides comforting the aged, he also said Mass for them. Emulating the peripatetic Polish Pope he so admired, he traveled far and wide in Japan, always on call to serve the Church.

He began the pastoral care of the Polish community while he was in the Jesuit Theologate, Kamishakujii. When he moved to St. Ignatius Residence, he received formal authorization from the Archbishop of Tokyo to establish a "Pastoral Center for the Polish Community" and obtained the faculties required to deal with the pastoral needs of the Poles. In the March 2006 interview he gave to *Katorikku Shimbun (The Catholic Weekly)*, he pointed out, "Over 100 attend the weekly Mass, and this swells to 500 at Christmas and Easter. Just as in Poland we have a blessing for food at the end of the Mass at Easter." Fr. Oblak continued caring for the Polish community until his death, saying weekly Masses, hearing confessions, and dispensing other sacraments, such as Marriage and Baptism.

Besides the pastoral care of the Polish congregation, Fr. Oblak had the responsibility of saying the daily early morning Mass at 6:00 o'clock at St. Ignatius Church. The early morning Mass used to be said by Fr. Cieslik, and when he died, Fr. Oblak gladly agreed to take his place. The morning Mass is usually attended by about 30 devoted faithful, and Fr. Oblak made a deep impression on many of them. He was so admired that some went to attend his Polish Mass, even though they didn't understand a word of Polish. Twice a week he heard confessions at St. Ignatius Church and readily offered himself at other times when needed.

Fr. Oblak was well-known for his concise and well-written homilies. He wrote his everyday homilies on no more than two B5 pages, and his Sunday homilies on no more than four B5 pages. For the Poles he wrote in Polish, and for the Japanese he wrote in Japanese, but always in Roman letters. His homilies were classic and orthodox in format, beginning with a brief explanation of the readings, followed by his reflections, and then the lessons to be learned. He always kept them simple, intelligible, and, above all, short. People loved his homilies, and he was always ready to share them with fellow priests. If anyone asked him for a homily, for any day whatsoever, he would be ready with it within 15 to 20 minutes, presumably because he had all the homilies on a computer folder or in a cardboard file. A Japanese lady who attended his morning Mass everyday had requested him several times to give her his homilies for publication, but he consistently refused to do so. A Jesuit at S. J. House too had asked him frequently to give him all the homilies so that he might put them on the World Wide Web—even arguing that his Roman-lettered Japanese homilies would help many foreign missionaries struggling with Japanese. But Fr. Oblak would always say, “No, no, no. There are many homilies already on the Internet. Mine are very simple and not worth putting on the Internet. Ask for yourself, and I’ll give you any number.”

For many years, especially after Communism began to crumble in Poland, Fr. Oblak took an active part in the Polish Embassy activities, often showing his priestly presence by wearing a Roman collar and a black suit. He also served regularly as an observer during election time, making sure that due election process was followed. The Polish Embassy welcomed and appreciated his contributions. Embassy officials were present both at the Polish Memorial

Mass and the Japanese Memorial Mass held in Tokyo. Fr. Oblak seems to have played the role of a mini-John Paul II in Japan, inspiring the Poles to stand firm in their Catholic faith and exhorting them to resist Communist, and lately secular, values.

The Professor

Fr. Oblak was a Professor of Moral Theology and Canon Law at Sophia University by career, and he fulfilled that task conscientiously. When he began teaching, the Jesuits oversaw the theological education of not only Jesuits but also candidates of other religious orders, seminarians from all dioceses except Kyushu, nuns, and laity. All his students remember him as an accommodating professor who was never rude or mean, but, on the contrary, very understanding and ready to overlook petty issues. He even went further by trying to make the life of students easier and more pleasant. One anecdote goes as follows. A few Jesuit scholastics preparing for the *ad gradum* examination realized that a certain professor whom they all dreaded was on the board of examiners. After worrying about it much, they decided to send a delegation to Fr. Oblak, who was then the Secretary of the Faculty of Theology with authority to schedule examiners and exams, to see if he could help them. After hearing their worries, Fr. Oblak told them: “Well, I guess the examinees must be entitled to at least one privilege during examinations, so I shall see what I can do for you.” To the joy of the scholastics, Fr. Oblak indeed assigned a different professor in place of the dreaded one. His students tell several stories like this, of how kind and understanding he always was. Several priests of other congregations and diocesan priests mention that he helped

them whenever they faced difficulties in going through theology—always using legal and humane means!

Fr. Oblak was one of the most competent Canon lawyers in Japan, and he possessed not only expertise but also prudence. Many priests, bishops, and nuns from all parts of Japan consulted him because he was exceptionally gifted with authoritative knowledge, humanistic outlook, and multilingual competence. At the Memorial Mass for Fr. Oblak, Cardinal Peter Shirayanagi recalled the many services that Fr. Oblak, with his command of Canon Law, rendered the Japanese Bishops, especially the Archbishops of Tokyo and Osaka. Fr. Oblak played a significant role for many years in the Ecclesiastical Tribunals of these dioceses, serving in different capacities, such as a judge and judicial vicar. Another major service that Fr. Oblak rendered the entire Church of Japan was to help in the Beatification Process of the 188 Japanese Martyrs, where again his skills in collecting data and preparing the documents required by Rome were called upon. Most of his academic work after retirement centered on assisting the Bishops and religious superiors in preparing documents related to annulment, laicization, and property management, often involving interviews with the parties concerned and deciphering and translating documents of different languages.

Fr. John Clarkson, who had known Fr. Oblak since the latter's arrival in Japan, draws the following portrait of Fr. Oblak, one with which many will concur:

Whenever I consulted him on any particular matter, it seemed to me that he was always anxious to find very human solutions that one would not call rigoristic at all. You could be

sure that he knew what he was talking about, knew the law that applied, and how to apply it. Over the years, I consulted him about canonical and pastoral questions that I met in my ministry and about other matters where I was helped by his knowledge and wisdom. In every case, he always showed much patience and kindness.

Cardinal Shirayanagi mentioned in his homily that Fr. Oblak helped a countless number of couples who had marital difficulties and that Fr. Oblak always put the welfare of the persons first. Many Jesuits involved in pastoral work miss him very much since they no longer have anyone like him that they can google for Canon Law answers.

Fr. Oblak had a lasting relationship with the *Mi-Kokoro no Fukyo Shimai-kai* (Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart) and contributed his help to them in many ways. The first contact took place soon after his arrival in Kamishakujii as a professor of Canon Law when they had to have someone to help them reorganize their Congregation after the Second Vatican Council. Fr. Oblak visited them many times after that and helped them reformulate their constitutions in the 1970s. After the new Code of Canon Law was released in 1983, Fr. Oblak helped the Sisters again, between 1984 and 1985, to revise their constitutions in accordance with the new Code.

Fr. Oblak himself would like to be remembered more as a holy man than as a talented or skilled Canon lawyer. He was a man of prayer and always faithful to his morning meditation, Mass, the Divine Office, examination of conscience, rosary, and confession. He was one of the few regular attendants at all the religious activities of S. J. House, never missing evening prayers, benedictions, or

exhortations. His devotion to Mary, as pointed out by Cardinal Shirayanagi, was well known, and he was often seen saying a rosary in different quiet areas of the campus.

Fr. Oblak was proud of being an orthodox traditionalist. He was a typical Jesuit of the classical mold, always thinking with the Church and searching for ways to serve it. He had no room for doubts about or questioning of moral teachings and dogmas, and he took seriously the dictum "*Roma locuta, causa finita.*" Always a gentleman, he never argued vociferously or engaged in quarrels about orthodoxy, but he made no secret of the fact that he disapproved of many modern trends both within and without the Catholic Church. As a sensitive pastor, he did desire some changes in the official policies of the Church, but he did not feel that such matters should be casually discussed or openly challenged. He would rather stand by the side of ecclesiastical authorities as a faithful follower of Ignatius, who demanded unflinching obedience to the hierarchical Church, and wait for due process to take its course. It pained him much to see Jesuits involved in controversies and confrontations with the hierarchy, and he showed no interest at all in talking about such issues. He was, obviously, very sad at the departures of so many men and women from the priesthood and religious life. He lamented the fact that the Polish Jesuit who had come to Japan before him and the two Polish Jesuits who came to Japan after him subsequently left the Society of Jesus and the priesthood. Despite his personal orthodoxy, however, Fr. Oblak never spoke critically of those who left and never let his personal views hinder his assistance to those who needed it to go through the canonical process of laicization. He always dealt with people with sympathy and

consideration, regardless of whether he agreed with them or not.

The Beginnings

Tadeusz Oblak was born the fourth child of John Oblak and Victoria Labola, on March 25, 1922, in Borzecin, one of the seven communes of Brzesko County, in Lesser Poland. Borzecin is a small village, and the only other famous son of the village is Slawomir Mrozek (born 1930), a journalist, dramatist, and man of letters, some of whose works are available in English. The town of Brzesko, the capital of the Brzesko County, is 50 km east of Krakow, and 350 km south of Warsaw. Even as of 2004, Brzesko's population was a mere 16,912, and so Borzecin must have been a very tiny village when Tadeusz was born.

Tadeusz was born on a very significant day. As March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, marks the day when Jesus was conceived, Western culture for centuries celebrated it as New Year's Day. Some ancient Christian writers even believed that March 25 was the day when God created the world, when Adam fell from grace, and when Christ was crucified. When Dionysius Exiguus introduced the *Anno Domini* system of counting years in AD 525, the years were numbered from the supposed date of the Incarnation (25 March), although this was later changed to Christmas. The year 1922 is when Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) died, and when Charles Schulz, Kurt Vonnegut, and Pier Paolo Pasolini were born.

Tadeusz bore the name of the Apostle Jude Thaddeus, patron of desperate and lost causes, perhaps foreshadowing his life-long assistance to people in despair, applying his mastery of Canon Law. The name might have been popular due to Tadeusz Kosciuszko (1746 – 1817), a

Polish national hero, who found fame in France, USA, and his own native Poland. Kosciuszko fought in the American Revolutionary War on the side of Washington, and was made a Brigadier General and a naturalized citizen of the United States. After returning to Poland in 1784, he led the 1794 Uprising (which eponymously bears his name) against the Russian Empire.

Tadeusz' middle name was Casimir (Kazimierz), which perhaps referred to St. Casimir (d.1484), the youthful Polish Prince, who lived a celibate and holy life, rather than to Casimir the Great (d.1370), who perhaps violated a few Church laws by marrying several women.

Tadeusz was born at a very crucial period in Polish history. Poland, which had been subject to three partitions by the neighboring superpowers—Russia, Prussia, and Austria—toward the end of the 18th century (1772, 1792, 1795) and ceased to exist for more than a century, came back to life in 1918, at the end of World War I, barely four years before Tadeusz was born. On March 17th, 1921, a new, democratic constitution of the Second Polish Republic was voted in and it was only in 1922 that the borders of the new republic were fully fixed. During his childhood, therefore, despite the hard challenges ahead in building up a new country, he had a bright future to look forward to. In continental Russia, 1922 was the year when Josef Stalin, the nemesis of millions, including the Poles, became the General Secretary of the Communist Party. It was an insignificant post, but Stalin made it quite significant by consolidating his own power base and later taking over the leadership of Russia from Lenin, when the latter died in January 1924.

Between 1930 and 1936, when Tadeusz was 8-14, the future Saint Maxmilian Kolbe took several missionary

trips from Poland to Nagasaki, Japan, where he founded a monastery, the *Seibo no Kishi* 'Knights of the Holy Mother' magazine, and a seminary. Tadeusz' brother Jan Wladyslaw, nine years his senior, was ordained a priest in 1936. These events might have inspired Tadeusz to consider becoming a priest and going as a missionary to Japan. Tadeusz himself maintained all his life that he had no specific reason for wishing to work in Japan—except that he felt it was a mysterious call from God.

When Tadeusz was barely 17, he became affected by the Second World War, as both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland. He was forced to spend the following six years, perhaps the most formative period of his youth, at home under very trying conditions and without



proper schooling, as all the schools had been closed. These bitter years taught him several lessons that he remembered all his life: to bear with suffering without losing hope, to take care of oneself without relying on others, and to be an autodidact, learning by personal investigation and trial-and-error method. It was during this period that he developed an interest in dismantling and re-assembling radios, clocks, electric bells, and

other mechanical devices—a passion that lasted all his life.

When the war was over, Tadeusz was already 23 years old, but he eagerly searched for a religious order that could satisfy his missionary zeal. After much discernment, he decided to enter the Society of Jesus, aware that the Jesuits were great missionaries. He started his novitiate in Stara Wies near Brzozow on August 30, 1945, with a determination to work in Japan, motivated still further by the apocalyptic events of that month, when all of humanity stood aghast at the destructive power of the atomic bombs that exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From 1947 to 1950, he studied philosophy in Krakow, and from 1950 until 1954 he studied theology, first in Krakow (I year), and then in Warsaw.

The Nazis had imprisoned some 40% of Poland's priests and half of the prisoners had died or had been executed. Young men like Tadeusz were doing their best to rebuild the Church's leadership. The end of World War II brought no relief to Poland, since the Soviet Union became the superpower controlling Poland through pro-Soviet Polish rulers. The Sovietization of Poland was complete with the constitution of 1952, which made Poland a people's republic on the Soviet model.

While Tadeusz was going through the Jesuit formation (1945~1954) in relative seclusion, the world around him was going through convulsive changes, some of them seriously affecting the Catholic Church in Russia and Poland. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had led to the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922, and a clash of the Catholic Church with Communism seemed inevitable. Stalin's ascent to power in the 1920s only made matters worse for the Church, culminating in the 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* of Pius XI. This fiery document warned the world of the dangers of atheistic Communism,

pointing out that it “strips man of his liberty, robs human personality of all its dignity, and removes all the moral restraints that check the eruptions of blind impulse.”

Stalinism exerted its influence in every walk of Polish life, and Catholic leaders were watched closely for errant behavior. In 1946, Stefan Wyszyński, the greatest moral force of modern Poland, became Bishop of Lublin. In 1948, when the Communists were wooing the nation’s youth by rewards and punishments, Bishop Wyszyński, already with a reputation for standing up against Communists, was appointed Archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw. He also succeeded the late Cardinal Hlond as the Primate of Poland, an ecclesiastical and secular position of prestige and authority found only in a handful of other countries. Traditionally, the Polish Primate was entitled even to act as the interrex after the death of a king. In 1949, the Vatican issued a decree against Communism, forbidding Catholics to cooperate with Communists and putting all Communist publications on the Index. The Communists retorted by restricting the freedom of worship even more and by imprisoning the clergy.

In January 1953, the year that Tadeusz was due to be ordained, three priests were arrested and tried as spies of the CIA. On March 5 of the same year, Stalin died in Moscow, sowing a seed of hope among the people who dreaded him. The grip of Communists over Poland, however, continued to get tighter. When *Tygodnik*



Powszechny, the leading Catholic newspaper, refused to print a eulogy in honor of Stalin, it was immediately suspended, and allowed to function again only with an editorial board approved by the regime.

It was in this atmosphere of religious oppression and Communist anti-Catholic propaganda that on August 23, 1953, Tadeusz was ordained priest by the illustrious Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of Poland. Wyszyński had become Cardinal only a few months earlier, and he was to be arrested one month later, on September 26, and kept a prisoner for the next three years. Fr. Oblak said his first Mass outdoors on a sunny but windy day. The wind was so strong that it was putting out candles, knocking down flowers, and shooting the faithful with twigs and leaves. The local parish priest in his address pointed out that a stormy and windy future might await Fr. Oblak, but he would be able to withstand all challenges with the sunny grace of God. Fr. Oblak looked upon the event as prophetic and recalled it often later in his life.

Even immediately after ordination, Fr. Oblak was eager to take off for Japan, but the political situation in Poland deterred him from doing so. He was unable to get either a passport from the Passport Office in Warsaw or a visa from the Japanese Embassy in Stockholm: both were denied to him for “lack of adequate reasons.” His own provincial was not very hopeful that Fr. Oblak would ever be able to leave for Japan, but Fr. Oblak persevered in his dream for the next three years.

The Polish situation began to change significantly due to a dramatic event in 1954, when Colonel Jozef Swiatlo, deputy director of a department in the Ministry of Public Security and a very influential Party chief, defected to the West. Swiatlo began to broadcast on Radio Free

Europe the clandestine activities of the Polish security services and the extent to which Moscow had control over everyday life in Poland. The scandal that followed these revelations led to the dismissal of the head of the security services and the release of Wladyslaw Gomulka from prison. Gomulka, who had been purged in 1949 from the Polish Communist party as a "rightist deviationist" and imprisoned since 1951, appeared a promising leader and even garnered the support of Cardinal Wyszynski. After the death of the hard-core Stalinist Boleslaw Bierut in March 1956, Poland went through a process of de-Stalinization, and Gomulka, reinstated as the Party leader, took over the leadership of the government. At least initially, he seemed to relax the restrictions that the previous government had imposed.

During the years 1949-55, Poland was effectively cut off from Western cultural, religious, and political influences, as the Soviet model dominated in all spheres. When Nikita Khrushchev came to power after Stalin, however, he initiated a loosening of political repression, which came to be known as Khrushchev's Thaw. In a historic speech delivered to the delegates of the 20th Communist Party Congress on February 23, 1956, he shocked his listeners by speaking out against Stalin's "cult of personality" and encouraging reforms. The Polish delegation that attended the Congress received signs that the rigid walls erected by Stalin could be chipped away without any repercussions. On March 20, 1956, Khrushchev himself arrived in Warsaw to woo the Poles with a friendly face, encouraging them all the same to remain faithfully under the Russian mantle.

Under these relatively benign, though tense, circumstances of 1956, Fr. Oblak was able to obtain a passport and a visa to Japan, the documents he had awaited

for three long years. At last, he could set out to fulfill his lifelong ambition of becoming a missionary in Japan.



The Labors

When Fr. Oblak arrived at Haneda airport, Tokyo, on July 20, 1956, having left Poland on July 7 and having traveled via Sweden, he was met by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the Vice-Provincial. In 1957, when the name of Fr. Oblak appears for the first time in the Japanese Jesuit Catalog, the Japanese Vice-Province was 376 men strong, of whom 84 priests, 104 scholastics, and 5 brothers were *applicati* from overseas. So Fr. Oblak was in a big company of foreigners, most of whom, however, had come as scholastics and at a much younger age to Japan. Heading straight to the Japanese language school in Taura, Fr. Oblak immersed

himself in English and Japanese Language studies, together with 33 other Jesuits from around the world. Fr. Clarkson, who was one year his senior at the language school, recalls: “Fr. Oblak was a diligent student. He never seemed to talk much about Poland or the Communist regime there, but I always felt that he seemed affected with a pervading sadness about his country's fate.” As a relatively older Jesuit and already a priest, Fr. Oblak served as the minister for his classmates, who were mostly scholastics.

In 1958, exactly on his 36th birthday, Fr. Oblak proceeded to Nagatsuka, Hiroshima, to make his tertianship along with Fr. Akijiro Oki, Fr. Peter del Campana, and 16 others, under Fr. Anthony Achee. Here too he was appointed minister of the tertians. While he was in tertianship, the Japanese Vice-Province was turned into a Province, and Fr. Arrupe took over as the Provincial on October 18, 1958. Although Fr. Oblak's own personal preference was to be a pastor in a remote parish, the newly appointed Provincial commissioned him to specialize in Canon Law, and Fr. Oblak obeyed. So, when the tertianship was over on January 25, 1959, he returned to Taura to refresh his Japanese and prepare for his travels. In July 1959, he proceeded to Rome to begin his special studies in Canon Law.

Fr. Oblak studied at the Gregorian with Frs. Aloysius Hayashi, John Clarkson, and Ignatius Cañada. Besides concentrating on his studies, he kept himself busy doing pastoral work, and during his final year, he stayed at the Russicum in Via Carlo Cattaneo. It was during his studies in Rome that he heard, on November 20, 1961, of the appointment of his brother Jan as Auxiliary Bishop of Gniezno, Poland. As his stay in Rome was coming to an

end, he took his last vows on February 2, 1963, thus becoming a full-fledged Jesuit.

On his return to Japan in 1963, Fr. Oblak was sent to Yamaguchi (Kameyama) Parish for pastoral work. There he served enthusiastically as a pastor, besides being the house consultor and examiner of candidates. After one year, however, he was given the mission of teaching Canon Law and Moral Theology in the Faculty of Theology at Sophia University. So in 1964, he took up residence in Kamishakujii, a suburb of metropolitan Tokyo, where the campus was, and began his long teaching career. Coincidentally, 1964 was the year when Bishop Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope, was made the Archbishop of Krakow.

The Jesuit theologate at that time served many dioceses and religious orders. As a result, there were numerous students of theology, including 45 Jesuit scholastics, and the job was demanding. Providentially, there was also Fr. Miecislaus Szumillo, another Pole, teaching Canon Law, and so Fr. Oblak had someone to initiate and guide him. Besides teaching, his job included working as the Secretary of the Faculty of Theology and as a Censor of books.

On May 22, 1965, the Japanese Provincial Fr. Arrupe was elected General of the Society of Jesus, and Fr. Hildebrand Martini, who was the Rector of the theologate, took over as the new Provincial of Japan, making Fr. Clarkson Rector of the theologate. Having settled in, Fr. Oblak extended his non-academic apostolate by taking up duties in nearby parishes and serving as the Confessor of the Pauline Sisters of Chartres and the Sisters of Seishin Aishi-kai. In 1966, Fr. Oblak was jolted by the sudden exit of his fellow countryman and fellow Canon lawyer Fr.

Szumillo from the Society and the priesthood. He was then left as the only Polish Jesuit in Japan and found the task of teaching Canon Law to a large number of students more arduous. The situation in Poland too was getting to be very trying for the Church and painful to Fr. Oblak, but he sensed a ray of hope when the Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was elected Pope in October 1978.

After 15 years in Kamishakujii, Fr. Oblak moved to St. Ignatius Residence, in Kojimachi, Tokyo, in 1979. During his stay at St. Ignatius Residence, he not only helped in the parish, but also kept up full-time teaching of Canon Law and Moral Theology. The three-day visit of Pope John Paul II to Japan in February, 1981, gave Fr. Oblak a rare opportunity to get to know the Polish Pope personally, as he served as the Pope's translator, accompanying him to most of the places he visited. He was very proud of and respectful of John Paul II and considered him one of the greatest Popes. Fr. Oblak had another occasion to be exhilarated when Lech Walesa, the head of Poland's independent Solidarity union, arrived in Japan for a week long visit on May 11, 1981. A casual-looking Walesa attended Mass at St. Ignatius Church, and Fr. Oblak was thrilled to meet someone who confronted the Communists head on. The occasion was not entirely a happy one as Pope John Paul II was shot on May 13, 1981, in St. Peter's Square, causing great anxiety among all Catholics, especially among the Poles, who at that time were on a collision course with the Communists. The Pope, however, miraculously survived, and by May 1982, he was ready to travel to Portugal and UK. Fr. Oblak had another occasion to celebrate in 1982, when his brother Jan was appointed Bishop of Warmia. Because of his association with the

bishops of Japan, Fr. Oblak felt especially pleased with his own brother's election to the episcopate.

With the election of Pope John Paul II, the situation in Poland began to change dramatically, and with the visit of Walesa to Rome in January 1981 and his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, the end of Communism in Poland seemed near. The number of Poles in Japan began to increase around this period, and Fr. Oblak, together with a Polish Dominican, Fr. Julian Rozycki, began to bring the Poles in Tokyo together on the 2nd Sunday of every month in Shibuya Catholic Church. At first only about 10 Poles assembled, but the number continued to increase. Subsequently, Fr. Oblak began conducting Polish Masses at St. Ignatius Church, a more convenient location, and gradually this became the center of Polish Catholic activities. With the increase of the Polish population in Tokyo, the Sunday Mass in Polish has been held weekly for the past 15 years, sometimes at St. Ignatius Church and sometimes in the Kulturheim Chapel of S. J. House. Three Polish nuns from the Congregation of the Providence of God have been helping the Polish community for many years, and two years ago, a Polish Sunday school was set up for the benefit of children born to Polish parents.

As a professor of Canon Law, Fr. Oblak had been offering informal assistance to several religious congregations and ecclesiastical authorities ever since he began his teaching career. Since the mid 1970s, he had also been working with Fr. John Ripplinger, who was the chief official at the Ecclesiastical Tribunal of the Tokyo Archdiocese, in matters related to marriage breakdowns. When the aging Fr. Ripplinger retired from the job in 1984, Fr. Oblak was appointed to take his place.

The most memorable event of 1984 for Fr. Oblak was the guided tour of Poland that he gave to Archbishop Shirayanagi. The Tokyo Archbishop had a standing invitation from Archbishop Franciszek Macharski of Krakow to visit Poland, ever since the latter accompanied the Pope to Japan in 1981. Finding time in 1984, Archbishop Shirayanagi took Fr. Oblak with him and visited various cultural and religious centers of Poland. The tour lasted nearly three weeks, and Fr. Oblak proved to be an excellent and enthusiastic guide, explaining to the Archbishop every aspect of Polish culture, Polish commitment to Catholicism, and the Polish people's passionate devotion to Mary, especially to the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. The visit left a lasting impression on the Archbishop, and he came to understand and appreciate better the extraordinary missionary zeal of the Pope and Fr. Oblak and the significance of Marian devotions in one's spiritual life.

While at Kojimachi residence, Fr. Oblak also had a brief stint (1980-81) as the Secretary of the Jesuit Provincial and Editor of the Province Newsletter. Fr. Robert Deiters, who was the Provincial at that time, remembers that Fr. Oblak was extremely cooperative and generous in accepting that assignment on very short notice, although Fr. Oblak was then a full time professor already burdened with numerous other commitments. For several years, Fr. Oblak served as a house consultant (1986-1994) as well.

The year 1988 ended rather gloomily for Fr. Oblak, since his favorite brother Jan, the Bishop Emeritus of Warmia, died aged 75, nine days before Christmas. By 1990, the hold of Communists on Poland loosened, and Walesa won the presidency in the second round of a general election held on 10 December, 1990, and the situation in

Poland began to improve. Fr. Oblak's long desired freedom to do more pastoral work came in 1992, when he retired from Sophia University and thus was relieved of teaching obligations. He then took up enthusiastically various assignments at St. Ignatius Parish, and agreed to become a Consultor of the Archdiocese of Osaka, serving in that capacity until 1996. In 1994, Fr. Oblak had the pleasure of meeting Walesa once more, but this time the latter was received solemnly as the President of Poland and a state guest of Japan.

In 1995, Fr. Oblak moved to S. J. House, the Jesuit community that was to be his last residence. The same year, he was appointed the Episcopal Delegate in the Beatification Process of the 188 Japanese Martyrs, among whom was the Jesuit Peter Kibe, known as the "Marco Polo of the Far East." As Cardinal Shirayanagi testified during the Memorial Mass, this was a time-consuming and grueling job, but Fr. Oblak accepted it cheerfully and traveled to different parts of Japan to collect materials and compile the necessary data concerning each one of the martyrs. The Cardinal pointed out that the process required meticulous documentation, and it could not have been completed without Fr. Oblak standing constantly at his side.

While at S. J. House, Fr. Oblak continued his pastoral duties in different parts of Japan. He didn't neglect the Polish community or the convents either. He also helped at St. Ignatius Church often, hearing confessions and saying the early morning Mass at 6:00 o'clock. He was the formal caretaker of the TV tuners and video-players at S. J. House, and he contributed substantially to the selection and installment of various devices currently in use.

The End

Fr. Oblak's Alitalia flight 878 left Narita at 13:05 Japan time. It was scheduled to touch down, after about 10,000 km and 12 hours of travel, in Milan Malpensa airport on July 18, at 18:05 local time (around 1:05 AM, July 19, Japan time), and he was to transfer to Alitalia flight 588 and take off at 21:30 for Krakow. It was the hottest month of the year in Milan, but the maximum temperature that day was only 29° C, six degrees lower than the maximum 35° C it was to reach a few days later. No details of the circumstances surrounding his collapse are known—except that he died 'in the arms of a policewoman'—but the autopsy seems to have confirmed that the death was due to natural causes. Fr. Oblak had stated to several people before his departure that he was very tired and sick and wished that he didn't have to travel. Even in his letter of May 31 to the Archbishop of Warmia, he wrote: "This year again, I am going to visit my country. ... But I am worried about my health and wonder if I will be able to endure the difficulties of such a long trip." On many occasions during the last week of his life, he did look exhausted and pale, but he was under no medication or medical observation. No one suspected that he was too seriously ill to travel, since he continued going about his work as usual, and even on the night before his departure, he was working on the jobs entrusted to him.

Fr. Oblak's funeral was held in Krakow, Poland, at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, on August 2, 2006, in the presence of His Excellency Wojciech Ziemba, the Archbishop of Warmia, Fr. Krzysztof Dyrek, the Jesuit Provincial of Lesser Poland, several Jesuits, and relatives. Fr. Oblak's elder sister, in her nineties, could not attend the funeral due to health reasons. Fr. Oblak's favorite passage, 2 Timothy 4:5-8, was read as the first reading: "For I am

already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.” Fr. Boguslaw Steczek, the Rector of a Jesuit community in Krakow, preached a touching homily, highlighting Fr. Oblak’s early life in Poland and his labors in Japan. In particular, he stressed the missionary zeal of Fr. Oblak and his commitment to the Church in Japan. He also recalled Fr. Oblak’s own words:

The beginning of my stay in Japan was very difficult, but it was my desire to go there, so I had no one to complain to except myself! There were many difficulties, but it’s difficulties that season us. I have been in Japan for close to 50 years, but I never complained about my lot and never regretted that I went to Japan as a missionary.

Fr. Steczek also cited glowing tributes paid to Fr. Oblak by Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz (Secretary of Pope John Paul II and current Archbishop of Krakow), Fr. Julian Rozycki, OP, and Fr. Pawel Janocinski, OP. The latter two had collaborated with Fr. Oblak for several years in his Polish apostolate. The homily concluded with a prayer to Fr. Oblak to intercede to the Lord for Poland, for Japan, and for the emergence of many zealous missionaries like him.

The Polish community in Tokyo held a private Memorial Mass for Fr. Oblak in Polish on July 30, with Fr. Pawel Janocinski, OP, and Fr. Koichi Matsumoto, SJ, Pastor of St. Ignatius Church, concelebrating. The Mass

was held at St. Mary's Chapel of St. Ignatius Church, and despite the fact it was summer, a large number of Poles, including representatives from the Polish Embassy, attended the service. Both Fr. Janocinski, representing the Polish community, and Fr. Matsumoto, representing the Jesuits and the parish, delivered eulogies.



The public Memorial Mass for Fr. Oblak in Tokyo was held on September 14, coincidentally the very day he was scheduled to return to Japan. Cardinal Shirayanagi was the chief celebrant, assisted by the Chancellors of the Osaka and Tokyo Archdioceses, the Jesuit Provincial of Japan, and about 50 priests. The congregation consisted of about 150 faithful, including many from his Polish flock. At least two officials came from the Polish Embassy, carrying a large wreath of white flowers. Japanese Sisters from Fujisawa (Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart), Polish Sisters from Meguro (Congregation of the

Providence of God), and several faithful who used to attend his early morning Mass too were present. In his homily of about 18 minutes, the Cardinal recalled how Polish Fr. Oblak was in being a man of strong faith, proud of his culture and heritage, and deeply devoted to Our Lady and the Church. He reminisced about Fr. Oblak's role as a translator and guide to the Pope during the latter's visit to Japan in 1981, and during the Cardinal's own visit to Poland with Fr. Oblak in 1984. He elaborated on the different services that Fr. Oblak rendered the Church in Japan, both in training the clergy, including several bishops, and in putting himself wholeheartedly at the disposal of the Church. He moved many people to tears when he spoke of how hard Fr. Oblak worked in marital cases, trying to bring peace and reconciliation, and for the process of canonizing the 188 Japanese martyrs, by traveling tirelessly to different parts of Japan. The Cardinal thanked God for sending such a dedicated missionary as Fr. Oblak to Japan and sought Fr. Oblak's intercession for the welfare of the Japanese Church. He concluded the homily by pointing out that in this age of secularism and consumerism, Fr. Oblak is a model for all in the way he put his complete trust in God and lived solely to fulfill God's will rather than to satisfy human urges. When the Mass ended, there were sobs and tears among the Polish faithful. Several individuals and groups took farewell photographs with Fr. Oblak's picture at the altar.

Fr Oblak was a down-to-earth honest priest who made no fuss about his career or achievements. He often claimed to be a nobody who was simply doing his duty. He neither indulged in narrating his exploits nor expected others to pay him glorious tributes. The concise epitaph he would expect is perhaps: Tadeusz Oblak, a simple Jesuit

who, in spite of his limitations, tried his best to give himself wholeheartedly to serving God and the Church in Japan.

The Memories

“Both the Canon Law and electric gadgets are complicated apparatuses. If you handle either of them carelessly, you run the risk of causing havoc.” (Fr. Oblak on his two preoccupations)

‘His Mass was very spiritual and mystical. Whenever I attended his morning Mass, I was filled with joy throughout the day and I felt an inexplicable experience of God’s love. I asked him once why his Masses have such an unusual power. And he said, “I don’t know. I am only a simple priest trying to pray and be true to God. I hope God hears my prayers.”’ (A Japanese lady who attended his 6:00 AM Mass everyday.)

‘Fr. Oblak was sometimes like a little boy with a touch of jealousy. I remember once when another Polish priest was leaving Japan, I stood very close to him and said how much I was going to miss him. Fr. Oblak saw me and said, “Oh, you love him more than me!” I said, “No, no, Fr. Oblak. Don’t be jealous. I love him as my brother, but I love you as my father! Very, very much.” Then he became red in the face and seemed satisfied. He was very simple and innocent.’ (A Polish lady and good friend of Fr. Oblak for many years)

‘When the Polish Bishop Pikus visited Japan in 2005 we all stood around him for a photo. I deliberately tried to insert my arm into Fr. Oblak’s arm for the photo as he had stood in a photo with the Pope, but he immediately

withdrew his arm and told me, “No, no, no, no! Keep your arms off me. Are you trying to get me into trouble?”’ (A Polish lady and good friend of Fr. Oblak for many years.)

‘Fr. Oblak once showed us a photo of his face, around the time of his ordination. Struck by his handsome looks, I told him, “Fr. Oblak, you made a big mistake in becoming a priest. What a waste! You were so handsome like a Hollywood actor.” And Fr. Oblak, trying to put on an angry face, retorted: “What nonsense! Do you mean to say God selects only ugly men to become priests?”’ (A Polish lady)

‘He always made time to take care of our spiritual needs and regularly heard our confessions. He told us that missionaries should always hope and never give up, whatever the challenges. Although he worked excessively himself, he was very concerned about our health and told us never to ignore proper sleep and rest.’ (Polish Sisters from the Congregation of the Providence of God)

‘Fr. Oblak was the glue that held us all together. Without him, we wouldn’t have had an opportunity like this to come together. Now we feel orphaned, and we don’t have anyone to say Mass for us every week as he did.’ (A Polish member of Fr. Oblak’s parish)

‘Fr. Oblak felt that it was very important for Polish missionaries to be prepared well for their work in Japan. I learned from him how much respect we must show to our Catholic faith, Polish culture and language. I also learned from him how to be an optimist, sustained by deep faith. Having him now as a patron in heaven, we can look toward

the future of the Polish apostolate in Tokyo with even more optimism.’ (Fr. Janocinski, OP, who often assisted Fr. Oblak in his pastoral work for the Poles)

‘Fr. Oblak was a savior to me and many other members of my congregation. Without him I wouldn’t have gone through theology successfully. He was always kind, helpful, and ready to rescue us whenever we had any academic problems.’ (A non-Jesuit priest.)

A Polish journalist once asked Fr. Oblak various questions about his work, and he told her that he was the only Polish Jesuit missionary in Japan. The lady misunderstood him and wrote in a publication that Fr. Oblak was the only Jesuit missionary in Japan, to his great embarrassment.

‘Fr. Oblak was very fastidious and extremely humble. He was embarrassed to make any requests, and when he made them, he apologized many times. The packages he wanted us to mail were always neatly prepared and addressed, and he gave us clearly typed instructions about what we must do with them. He made us feel important.’ (An employee caring for mail.)

‘He was an extremely generous man. Although he was a great professor, he treated us, employees, as friends. He has given us many boxes of chocolates, cookies, and other presents; but he never expected thanks or publicity. He would explicitly forbid us to thank him.’ (An employee)