A History of Stanislaus, Bishop and Martyr (July 26, 1030 - April 11,1079)

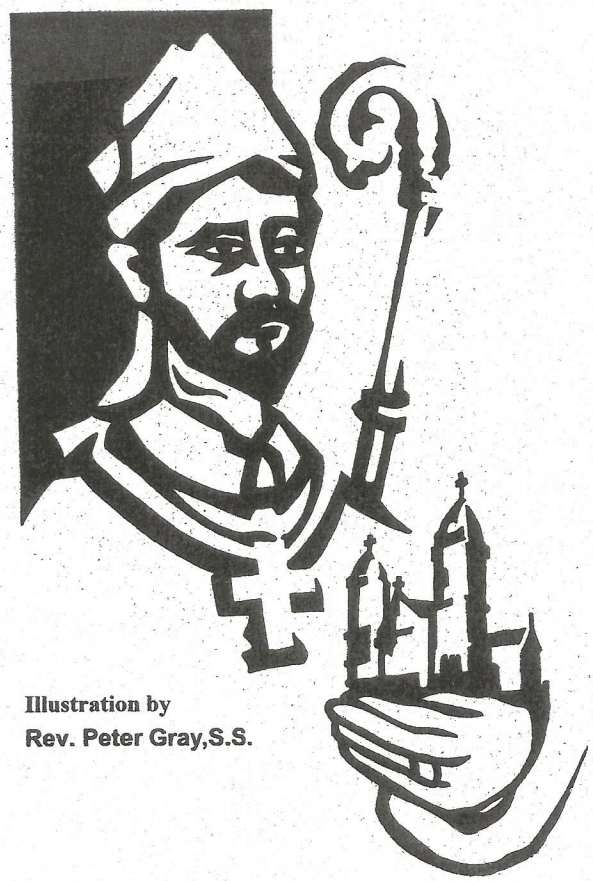

Illustration by
Rev. Peter Gray,S.S.

According to tradition, Stanislaus was born at Szczepanów, a village in Lesser Poland, the only son of the noble and pious Wielislaw and Bogna. He was educated at a cathedral school in Gniezno (then the capital of Poland) and later, according to different sources, in Paris or Liège. On his return to Poland, Stanislaus was ordained a priest by Lambert II Sula, Bishop of Kraków.

After the Bishop's death (1072), Stanislaus was elected his successor but accepted the office only at the explicit command of Pope Alexander II. Stanislaus was one of the earliest native Polish bishops. He also became a ducal advisor and had some influence on Polish politics.

Stanislaus' major accomplishments included:

bringing papal legates to Poland, and reestablishment of a metropolitan see in Gniezno. The latter was a precondition for Duke Boleslaw's coronation as king, which took place in 1076. Stanislaus then encouraged King Boleslaw to establish Benedictine monasteries to aid in the Christianization of Poland.

Stanislaus' initial conflict with King Boleslaw was over a land dispute. The Bishop had purchased for the diocese a piece of land on the banks of the Vistula river near Lublin from a certain Peter (Piotr), but after Piotr's death the land had been claimed by his family. The King ruled for the claimants, but – according to legend – Stanislaus resurrected Piotr so that he could confirm that he had sold the land to the Bishop.

According to Augustin Calmet, an 18th-century Bible scholar, Stanislaus asked the King for three days to produce his witness, Piotr. The King and court were said to have laughed at the absurd request, but the King granted Stanislaus the three days. Stanislaus spent them in ceaseless prayer, then, dressed in full bishop's regalia, went with a procession to the cemetery where Piotr had been buried three years earlier. He had Piotr's grave dug up until his remains were discovered. Then, before a multitude of witnesses, Stanislaus bade Piotr rise, and Piotr did so.

Piotr was then dressed in a cloak and brought before King Boleslaw to testify on Stanislaw's behalf. The dumbfounded court heard Piotr reprimand his three sons and testify that Stanislaus had indeed paid for the land. Unable to give any other verdict, the King dismissed the suit against the Bishop. Stanislaus asked Piotr whether he would remain alive but Piotr declined, and so was laid to rest once more in his grave and was reburied.

A more substantial conflict with King Boleslaw arose after a prolonged war in Ruthenia, when weary warriors deserted home, alarmed at tidings that their overseers were taking over their estates and wives. According to Kadlubek, the King punished the soldiers' faithless wives very cruelly and was criticized for it by Bishop Stanislaus. Jan Dlugosz, however, writes that the Bishop had in fact criticized the King for his own sexual immorality. According to recent historians, Stanislaus took part in a plot of nobles, aimed to gain more powers or dethrone the king. Gallus Anonymus in his laconic account only condemned both "traitor bishop" and violent king.

Whatever the actual cause of the conflict between them, the result was that the Bishop excommunicated King Boleslaw, which included forbidding the saying of the Divine Office by the canons of Krakow Cathedral in case Boleslaw attended. The excommunication aided the King's political opponents, and the King accused Bishop Stanislaus of treason.

King Boleslaw sent his men to execute Bishop Stanislaus without trial but when they didn't dare to touch the Bishop, the King decided to kill the bishop himself. He is said to have slain Stanislaus while he was celebrating Mass in the Skalka outside the walls of Kraków. According to Pawel Jasienica: Polska Piastów, it was actually in the Wawel castle. The guards then cut the Bishop's body into pieces and scattered them in a large pond of water to be devoured by wild beasts. According to the legend, his members miraculously reintegrated while the pool was guarded by four eagles. The exact date of Stanislaus' death is uncertain. According to different sources, it was either April 11 or May 8, 1079.

The murder stirred outrage through the land and led to the dethronement of King Boleslaw II the Bold, who had to seek refuge in Hungary and was succeeded by his brother, Wladyslaw I Herman. Stanislaus was immediately venerated as a martyr and, a century and a half after his death, his relics were transferred to the Wawel Cathedral complex in Krakow. Stanislaus was canonized by Pope Innocent IV in 1253. He remains the major saint of Polish Catholics throughout the world wherever they settle in what is affectionately referred to as *"Polonia"*.

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