

Holy Apparition. The birth and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina

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Abstract: Both the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st have brought into Polish religious life new places of cult, built upon miraculous events. The epoch considered as secularised turned out to be a time of intense manifestation of the supernatural. This paper presents the origins and the development of the St Andrew Bobola sanctuary in Strachocina. The text is based on available literary sources as well as the author's empirical research conducted over several years of field study. First, selected information concerning the martyr's cult in the past is provided, followed by an outline of its development. Second, the presence of the saint in the consciousness of contemporary inhabitants of Strachocina and pilgrim visitors is depicted.

Keywords: miracles, holy places, religiosity, sacred, sacrosphere of Poland, spirituality, St Andrew Bobola, Strachocina, visions

Phenomena that can be described as supernatural occupy a permanent place in the long history of culture. They are present at the birth of many communities, whose founding myths point to the primal manifestation of the sacred as a proper impulse for the development of their cultures. The commemoration of an

extraordinary experience, originally through a rock or a post, and later through more sophisticated architectural forms, developed religious cults and co-created the cultural identity of various communities (see e.g. Kalniuk 2019: 81–87; Eliade 2004: 36; Orsi 1999). A place marked with a sacred symbol was both a geographical and social centre of a community's life (Eliade 1999: 8, 22, 52; Eade, Sallnow 1991: 78). The properties of this area belong to the condition of liminality, as understood by Victor Turner (Turner 2010). A holy place is a kind of exterritorial zone, means of communication with another reality, or division line between the sacred and profane. The successful process of sanctification of a place requires the presence and leadership of religious authorities.

Religion and its priests are responsible for the transmission of meta senses and definition of their expression in a group. They participate in establishing a regulated festive cycle. The sacred is materialised in an organised religious cult (van Gennep 2006: 37–38; Orsi 1999: 11–12; Rappaport 1999: 141). This phenomenon can be illustrated by contemporary devotional practices that honour various saints. Although those divine chosen ones, according to the Christian credo, dwell in the heavens, through their relics, statues and pictures, they remain closely connected to certain places on earth. They possess objects dedicated to them, from small roadside shrines to magnificent basilicas, as well as days devoted to them, from liturgical commemorations to feasts in their honour (Boufflet 2011; Bynum 2007). Saints abide in the liminal area, being 'borderline people' (Turner 2010: 116–125). In a broad cultural landscape, they are, among others, mediators that mediate between the faithful and the sacred (Kalniuk 2014). In the Christian context, this is specially manifested in cult places devoted to them such as sanctuaries, considered so-called 'hotlines' to supernatural reality (Turner & Turner 2009: 15). These church objects are space-times with interesting origins and dynamics (Seweryniak 2010: 21–42). This paper proposes a study a new place of cult, the sanctuary of St Andrew Bobola in Strachocina, near Sanok. The narration is based on available literary material, as well as empirical data, drawn from the author's field research over several years¹. First, selected information concerning the martyr's cult in the past is provided, followed by an outline of its development. The presence of the saint in the consciousness of contemporary Strachocina inhabitants and pilgrim visitors is then depicted².

Bobola in historical visions

Andrew Bobola was a Jesuit priest who spent most of his life in the Pińsk area (formerly Polesie, currently in Belarus), whose inhabitants were diversified both in terms of ethnicity and religion. This fact, connected with his strong missionary involvement and notable successes in that field, in the context of historical events of the 17th century, lead to an unequivocal assessment of the saint. He used to be called a ‘hunter of souls’. Considered a saint by Catholics, and thought of as *persona non grata* by Orthodox Christians, he disturbed public opinion of his time destabilising the already tense socio-political and religious situation in the region. This led to a certain reserve towards him, which is still present even today, especially in Orthodox circles.

Source materials have allowed researchers to reconstruct, to a satisfactory degree, the history of the Bobola family. The sources indicate that in the 13th century they lived in Silesia as impoverished noblemen (Paciuszkiewicz 1996: 9). At the beginning of the 14th century they appeared in Lesser Poland, still, as before, without high social status. They did, however, have connections with representatives of some notable families, which led to their spread over the country. The presence of the Bobola family between the 15th and 17th centuries was reported among others in Jasło, Krosno and Sanok, where they were known as moderately well-off and trustworthy citizens. The Bobolas had a strong commitment to Catholicism, which, in the period after the Reformation, was expressed, among others, by maintaining friendly relations with Jesuits, known for their counter-Reformation activity. Heraldic analysts claim that St Andrew originates from the Bobola family of Lesser Poland. This can be confirmed by the statement he made in a Lithuanian Jesuit’s house: “I, Andrzej Bobola of the Lesser Poland” (ibid.: 8). Based on information on his ancestors and knowledge of the baptism customs of that time, the birth date of the saint was determined as 30th November, 1591 (30th November is the feast day of St Andrew the Apostle). A note preserved in Pińsk indicates that Andrew Bobola died a martyr on 16th may 1657 (Niżnik 2016: 67).

The process of being declared a saint was problematic for Bobola. After his martyrdom, there were no socio-cultural repercussions that would stimulate the ‘expansion of holiness’³. The cruelty of the Cossacks, which stood behind the death of Bobola, and the threat they still posed, might have efficiently suppressed

the spontaneous reactions of the people (Besala 2010). As a result, Bobola was forgotten. In fact, this 'social amnesia' was caused by a number of factors: the aforementioned threat from the Cossacks, opposing propaganda on the part of the Orthodox Church, as well as the attitude of the Jesuits themselves. The congregation focused on enduring the turbulent times rather than cherishing lofty ideals. Bobola was just another one of the 49 Jesuits murdered at the time of the 'flood'; and was buried accordingly in the crypt of the Pińsk church in a simple, black-painted, coffin. The panorama of difficult socio-political events could have closed the case forever. However, the recognition of his holiness was only postponed in time and developed in stages. The intermittent commemorations of the martyr followed by longer periods of oblivion reoccurred several times, in 1702 (Pińsk), 1819 (Vilnius), and 1987 (Strachocina). The analysis of events connected with the development of Bobola's cult clearly shows the presence of the supernatural factor. Bobola consequently communicated with people through dreams and visions⁴. The same schema applied to historical events as well as the foundation of a new place of his cult, located in Lesser Poland, thus it seems appropriate to present it here.

In 1702, the monk appeared in Pinsk. During the apparition, he accused Marcin Godebski, the Jesuit superior, of politicking, and then, conditionally, offered to help him (Popłatek 1996: 138–139). To get this help, it was necessary to find Bobola's body, which was successfully done after several days. The corpse, with no typical signs of decay but with clear indication of torture confirming his identity, "was cleansed, wrapped in a new shroud, adorned with new garments and a black damask chasuble, and then placed in a new coffin, which was then placed on a scaffolding in the middle of the crypt, opposite the window" (Popłatek 2007: 118–139). Initially crowds of poor people, and then the nobility too, started gathering around the place. People who were afflicted by hunger after military requisitioning and then decimated by the plague in 1709–1710 reported to the Jesuits that they had received extraordinary help from the martyr⁵. These reports inclined Alexander Benedict Wyhowski, the ordinary of Lutsk, to officially explain the situation. In the course of this work a nearly 2,000 page document was prepared containing numerous testimonies of miracles. Since the presented material was deemed insufficient for confirmation of martyrdom, a decision was made to collect further evidence. Descriptions of four miracles through the intercession of Andrew were requested. This requirement was met as early as the mid-18th century, although it did not lead to beatification which

took place only on 30th November, 1853. The canonisation followed on 17th April of the following year after the examination of another miracle⁶.

Again, during the time of partition in 1819, Bobola appeared to a Dominican, Alojzy Korzeniowski. The visitor appeared in the friar's monastery cell in Vilnius, introduced himself, and then asked the monk to open the window, through which the slightly frightened Dominican "saw immeasurable space instead of a cramped cloister garden" (Popłatek 2007: 214). In that space he could see an enormous military conflict. "When such a war comes, Bobola said, the coming of peace will be accompanied by the resurrection of Poland, and I will be declared its main patron" (ibid.). To legitimise the authenticity of the apparition, he left behind his handprint⁷. The fulfilment of the prophecy was completed in two stages. After 99 years Poland regained its independence, and after over 180 years, Andrew Bobola became its patron.

Bobola in contemporary visions

At the end of the 20th century Bobola drew attention to himself again, in the small Lesser Polish village of Strachocina. As a result of these events, the village was declared the birthplace of the priest. The results of intensified research show that the saint strove to be recognised by appearing at night throughout almost the whole 20th century at the rectory, thus unintentionally frightening the priests working there. Father Ryszard Mucha, who worked in Strachocina parish between 1970 and 1983, had the most numerous apparitions. According to most local inhabitants, these events led to a nervous breakdown for the priest: "The former parish priest, Father Ryszard Mucha, got sick because of, among others, fears and spiritual experiences. I heard him say that somebody comes at night, stands and waits at the door" (53-year-old woman from Strachocina). Father Mucha's successor, prelate Józef Niżnik, does not fully agree with this diagnosis and explains that it was the lack of understanding and care from people around him that led to his breakdown. The priest, who managed to recognise the apparition's slim posture, dark beard and long cassock as Andrew Bobola, deflected criticism directed at his predecessors, claiming that an encounter with an apparition is a unique and difficult matter. He recalls that the first time he was woken up at night, he threw himself at the figure as if it was a thug. He thought he was dealing with a burglar (Paciuszkiewicz 1996: 18, 20).

The process of discovering the truth took him over three years and involved multiple encounters with the mysterious figure. He uses the term 'encounter' as in his opinion the regular visit time (2:10 a.m.) and knocking at the door pointed to good intentions and a willingness to communicate: "I realised that the one who knocks wants to enter, so I no longer thought that he needed help, but that he might need something more" (author's conversation with Father Niznik). The change of his attitude kept evolving until the decisive conversation took place during the night between 16th and 17th May, 1987. "It was then that I consciously started communication with the figure. I asked who he was and what he wanted. Then I heard a voice that in a way penetrated me: 'I am St Andrew Bobola. Start honouring me in Strachocina'" (Niznik 2016: 105). The villagers' reports seem more vivid and rich in detail:

From what he said, I know that a figure would come at night, either visible or invisible. At two after midnight, every other night, the door would open wide. No matter what time he would go to bed, it would wake him up. The crucifix or a picture on the wall would move so much that it seemed it might fall at first but then it would stop. The invisible figure would just walk a little around the room. But the man is only a man – he would go to sleep in another parish, as he wouldn't be able to put up with it. He would say exorcisms with the sisters in the rectory. (85-year-old woman from Strachocina)



Figure 1. The Parish House, site of the saint's apparitions. Photograph by the author 2018.

The first conversation between Niżnik and Bobola turned out to be the last. “When they started the cult of Bobola, then peace came”, one of my interlocutors concluded (58-year-old woman from Strachocina). The puzzle was solved. “When I asked him those two questions, I didn’t think he might be a saint, as there was no cult of Bobola here. The cult was clearly initiated at the saint’s request” (author’s conversation with Father Niżnik). Along with the transfer of his relics from his sanctuary in Warsaw, pursuant to a relevant decree, on the 16th May, 1988, St Catherine church in Strachocina became the sanctuary of Andrzej Bobola. On this day the cult was officially started here. However, the presence of the saint, though unconscious, was present much earlier in the landscape and nomenclature. This can be seen, for example in a toponym ‘Bobolówka’, which was used by local villagers for the area around the church. Within several years ‘Bobolówka’ was adapted for religious purposes. On the hill that is considered a birthplace of Bobola, there is a big, roofed field altar. To reach it, one walks along the Stations of the Cross, with scenes from the life of the saint. Down below, in the field, there is a modest tourist base: several tables, benches and toilets. In the summer, on the 16th of each month, processions are organised there.

A new tradition was started in Strachocina. After a long time, ‘Bobolówka’ was discovered and appreciated. Pilgrimages started being organised to the hill near the church and liturgy was celebrated there (beginning in 1992). On the provisional construction of the altar, an inscription was placed: “This place has been chosen by God”. It was a clear reference to what happened in 1591 on the hill, namely, to the birth of Andrew Bobola. (Paciuszkiewicz 1996: 40)



Figures 2, 3. Pilgrims on their way to Bobolówka. Photograph by the author 2018.

The villagers, for the most part, identify with the newly discovered patron, actively taking part in pastoral initiatives taken up by the parish. The church has been restored and scenes from the life of the saint have been carved on the ornamented entrance door. Inside the temple, a 15th century font has been exposed, where the future patron saint of Poland is thought to have been baptised⁸. The sanctuary is visited by ordinary pilgrims as well as notable representatives of both church and civil authorities. It is they who largely contribute to the development of the saint's cult (author's conversation with Father Niżnik). The process of social and cultural change in Strachocina under the influence of the cult of Bobola is significant. The changes are noticed both by the local inhabitants and visitors. A local religious sister claims that "Bobola religiousness" plays an important role in the religious life of local people (53-year-old woman from Strachocina). A pilgrim from Ustrzyki Górne pointed out that:

the development is visible in the example of the rectory and, of course, 'Bobolówka'. If we go back to several years ago, the only thing that was here was a dilapidated shed. Today it is a totally different place. Every year something new appears: Stations of the Cross, toilets, a carpark. We are present in the internet, and Father Joseph regularly posts pic-

tures from events that take place here. Strachocina, thanks to Bobola, is famous now. (49-year-old woman from Ustrzyki Górne)

The parish priest has a similar opinion: “Religiously, these are not the same people. A colossal change has taken place. It is not the same village anymore. In the past it used to be just an unknown village. Now, if you ask anybody in Poland about Strachocina, they will rather be familiar with the name” (author’s conversation with Father Niżnik). Checking these opinions against some past records, evolution cannot be denied. In 1972, the parish priest Józef Mucha made this bitter record in the Chronicle of the Roman Catholic parish in Strachocina: “All pastoral works seem very sluggish. A clear, visible sign of the lack of God’s blessing. With the exception of a group of elderly women [who came with] children, there is nobody you can count on. The attendance at mass is still low” (Paciuszkiewicz 1996: 61).

The cult is understood by many local people as the activity of the parish priest and religious sisters, as they are considered to be “experts in the sacred” (see Witek 2014: 112). “It is mainly the nuns who sustain the cult, rather than lay people. It is too far to the church, which is located on the border of the village” (71-year-old woman from Strachocina). At the same time, on being asked about Bobola, the nuns direct you to the parish priest. He is also considered by the villagers to be the repository of the mystery and a person worth talking to. “It is the elders whom you need to ask, or the parish priest.... The presence of the sacred in Bobola’s cult is regulated by the authority of priests – the functionaries of the sacred” (Ślusarska 2014: 90), and its territorial scope has a local-centric character, centred around the church and ‘Bobolówka’ (Pawluczuk 2003: 154–155). These rather narrow parameters for the cult stand in opposition to a broad, multifaceted character of the saint’s intercession in the consciousness of local inhabitants. One of them claimed: “I think that he helps everyone who needs help, the poor and the sick” (58-year-old woman from Strachocina). Another one added: “The storms and hail are around us, the rooves are blown off, and nothing bad happens to us. We are protected by Bobola” (38-year-old woman from Strachocina).

The birth and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina

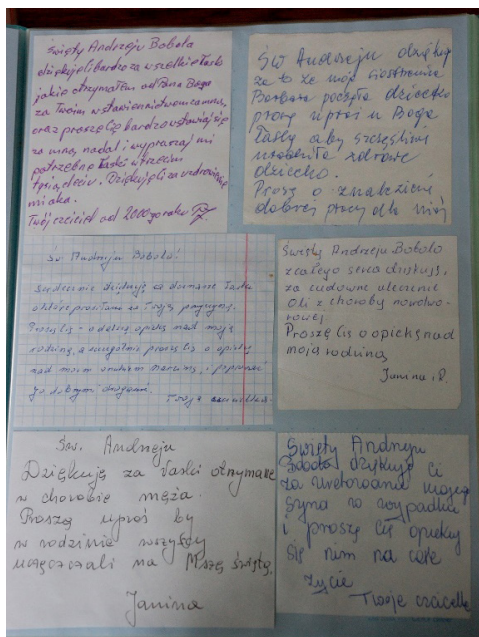


Figure 4. Handwritten entries by pilgrims in the Book of Intentions. Photograph by the author 2018.

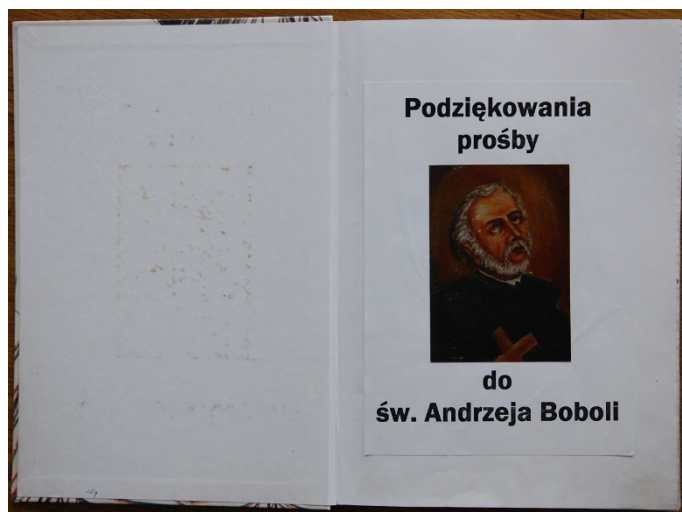


Figure 5. Book of Intentions: prayers and thanksgiving to St Andrew. Photograph by the author 2018.

The parish priest explains that “Andrew cannot be pigeonholed, as his help is extensive, dealing both with physical and spiritual matters” (author’s conversation with Father Niznik). In his opinion, Bobola’s mission has a complementary as well as original character relative to other patron saints in Poland. On the other hand, according to the parish priest, the martyr’s unprecedented calling for his cult shows both his uniqueness and the significance of his mission.

Incidents connected with Bobola relate to the rescue of the country. For many years I had been looking at it in a different way, but recently it struck me that he did not say he wanted to be honoured by parishioners, but by the Polish. If we had understood that before and honoured him, Poland would probably be different now. He used to offer his help in relation to the fall of communism in Poland. Whenever Poland was in danger Andrew Bobola offered help beforehand. I think that the essence of Andrew Bobola is Poland and the nation. He is Poland’s saint. Not even for the church in Poland, but for Poland itself. The Strachocina sanctuary is important for Poland, only if people could understand that (author’s conversation with Father Niznik).

Bobola, Strachocina, and Polish religiosity...

The example of Bobola and his cult in Subcarpathia region shows the vitality and dynamism of sacrum. It also manages to illustrate man’s desire to relate to the realm of mystery and his refusal to accept its elimination. The appearance of Bobola and recognition of the saint in the frightening apparition indicate to the autonomy of the supernatural sphere and a multitude of its possible expressions. The church authorities claim that although the incidents initiating the cult were far from a typical scenario, they definitely had a positive effect. Pieces of Bobolas history imprinted in the local area and contemporary images of the saint were combined in the emergence of the sanctuary. It has led to a new understanding of the known time-space as a sacred place connected with the martyr. There were at least two possible courses of action. Strachocina without Bobola, instead of a flourishing centre of catholic devotion, could have become a centre for the promotion of *fabula incredibilis* tales. If it had been preserved in the common consciousness as a scary place with a ‘haunted rectory’, it would attract sensation-seekers rather than pilgrims⁹. However, this countryside sanctuary has become more and more recognisable as a centre of religious cult.

The Strachocina case shows that political transformation in Poland did not generate secularising processes leading to prevalent religious indifference¹⁰. The supernatural is still manifested in floating post-modernity. Pilgrimages, as well as the cult of saints and artefacts connected with them, still profile religious behaviours of the Polish (see e.g. Margry 2008: 13–46; Coleman and Eade 2004; Orsi 1999; Eade and Sallnow 1991). To some extent, new places of cult, such as the Strachocina sanctuary, sustain and develop the traditional devotion, without being its hostages. The novelty of the sanctuary described here is manifested, among others, in the departure from the Marian complex and schematicity of origin so often seen in similar places (see e.g. Zachar Podolonská 2019: 284–326; Niedźwiedź 2014: 79; Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009; Halemba 2006). The scale and character of this centre work towards harmonious diversification of Polish sacrosphere. Today, we can observe the coexistence of centres significant in terms of national identity as well as smaller ones. Alongside visiting major sanctuaries (for example a pilgrimage to the national Marian sanctuary in Częstochowa), pilgrimages to local cult places (for example the St Andrew Bobola sanctuary) are growing in popularity. Sometimes the route of one pilgrimage includes centres of different significance. This phenomenon mirrors plurality, which is typical of modernity, and is also present in the religious sphere.

Notes

¹ The article presents reflections and conclusions from anthropological fieldwork which I performed a few times in Strachocina. During my participant observation, I wanted to interview people who represented different degrees of awareness and commitment to worship. Hence, although dealing with the religious sphere is customary for priests, friars and nuns they constituted only one sub-group of my interviewees. Apart from the clergy, I also interviewed locals and pilgrims and/or tourists of all ages and sexes.

² See for example a particular case study on similar subject (Klimek 2018).

³ An expression used by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in the context of dynamic development of the cult of relics and pilgrimages (Tokarska-Bakir 2000: 279). The history of culture gives numerous examples of social unrest connected with saints. “As an example, in the early Middle Ages the Welsh dioceses of St David and St Llandaff were competing against each other, while the acquisition of relics gave higher status to a sanctuary and its clergy as well as bringing prosperity” (Bowi 2008: 267).

⁴ The saint could be authoritarian in what he said. Although such behaviour may be rare in one dimensional hagiography, it is well known in religious studies. The non-schematicity of apparitions and their opposition to what is normative, regular and organised seems typical (Turner and Turner 2009: 182).

⁵ Among the beneficiaries of the miraculous events were both Catholics and orthodox Christians. A similar situation reoccurred in Połock, where the body of the martyr was transferred. The Orthodox composed a hymn in his honour (see Niznik 2016: 81; Polak 1996: 210–211).

There are numerous examples indicating that the miracle addressees ('miracle takers') were (and are) morally imperfect people, as well as religiously indifferent (see Świeżyński 2012: 241). A testimony of a supernatural phenomenon by people of different religions or atheists occurs relatively often. The power of the "witnesses without tongue" is particularly valuable and excludes any doubt (Tokarska-Bakir 2000: 286–287).

⁶ The theory of miracle is broad and varied both in consideration of the origin and the course of such an event, as well as in the attempts to interpret it. This explains miracles as an ahistorical monolith, the evolution of which can clearly be observed (see e.g. Pyysiäinen 2002; Ashe 1978; Swinburne 1970).

⁷ In this image, one can see the reference to so called 'divine feet', i.e. footprints in various places, supposedly left by holy people. They can be found all over Poland and much more widely and were properly honoured (Baruch 1907).

⁸ There is a connection to an interesting folklore moment, well known from folk stories about self-propagating or self-denying holy statues or pictures. A font where nuns used to grow pansies, as an 88-year-old respondent from Strachocina said in the summer of 2018, remained still when four large men attempted to move it. However, it could be moved without any problems into the church, where it still stands in the presbytery. A similar motif can be found in Polish folk tradition. And as with the case of the 'stubborn' font, there is a story of sunken church bells, which, after being taken out of the depths, could only be moved to a place where a church was supposed to be built. Moving them anywhere else was impossible (see Wróblewska 2018).

⁹ The toponymy of Strachocina predestined it to development in this direction, which was, however, changed through the manifestation of holiness. The history of culture knows examples of the exorcising nature of saints' presence (see Węglarz 1983:152; di Nola 1997: 186).

¹⁰ Researchers in socio-cultural phenomena point to the specificity of secularisation processes in Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, they emphasise the distinctiveness of Polish religiosity (see e.g. Bruce 2013: 13; Collins-Mayo 2010: 1139–1142; Casanova 2004: 19; Borowik 2003: 41–59).

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