

Blessed Honorat of Biała (1829-1916)



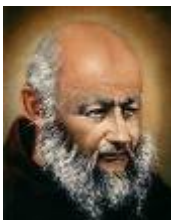
he Polish Capuchin Br. Honorat of Biała Podlaska, in the world Waclaw Kozmiński, was the founder of seventeen religious congregations that still exist and eight, or possibly ten, that are no more. He was born in Biała Podlaska on 16 October 1829 to Stefan and Aleksandra Kahl. He finished his days at Nowe-Miasto on 16 December 1916.

At home he received a fine Christian formation. After completing primary school in his home town he attended grammar school in Plock. In 1845 he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Influenced by Enlightenment currents and an atheistic environment he lost the faith. In 1846, suspected of belonging to a political organisation, he was jailed in Warsaw by the Tsarist police. Here he contracted typhus and lived under the constant fear of capital punishment until 27 March 1847 when, against all odds, he was released. Finally he returned to the faith on the Feastday of the Assumption (15 August 1846).

After battling with himself for having to leave his infirm mother, on 21 December 1848 he entered the Capuchin novitiate at Lubartów. Finally he was ordained priest on 27 December 1852. He was professor of sacred eloquence and theology for the Capuchin cleric students, penitentiary of converted heretics, provincial Definitor, guardian in the friary of Warsaw for a year. For the twenty years between 1895 and 1916, he was general commissary of the Capuchins under Russian domination.

Above all he was a preacher and gifted spiritual directed since the early days of his priesthood when, in the years 1854 to 1864 we find him busy preaching continuously in the churches of Warsaw. Given the task of the direction of Franciscan tertiaries, he did not limit himself only to promote their devotional life, but sought to involve them in energetic social and charitable works. At this time he met Sofia Truszkowska and was her spiritual guide and took care of the so called "living rosary."¹ Far from being satisfied with forming groups of men and women dedicated to the recitation of the rosary, he enthused them to undertake a vast charitable activity.

After the insurrection against the Russians in January 1863 and its disastrous outcome, and with religious Orders condemned to extinction, Br. Honorat was first confined to the friary of Zakroczym where he remained until 1892. Then he went to the friary of Nowe-Miasto.



He sought to save the Catholic faith and patriotic spirit of his people in the face of Tsarist persecution that sought to separate the Church in Poland from the Church in Rome, and have it part of the Orthodox Church. The means he chose to accomplish this bold plan were devotion to Our Lady and the Franciscan Third Order where, with the permission of the Minister General of the Capuchins, he carried out radical

reform.

Civil law forbade apostolic work and the reception of novices, thus condemning religious to extinction. And so anyone who wished to become a

¹ Blessed Angela Maria (Sofia Camilla) Truszkowska, cf <http://www.santiebeati.it/dettaglio/92050> (06 July 2009)

religious was obliged to leave the country to do so. Br. Honorat always advised against expatriation to those who asked his counsel. Instead he proposed that they live the evangelical counsels in the spirit of the Franciscan Third Order, and so continue to lead a hidden and ostensibly ordinary life, without habit, friary or convent. In the meantime the person prayed and studied the gospel from which to draw spirit and so lead a form of religious life.

His model was the Holy Family of Nazareth. Central is the hidden life which he strove to foster in the world and prescribe in precise terms in all the constitutions and directories that he lay down for the institutes that he founded. The hidden life for him is not just a contingent requisite imposed by the socio-political conditions in Poland at the time. Rather he recognised it as a gospel principle. He wrote, "These congregations observe a life hidden from the eyes of the world. This mode of religious life is not suggested only by motives of prudence or necessity, but from the commitment to imitate the hidden life of the Virgin Mary. This form of life is not subject to happenings in external social and political circumstances. Each person chooses it because it is desirable in itself, since it allows greater glory for God, as well easier spiritual progress and a surer salvation."

Numerous institutes took shape within his confessional at Zakroczym. Each of these institutes had to reach a particular group: intellectuals, the young, office workers, factory workers, domestic workers, children, the sick, artisans, farmers; in places and with activities that could benefit one's neighbour and influence a vast circle of people such as in taverns, restaurants, bookshops, libraries, schools, tailors or other shops.

To spread the influence of the apostolate of his religious, he wanted each congregation to be formed by three different categories of members. The first category was composed of religious living in common and who had the task of accepting and directing the others. Religious in temporary vows constituted the second category while living with their families or in small groups. They are the 'units' (units for men and units for women)². They were the more dynamic element of each congregation and had more opportunity to influence others with their active apostolate and example. The third category, finally, included tertiaries involved in a particular way in apostolic collaboration.



All these religious lived in secular dress and their way of life was confirmed by the Holy See with the Decree *Ecclesia catholica* of 21 June 1889. Thanks both to particular circumstances and the insight that a great modern apostle had into the signs of the times, a dozen or so "secular" institutes rightfully and actually found their place in the Church, institutes for which Br. Honorat is considered the forerunner.

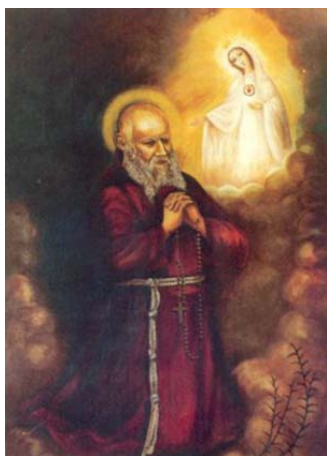
The experiment, however, was short lived because as a consequence to recriminations and accusations 1907 saw restrictions imposed the "novelty" of the religious life begun by Br. Honorat beyond the traditional canonical categories. These restrictions resulted in the abolition of the 'units.'

² 'uniti' and 'unite'

The elderly founder did not fail to defend the form of life and religious apostolate that he had initiated so well and which was necessitated by particular historical and socio-political circumstances. He wrote of the souls who came to him. He wanted to make of them an “army of confessors of the faith, who could resolutely oppose scorn from the world, while silent and hidden, giving a radical and committed Christian witness everywhere.”

He had always enjoined on his religious to write nothing but to surround their identities with absolute silence. To them he gave this testimony about their life: “These ardent souls generate around themselves a charitable moral atmosphere not only among their personal individual contacts but also in groups and the masses. It is recognised that wherever persons with a good spirit are found, even if they do not do anything in particular, they make their salutary presence felt.”

In 1916, a few days before his death, with dramatically prophetic words he insisted on the necessity to surround religious life with the absolute reserve and to live it clandestinely: “I beg you not to want to show yourselves as religious because the freedom we enjoy now is temporary. Times of great difficulty will return ... Be constant in this kind of life since you have been called to this. Only with this will you acquire the treasures of divine grace. Only with this can you work so fruitfully for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”



When in 1905 he was no longer able to receive people in the confessional because of illness and deafness, Br. Honorat applied himself to work at the desk. He composed a substantial correspondence with his spiritual children. His hand-written letters, almost four thousand of them, are conserved in twelve volumes in the Vice-postulation archive in Warsaw. Many of his sermons, about a thousand, are also kept in the same archive, along with a vast assortment of other works, mostly hand written, that he had been composing since his young days. These treat of such matters as aesthetics, Mariology, hagiography, history, homiletics, the Rule of the Third Order of Saint Francis and the constitutions of different congregations, Polish translations and various other subjects. Worthy of mention is his immense work *Who is Mary*. In fifty two tomes and seventy six volumes it is an authentic Marian encyclopaedia. Only the first volume was ever published, in two different editions. His *Spiritual Diary* is also interesting for a knowledge of Br. Honorat’s spiritual life and apostolic commitment. In it we read, “Since the first moment when I entered the Order I have followed this project: to make known to people the love of God.” Of his nearly one hundred works, forty one still have not been published.

Considered a holy man Br. Honorat died on 16 December 1916 at eighty seven years of age. He was buried in the crypt of the friary at Nowe-Miasto. After their identification his remains were transferred to the church above the crypt on 10 December 1975. Finally John Paul II proclaimed him blessed on 16 October 1988.

Translation based on the article by MARIANO D’ALATRI in *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, p. 255-262