



INVICTI ATHLETAE CHRISTI

(Christ's Unconquered Athlete)

Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on St Andrew Bobola to the venerable brethren, the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other local Ordinaries
in peace and communion with the Apostolic See

Venerable Brethren,
Greetings and Apostolic Benediction.

On the 300th anniversary of the death of Christ's unconquered athlete, Andrew Bobola, We desire to direct his martyrdom and holiness of life to the devout and reverent meditation of all Catholics throughout the world and particularly of the children of Our dearest Poland for whom the Saint is a glorious and shining example of Christian fortitude.

2. This happy occasion is inscribed in the Church's annals in letters of gold, and We would not wish to let it pass without some mention of his life and virtues, and without proposing him, through this Encyclical, to your imitation, Venerable Brethren, and that of the flocks committed to your care - in the measure that each one's occupation and state of life permits.

3. What seems to shine forth especially in the life of Andrew Bobola is his Catholic faith, whose vigour, nourished by divine grace, grew so much stronger with the passing of the years that it conferred on him a special mark of distinction, and spurred him on to undergo his martyrdom with courage.

4. "Now my just one lives by faith," as the Apostles of the Gentiles declares, [1] and in Bobola, faith shone with an unusual splendour. Whatever the Catholic Church teaches to be believed or done, he embraced with unwavering mind, and willingly endeavoured to practice. Thus, from earliest youth, he considered it normal to check, control, and subdue all those disorderly inclinations which, since the unhappy fall of Adam, disturb our nature and easily attract it to what is forbidden. But at the same time, his every effort and all his strength were directed to the adornment of his soul with Christian virtues.

5. He was born in 1591 in the district of Sandomira, of parents distinguished by the nobility of their family, but even more so by the vigour and constancy of their Catholic faith. Endowed with a sound and ready intelligence, he received at home, from his tenderest years, a fine education and formation in Christian morality. He was later sent to the schools of the Society of Jesus, where he was remarkable for innocence of life and piety.

6. But since he spurned the poms and vanities of the world, and earnestly strove after "the greater gifts,"[2] with the object of progressing more rapidly along the road to perfection, he gladly offered himself, when a youth of nineteen years, to the Society of Jesus, and was received into the noviceship, then at Vilna. He remembered that solemn warning of Jesus Christ, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me,"[3] and so daily strove more eagerly to acquire the virtue of Christian humility by contempt of self.

7. But since he was by temperament proud, impatient, and sometimes obstinate, Bobola had to wage a very sharp contest against himself, and ascend his Calvary, as it were, laden with the cross, in order to reach the height of this virtue. There, at length, impelled and assisted by the grace he had obtained by constant and fervent prayers, he might be able to reach Christian perfection, for as St. Bernard wisely said, "the spiritual edifice cannot possibly stand except on the firm foundation of humility."[4]

8. Above all, Bobola was on fire with a great love of God and of his neighbours. As a result, he found nothing sweeter than to spend long hours, whenever possible, before the sacred tabernacle, and to assist the unfortunate in every way according to his means. He loved God above all, and far more than himself. He sought exclusively God's glory, according to the Rule of his Father, St Ignatius. To this Saint, then, the words of the same holy Doctor (St Bernard) can be applied, "He alone should be desired, Who alone fulfils desire."[5]

9. It is not surprising, then, that this athlete of Jesus Christ, adorned with these gifts of grace, should have achieved such notable progress in the apostolic field, and been able to gather rich fruits in the saving of souls. He was on fire to preserve, extend, and defend the Catholic faith. Thus, when serving as a teacher at Vilna, and later when living in other cities, he diligently taught the elements of Christian doctrine, and encouraged devotion to the Eucharist, and an ardent and filial love of the Virgin Mother of God.

10. But afterwards, when he was raised to the dignity of the priesthood - in the same year and on the same day that Ignatius and Francis Xavier were inscribed at Rome in the calendar of the Saints - he chose before all else to spare no labour, in ministerial journeys and by sermons on holy things, in order that he might spread everywhere a Catholic faith which would not be ineffective, but productive of good works.

11. But the Catholic Church, particularly in the countries to the East, was facing an extremely grave crisis owing to the efforts of the schismatics, who were striving by every device to draw the faithful away from the unity of the Church into their own errors. Andrew went, therefore, into those regions on the instruction and command of his Superiors, and by public sermons and private instruction through their cities, towns, and villages, and most of all by the fervour of his exceptional holiness and the burning zeal of his apostolate, he freed the wavering faith of a multitude of Christians from beguiling falsehood, brought them back to sound principles, and joyfully invited all he could to return to the one fold of Jesus Christ.

12. He did not merely restore and strengthen the faith of the Christians, languishing and on the verge of collapse, but roused them also to weep for their own sins, to settle their

disputes, to heal their divisions, to restore true morality. It seemed that, like his Divine Master, wherever he passed by doing good, a new spring blossomed forth, bright with heavenly flowers and fruits of salvation. Consequently, as tradition has it, he received from all, even from the schismatics, the significant title of "hunter of souls."

13. This tireless apostle of Jesus Christ had lived by faith, had spread the faith, and had defended the faith; so too, he did not hesitate to die for the faith of his fathers.

14. Notable among almost countless others was the unforgettable and savage onslaught on the Catholic religion which flared up in the 17th century in the Eastern countries. The Cossack forces then invaded those lands, and directed their furious attack on Catholics and their pastors, and on the heralds of the truth of the Gospel. Temples dedicated to the divine worship were utterly destroyed; monasteries were consumed by fire; priests and their flocks were everywhere put to the sword; everything was laid waste; all that was sacred was scattered to the winds.

15. Andrew Bobola could apply to himself that saying, "Nothing that is known to belong to God, do I consider outside my interests." [6] He feared death and sufferings not at all. On fire with love for God and his neighbour, he entered the fray with all his resources, in order to draw back as many as he could from a foreswearing of the Catholic faith, and from the snares and errors of those who were separated from the Church, and in order to provide a valiant and rousing encouragement for the preservation of Christian teaching in all its integrity.

16. But on May 16, 1657, on the feast of our Lord's Ascension into heaven, he was seized near Janovia by the enemies of the Catholics. We do not think this filled him with fear, but rather with a heavenly joy. For we know that he had always prayed for martyrdom and had often recalled the words of the Divine Redeemer, "Blessed are you when men reproach you, and persecute you, and speaking falsely say all manner of evil against you, for my sake. Rejoice and exult, because your reward is great in heaven; for so did they persecute the prophets who were before you." [7]

17. The mind shudders as it recalls all the tortures which the athlete of Jesus Christ endured with unconquerable fortitude and a faith resolute and unbroken. For, "beaten with rods, struck with blows, dragged by a rope behind a horse on a painful and blood-stained path, he was brought to Janovia to be delivered to the final torture.

18. "In that contest, the Polish Martyr rose to the heights of the noblest triumphs which the Church commemorates. Andrew was asked if he were a priest of the Latin rite, and he replied, 'I am a Catholic priest; I was born in the Catholic faith; in that faith I wish to die. My faith is true; it leads to salvation. Do you rather repent; give place to sorrow for sin, else you will be unable, in your errors, to win salvation. By embracing my faith, you will acknowledge the true God, and will save your souls'." [8]

19. At these words, those wicked men, utterly devoid of humanity, were roused to a fiendish barbarity, and reached such a degree of cruelty that they inflicted still more horrible sufferings on the soldier of Christ. Once again, "he was scourged, a crown like that

of Jesus Christ was bound about his head, he was struck heavy blows and lay wounded by a scimitar. Next, his right eye was gouged out, strips of skin were torn off, his wounds were savagely scorched and rubbed with prickly bundles of straw. Nor was that enough: his ears, nose and lips were cut off, his tongue torn out by the root, and finally, a weapon plunged into his heart. And, at long last, the valiant athlete, three hours after midday, displaying a truly marvellous example of fortitude, was pierced by a sword and achieved the glory of martyrdom." [9]

20. The victorious martyr, crimsoned in his own blood, has been received through his triumph into heaven, and on earth, the Church, when she beheld his resplendent holiness attested and confirmed by God Himself through truly remarkable miracles, proposed him for the devotion and imitation of the whole community of Christians. For in 1853, Our Predecessor of venerable memory, Pius IX, enrolled him among the Blessed in heaven, and in 1938, Our immediate Predecessor of immortal memory, Pius XI, solemnly placed him in the ranks of the Saints.

21. We have been pleased to sketch in brief outline, through this Encyclical Letter, the principal points in the life and holiness of Andrew Bobola, so that all sons of the Catholic Church throughout the world might not only admire, but also imitate with equal fidelity his sound religious teaching, his unwavering faith, his fortitude in defending the honour and glory of Christ even to martyrdom. Under your guidance and encouragement, Venerable Brothers, may all men contemplate his illustrious virtues, especially during these centenary celebrations. Let them understand that it is their duty to follow in his holy footsteps.

22. Today, to Our sorrow, there are places where the Christian faith either languishes in inert weakness, or is practically extinguished. The Gospel teaching is almost entirely ignored by many; by others - what is worse - it is totally repudiated. They consider the faith incongruous in men of this progressive age, who possess all things on this earth without God, through their own natural abilities: their ingenuity, their talents, their strength. By these powers they live, with these they labour, with these they dominate nature and reduce it to servitude for the common use and prosperity of their fellow citizens.

23. Some strive to tear out and entirely eradicate the Christian faith from the souls of others, especially of those who are unlettered and simple folk, poor people whose faith is their one solace in this mortal life. They promise them a wonderful happiness which we will never be able to fully attain in this earthly exile. For no matter where man looks, no matter how he strives, if he wanders far from God, he will not enjoy nature's tranquillity, which he seeks, nor harmony and peace of soul; he will be restless and harassed, as though tossed by fever.

24. In seeking earthly riches, conveniences, and pleasures, in putting his trust in these, man pursues what escapes him, clings to what is crumbling down. For without God and His most holy law no right order is given man, no happiness worthy of the name, since man then lacks that solid basic norm by which to order his life; men in civil authority lack the basic norm for governing; and the community lacks the very foundation of moderation. And as you well know, Venerable Brothers, only heavenly joys, which are eternal, and not what is in flux and transitory, can fill and satisfy the soul.

25. Nor may one assert, as many rashly contend, that Christian teaching is an obstacle to the light of human reason. For, in fact, this teaching rather adds splendour and strength to human reason, inasmuch as it steers human reason away from specious truth and opens to it a vaster and higher plane of knowledge.

26. We must not regard the divine Gospel - the teaching of Jesus Christ which He entrusted to the Catholic Church for interpretation - as something beyond us and finished. Rather must we realize that it is something living, something vigorous. The Gospel can show men the one certain path to truth, to justice, to all virtue; it can lead them to fraternal union and peace; it can be a strong and unshakable bulwark for their laws, their institutions, and their communities.

27. If prudent men will ponder these things, they will readily understand why Andrew Bobola willingly and with all his strength undertook so many labours and hardships to safeguard the Catholic faith of his fellow citizens, and to protect their moral life, besieged on all sides by many dangers and enticements, from snares of all kinds, and through his tireless labours to form that life in the mould of Christian virtue.

28. Today also, as We have said, Venerable Brothers, the Catholic religion in many places has been exposed to grave danger. It is necessary, therefore, to defend it by every available means, to explain it, to propagate it. In this great cause may not only those Sacred Ministers help you, who by the office entrusted to them must give you their trained assistance, but also the laity, who are most generous and ready to fight the battle of God for peace.

29. The more boldly haters of God and enemies of Christian teaching attack Jesus Christ and the Church He founded, the more readily must priests and all Catholics, by spoken word, popular writings, and good example, resist them, respectful ever of individuals, but defending the truth. And if to do this they must overcome many obstacles, and even sacrifice time and money, they must never refuse, mindful of the maxim that Christian virtue must do and suffer much, but God Himself will reward it most generously with everlasting happiness.

30. There is always a bit of martyrdom in such virtue if we really want to strive day by day for a greater perfection of Christian life. For not only by shedding of blood is the witness of our faith given to God, but also by courageous and constant resistance to the lure of evil, and by the complete and generous dedication of all that we are and have to Him Who is our Creator and Redeemer, and will one day be our never ending joy in heaven.

31. Let everyone, then, contemplate the strength of soul of St. Andrew Bobola, Martyr. Let them learn from his example, preserve intact his unconquered faith, and defend it by every means. Let them so imitate his apostolic zeal that they too will try, in every way they can, to strengthen the Kingdom of Christ on earth, and, so far as their state of life permits, to spread that Kingdom everywhere.

32. Though We wish to direct Our paternal urgings and hopes to all Shepherds and their flocks, We direct Our words in a special way to those dwelling in Poland. For Andrew Bobola is their great glory, since he was born of that nation, and honoured it not only by the

splendour of so many virtues, but with the crimson of his martyrdom. Following his example, then, may they continue to hold fast to their ancestral faith in the face of all attacks. May they strive earnestly to live up to the Christian moral code. They should attentively consider this the greatest glory of their country: to imitate the unbreakable constancy of their ancestors and make Poland ever faithful, the outer bastion of Christianity.

33. For as history teaches, "that witness of the ages, light of truth . . . teacher of life,"[10] God Himself seems to have entrusted this special task to the Polish people. May they ever shoulder that responsibility with energetic and persevering hearts, parrying evil snares, conquering and vanquishing with God's help every difficulty and every distress. Let them look to the reward God promises to all who with perfect fidelity, unflinching readiness, and burning love live, labour, and strive to defend and spread throughout the world His Kingdom of peace.

34. On this occasion We cannot refrain from addressing in a special way through this Encyclical Letter all the beloved children of Poland, and, above all, those Bishops who for the sake of Christ have suffered pain and affliction. Act boldly, but with that Christian promptness of soul which goes hand in hand with prudence, knowledge, and wisdom. Keep Catholic faith and unity. Let faith be the cord that girds your loins [11]; let it be renowned throughout the whole world[12]; may it be for you and for everyone "the victory that overcomes the world." [13] But do this "looking toward the author and finisher of faith, Jesus, who for the joy set before him, endured a cross, despising shame, and sits at the right hand of the throne of God." [14]

35. Thus, too, you will ensure that all the citizens of heaven, especially those who sprang from your race and now enjoy eternal beatitude, together with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God and Queen of Poland, look down benignly on your beloved country, and guard and protect it.

36. That this may come to pass, We ardently desire, Venerable Brothers, that you, together with all Christians throughout the world, earnestly beseech God, during these centennial festivities, to shower His richest blessings and heavenly consolations above all on those who are in greater danger and are afflicted by more bitter trials. **Together with these prayers let us beg the most merciful God that the long-desired harmony among nations be restored and flourish, and that the Church's sacred rights and activities, which contribute so mightily to the true good of even human society, may once again be dutifully recognized by all, and be everywhere lawfully and successfully put to use.**

37. That these things may be speedily accomplished, We join Our own most fervent prayers to yours. And as a pledge of heavenly graces and mark of Our paternal good will, with burning love We impart to each and every one of you, Venerable Brothers, and to the whole Christian people, Our Apostolic Blessing.

Given at Rome, in St. Peter's, the 16th day of May - anniversary of the day when three hundred years ago St. Andrew Bobola won the Martyr's palm - 1957, the 19th of Our Pontificate.

PIUS XII

1. Hebr. 10.38
2. 1 Cor. 12.31
3. Luke 9.23
4. Sermon on the Canticle 36, n. 5; PL 183.969 D
5. On the Dedication of a Church, Sermon IV, n. 4; PL 183.528 D
6. St. Bernard, Epis. 20, ad Card. Haimericum; PL 182.123 B
7. Matt. 5.11-12
8. Litt. decr. Pii XI "Ex aperto Christi latere": AAS XXX, 1938, p. 359
9. Homilia Pii XI in canoniz. S. Andreae B.: AAS XXX, 1938, pp.152-3
10. Cicero, De Or. 2.9, 36
11. Cf. i... 11.5
12. Cf. Rom. 1.8
13. 1 John 5.4
14. Hebr. 12.2