

Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, dead at 89, was bred to heroism

Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, who succeeded St. Pope John Paul II as the Archbishop of Kraków and who died Tuesday at 89, lived in a modest, self-effacing way that taught Cracovians something they may not have expected to learn in 1979: that they could love and esteem an archbishop who was quiet but unflinchingly steadfast, as they had loved and esteemed the princely Adam Stefan Sapieha and the dynamic Karol Wojtyła.

On January 28, 1979, Franciszek Macharski took up one of the most difficult assignments given any Catholic bishop in the twentieth century: succeeding Karol Wojtyła, who had been elected pope three months before, as archbishop of Kraków.

There were some raised eyebrows at the time: how could this tall, thin, reticent seminary rector successfully fill the shoes of the larger-than-life Wojtyła, a perfect “match” with his archdiocese and the most beloved man in Poland’s cultural and spiritual capital?

In the event, Macharski more than fulfilled John Paul II’s expectations that he was the man for Kraków at that moment in the history of the archdiocese. And he did it by remaining himself, not by trying to out-shine his predecessor, who was, literally, a legend in his own time.

When I first met Cardinal Macharski in June 1991, he told me that it had long been the tradition that the Cracovian bishop was the *defensor civitatis* – the ultimate defender of the city, its citizens, and their rights – in a line of episcopal heroism that ran back to the eleventh century and the martyrdom of St. Stanisław by King Bolesław the Bold.

In the twentieth century, that role had been brilliantly played by Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha, the Polish-Lithuanian prince-archbishop who defied Nazi gangster Hans Frank during the German Occupation of 1939–45, and by Wojtyła, whose war with Poland’s communists reached what then seemed its triumphant apogee in 1977, when Wojtyła consecrated the Ark Church in Nowa Huta, the new town on the outskirts of Kraków deliberately planned as a godless incubator of New Soviet Man.

As *defensor civitatis*, Macharski’s own time of testing would not be long in coming.

He may have looked the gangly, scholarly introvert, but Franciszek Macharski was, in a sense, bred to heroism. The son of a prosperous merchant family that lived over its store on Kraków Main Market Square, the twelve-year boy heard his father in urgent conversation over the phone with then-Archbishop Sapieha on September 1, 1939, as the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe began to grind Poland into the dust.

That grim morning, the elder Macharski called the archbishop and asked, “What will you do?” “I stay!” Sapieha replied, firmly. “We stay, too,” Mr. Macharski told his youngest child, Franek, and the rest of the family. In staying, they lost their business and their home. But they remained true to themselves, and to their Catholic and patriotic convictions.

After manual labor during the Occupation, Franciszek Macharski entered the Kraków seminary and was ordained to the priesthood by Cardinal Sapieha in 1950. After several parish assignments he was sent for higher studies to Fribourg, where he earned the doctorate in 1960 before returning to Kraków to teach, eventually becoming rector of the seminary he had attended.

Macharski was very much in the background of John Paul II’s epic *Nine Days* in June 1979, when the Polish pope returned to his homeland and bent the course of history in a new direction. But when the long arm of Soviet power reached out to try and strike down John Paul on May 13, 1981, it was Macharski who, in effect, led the nation in prayer that John Paul’s life be spared, at a colossal “white Mass” in the Main Market Square that drew half a million people.

Then, after martial law was imposed on Poland on the night of December 12–13, 1981, Franciszek Macharski became the *defensor civitatis* in full.

He relentlessly badgered the regime of General Wojciech Jaruzelski to lift martial law, to restore a measure of normality to Polish public life, and to see in the banned Solidarity movement an opportunity for national self-renewal. He protested the arrests of local Solidarity leaders and organized material aid for their families. He met with the imprisoned Solidarity leadership and took clandestine messages from them to John Paul II – and vice versa.

In doing all of that, and more, he lived the tradition of the *defensor civitatis* in a modest, self-effacing way that taught Cracovians something they may not have expected to learn in 1979: that they could love and esteem an archbishop who was quiet but unflinchingly steadfast, as they had loved and esteemed the princely Adam Stefan Sapieha and the dynamic Karol Wojtyła. Courage – Kraków learned from Franciszek Macharski, can be lived in many ways.

After his retirement in 2005, Cardinal Macharski lived with the Albertine Sisters in the convent whose chapel displays St. Albert Chmielowski’s famous *Ecce Homo* painting. When he died on August 2, he was a beloved father-figure: welcomed into the Kingdom, Cracovians imagined, by the saint who had summoned him to be the city’s great defender in a hard hour.

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Special to CRUX

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