

Adam Oraczewski – Pope Adam II

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Towards the end of 1927, a suspended Roman Catholic priest, Adam Anthony Oraczewski (1883–1973) published a 60-page pamphlet in Kansas City, Missouri. It had a bold title: *All in One True Faith*. The front page features the author dressed in the papal white, declaring that since August 7 that year, he was Adam II, Pope of the Holy Catholic Church.

Among the modern alternative popes, Polish-American Adam II is certainly among the least known and one of the earliest.¹ He lived until he was 90 years old, but we have relatively few sources to his life. However, thanks to the two booklets, a few newspaper articles, and a series of official records, it is possible to write a brief biography. Still, many lacunae and uncertainties remain.

Background, Ministry, and Frauds

Adam Oraczewski was born on October 7, 1883, in Radzanow in Mazovia, Poland, a small town located about 100 kilometers north-west of Warsaw.² At the age of 28, on December 1, 1911, he arrived in New York with a ship from Southampton. The passenger list stated that he was a professor, that he had lived in Warsaw before arriving in the new country and that he was bound for Detroit, where his brother Józef (Joseph) lived. By that time, the city had a rapidly growing Polish community.³

Shortly after arriving in Detroit, however, Adam Oraczewski left for Orchard Lake Seminary, located some 30 kilometers outside the city. The institution had its immediate roots in the Polish seminary in Detroit which was founded in 1884. Due to growing number of students, in 1909 the seminary

¹ I would like to thank Maciej Chrzanowski, who made me aware of Pope Adam's existence. See, also Pietrzyk 1994 for a very brief biography.

² Ohio County Naturalization Records 1929, Declaration of Intention by Adam Anthony Oraczewski, 15 February 1929.

³ New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), vol. 3936, S/S St. Louis from Southampton, departure on November 22 and arrival on December 1, 1911. On Polish Detroit, see e.g. Zunz 2000: 187–195.

moved from the city Orchard Lake, where it was housed in the buildings of a former military academy. By Oraczewski's time, Orchard Lake had more than 500 students, though only a minority were in the five-year program of philosophy and theology studies that would lead to ordination. Apart from Polish-Americans, the seminary was open to men with Lithuanian and Ruthenian backgrounds. However, after some time Oraczewski was expelled from Orchard Lake. The reason for the dismissal is unclear, but he later described it in vague terms: that he had committed "a wrong."⁴

By 1916–1917 Oraczewski was a teacher at the Polish-language Sacred Heart School in New Britain, Connecticut. It was a Roman Catholic elementary school, with close ties to the Polish parish that bore the same name. For more than six decades, from 1896 the very influential Lucjan (Lucian) Bójnowski (1868–1960) led the parish. A modern researcher claims that Father Bójnowski was autocratic and that he "maintained a monopoly of power in the Polish community" in the town. At the time, New Britain was the home to a great number of Polish immigrants, most of whom worked in hardware factories, and the Sacred Heart parish became the ecclesiastical center for them, having almost 10,000 members at its height. The number of Polish townspeople who left the Roman Catholic Church for other denominations, for example, the rapidly growing Polish National Catholic Church was very low in New Britain compared with many other places. Bójnowski's huge influence was certainly part of the explanation.⁵

Nevertheless, later in 1917, Adam Oraczewski was discharged from his teaching position at Sacred Heart. Taking into account the many conflicts that he would become involved in throughout the coming decade and Father Bójnowski's strong views on all church and community matters, it is not a bold assertion to presume that the curate dismissed him.⁶

⁴ Oraczewski's name appears in the Seminaries alumni catalogue: *Wykaz członków alumnatu Seminarium Polskiego* 1937: 40. For the history of the Polish seminaries in Detroit and Orchard Lake, see Michnowich 1965 and Radziłowski 2009.

⁵ On New Britain, the Polish community and the church, see Blejwas 1977.

⁶ "New Britain Violator of Postal Law Arrested," *Hartford Courant*, October 2, 1917; and "Federal Prisoner Accuses Priest of Breaking Vows," *Hartford Courant*, October 3, 1917.

On October 1, 1917, the police arrested Oraczewski for "violation of postal laws," accusing him of having sent defamatory letters to and about the Bartolomiej (Bartholomew) Slawinski, a Polish-American who was the pastor of the Sacred Heart Parish in Easthampton, Massachusetts. According to Oraczewski the priest told people that he was dismissed from seminary, but blamed Slawinski for his expulsion. While at Orchard Lake, he had confessed "a wrong," to the recently ordained Father Slawinski, and according to Oraczewski, the priest broke the seal of confession, and for that reason, he had had to leave the seminary without finishing his studies for the priesthood. Since then, Oraczewski claimed "he had gone from place to place trying to start anew," but that his old nemesis Slawinski had put him under surveillance, "preventing him from getting a steady job." For that reason, he had "turned upon the priest by sending him defamatory letters, accusing him of wearing the garb dishonestly and breaking the holy vows." The press did not report how the case ended, but nothing indicates that Oraczewski was sentenced or even that there was a formal trial, and Slawinski would remain an important character in the history of Polish-American Catholicism.⁷

After this affair, Adam Oraczewski soon left Connecticut. By September 1918, when signing his draft registration card, he lived in Omaha, Nebraska. In the document, he claimed to be a priest, which he was not at the time.⁸ Still, he may have been a deacon, because, on April 8, 1919, Oraczewski was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in Oklahoma City by Bishop Theophile Meershaert (1847–1924). As we have seen, Oraczewski had attended the Orchard Lake but left without finishing the courses. Still, before ordination, he was able to present documents that stated that he had completed his Philosophy and Theology at St. Joseph's Seminary in Płock before leaving for the United States.⁹

Following ordination, the bishop transferred Oraczewski to Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where he was an assistant to the Belgian-born parish priest John van

⁷ "New Britain Violator," *Hartford Courant*, October 2, 1917; and "Federal Prisoner," *Hartford Courant*, October 3, 1917. On Slawinski, see *Sacred Heart of Jesus Church* 1984: 11–16.

⁸ United States World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918.

⁹ "Pope Adam II, 'Once Priest in Oklahoma Accused of Fraud'," *The Catholic Advance*, October 1, 1927.

den Hende, in whose home he stayed.¹⁰ He soon left that position, and according to the 1921 *Official Catholic Directory*, he was a priest in Harrah, Oklahoma, which was a small town with a sizeable Polish population, mostly involved in cotton ginning.¹¹ Still, it seems that his stay in Harrah was very brief and he soon left his home diocese and moved to New Hampshire. For little more than a year, between June 1921 and August 1922, Oraczewski was a priest in the St. Joseph's parish in Claremont, where he was actively involved in the ongoing construction of a new church building for the Polish-American community.¹² That a newly ordained cleric served for short periods of time in several parishes was not rare, but that Oraczewski left his home diocese so rapidly after ordination was less common. However, after 1922, it seems that he returned to Oklahoma, where he at least had brief clerical appointments, though the details about his activities are unknown.

In 1924, Bishop Meershaert died, and his successor as bishop of Oklahoma, the very energetic Francis C. Kelly (1870–1948) immediately took suspicions against Adam Oraczewski, who was seen as a problematic individual and initiated an investigation into his case. It is probable that the prelate had received testimonies that everything was not in order. After an initial investigation, Oraczewski was found guilty of having written a letter to the pope, forging the signature of the administrator of the diocese and the diocesan chancellor. In the letter, he had recommended himself as Bishop Meershaert's successor, claiming to have considerable support among the diocesan clergy. However, Kelly harbored other suspicions, too: that the records that Oraczewski had fabricated the documents that he had presented to prove his seminary education in Poland.¹³

When information about the case reached Rome, on January 12, 1925, Oraczewski was suspended *a divinis* by the Sacred Consistorial Congregation for

¹⁰ United States Census 1920, District ED 270, Sheet Number and Letter 6B. See also *Official Catholic Directory* 1920: 618.

¹¹ *Official Catholic Directory* 1921: 1093.

¹² *Saint Joseph Church* 1975. See also *Official Catholic Directory* 1922: 1118.

¹³ "Pope Adam II", *The Catholic Advance*, October 1, 1927, cf. "Suspended 'a divinis,'" *The Catholic Advance*, January 24, 1925. On Kelley's investigation, see also Gaffey 1980:149–150.

forging the letter to the pope, and the diocese continued its investigation into his case, scrutinizing the records he presented to the bishop before ordination. Soon, they reached the conclusion that Oraczewski, indeed, had forged all documents about his education in Poland. There was not even a St. Joseph's Seminary in Płock.¹⁴

As a result of the diocesan investigation, Bishop Kelly confined Oraczewski to the Sacred Heart Benedictine Abbey to do penance. He stayed there during parts of 1925 and 1926. Though Oraczewski had presented forged documentation, the ordination, as such, was valid, but the bishop would certainly not employ him in any parish in the diocese. Eventually, on January 31, 1927, the Sacred Consistorial Congregation notified Bishop Kelley that Oraczewski was never formally incardinated in the diocese of Oklahoma. Consequently, the diocese had no obligation to sustain him economically and the ecclesiastical authorities tried to inform Oraczewski that he should move elsewhere in the United States or, better still, return to Poland.¹⁵

By that time, Oraczewski had left the monastery, and the diocesan authorities did not know his whereabouts. Soon, however, they got to know that he was in Kansas City, Missouri, and by using forged letters of recommendation from Bishop Kelly he had been able to serve as a priest there. By September 1927 the case took a new dramatic turn as Oraczewski suddenly made his papal claims public, publishing the booklet *All in One True Faith*, which he distributed to clergy, laypersons and the media. A few newspapers did, indeed, run the unusual story, and included notes on his problematic history with the Roman Catholic Church in Oklahoma, but, on the whole, the interest was very limited.¹⁶

¹⁴ "'Pope Adam II'", *The Catholic Advance*, October 1, 1927, cf. "Suspended 'a divinis,'" *The Catholic Advance*, January 24, 1925.

¹⁵ "'Pope Adam II'", *The Catholic Advance*, October 1, 1927.

¹⁶ Oraczewski 1927. The claims were known made known by the press in early October, see "'Pope Adam II,'" *The Catholic Advance*, October 1, 1927. Cf. *Katolik Codzienny*, October 13, 1927, referring to *Pittsburznanin*. The reference to the Polish language newspapers are made on <http://www.wlacy.myslenice.net.pl/papiestwo/osoby/Adam%20II.htm>.

In the pamphlet, the author gave 404 E. 10th St., Kansas City as his home address. At the time, it was a residential Y.M.C.A. building.¹⁷

Pope of the Holy Catholic Church

On the front-page of his *All in one true faith* Oraczewski noted that he was “proclaimed Pope of the Holy Catholic Church, Aug. 7th, 1927.” However, in the pamphlet, he gave no information whatsoever on how he had become the pontiff. In the final parts of the book, he explains that he was “raised and educated a Roman Catholic” and ordained in 1919, but that he had “realized the introduction of dogmas and compulsory laws that had spoiled the purity of Christ’s simple teachings.”¹⁸ In fact, Oraczewski put little emphasis on himself person and his high office but focused on his diagnosis of the Roman Catholic Church and a vision of a new, true Church which would be more democratically run.

From the very first page onwards, Oraczewski’s consistent view was that the Roman Catholic Church was full of “hypocrisy, bribery, venality, perversity and foreign domination.” Therefore, he writes: “we decided to fight with all our might and main.” In this context, there is no doubt that “we” referred to himself. Thus, there is nothing that indicates that somebody else elected him or that he felt divinely designated. He only stated that “we do firmly believe that the almighty God will bless our enterprise.” According to Oraczewski, some of the main problems of the church were seminaries, dominant bishops and the vows of clerical celibacy. Still another, much bigger issue was the division of humankind in many different religions, but Pope Adam was convinced that his radical church reform would lead to greater human unity.¹⁹

In the pamphlet, the author’s description of the clerical education and career patterns are quite detailed. Pope Adam showed a particular dislike for

¹⁷ For the location of the Y.M.C.A. building, see *Year Book of the Young Men's Christian Associations of North America* 1921: 114.

¹⁸ Oraczewski 1927.

¹⁹ Oraczewski 1927: 1–7.

seminaries. Among other things, he included a long dialogue between a priest candidate who had spent several years there and a newly arrived seminarian. In short, Pope Adam saw the seminary as the root to godlessness, impiety, frivolity, laziness, hypocrisy, where young men crawled for the teachers to get good grades. In his vision for the reformed church, young men should begin their studies at the seminary at the age of 20. Having finished their five-year education, they would receive both a Ph.D. and D.D. degree and could be ordained.²⁰

After the treatment of the errors of the Roman Catholic seminaries and his visions, Adam II included a new dialogue between the same two men that took place a decade after the first one's ordination to the priesthood. The more experienced cleric told his younger friend about the slave work that assistant priests had to do, while the curates did little or nothing. Moreover, he claimed that most of them had at least one woman, with whom they lived. In the older priest's view, the education of the regular clergy was even worse than the diocesans'. He claimed that monasteries were very dangerous places, not least due to the prevalent power struggles between different factions. In short, they were seedbeds for corruption and impiety.²¹

In Pope Adam's church vision, at the age of 25, all seminarians were ordained to the priesthood, and after that, they should directly be made bishops and administrators of a parish. To sustain a priest economically, but still be manageable, a parish should be made up by some 500 families. According to Pope Adam, the vast distinctions between priests and bishops was one of the many errors that had entered the Roman Church, and he claimed biblical evidence for his view. He did not mention any episcopal consecration, and consequently, apostolic succession seems to have been a non-issue. For Adam II, much intra-ecclesiastical corruption, pride, and abuse of power would disappear by making all priests into bishops.²²

In Pope Adam's vision, the ecclesiastical career should solely be based on the number of years of service. At 35 the bishop will become archbishop, at 45

²⁰ Oraczewski 1927: 20–35, 47–48.

²¹ Oraczewski 1927: 36–44.

²² Oraczewski 1927: 44–50.

cardinal, and when he turned 55, he would be named an apostle. Except for the different types of garments they should use, the author did not say anything about their tasks or that a higher position meant any increased power. In the top of the hierarchy was the pope. Adam II did not indicate any age for the pope, nor how a new pope should be elected. It is, however, clear that the pope was not infallible. The pope should not be able to issue any law by his own, the Congress of Clergy, where all bishops had an equal vote, should take a final decision. He had the intention to call a Congress of Clergy to vote on the rules he had presented in his booklet. It was a collegial vision of church leadership.²³

If joining Pope Adam's Catholic Church, Roman Catholic priests would be named bishops, and all Protestant ministers could be ordained to the priesthood and be made bishops, and so could rabbis. He did not mention the possibilities for adherents of other religions, but as his main goal was to unify people of all creeds, all could enter his church.²⁴ Although Pope Adam was opposed to the ordination of women, he wanted to re-establish the position of deaconess in the Catholic Church, as it had been abolished due to false teachings. The candidates to the office could be nurses or teachers, but before they became blessed deaconesses, they should also be trained in philosophy and theology. Just as in the case of male clerics, former Roman Catholic sisters could be blessed as deaconesses instantaneously when joining the Reformed Church, but so could "accomplished nurses."²⁵

Neither clergy nor deaconesses should be celibate, at least it was not a requirement, as Pope Adam claimed that celibacy was both unnatural and biologically impossible. He argued that if God had intended to create some people destined to celibacy, he would have made them differently, i.e., without sexual organs. Moreover, in his view, it was unlawful to demand celibacy from those who felt a calling to a certain office.²⁶

Though Adam II dedicated much space to church organization, he did include some more general doctrinal teaching. In his theology, much space is

²³ Oraczewski 1927: 43–55.

²⁴ Oraczewski 1927: 54.

²⁵ Oraczewski 1927: 50, 54.

²⁶ Oraczewski 1927: 14–20.

given to God the Creator, and while he did not present an anti-Trinitarian doctrine, he said nothing explicitly about the divinity of Christ. He vehemently opposes the idea of evolution; God created everything from the beginning. Still, he conceded that humanity developed culturally through the ages and that this has implied “certain modification of forms and limbs of the human body.” What the author meant by this curious statement was, however, not explained.²⁷

According to Pope Adam, the Bible is an important source of divine revelation. It was written by “God’s inspired people,” but at the same time, he underlined that throughout the ages the texts had been “spoiled” by “additions and omissions,” which had corrupted God’s message. However, he did believe that revelation ended writing of the Bible, but that God could communicate in other, extraordinary means in the contemporary eras, for example by transmitting messages through the radio. If that is an indication of how Oraczewski thought that he had received his mission, but the radio theme is reiterated throughout the pamphlet.²⁸

The sacraments have a central place in Pope Adam’s theology. Apart from the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, he included an eighth one: betrothal. While marriage could not be dissolved, a betrothal could. When the sacrament of betrothal had been administered, the young man and woman would live together, so that they got to know each other well before they decided whether to marry. During the betrothal period, they are allowed to have sexual intercourse, but they should not procreate, so they should use contraceptives, while abortion was strictly prohibited. As for the sacrament of marriage, Adam II gave quite detailed rules on procreation. The woman should only give birth between the age of 25 and 40, and not more often than every third year, as he thought that the female body was not suited for more frequent pregnancies and that the parents must have a chance to raise their children in a good way.²⁹

On the very last page of *All in One True Faith* came something of a surprise, which he has not alluded to before. There, Pope Adam presented a very ambitious and costly project. He wrote that he intended to collect no less than

²⁷ Oraczewski 1927: 2–9, 41–47.

²⁸ Oraczewski 1927: 7–9.

²⁹ Oraczewski 1927: 28–34.

100 million U.S. dollars for the construction of the center of the Holy Catholic Church. This money should, among other things be used to acquire 50,000 acres of land near Washington D.C. The area would be the new Vatican, which should be proclaimed a free and independent state. There, he should construct a St. Peter's Church for at least 25 million dollars and a papal palace for some 30 million. He informed the readers that the contributions could be deposited into the account of the Catholic Church in North America, which seems to be the official name of his church.³⁰ Still, Adam II's papal claims were certainly universal; he was the pope of the Holy Catholic Church, which was not Roman anymore.

After the Proclamation

Though it is obvious that Adam II was not successful in his grand plans, we do not even know if he attracted any adherents at all and for how long he claimed to be the pope, but probably not more than a few years or less. After an eventful and dramatic decade with constant moves, his life became much more stable, but the sources we have are much fewer. Still, it is possible to know a few things about his life after the publication of his papal pamphlet. In 1928 or early 1929, Oraczewski left Kansas City for Cleveland, Ohio. In February 1929, he filed his Declaration of Intention to become a U.S. Citizen there.³¹ After a decade of constant moving and fleeing from place to place, he would remain in the Cleveland area until his death, more than four decades later.

According to the 1930 U.S. Census, Oraczewski was a boarder in a Polish construction worker's home on Worley Avenue in the neighborhood known as Warszawa. The Census noted that he was a priest, though the title "Rev[erend]" was deleted by the enumerator. Still, he noted the Roman Catholic Church as his employer.³² Close to Oraczewski's home was the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which had a somewhat unusual background. In the 1890s, it had

³⁰ Oraczewski 1927: 59.

³¹ Ohio County Naturalization Records, 1929: Adam Anthony Oraczewski.

³² United States Census 1930, District ED 23, Sheet Number and Letter 14B. On Poles in Cleveland, see the entry in *Encyclopedia of Cleveland* <http://case.edu/ech/articles/p/poles>

begun as an independent Polish Catholic congregation, founded by Anton Francis Kolaszewski (1855–1910), who for some time associated with Old Catholic Bishop René Vilatte, but from 1908 it was admitted into the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, which then lifted the ban against the congregation. By 1930, Marion J. Orzechowski had been the curate for two decades, and he was known for being diplomatic, trying to mediate between the parishioners who had been independents and others. If Oraczewski had a connection to the parish or its school is unknown.³³

According to the 1940 Federal Census Oraczewski, who now had been a U.S. citizen for four years, lived in a home of his own in 10712 Crestwood Avenue in the Cleveland Heights area. Once again, he reported to be a priest and that the Roman Catholic Church employed him. He lived close to Santa Rita Catholic Church, but we do not know whether he had any connection with the parish.³⁴ However, on his registration card for the 1942 draft, Oraczewski stated that he then was a retired priest, mentioning Joseph Schrembs (1866–1945), the bishop of Cleveland as his contact person.³⁵

The official sources from the 1930s and 1940s give few details, but in 1940, Oraczewski published the only other printed text we know. It is a 24-page pamphlet succinctly named *War*. He published it under the name “Rev. Adam A. Oraczewski” and gave his home address as the editorial address. Apart from the name, which disclosed that he was a priest, nothing in the book can be said to have a religious content apart from some expression of U.S. civic religion. The text was written just after the German declaration of war against Poland on September 1, 1940; the acquisition date for the copy in the Library of Congress is October 8.³⁶

In the preface, Oraczewski wrote that the booklet was directed to the American youth and calls them to wake up, and throughout he gave a detailed

³³ On the Immaculate Heart of Mary church, see Kaczynski 1998.

³⁴ United States Census 1940, District ED 92-719, sheet 2B, cf. Ohio, County Naturalization Records, 1936. Fore Cleveland Heights, see the entry in the online *Encyclopedia of Cleveland* <http://case.edu/ech/articles/c/cleveland-heights>

³⁵ United States World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942.

³⁶ Oraczewski 1940.

and well-informed analysis of the development of the War. He argued that the United States was not safe from the aggression of the Nazis and that they must act to help the Europeans. He stated that the Germans “lulled” Great Britain and the United States, securing large loans that enabled them to build a strong army. Hitler had managed to fool several countries into non-aggression pacts, but he “did not hide his plans,” including his goal to “destroy all the Slavic Race.” Orazcewski clearly stated that the allied was in a worse situation now than in 1917, when the United States entered World War I. Given the huge immigration, he stated that the United States is a “miniature world.” With that followed the risk the presence of “fifth columns,” which supported the Nazi cause. In Orazcewski’s view, this called for great caution and that the United States would be attacked from within.³⁷

At the current state of research, we do not know anything else about Orazcewski’s life in the coming decades other than that he remained in the Cleveland area. On August 9, 1973, he died at the Jennings Hall retirement home in Garfield Heights, Cleveland. It was a Roman Catholic institution, run by the Sisters of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ He was buried at the nearby Calvary Cemetery. The inscription on the stone concentrates very much upon him being a priest, even indicating the year of his ordination and a biblical reference to the eternal priesthood in the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4): “Rev. Adam Orazcewski. 1883–1919–1973. Thou art a priest forever” together with an image of a chalice.³⁹

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³⁷ Orazcewski 1940.

³⁸ Ohio Death Index 1973, cf. United States Social Security Death Index, 1973. For Jennings Hall, see the entry in *Encyclopedia of Cleveland*, <http://case.edu/ech/articles/j/jennings-hall>

³⁹ See image on <http://billiongraves.com/grave/person/24572473>.

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