

## **Personal memory of Father Jerzy Popieluszko**

*by Annalia Guglielmi, 10 July 2009*

I saw father Popieluszko for the first time when he was chaplain at the church of St. Ann, the university pastoral church, where I used to stay whenever I was in Warsaw; here I always had the chance to glean vital information about developments in Poland and to meet leading dissidents from university circles. It was an unusual parish, led by that old diehard father Uszynski, one of the most intelligent and feisty clerics I have ever known, aided by four young priests who fully shared his understanding of the Church and of pastoral activities. These included father Jerzy. Then we lost touch with each other for several years, until I heard about his Masses for the Nation, which had soon become highly popular events all over the country. They attracted thousands and thousands of people from all walks of life and had also become a magnet for artists: poets, actors, singers and musicians placed their talent at the service of these gatherings, which were effectively religious, but also had a profound cultural appeal; in fact they revived memories of Poland's history and culture. So people went to the church of St. Stanislaw Kostka to pray, to listen to father Jerzy but also to hear traditional folk songs, or the music of Chopin or Penderecki, or the poetry of Norwid, Slowacki and Mickiewicz recited by the best actors on the Polish scene. In this way they once again felt proud to be Polish, hope was re-ignited, people's identity and dignity were restored, for those two hours they felt part of a deep-rooted community that refused to die. And with deliberation they sang the words of the Polish national anthem: "Poland will not die as long as we live".

I was in Poland the day father Jerzy was kidnapped, and the night in which his body was found, I was staying with Maja Komorowska, one of Poland's leading theatre and film actresses. Maja was involved in the Committee in Aid of the Victims of Political Persecution set up after the introduction of the State of War (among other things she used her great popularity to gain access to political prisoners). She was also a close friend of father Popieluszko and a leading light in the Masses for the Nation. We rushed to the church of St. Stanislaw Kostka, where a huge crowd had already gathered, candles in hand, despite the presence of police vans and a hefty cordon of anti-riot police. We spent that night praying, singing and listening to the voice of the parish priest and of the poets that had assembled there. The following morning I left for Italy. As soon as I arrived, I was picked up at the airport and taken to Milan, to address a demonstration organized by Movimento Popolare in memory of father Jerzy.

In the years that followed, I paid frequent visits to his grave. For years, walking into that courtyard was like entering another Poland: along the fence, hundreds of Solidarnosc banners and flags from all the Polish cities had been hung, a security service was guaranteed day and night by workers from every region of the country, along with flowers, written notes, prayers and appeals. Everything that was forbidden outside that space, was possible within it. Then, a few years later, I worked at Huta Warszawa and I met "his workers", and heard their stories, and I realized how they still felt tied to him by a deep bond of affection and gratitude, how proud they were to have been his community and how determined they were to keep his memory alive through the work of the re-born Solidarnosc movement.