














Jarosław Roman Marczewski

# Through the Eyes of a Parish Priest: the Image of Peasant Communities in the Lublin and Podlasie Regions in the Memoirs of Fr. Karol Dębiński from 1867–1915

*Oczami proboszcza. Obraz społeczności chłopskich na Lubelszczyźnie i Podlasiu  
w świetle pamiętników ks. Karola Dębińskiego z lat 1867–1915*

## ABSTRACT

Fr. Karol Dębiński, a clergyman of the Lublin and later Podlasie dioceses, was a distinguished member of the local clergy at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He was noted for his high intellectual and spiritual qualities, and served as a close collaborator of the bishop, a member of the chapter, and the administrator of the Lublin Cathedral. He demonstrated a deep understanding of both domestic and international church and social realities. Fr. Dębiński authored extensive memoirs, in which he presented, among other matters, the social landscape of four rural parishes where he served as a parish priest: Serniki, Włostowice, Janów Podlaski, and Biskupice. This unique type

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of source, valuable for its reliance on personal observation and evaluation, offers insights into significant aspects of rural life from the author's perspective. Contrary to expectations, it lacks substantial descriptions of religious practices and folk traditions. Instead, it assesses levels of education and morality within individual parishes, as well as the living and farming conditions of the rural population. The author also discusses the varied nature of relationships between parishioners and the parish priest.

**Key words:** Lublin region, Podlasie region, Biskupice, Janów Podlaski, Serniki, Włostowice, peasantry, rural education, rural morality, rural economy, rural parish, clergy, pastoral care

#### STRESZCZENIE

Ks. Karol Dębiński, duchowny diecezji lubelskiej, a potem podlaskiej, był zasłużonym członkiem lokalnego duchowieństwa przełomu XIX i XX w. Cechowały go wysokie walory intelektualne i duchowe. Był bliskim współpracownikiem biskupa, członkiem kapituły, rządcą lubelskiej katedry. Posiadał dobrą znajomość realiów życia kościelno-społecznego w kraju i za granicą. Był autorem obszernych pamiętników, na kartach których przedstawił między innymi obraz społeczności wiejskiej czterech parafii, gdzie pracował jako proboszcz: Serniki, Włostowice, Janów Podlaski, Biskupice. Ten wyjątkowy rodzaj materiału źródłowego, mający walor osobistej obserwacji i oceny pozwala na ukazanie istotnych z punktu widzenia autora obszarów życia wiejskiego. Wbrew temu, czego można by się spodziewać brak w nim istotniejszych opisów praktyk religijnych i obrzędowości ludowej. Ukazany została natomiast i poddany ocenie poziom oświaty i moralności w poszczególnych parafiach, a także warunki życia i gospodarowania chłopów na wsi. Autor przedstawił także zróżnicowany rodzaj relacji parafian do proboszcza.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Lubelszczyzna, Podlasie, Biskupice, Janów Podlaski, Serniki, Włostowice, chłopci, oświata ludowa, moralność na wsi, gospodarka wiejska, parafia wiejska, duchowieństwo, duszpasterstwo

#### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, the extensive memoirs of Fr. Karol Dębiński (1858–1943), covering the years 1867–1915, were published, spanning nearly six hundred pages<sup>1</sup>. The publication of these previously typewritten memoirs attracted considerable attention and received a positive reception, culminating in the organization of an international academic conference dedicated to their author and his work<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Z przeżytych chwil... Pamiętniki ks. Karola Dębińskiego z lat 1867–1915*, ed. J.R. Marczewski, Lublin 2021.

<sup>2</sup> A. Łosowska, [Recenzja] *Z przeżytych chwil... Pamiętniki ks. Karola Dębińskiego z lat 1867–1915*, oprac. ks. Jarosław R. Marczewski, Lublin 2021, Wydawnictwo Polihymnia, ss. 615, "Res Historica" 2022, 54, pp. 761–773; eadem, [Recenzja]: *Pomiędzy św. Piotrem a Sankt Petersburgiem. Kościół katolicki na Lubelszczyźnie i Podlasiu na przełomie XIX/XX wieku. Materiały*

As a type of source material, memoirs – subjective records of an author's experiences – have become an object of study for specialists in various fields, including historians, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists. Their unique value lies in the way they illuminate the significance of individual life events within broader social, economic, and political contexts<sup>3</sup>. Fr. Dębiński's memoirs provide a multifaceted account with significant research and interpretative potential regarding a wide range of social groups. This stems mainly from the author's intellectual abilities and personal qualities, combined with the richness of his life experience.

The aim of this article is to present the depiction of local peasant communities in the Lublin and Podlasie regions at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the perspective of a distinguished priest and parish pastor, while considering the specific nature of his interests and assessments. This perspective carries both distinct advantages and inherent limitations, yet it affords a unique insight into aspects of rural life and social organization that were particularly significant to the clergyman and might otherwise have escaped the notice of other observers. On the other hand, the images of the parish community were inevitably shaped by the author's commitment to enhancing the religious, moral, and cultural standards of the faithful, as well as promoting their economic activity.

It should be noted that research and scholarly discussion concerning the portrayal of the peasant class through the eyes of the clergy remain relatively scarce<sup>4</sup>. While there is no shortage of studies on the mentality and daily life of priests, the aspect of personal observation of the village life and their relationship with the rural community remains largely underexplored<sup>5</sup>. This is partly due to the particular nature of the source

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z konferencji międzynarodowej, *Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II*, Lublin, 2 czerwca 2022, red. ks. Jarosław R. Marczewski, Wydawnictwo Academicon, Lublin 2022, ss. 226, ISBN 978–83–62475–99–5, "Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne" 2022, 119, pp. 549–552.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Łukasik, *Pamiętniki. W kręgu zainteresowań polskich badaczy. Historia – tradycja – kontynuacja*, "Debata Edukacyjna" 2012, 5, pp. 55–56.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this topic is being intensively, albeit indirectly, explored for the early modern period: T. Wiślicz, *Zarobić na duszne zbawienie. Religijność chłopów małopolskich od połowy XVI do końca XVIII wieku*, Warszawa 2001; idem, *Duchowieństwo parafialne a religia ludowa na wsi polskiej XVII–XVIII wieku*, in: *Przestrzeń religijna Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w średniowieczu*, eds. K. Bracha, P. Kras, Warszawa 2010, pp. 257–270; idem, *Shepherds of the Catholic Flock: Polish Parochial Clergy, Popular Religion, and the Reception of the Council of Trent*, in: *Gelehrte Geistlichkeit – geistliche Gelehrte. Beiträge zur Geschichte des Bürgertums in der Frühneuzeit*, ed. L. Schorn-Schütte, Berlin 2012 (*Historische Forschungen*, vol. 97), pp. 25–52.

<sup>5</sup> The issues of the daily life of the Polish clergy at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have found their researchers. A pioneering work in this field remains:

material. In this context, official church records offer little insight, while it is the memoirs of clergymen that constitute the principal sources of information. However, these memoirs, at least those published in print, are not numerous enough to provide comprehensive coverage of rural issues from the perspective of parish priests<sup>6</sup>. In this regard, both the source itself and its analysis, as well as the general conclusions derived from it, constitute a new contribution to the broader discussion on the clergy of the period and the portrayal of rural communities. For the Lublin and Podlasie regions, Fr. Dębiński's memoirs remain the only available source of this kind, thereby opening the debate on the image of peasant communities through the eyes of the clergy in this area and providing opportunities for future comparative studies.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, it is essential to provide a biographical sketch and intellectual-spiritual profile of Fr. Dębiński. An analysis of the memoirs' content, the events described,

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D. Olszewski, *Przemiany społeczno-religijne w Królestwie Polskim w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku. Analiza środowiska diecezjalnego*, Lublin 1984. Among other studies that highlight this topic in the context of ecclesiastical issues, it is worth mentioning: F. Stopniak, *Kościół na Lubelszczyźnie i Podlasiu na przełomie XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 1975. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the latest achievements: K. Lewalski, *Miedzy sacrum a profanum, czyli jak to wśród braci kapłańskich bywało. Duchowieństwo rzymskokatolickie w zaborze rosyjskim w II połowie XIX i na początku XX wieku (zarys problematyki)*, "Echa Przeszości" 2006, 7, pp. 53–67; idem, *Na plebanii na przełomie XIX i XX w.*, in: *Dom – spotkanie przestrzeni prywatnej i publicznej na tle przemian cywilizacyjnych XIX i XX w. Zbiór studiów*, eds. Z. Opacki, D. Płaza-Opacka, Gdańsk 2008, pp. 163–170; idem, *„Dixit laicus clero: nunquam tibi amicus ero!”*, czyli o relacjach świata duchownych (rzymskokatolickich) ze światem świeckich na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, in: *Duchowieństwo i laicy*, ed. A. Wałkowski, Warszawa 2010, pp. 165–176; idem, *Ksiądz i kobieta. Obrazy z XVIII, XIX i XX wieku*, "Studia Historica Gedanensia" 2012, 3, pp. 59–78; idem, *„Szatan [...] nawet przez brzydką niewiaśc potrafi usidlić kapłana”. O kobietach z perspektywy pasterzy dusz (XIX/XX w.). Zarys problematyki*, in: *Portret kobiety*. Polki w realiach epoki, vol. 1, *Życie prywatne Polaków w XIX wieku*, eds. M. Korybut-Marciniak, M. Zbrzeźniak, Łódź–Olsztyn 2014, pp. 187–201; idem, *Życie codzienne duchowieństwa w XIX w. Droga do odheroizowania, trywializacji czy obiektywizacji obrazu grupy?*, in: *Duchowni na plebanii i w drodze: konteksty codzienności i interpretacje historyczne*, eds. K. Lewalski, A. Łysiak-Łątkowska, Gdańsk 2015, pp. 12–55; idem, *Pogodna jesień czy smutny schyłek żywota? Ksiądz na emeryturze w Królestwie Polskim na przełomie XIX i XX wieku*, in: *Ludzie starzy i starość na ziemiach polskich od XVIII do XXI wieku (na tle porównawczym)*, vol. 2, *Aspekty społeczno-kulturowe*, eds. A. Janiak-Jasińska et al., Warszawa 2016, pp. 33–52; idem, *Odłony codzienności. Rzymskokatolickie duchowieństwo parafialne na prowincji Królestwa Polskiego na przełomie XIX i XX wieku. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Gdańsk 2019.

<sup>6</sup> A list of memoirs of the clergy from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be found in: K. Lewalski, *Odłony*, pp. 301–302. Valuable insights on this topic can also be found in: A. Kwaśniewski, *Pamiętniki ks. Karola Dębińskiego jako świadectwo kultury umysłowej duchowieństwa*, in: *Pomiędzy*, p. 156.

and the evaluations presented will enable the identification and systematic organization of the rural population's image, reflecting traits that are, to some extent, typical for a representative of the local clergy.

#### FR. KAROL DĘBIŃSKI: A BIOGRAPHICAL AND CHARACTER SKETCH

Karol Dębiński was born in 1858 into a family engaged in blacksmithing and farming, with roots in the petty nobility of the Łuków district in the Podlasie region. He initially received his education at home before attending a gymnasium in Siedlce. Following the discovery of his vocation to the priesthood, he entered the Lublin Seminary in 1877 and, due to his exceptional intellectual abilities, was subsequently sent to the Roman Catholic Theological Academy in St. Petersburg. He was ordained a priest in 1884 and completed his studies with a master's degree in theology the following year, after which he returned to his diocese<sup>7</sup>. In the years following his ordination, his work encompassed several domains, including pastoral duties, academic and teaching activities, and administrative responsibilities.

Initially, Fr. Dębiński served as a vicar at the parish of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle in Lublin and later at the Lublin Cathedral. In 1886, he began lecturing on archaeology and the Bible at the Lublin Seminary. He also acted as a prison chaplain at Lublin Castle and taught religion in local schools. In 1893, he assumed a position at the Tribunal of the Diocese of Lublin. Two years later, in 1895, he became the parish priest in Serniki, and in 1897, he was appointed parish priest in Włostowice and dean of the local deanery. In 1904, Fr. Dębiński was named a member of the Lublin Cathedral Chapter. In the following years, he undertook various special assignments delegated by the bishop as a close collaborator and representative. In 1906, he assumed the parish of Janów Podlaski along with its deanery. The following year, upon election by the cathedral chapter and confirmation by his superiors, he was sent to St. Petersburg to serve as an assessor in the Roman Catholic College. In 1909, he was additionally appointed inspector and professor at the local Theological Academy, where he lectured on pastoral theology. After resigning from these positions, he returned to the diocese in early 1911. The Theological Academy in St. Petersburg awarded him a doctorate in theology for his scholarly work. Upon his return, he was initially nominated for the parish of Biskupice, but in 1912 he was appointed treasurer of the cathedral chapter, a role that entailed numerous administrative responsibilities

<sup>7</sup> *Z przeżytych*, pp. 9–10.

at the Lublin Cathedral. His achievements during this period included the urban redesign of the cathedral square and the establishment of the first diocesan museum, located in the cathedral sacristy. Between 1914 and 1916, Fr. Dębiński served as a member of the Lublin Municipal Civic Committee, where he was actively involved in providing aid to victims of World War I. In 1918, he assumed the position of parish priest in Łuków and dean of the local deanery. With the reactivation of the Podlasie Diocese in 1918, previously suppressed by the Tsarist authorities, Fr. Dębiński joined its clergy. His established ecclesiastical reputation enabled him to assume several key positions within the newly formed diocesan administration while continuing to serve as parish priest and dean of Łuków. He was appointed prelate-archdeacon of the Podlasie Cathedral Chapter, an official of the diocesan tribunal, and the bishop's general vicar. Beginning in 1919, he lectured on pastoral theology at the Podlasie Seminary. In 1920, the Holy See appointed him a protonotary apostolic. In 1923, the bishop entrusted him with organizing the Minor Seminary in Siedlce along with the associated Bishop's Gymnasium. Consequently, Fr. Dębiński assumed the positions of rector of the seminary and principal of the school, which he held for thirteen years. He retired in 1936 and passed away in 1943 in Siedlce<sup>8</sup>.

Fr. Dębiński prepared and published numerous scholarly and popular works on church history, typically integrating historical analysis with insights drawn from his pastoral experience or from events he witnessed or actively participated in. His primary area of expertise was pastoral theology, in which he not only taught but also authored a two-volume textbook exceeding 6,000 pages. Fr. Dębiński's scholarly work emphasized the importance of active lay participation in church life. Additionally, he published lexicographical works and numerous articles in ecclesiastical periodicals<sup>9</sup>.

The ecclesiastical responsibilities he held, alongside his scholarly and journalistic accomplishments, attest to Fr. Dębiński's exceptional intellectual and organizational abilities. The personal attributes that distinguished Fr. Dębiński may be summarized as follows: 'He was a priest with extensive knowledge in theology, asceticism, canon law, social issues, and education. He was well-versed in both Polish and foreign literature, as well as in history, physics, and chemistry, and he enjoyed discussing art and aesthetics. Among his inner qualities were bold initiative and intense activity, refined manners, and consistency, all of which together embodied

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>9</sup> P.J. Badura, *Dębiński Karol*, in: *Słownik polskich teologów katolickich*, vol. 1, ed. H.E. Wyczawski, Warszawa 1981, pp. 300–301; A. Kwaśniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 136.



the highest ideals of the priestly spirit. His life of faith and prayer, inner focus, and simple, ascetic lifestyle adorned him both in the spiritual sphere and in his external and public life. Among his personal virtues was also his respect for all people, including the poorest, as well as for intellectual and manual workers and the unemployed. He possessed a clear understanding of international currents and developments. It may be said that he was a priest of his time<sup>10</sup>.

It is worth noting that, through his scholarly work, Fr. Dębiński developed a clear vision of the priest-pastor role, which he consistently sought to embody. His attributes included striving for God's glory and the salvation of souls; possessing appropriate deep knowledge; a legalistic but not servile attitude towards secular authority, especially when it overly interfered with the internal affairs of church life; and engagement in social work<sup>11</sup>. This vision, together with his personal predispositions and experience, provided the foundation for his pastoral work in the parishes entrusted to him by diocesan authorities.

#### FR. DĘBIŃSKI'S RURAL PARISHES

Fr. Dębiński assumed his first parish in November 1895. According to the governmental regulations of the time, he formally became the administrator of the parish in Serniki, within the Lubartów deanery. The parish was rural, encompassing eight villages: Chlewiska, Czerniejów, Nowa Wieś, Podpałecznicza, Ruskowola, Serniki, Wola Sernicka, and Wólka Zabłocka. The parish church, constructed of stone, was built and consecrated in the second half of the eighteenth century. The total number of parishioners reached nearly 3,600<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Był księdzem szerokiej wiedzy teologicznej, ascetycznej, prawniczej, społecznej i wychowawczej. Znał literaturę polską i obcą. Znał historię, fizykę i chemię, chętnie rozmawiał o sztuce i estetyce. Do jego wewnętrznych zalet należała śmiała inicjatywa i natężona aktywność, wysoka kultura życiowa i konsekwencja, a wszystko to razem, jako wykwit ducha kapłańskiego. Duch wiary i modlitwy, skupienie wewnętrzne, prosty i umartwiony tryb życia przyozdabiały go w sferze nadprzyrodzonej, jak i w zewnętrznym i publicznym życiu. Do wewnętrznych także jego zalet należało i to, że miał poszanowanie dla ludzi choćby najbiedniejszych, dla pracowników umysłowych, fizycznych i bezrobotnych. W prądach i sytuacjach międzynarodowych widział jasno drogi. Można powiedzieć, że był kapłanem na poziomie czasu'. *Z przeżytych*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> K. Lewalski, *Wzór duszpasterza w świetle wybranych opracowań pastoralnych okresu zaborów. Zarys problematyki*, "Studia Gdańskie" 2012, 31, pp. 110–112.

<sup>12</sup> J.R. Marczewski, *O wyzwaniach w administrowaniu parafią pod rosyjskim zaborem – na podstawie pamiętników ks. Karola Dębińskiego*, in: *Pomiędzy*, p. 170.

After just over a year and a half in Serniki, Fr. Dębiński was appointed parish priest of Włostowice in June 1897, concurrently serving as dean of the New Alexandria deanery. This parish had a mixed rural-urban character: although the parish church was located in the village, the parish also encompassed Puławy, where a Catholic chapel was situated. Although Puławy did not receive city rights until 1906, it had long been recognized as an important cultural center, with the Czartoryski residence serving as its focal point. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it also hosted significant educational institutions and military garrisons. Additionally, it was the administrative seat of the New Alexandria district. Besides Puławy and Włostowice, the parish included five villages: Mokradki, Parchatka, Skowieszyn, Wieś Puławska, and Wólka Profecka<sup>13</sup>. The total number of parishioners exceeded 5,000. In addition to the pastor, a vicar also served the parish. Meanwhile, the parish church, constructed of stone, was erected in the first half of the eighteenth century and consecrated in the first half of the nineteenth century. The chapel in Puławy, in contrast, dated from the early nineteenth century and formed part of the palace-park complex formerly owned by the Czartoryski family. After nearly nine years of pastoral service, Fr. Dębiński left the parish of Włostowice in April 1906<sup>14</sup>.

In the same month, he assumed the role of parish priest of Janów Podlaski and was concurrently appointed dean of the local deanery. The parish of Janów Podlaski, much like his previous assignment, had a mixed social character. Although Janów Podlaski had lost its city rights following the January Uprising, it had held them for over four centuries. Historically, it had served as the seat of the bishops of Łuck and later as the capital of the Podlasie Diocese. The church, which functioned as the cathedral, was constructed and consecrated in the first half of the eighteenth century. The small-town profile of Janów Podlaski was complemented by Konstantynów, which lent its name to the local deanery, along with thirty-two surrounding villages (Błonie, Bonin, Borsuki, Bobol, Bogukały, Buczyce Nowe, Buczyce Stare, Cieleśnica, Derno, Gnójno, Hołodnica, Horoszeki, Jakówki, Kajetanka, Klonownica, Klonowniczka, Komarno, Łengi, Michałki, Nowinki, Ostrów, Pawłów Nowy, Pawłów Stary, Peredyło, Rokitno, Stasiówka, Wierzchliś, Wychowicze, Wygoda, Zaborek, Zakalinki, Zakanale) and 9 manors (Antonin, Lipnica, Michałki, Polinów, Rokitno,

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<sup>13</sup> *Catalogus Ecclesiarum et Utriusque Cleri tam Saecularis quam Regularis Dioecesis Lublinensis pro Anno Domini 1898*, Lublin 1898, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> J.R. Marczewski, *O wyzwaniach*, p. 170.



Sulinów, Wandopol, Wólka Polnowska, Woroblin)<sup>15</sup>. The vast majority of parishioners – over 8,000 people – were former Eastern Catholics who returned en masse to the Church in 1905 following a period of compulsory conversion to Orthodoxy. The parish as a whole numbered more than 11,000 faithful and was also served by a vicar. Fr. Dębiński's pastoral work in Janów Podlaski lasted only a year and a half, until October 1907, when he was appointed assessor at the Roman Catholic College in St. Petersburg. While formally remaining the parish priest of Janów, he was absent for the majority of this period, attending only during vacations and providing sporadic assistance with parish responsibilities<sup>16</sup>.

Upon his return from St. Petersburg, Fr. Dębiński was appointed administrator of Biskupice parish in the Lublin deanery in February 1911. In addition to Biskupice, the parish encompassed eleven villages – Brzezice, Brzeziczki, Dorohucz, Łysołaje, Majdan Brzezicki, Pełczyn, Siostrzytów, Majdan Siostrzytowski, Stróża, Trawniki, and Zgniła Struga – as well as the manor of Dąbrowica Trawnicka. The total number of parishioners reached approximately 6,700, and the parish was also served by a vicar. The parish church, dating from the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, was consecrated in the second half of the eighteenth century.

After a year of service in Biskupice, Fr. Dębiński was appointed secretary, or treasurer, of the Lublin Cathedral Chapter, and in March 1912 he assumed responsibility for administering the cathedral church in Lublin. He carried out these duties until the end of the Partition period<sup>17</sup>.

#### THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL LIFE OF THE PEASANTRY

An especially noteworthy observation from Fr. Dębiński's memoirs is the near-complete omission of information concerning the religious practices of his parishioners.

Undoubtedly, this does not imply a lack of pastoral engagement or abandonment of religious practices by the faithful. It appears that the narrative approach adopted in the memoirs deliberately omits this aspect<sup>18</sup>. Religious practice, particularly among the rural population, was a commonplace aspect of life at that stage of history. Participation in divine worship and the reception of the sacraments constituted standard

<sup>15</sup> *Catalogus Ecclesiarum et Utriusque Cleri tam Saecularis quam Regularis Dioecesis Lublensis pro Anno Domini 1907*, Lublin 1907, pp. 85–86.

<sup>16</sup> J.R. Marczewski, *O wyzwaniach*, p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> A. Kwaśniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

elements of Christian life. Naturally, local and personal circumstances – such as terrain, weather, and health – could occasionally influence the intensity of religious engagement<sup>19</sup>.

However, the religiosity of rural parishioners was often presented in relation to their moral conduct. The author emphasized that rural communities were generally morally upright, although they were susceptible to varying degrees of corrupting influences from different sources. For instance, the inhabitants of Serniki were described as friendly, kind, and inclined toward good deeds. A notable source of moral threat came from the stable boys of the local estate owner, who bred racehorses and, through their travels across the Russian state, were exposed to corrupting influences. Despite this, the pastor observed no widespread debauchery, drunkenness, or theft within the parish. Individual cases of alcohol abuse were often perceived more as elements of local color, sometimes even humorously. Consistently, he remarked that, among other morally questionable behaviors, certain parishioners displayed a particular inclination toward card games<sup>20</sup>.

In the case of the Włostowice parish, its particular social composition had a notable impact on the moral trends among the rural population. A substantial portion of the parishioners were engaged in crafts, particularly masonry. Under these circumstances, despite the proper moral conduct observed among women, men who spent most of the year away from home for work contributed to a degree of moral disorder within parish life. During the winter months, alcohol abuse, often accompanied by coarse public behavior, was a common phenomenon. Another distinct issue involved intimate misconduct arising from rural girls taking service positions with lecturers and students of the Puławy Institute of Rural Management and Forestry. The pastor perceived this phenomenon not only as a consequence of the intelligentsia exploiting their social position, but also as the result of economically disadvantaged individuals seeking to improve their circumstances, often with the hope of securing favorable marriages<sup>21</sup>.

The situation was somewhat different in the parishes of Janów and Biskupice, both of which Fr. Dębiński considered to be morally degraded. In these cases, the problem arose less from external influences than from internal factors, particularly the negative impact of local clergy who failed to meet appropriate standards. In Biskupice, moral failings included

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<sup>19</sup> J.R. Marczewski, *Życie religijne*, in: *Dzieje archidiecezji lubelskiej (1805–2005)*, ed. M.T. Zahajkiewicz, Lublin 2005, pp. 113–190.

<sup>20</sup> *Z przeżytych*, pp. 187–191.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

drunkenness, quarrelsomeness, and theft. The previous pastor, who had neglected both proper pastoral duties and organizational, administrative responsibilities, bore partial responsibility for these issues. Consequently, the diocesan authorities removed him from his position. His intrigues, however, had already divided the parish community, fostering mutual animosity, accusations, and even informing against one another<sup>22</sup>.

Similarly, the contemporary moral situation of the residents of Janów parish was shaped not only by the actions of the clergy but also by the influence of local Russian authorities. As in Biskupice, deep divisions existed among the population. Several clergymen, who treated the faithful instrumentally, competed for ecclesiastical positions and material resources, thereby antagonizing parishioners who aligned themselves with different factions. These events occurred in the so-called post-Uniate areas, where, following the forced conversion of Eastern Rite Catholics to Orthodoxy in the 1870s, the involvement of Tsarist officials – keen to exploit the situation – was also evident<sup>23</sup>.

In summary, the moral depiction of the rural population, as observed by the discerning pastor Fr. Dębiński, appears to have been varied. While his memoirs reflect the view that the peasants possessed a fundamentally positive moral stance, this assessment is qualified by specific life circumstances, including both external influences and the inappropriate conduct of certain spiritual leaders.

#### THE STATE OF EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The level of education, particularly the religious knowledge of parishioners, was a central concern for the rural parish pastor. Given the absence of compulsory schooling, the limited network of educational institutions, and the general reluctance of peasants toward formal education, Fr. Dębiński regarded his pastoral duties as quasi-didactic in nature.

In the Serniki parish, he observed that, despite the absence of schools, more than two-thirds of the population were able to read. Parishioners acquired this skill largely through self-education and mutual

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 420.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 320–324; the circumstances leading to tensions and their consequences in the form of moral lapses were described in memoir excerpts of his work by Fr. Józef Pruszkowski, the parish priest of Janów from 1868 to 1881: *Janów Biskupi czyli Podlaski: z dawnych i współczesnych źródeł napisał P. J. K. Podlasiak*, Kraków 1897, pp. 351–354.

instructions, particularly during the winter months when agricultural work was reduced<sup>24</sup>.

A notable feature of parish life was the participation of parishioners in library activities organized by the pastor, including reading rooms and lending libraries for books and magazines. In Serniki, Fr. Dębiński provided parishioners with appropriate reading materials, as well as the popular magazine "Zorza", to which he held a subscription. Interestingly, parishioners observed a form of informal assessment by engaging in discussions about the content they had read upon returning borrowed materials. More ambitious individuals even began to subscribe independently to the recommended magazines<sup>25</sup>. A similar situation occurred in the Włostowice parish, where, additionally, small booklets with edifying content could be obtained free of charge and permanently, thanks to the pastor<sup>26</sup>.

In contrast to the parishes mentioned above, Fr. Dębiński characterized the intellectual situation in the Janów parish as marked by widespread ignorance. One measure to address this was the public Sunday reading of the Jesuit magazine "Głosy Katolickie" in the church, which attracted over a hundred listeners. Additionally, a branch of the Polish Educational Society was established with the intention of opening a Polish-language school. The rural population received this initiative enthusiastically, particularly as, following the 1905 school strikes, local children did not return to the Russian government school. The failure of this plan was partly mitigated by the establishment of a public reading room in October 1906, where the pastor conducted readings he had selected. For example, the first reading featured Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1882 novella *Bart the Conqueror*. Due to opposition from the local Russian authorities, the activity was restricted to the parish library, which operated until 1909, providing interested individuals with access to periodicals and the opportunity to borrow books<sup>27</sup>.

A similar picture of educational advancement among the peasantry emerged in the Biskupice parish. There, too, the rural community, encouraged by the pastor, made use of the parish library, which counted more than 170 borrowers. The influence of printed materials was likely amplified through family members or neighbours, who benefited from the loud reading of borrowed books in private homes. Furthermore,

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<sup>24</sup> *Z przeżytych*, pp. 187–188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 188–189.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 327–329.

approximately 30 parishioners subscribed to various popular periodicals, including the Warsaw-based "Gazeta Świąteczna"<sup>28</sup>.

Beyond the general level of education, the extent of religious knowledge among parishioners was of particular concern to the pastor. In the Serniki and Janów parishes, Fr. Dębiński observed that superstitions were widespread among the population<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, he consistently created opportunities for acquiring religious knowledge. In the Serniki and Włostowice parishes, adults attended Sunday and holiday sermons delivered from the church pulpit. Children received separate catechism instruction, conducted using a dialogical method that allowed for closer interaction with the priest as he moved among them, through the church. In the Janów parish, catechism lessons for children from more distant villages took place on weekdays, depending on weather conditions, either under a roadside cross or in a barn. Notably, during these children's lessons, youth and adults were also present and passively benefited from the instruction. Additionally, individuals preparing for marriage were required to demonstrate their knowledge of catechetical truths before the pastor, which effectively necessitated individual, self-guided preparation<sup>30</sup>.

It appears that, in Fr. Dębiński's view, the intellectual level and educational situation of the villages – both in a broader sense and in terms of strictly religious knowledge – were unsatisfactory. According to a parish priest possessing a thorough understanding of contemporary educational realities, the local rural communities were regarded as undereducated. Simultaneously, with the pastor's increased engagement and systematic encouragement, the peasant population made significant efforts toward intellectual and cultural development.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A PARISH PRIEST AND HIS PARISHIONERS

A distinctive feature of peasant communities emerged at the intersection of personal and official relations with the clergy, particularly with the local parish priest. These relationships were highly varied, likely shaped by both individual experiences and historical factors embedded within broader social and economic contexts. The latter factor,

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 421–422.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 188, 324.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 188, 204, 325–326.

in particular, often functioned as a barometer of the prevailing sentiments and the level of mutual trust<sup>31</sup>.

Fr. Dębiński described the inhabitants of the Serniki parish as generally friendly towards the clergy. This disposition was attributed both to the exemplary conduct of previous parish priests and to the active engagement of the current pastor. An illustration of the priest's respect for parishioners was his organization of pastoral care for the sick. Fr. Dębiński noted that, among peasants – particularly the poorer ones – calling a priest for the dying was often problematic. Due to long distances, it was a standard practice to send a horse-drawn carriage for the priest, which could be humiliating for the poor, as they had to rely on the assistance of wealthier farmers. In Serniki, Fr. Dębiński addressed this issue by arranging for wealthier parishioners to contribute to the upkeep of the parish horses. In return, the priest would always use his carriage to visit the faithful for sacramental duties. This arrangement enabled both wealthy and poor parishioners to summon the priest without restriction, ensuring the timely administration of last rites and preventing deaths from occurring unattended by them<sup>32</sup>. Reciprocal care for the priest by the parishioners, though not manifested through substantial monetary offerings, was sincere and sufficient. The priest's prohibition against the customary offering of grain during winter pastoral visits contributed to his being warmly received in every household. The respect shown by the pastor was reciprocated through communal contributions of various provisions, delivered to the rectory following the completion of pastoral visits across all parish villages<sup>33</sup>. Similar expressions of gratitude were abundant when the priest permanently departed from the parish, during mutual, emotional farewells<sup>34</sup>.

The relationship with parishioners in Włostowice differed notably. The farming population displayed considerable reserve toward the parish priest, influenced by the socially mixed composition of the parish. Craftsmen felt a responsibility to direct parish activities and manage church affairs. The priest's attempts to resolve financial matters generated

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<sup>31</sup> It should be borne in mind that a common phenomenon in the Polish countryside at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a strong class antagonism accompanying the political and social emancipation of the peasants. This manifested itself, among other things, in popular anticlericalism, which was expressed in the criticism of the lifestyle of priests but generally did not take on antireligious forms; R. Tomicki, *Religijność ludowa*, in: *Etnografia polski. Przemiany kultury ludowej*, vol. 2, eds. M. Biernacka et al., Wrocław 1981, pp. 62–63.

<sup>32</sup> *Z przeżytych*, pp. 190–191.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 199.



significant tensions. While the village craftsmen were openly hostile toward the priest, the farmers largely remained detached from the conflict. Only the tangible financial and economic benefits of the priest's engagement – such as the renovation of the church – combined with the recognition of farmers through the appointment of their representative as parish treasurer, enhanced trust in the priest and fostered a degree of peasant empowerment within the church context<sup>35</sup>. The internal dynamics of the parish were further reflected in the allocation of burial spaces: the most desirable plots in the parish cemetery were reserved for local craftsmen and the Puławy aristocracy, whereas peasant burials were relegated to less favorable areas of the grounds<sup>36</sup>.

In the Janów and Biskupice parishes, the relationships between the rural population and the parish priests were inconsistent. This was largely due to the instrumentalization of the faithful by certain clergy, motivated by concerns over social prestige and financial gain. Peasants in these parishes supported some priests while opposing others, particularly because of fees and offerings collected. In his efforts to rectify previous grievances, Fr. Dębiński found himself, as he claimed, unjustly exploited by parishioners who neglected to provide fair compensation for his services. He described such conduct among the inhabitants of the Janów parish as ignoble<sup>37</sup>.

According to Fr. Dębiński, the population of the Biskupice parish exhibited profound distrust toward the clergy, primarily for economic reasons. A notable example was the emigration of many parishioners to Paraná. Convinced of the futility of this migration – particularly due to the significant material losses suffered by those who sold their farms to intermediaries – the priest faced considerable tensions in Biskupice. His efforts to dissuade the faithful from emigrating were perceived by the rural community as an alliance between the altar and the manor, exploiting the peasants<sup>38</sup>.

It appears that the socioeconomic tensions in the relationships between the rectory and the village were largely of an institutional nature.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 201–203, 208–210; it is worth noting that in one of his publications, Fr. Dębiński spoke more positively about cooperation with parishioners. However, this publication appeared before the events of the revolution in 1905–1907. Surely, the strikes and incidents in Włostowice and Puławy modified his perspective on the attitude of local parishioners; K. Dębiński, *Kościół we Włostowicach i kaplica w Nowo-Aleksandryi*, Warszawa 1904, pp. 31–32.

<sup>36</sup> *Z przeżytych*, p. 208.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 324–325.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 420–421.

Moreover, as Fr. Dębiński's observations indicate local and subjective factors also shaped this pattern of interaction.

#### MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF THE VILLAGE AND EFFORTS TOWARD IMPROVEMENT

Fr. Dębiński's records provide valuable insight into the material conditions of village life and the preoccupation with daily means of subsistence. More detailed information is available regarding the peasants of the Serniki parish: 'The peasants' houses were entirely constructed of wood and roofed with straw, featuring a central hallway flanked on either side by a room and a chamber, the latter typically serving as a pantry. The main room contained a large English-style chimney and a substantial stove, near which the elderly and children slept. Furnishings included a table with a cross, a bed with pillows covered in homemade white sheets, and numerous religious images adorning the walls, though of very poor artistic quality. [...] The farm buildings and other economic structures were located in the yard, adjacent to the house. Nevertheless, calves and piglets – particularly during the winter – were allowed the unusual privilege of staying in the same room as the household members. [...] All parishioners of Serniki wore traditional clothing. Men attired themselves in gray or black homemade frocks with collars and cuffs made of green or navy blue cloth, often adorned with matching embroidery, while women wore skirts and bodices woven from multicolored wool. Girls braided their hair, whereas women covered theirs with caps featuring a conical front. Store-bought fabrics were rarely employed. In winter, men wore lambskin caps, while in summer they topped their heads with homemade straw hats'<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> 'Domy wieśniaków były wyłącznie drewniane, słomą kryte, przez środek przecinała je sień, z obydwu stron której było po jednej izbie i alkierzu, który zwykle służył i za spiżarnię. W izbie duży komin, przeważnie angielski, duży piec, na którym i za którym spali starzy i dzieci, stół z krzyżem, łóżko z poduszkami pokryte białym prześcieradłem swojej roboty, na ścianach liczne obrazy święte, pod względem artystycznym bardzo liche. [...] Zabudowania gospodarcze i ekonomiczne były w podwórzu, tuż przy domu, cielątka jednak i prosiątka, szczególnie w zimie, miały przywilej mieszkania w izbie razem z ludźmi. [...] Wszyscy parafianie sernickcy nosili strój sobie właściwy: mężczyźni – siwe lub czarne sukmany domowej roboty z kołnierzami i mankietami z zielonego lub granatowego sukna z takimiż sznurkowymi wszyciami, a kobiety spódnice i gorsety tkane z różnobarwnej wełny. Dziewczęta włosy zaplatały w warkocz, kobiety zaś kryły je w czepeczkach, mających nad czołem kształt stożka. Materiał sklepowy na ubrania rzadko był używany. Mężczyźni nakrywali głowy w zimie barankowymi czapkami, a w lecie słomianymi kapelusami własnej roboty'. *Z przeżytych*, pp. 187–188.

According to Fr. Dębiński, the local population, exclusively engaged in agriculture, was relatively prosperous. Although they held only small plots of land, they also cultivated vegetable gardens, selling the produce in Lublin and benefiting from their proximity to this regional center. Moreover, pig farming was widespread in Serniki. The villagers produced simple woven goods for personal use. At Fr. Dębiński's initiative, they also began weaving baskets and practicing beekeeping, activities that soon proved profitable due to strong demand in the Lublin market<sup>40</sup>.

The rural areas of the Podlasie region were certainly poorer. In the Janów parish, the houses were described by the priest as follows: 'A kitchen with English stoves, a huge stove that one can sleep on, a large bed, usually without pillows, covered with a white cloth, a bench, a table, a pair of stools, and finally a loom where women weave linen, cloth, and sometimes very pretty colorful rugs called kilims. This is the entire furnishing of the house. The walls are full of pictures, mostly poor-quality oleographs depicting various saints. [...] Although the houses were cleaned and even whitewashed for my visit, under normal conditions the inhabitants paid little attention to cleanliness, as keeping chickens, piglets, and calves in the same room was common. A few houses, however, were equipped with wooden floors, carefully constructed tiled or brick stoves, and proper bedding on the beds, though such dwellings remained rare'<sup>41</sup>.

The backwardness was evident in the farming methods employed and the use of archaic agricultural tools. Fields were often plowed with wooden plows, and wooden harrows were commonly used<sup>42</sup>.

It is worth noting the author's observations on the attitude of the rural population toward various association initiatives aimed at improving farming practices. In almost every parish, the clergy noted a high level of distrust toward such projects, which was largely attributed to fear of incurring financial losses. In particular, the initiatives of the manor were met with considerable suspicion. Nevertheless, the involvement

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 188, 191.

<sup>41</sup> 'Kuchnia z blachami angielskimi, ogromny piec, na którym i spać można, duże, przeważnie bez poduszek, łóżko przykryte białą płachtą, ława, stół, para stołków, wreszcie krosna, na których kobiety robią płótno, sukno i różnokolorowe, czasem bardzo ładne dywaniki, zwane tu kilimkami. Oto całe umeblowanie mieszkania. Na ścianach pełno obrazów, przeważnie oleodruków lichej roboty, wyobrażających różnych świętych. [...] Wprawdzie na moje przyjęcie domy były oczyszczone, a nawet wybielone, w zwykłych jednak warunkach lud tutejszy zamiłowaniem do czystości nie grzeszy, hodowanie bowiem w izbie kur, prosiąt i cieląt jest tu rzeczą zwykłą. Pomimo to są już domki z podłogą, z piecami kaflowymi lub ceglanymi zbudowanymi starannie, z porządną pościelą na łóżkach, ale takich jeszcze niewiele'. *Z przeżytych*, p. 333.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 334.

of a clergy member generally facilitated these efforts, thereby enabling the establishment of farming circles<sup>43</sup>.

Fr. Dębiński's observations concerning the material conditions of rural communities should be interpreted within the context of the historical realities of the period. It is also important to consider his specific evaluative approach, which employed terms such as 'wealth' or 'poverty' based on direct comparisons among the resources of the rural parishes under his pastoral care, rather than in relation to the assets of other social strata.

### CONCLUSIONS

The depiction of the peasant class in the Lublin and Podlasie regions at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as rendered by Fr. Dębiński, is undoubtedly selective and partial. This limitation stems not only from the focus on the inhabitants and affairs of a relatively small number of villages across several parishes dispersed throughout the former Lublin diocese, but also from the emphasis on aspects deemed significant by the contemporary pastor – particularly those pertaining to the religious life of parishioners, including Christian morality, catechetical knowledge, and their relationship with the parish priest. Consequently, the portrayal is framed by the high expectations of the clergyman, resulting in a representation of the peasant class that, in his eyes, often fell short of the desired moral and educational standards.

Beyond strictly religious matters, other aspects were addressed as a result of the pastor's concerns and sense of compassion. The depiction is neither idyllic nor idealized; rather, it reflects the harsh realities of rural life during the period under consideration. Low levels of education, material poverty, and limited social development are recurrently noted in the memoirs. Notably, the portrayal of the peasant community scarcely touches upon local customs or folklore. Instead of offering a formal, external description of a social group, the author focused on the realities of pastoral work aimed at the salvation of souls, and consequently, on aspects subject to moral evaluation. This evaluation, however, extended not only to the conduct of the parishioners but also to the author himself, reflecting on his responsibilities as a caretaker of both the temporal and spiritual welfare of his flock.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

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