

Just Call Me Jerzy: Popiełuszko in the United States and Canada

A book on the life of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, by Judith Kelly

Reviewed by Scott Wright

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In recent years, an oral history project called StoryCorps has begun to document “the American experience,” airing excerpts of many of those inspiring stories on public radio. The format is simple: a conversation between two friends, sometimes members of the same family, which marks a significant moment in their journey or life together.

Judith Kelly’s 2016 book, *Just Call Me Jerzy*, is such a story. In this beautiful and carefully crafted book, she tells the story of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko (1947–1984), a Polish priest assassinated by secret police agents of the Polish government for his courageous defense of the Solidarity workers’ movement and his outspoken denunciations of the oppressive military regime. In the course of telling this inspiring story, the author manages to tell her own.

In an afterword entitled “*Why Jerzy?*” we find out her reason for undertaking this journey. Growing up in a northeastern Pennsylvania family farm, a rural background she shares with Fr. Jerzy, and experiencing the denigration that many immigrant families still experience today, she writes: “Fr. Jerzy helped me find my Polish family and, in the process, gain a deeper understanding of myself.”

But the book is so much more than a personal journey to discover one’s roots; it is also a profound journey of faith – and a shared one at that. In writing this book, Judith Kelly has opened a world that will be new to many readers, and one that is profoundly moving and significant, especially for our times.

I think it is fair to say that many people in the United States are familiar with the martyrs of El Salvador who were killed during the civil war in the 1980s; far fewer, perhaps, know the story of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko (October 19, 1984) and the martyrs of Poland who were killed during that same time period. In many ways, the Cold War not only divided the world into East and West, it also divided the expressions of solidarity into two camps: one with the church in Eastern Europe, and the other with the church in Latin America.

Now, nearly thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we are discovering that the struggle for truth, justice, freedom and liberation looks different, depending on the geography

and history of the region where it takes place. But the courage of those who defy oppressive regimes, and the color of the blood of the martyrs, is the same.

As the story unfolds – and it is told in dramatic terms by the author in a carefully documented and detailed manner that reflects both her deep passion for her subject and the close relationships she developed with people who lived through that critical time – I found myself remembering the time I lived in El Salvador during the same time period (1981–1984). There are many parallels, above all “a longstanding struggle between church and state.”

From the day of his ordination in 1972, Fr. Jerzy and his good friend made “a pact with each other to be activist priests.” With the emergence of the Polish workers’ movement Solidarity in the northern city of Gdansk in 1980, the brutal martial-law crackdown in December 1981, and monthly Masses for the Country held by Fr. Jerzy between February 1982 and his death in October 1984, the stage was set for a showdown between church and state, and his eventual assassination and martyrdom.

Fr. Jerzy became a marked man, but remained steadfast to the end: “The people will go on praying for me,” he told a journalist not long before he was killed. “You see, I may be afraid, but I really have no alternative. I could not act otherwise. Besides, I would only be truly afraid if what I was doing was wrong. I’ve always had to live with that risk. But if I must die violently, then I’d prefer to meet death while defending something worthwhile than save my life by refusing to take a stand against injustice.” His violent death at the hand of security agents is a reminder of the fate of prophets in our world today.

In her Introduction to *Just Call Me Jerzy*, Judith Kelly quotes Fr. Daniel Berrigan, SJ: “The nonviolent hero often ends up dead. . . . So does the soldier, by the thousand.” Berrigan asks: “Who dies in a way [that] is a gift to history?” That is a crucial question for our day, as horrific violence and cruel wars crush the lives of people everywhere, especially women and children, and nuclear-armed nations including our own threaten to ignite a global holocaust.

One of the important messages of this book is to offer an answer to Fr. Berrigan’s question. Clearly the story of Fr. Jerzy’s martyrdom and the struggle for truth and freedom that he represented is a gift to history. So also was it a very personal gift to the author. As Judith Kelly says in the Afterword about her own journey: Fr. Jerzy “has inspired me to live out my call as a faith-based activist, to let go of fear, and to trust in the nonviolent Jesus.”

But the book does not end with Fr. Jerzy's death. The second half of the book, which chronicles Fr. Jerzy's travels to the United States and Canada prior to his fateful and final return to Poland, poses the question that is often asked of those who pass in our midst as friends and who by the manner of their faithfulness and often tragic deaths are eventually recognized as saints and martyrs. In the course of this journey, the reader is led to ask: What was it that led Fr. Jerzy to place his life in danger by his solidarity with the Polish workers and his prophetic denunciations of the Polish government oppression? And what was it that led him to remain faithful to the end, even when he knew that "he would not be alive in six months?"

These questions remain in the background as the reader is led through a detailed journey of encounters and travels with family and friends, all the while knowing the tragic, but heroic conclusion to which this journey is leading. There are heroes in our midst, as the words from the Book of Hebrews quoted at the beginning of part two remind us: "Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2).

In the end, we are left with a remarkable story in which the life of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko is intertwined with the lives of two saints, all of whom met on Polish soil and share a common history. In Judith Kelly's concluding words to part one: "Jerzy would surely be pleased to join two of his heroes," Saint Maximilian Kolbe (who voluntarily sacrificed his life for a condemned prisoner in Auschwitz), and Saint John Paul II. Yet in the end, Fr. Jerzy remained "one of us," an ordinary man with extraordinary courage, "a heroic example and gift to his family, friends, country, Church, and the entire world."

And so, too, is this book a gift to all of us who have been invited to share in this conversation between two people who share their journey of faith across continents. Though the author never met Fr. Jerzy in real life, they are of the same generation, and it is clear that they truly have met in that great tradition of the Church called "the communion of saints," which binds the living and the dead in a living bond of memory, hope and witness for justice, peace, truth and reconciliation.

Fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us: "We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation." That message still resonates today, and was taken up in an inspiring way by Pope Francis in his response to a gathering in Rome last year initiated by Pax Christi International on nonviolence and just peace. Judith Kelly's book, *Just*

Call Me Jerzy, is yet one more reminder and challenge to all of us to be part of that cloud of witnesses that bears witness to the Beloved Community and dream of peace to which the world aspires.

I can find no more fitting way to end than to cite the author's own concluding words, penned one year ago today on April 23, Jerzy's "name day," in which she quotes his words of hope and challenge: "Let us be aware that in demanding the truth from others, we must live the truth. In demanding justice, we must be fair with those who surround us. In demanding courage and fortitude, we too must be valiant and courageous every day."

Stories have a way of renewing our spirits and inviting us to a life of risk for the sake of the Gospel: may this story inspire you!

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