

HOLY WAR  
IN  
LATE MEDIEVAL  
AND  
EARLY MODERN  
EAST-CENTRAL  
EUROPE



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Akademia Ignatianum  
w Krakowie

Wydawnictwo  
WAM

Kraków 2017

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This publication was financed from the funds of the statutory activity  
of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

Supervising editor  
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Graphic layout and DTP  
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Cover design  
PHOTO DESIGN – Lesław Sławiński

ISBN 978-83-7614-328-6 (Ignatianum)  
ISBN 978-83-277-1417-6 (WAM)

WAM PUBLISHING HOUSE  
ul. Kopernika 26 • 31-501 Krakow  
tel. +48 12 62 93 200 • fax +48 12 42 95 003  
e-mail: wam@wydawnictwowam.pl  
www.wydawnictwowam.pl

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## Piotr Skarga's *The Soldier's Devotion* and the Idea of the "Devout Christian Soldier"

### I. Introduction

In the year 1606, Piotr Skarga, a Jesuit, who was the court preacher for King Sigismund III of Poland, wrote a short text entitled *The Soldier's Service, that is: Instructions, Prayers and Examples Dedicated to the Military*.<sup>1</sup> It was published in Cracow in the printing house of Jacob Siebeneicher and dedicated to Jan Karol Chodkiewicz (Starosta of Samogita and the Grand Hetman of the Duchy of Lithuania) and Stanisław Żółkiewski (the Castellan of Lviv and the Crown Field Hetman of Poland) – both of the addressees were “most renowned army commanders.”<sup>2</sup> Piotr Skarga clearly expressed the aim of the work and why he dedicated it to these distinguished military leaders. He wished the book to “be recommended to all soldiers, so that, as Christian warriors, they could gain help from it by increasing the fear of God in themselves and by virtuous conduct.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Skarga, “Żołnierskie nabożeństwo, to jest, nauki i modlitwy, i przykłady do tego stanu służące. Pisane od X. Piotra Skargi, Societatis Iesu”, in: *Piotra Skargi Pisma wszystkie*, vol. 5, Warszawa 1930 [Hereafter: P. Skarga SJ, “Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo”]. After “Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo”, edition from 1610. Transcription of the text after *Piotra Skargi Pisma wszystkie*, Warszawa 1923. More information about editions in *Piotra Skargi Pisma wszystkie*, vol. 1, “Od wydawcy”, pp. II–III.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

His reason for undertaking such a project, as he writes in the address, was, on the one hand, the bad condition of the soldiers, who were recruited from the nobility: "The military rank, which for the most part has been neglected and ruined by insubordination, is in dire need of repair. Our gentlefolk, who are called to this vocation and take great pride in it, have lost the habit of the knightly occupation."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, however, the reforms of the military were vital for the prosperity of the Commonwealth, which, in his understanding, would require "the restoration of the military to its proper duties and level of vigilance in order to gain the means necessary to fight its enemies and to keep the homeland and the Commonwealth well defended."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The text structure and content

The structure of *The Soldier's Service* creates a coherent whole and is comprised of three different, yet mutually complementary parts, which are dedicated to the problem of military vocation and war. Altogether, they offer the Roman Catholic approach to these issues, which is already indicated in the very title of the text: "...the Instructions [Part One], Prayers [Part Two] and Examples for the Military [Part Three]".<sup>6</sup>

The first part consisting of fifteen chapters is entitled "The Soldier's Instructions and Service."<sup>7</sup> Skarga includes in it his own reflections on the subject, which he arranges under the following headings: "The First Instruction: On respecting the status of the Christian soldier"<sup>8</sup>; "The Second Instruction: On how everybody can please God and find eternal salvation through the knightly vocation"<sup>9</sup>; "The

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> "(...) Nauki [część pierwsza] i Modlitwy [część druga], i Przykłady do tego stanu służące [część trzecia]." Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Żołnierskie nauki i Nabożeństwo."

<sup>8</sup> "Pierwsza Nauka, O uważeniu stanu Żołnierskiego Chrześcijańskiego." Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Wtóra Nauka. Iż w rycerskim stanie może się każdy P. Bogu podobać, i zbawienie wieczne naleść."

Third Instruction: The two reasons for which the soldier should be the most devout of all"<sup>10</sup>; "The Fourth Instruction: The motivation for joining the military"<sup>11</sup>; "The Fifth Instruction: In what kind of war the Christian soldier should participate"<sup>12</sup>; "The Sixth Instruction: The safest war against the Turks, pagans and other infidels of the Holy Cross and the enemies of God's Church"<sup>13</sup>; "The Seventh Instruction: The origin of every war lies in regaining and safeguarding the common peace"<sup>14</sup>; "The Eighth Instruction. On the military laws as given by St. John the Baptist"<sup>15</sup>; "The Ninth Instruction: On the cardinal knightly virtues"<sup>16</sup>; "The Tenth Instruction: On the discipline of the soldier"<sup>17</sup>; "The Eleventh Instruction: On the danger of going to battle in a state of mortal sin"<sup>18</sup>; "The Twelfth Instruction: How to prepare and arm one's soul before battle"<sup>19</sup>; "The Thirteenth Instruction: How the heart grows in time of need"<sup>20</sup>; "The Fourteenth Instruction: How the Christian soldier should behave after a victorious battle"<sup>21</sup>; "The Fifteenth Instruction: The soldier's leisure time at home in times of peace."<sup>22</sup>

The second part of this section is entitled "The Soldier's Prayers" and takes the form of a personal prayer offered to God by the Christian soldier; his vocation and actions are seen and reflected upon in

<sup>10</sup> "Trzecia Nauka. Żołnierz winien być nad inne nabożniejszy dla dwu przyczyn."

<sup>11</sup> "Czwarta Nauka. Z jakim końcem do żołnierstwa przystawać."

<sup>12</sup> "Piąta Nauka. Na jaką wojnę pisać się ma żołnierz Chrześcijański."

<sup>13</sup> "Szósta Nauka. Nabespieczniejsza wojna na Turki, Pogany i inne niewierne Krzyża Ś. i kościoła Bożego nieprzyjacielem."

<sup>14</sup> "Siódma Nauka. Iż przyczyna każdej wojny jest nabywanie i zatrzymanie pokoju pospolitego"

<sup>15</sup> "Ósma Nauka. O prawach żołnierskich od Jana Ś. Chrzciela podanych."

<sup>16</sup> "Dziewiąta Nauka. O przedniejszych cnotach Rycerskich."

<sup>17</sup> "Dziesiąta Nauka. O karności żołnierskiej."

<sup>18</sup> "Jedenasta Nauka. Jako z grzechami jawnymi żołnierzy, niebezpieczno iść do potkania."

<sup>19</sup> "Dwunasta Nauka. Do potrzeby i bitwy idąc, jako się ma żołnierz przyprowadzić i na duszy uzbroić."

<sup>20</sup> "Trzynasta Nauka. Czym serce wielkie do potrzeby roście."

<sup>21</sup> "Czternasta Nauka. Jako się po wygranej bitwie zachować ma Chrześcijański żołnierz."

<sup>22</sup> "Piętnasta Nauka. Bez wojny i doma zabawa żołnierska."

the light of faith. There are eight prayers altogether: seven of them are connected with the military vocation and one of them is related to the actions of the soldier. This is complemented by five martial prayers, which are drawn from the Old Testament and are entitled "The Prayers of the Holy Fathers at War, Taken from Scripture."<sup>23</sup> The "personal" prayers, which should be offered to God by the devout soldier, consisting without exception of very pure intentions, have to do with a very specific aspect of military service and are followed by the "Lord's Prayer", the "Ave Maria" and the particular Psalm selected for that occasion. They are arranged according to the intentions as follows: The First Prayer: "For the military vocation"; The Second Prayer: "For successful guidance to uncertain battle"; The Third Prayer: "For the gift of piety"; the Fourth Prayer: "For the soldier's actions"; The Fifth Prayer: "For a just war"; The Sixth Prayer: "For Christian unity in the war against the Turks"; The Seventh Prayer: "For peace". The seven prayers find their culmination in the closing prayer entitled "The Prayer at the moment of going to the battle in the name of God", which addresses the very moment of a soldier's military action. This final prayer ends with the Credo – the traditional confession of faith.<sup>24</sup> It is followed by a collection of wartime prayers drawn from the Old Testament. They form an interesting set of prayers "received by God" and their purpose is to strengthen the soldier's spirit. Their role is also to reinforce faith in God's support during the soldier's ordeals and offer instruction on how to pray in order to be granted what is asked for.

Finally, in the third part composed of three sections and entitled "The Soldier's Spiritual Awakening", Skarga gathers together a number of Biblical and non-Biblical examples of "pious fortitude and knightly joy." Its purpose is expressed laconically in the closing part: "with God's help you will read (...) and awake spiritually to follow these examples."<sup>25</sup> To lift the hearts of soldiers, the author provides in the first section entitled "The Spiritual Awakening for the Soldiers in Battle" ten speeches, which derive from the Bible and were originally addressed to the Israelites before battle. These orations express an unflinching faith in God's support and a firm conviction that the

<sup>23</sup> "Modlitwy Ojców ŚŚ. na wojnie, z Pisma świętego." Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> See ibidem, pp. 28–41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.



outcome of battle is not decided by the number of soldiers (or by the weapons) because "strength comes from Heaven" (1 Macc. 3:19).

Skarga clearly expresses this idea in the eighteen "Examples of pious fortitude and knightly joys taken from Scripture," which form the content of the second section, and are summarized in three guiding thoughts. The first one reminds the reader that "even though, as the Psalm testifies, God is always and everywhere powerful, His power is expressed to the utmost in war. God is the sole ruler in war, and by having human hearts in His hands, he either fills them with courage or cowardice."<sup>26</sup> Then he continues in the second example: "What happens in war is not what people think, but what God in Heaven has willed. For this reason, just and God-fearing heroes, knights and captains never go to war before God has been consulted, whose help they seek through penance, and other appropriate and humble means."<sup>27</sup> In the concluding third part Skarga describes the true source of fortitude and the joy of God's soldier: "when God lifts the hearts of soldiers with his spirit, the great things, which are at stake, are determined and won by small numbers."<sup>28</sup>

Also the last section, entitled "The examples of the pious fortitude and military joy, taken from the Christian history of the New Testament," consists of eighteen examples and is based on lessons learnt from the history of Christianity and of Poland. It is structured according to the same pattern as the previous section and has the same message, which is thus expressed in the opening sentence: "God gave help to the pious kings and soldiers, who were calling His name for help, and gave them courage and miraculous victories at war when they humbled themselves before Him."<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt, that if analyzed from the viewpoint of holy war, *The Soldier's Service* broadens our general perspective on the issue. It can be characterized as a Jesuit version of the Roman Catholic approach to the problem and brings the complex, didactic and ascetic analysis of such closely related issues as the nature and ethos of the soldier's profession and the various types of war in which the soldier can or should take part. Moreover, the text is of primary importance

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

for Polish culture and, at the same time, it can be seen as a genuine Polish contribution to the debate about holy war, which is the subject of this book. Being aware of the complexity of the problem, we are going to limit our interest to the formal analysis of the semantic and argumentative element of the Christian soldier's status and ethos, as it is presented in *The Soldier's Service*.

### 3. The idea of the soldier's vocation in *The Soldier's Service*

*The Soldier's Service* was seen by its author as a contribution to the necessary reform of the military. In a nutshell, the text is a didactic and ascetic treatise explaining the Roman Catholic and Jesuit position on the military in light of Christian ideals; it also analyzes morally acceptable forms of war as applied to the real historical circumstances of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It is worth remembering that these issues, laid out systematically in *The Soldier's Service*, had been addressed by Piotr Skarga before in the following texts and sermons: *Spiritual awakening in time of war* (1600); *To the soldiers in need* (1600); *The Church's thanksgiving for the victory over Greater Wallachia granted by God to this Crown* (1600); *The sermon on mounting a horse for battle, when Zygmunt III, the undefeated and blessed by God King of Poland and Sweden, and our beloved lord, mounted his horse to lead the army to Livonia* (1601); *An obeisance to the Lord of Hosts for the Livonian victory over Charles the Duke of Södermanland, granted by God on the day of St. Stanisław, 27<sup>th</sup> day of September in the year of Our Lord 1605 in the battle of Kirchholm, for the pleasure of our king, due to Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, the Grand Hetman of Lithuania* (1605).

#### The origin of the military and the duty of the Christian soldier

In the First Instruction, entitled "On respecting the status of the Christian soldier", Piotr Skarga begins his analysis by stressing the obvious, namely that the need for an army "is brought about by human petulance, which deprives this world of golden prosperity and

snatches away happy life.”<sup>30</sup> He argues, however, that not all petulance leads to military intervention: “Some people cause trouble at home, and in their neighborhoods, by hurting others and by taking things that do not belong to them, and this brings about various tribulations. Yet the law and punishment can curb this. Others, in contrast, invade foreign countries with the strength of an army and want to seize and devastate a land and enslave its people; and it is against them that soldiers are dispatched according to reason and the natural law, so that they can restore and preserve peace, and keep the enemy at bay with bravery and an iron fist. This is particularly true when there is no other way to cope with an enemy; when other methods for reconciliation have failed.”<sup>31</sup>

If we look at the vocation of the soldier in this light, taking into account the purpose and nature of his activities, then it turns out to be a necessity demanded by reason and natural law in the face of human petulance and lawlessness. At the same time, it is seen by Piotr Skarga as a special kind of service rendered to all people, a service which has a rational, moral, and theological justification, as something desired and good, worthy of human respect and favored by God. One of the most vivid examples of this type of argumentation, which expresses in a nutshell the idea of the Christian soldier, is the statement made by Piotr Skarga in the First Study: “since they [the Christian Soldiers] are the embodiment of love for their brothers, the Commonwealth and the country, for the glory of God, the Holy Church and the Christian faith, and for their defense they put their lives at risk. And it is due to the great and famed virtue of courage which stems from the love of God and of which Christ the Lord says: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>32</sup>

### Ideal and reality

A certain embodiment of this ideal, rekindled by the love of God and focused on service to Church and nation, can be found in the Fourth Instruction entitled: “The motivations for joining the military.” Looking at the problem in a more realistic and complex way,

<sup>30</sup> “Pierwsza Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

the author assumes that the God-fearing Christian soldier “puts three things above himself in his service”<sup>33</sup> rather than merely two, as one could hastily conclude from the First Instruction. First of all, that he “may serve his country, the Commonwealth, in which he was born and baptized, and in which he lives and has his earthly possessions; and that he may not allow it to suffer any violence and loss to the best of his abilities, shedding his own blood when necessary for it and that which pertains to it.”<sup>34</sup> Secondly, that he “may defend the faith, the Gospel and the Holy Church, keeping it from falling, especially when the pagans and infidels, who hate the Christian God united in Trinity, rise against our kingdom and bring to ruin the priesthood, the law and the people.”<sup>35</sup> Thirdly, that he “may win fame in war, favors from his king and the Commonwealth and financial benefits.”<sup>36</sup>

Skarga points out, however, that only the first two causes, that is the protection of the country and the defense of the faith apply without restriction to the devout Christian soldier, since they are inherently sinless and worthy of human and divine rewards. According to the biblical theologico-political paradigm of the monarchy, the Christian soldier “by serving kings and authorities, serves God himself, from whom those rulers draw their power. He does not take up arms of his own will, but from a higher echelon and for the common good. His service, as good and necessary, is therefore without sin, and certainly earns merit from God, when he offers his service for His glory (...) and for the well-being of the Commonwealth and the country.”<sup>37</sup> The last motive, which is fame and material benefit, can be moral as long as it does not become the primary drive for him, but only if it is seen as a desire to offer distinguished service to Church and country. In accordance with the Seventh Instruction, “the leaders and their soldiers commit grave sins when they wage war for the expansion of their lands, for the display of their military prowess, for their fame and other vain purposes, and even though they are not forced to do it, they inflict such loss and misery on

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<sup>33</sup> “Czwarta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> “Czwarta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> “Wtóra Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 5.

people without taking into account the common good or peace.”<sup>38</sup> According to Skarga, seeking fame “can be without sin as long as it does not constitute the primary drive. The other two must be placed first, while the third one is merely treated as complementary.”<sup>39</sup> It is only acceptable as an expression of virtue, not born out of egotistic vanity, but “afire with God’s love.”

#### 4. The ethos and spirituality of the Christian soldier

*The Soldier's Service* is a fabric of instructions, prayers and examples woven out of principles, attitudes and their theological-existential justification. Altogether, they constitute the ethos of the Christian soldier. It is not our intention to give a full and comprehensive description of the Jesuit perspective on the problem of holy war. Instead, we would like to concentrate on five aspects of Skarga’s argument: the axiological and theological foundations of Skarga’s idea, the rules of conduct in battle, the rules of conduct after victory, and the rules of conduct in times of peace.

#### 5. The axiological and theological foundation of the ethos of the Christian soldier

Upon inspection, the axiological foundation of Skarga’s thought in this document is constituted by the knightly virtues, the most important of which are the subject of the Ninth Instruction entitled “On the Primary Knightly Virtues.” Piotr Skarga lists them in hierarchical order as justice, fortitude and obedience. “The first one is justice, it is under her banner that the Christian soldier marches. Without justice he would prefer to stay at home, he would have no hope for victory, and he would be afraid of God’s vengeance which follows the spilling of innocent blood.”<sup>40</sup> This is because the Chris-

<sup>38</sup> “Siódma Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> “Czwarta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> “Dziewiąta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 15.

tian soldier is primarily “the enactor of justice in war”<sup>41</sup> and – as explained in the Fifth Instruction entitled: “In what kind of war the Christian soldier should participate” – he can only participate in a war “which is determined officially by the highest power, which is spotlessly just”<sup>42</sup>, and which “does no harm to the innocent.”<sup>43</sup>

The second virtue in the proposed order is “fortitude” (...) and it finds its reflection in three things. Firstly, the soldier sweeps away the bodily desires and weaknesses; he conquers himself and subjugates his bad habits before he has won victory over his country’s enemies.”<sup>44</sup> In this venture he is guided by the rule that the soldier “serves with reason and virtue.”<sup>45</sup> Next, this kind of fortitude must be shown by enduring hardships, as “the army is established on hardness, not softness.”<sup>46</sup> Finally, it should be based on the ability to “put at risk one’s own life if necessary.” This third form of fortitude, Skarga argues, brings about the “dauntless heart”, due to which the brave soldier “even in the heat of battle, when the time comes, guided by reason, will succeed with the help of God.”<sup>47</sup>

The third of the knightly virtues is obedience, which is, “the highest and the greatest in this profession, without which, as in life, nothing good could be achieved during war.”<sup>48</sup> This form of obedience can be described as “holy” because its ultimate foundation and justification is not in the soldier’s fortitude, but in his unflinching faith. Skarga explains in the following two comments: “The obedient soldier charges against canons, guns and spears, when ordered to do so, even though he sees dead bodies strewn around, and this is how it ought to be; all good men do this, and they have a reward from God for their obedience in a just war.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, a Christian soldier “should respect his commanders as God’s representatives.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>42</sup> “Pięta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> “Dziewiąta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, pp. 15–16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

The idea of the virtue of obedience motivated by faith, as presented in the Ninth Instruction, seems to imply the familiar doctrine, which states that the soldier "by serving kings and authorities, serves God himself, from whom those rulers draw their power."<sup>51</sup>

The concept of the soldier's ethos, the axiological foundations of which are justice, bravery, and obedience, reaches its fulfillment when we add the fourth of the virtues that complement it, namely the virtue of faith and devotion, which is the cornerstone of its theological foundation. Its significance is perfectly revealed in the First Prayer, which opens the second part of *The Soldier's Service*, entitled "For the vocation of the soldier". This supplication expresses the quintessential theological understanding of the military profession:

"O, Thou who art the Ruler of all things and the Lord of Heaven and Earth, thou who hast distributed all human leisure and work, and hast ordered none to be idle: for some serve you through sacred offerings and prayers, while others provide food and safeguard the peace, and others protect the country from enemies. Thou hast established the military order for the purpose of defense according to the natural law and provided it with institutions which draw power from Thy might; Thou hast strengthened it by the examples of Thy holy servants and kings; Thou hast improved this profession by the teachings of Thy Son; and Thy Son and Our Lord, our God and Our Teacher, gave the command to conscript soldiers, and sayeth that the secular lords 'must have servants in order to secure their kingdoms.' Humbling myself before Thy Majesty I beg Thee to guide my hand in writing this introduction to the soldier's vocation, to which Thou hast called me through inspiration and signs, so that I could accept it with Thy blessing, and illuminate it with the Christian virtues, and earn through it my salvation and Thy grace."<sup>52</sup>

At first glance, this prayer is a theological, Roman Catholic compendium of the doctrine of the military. However, it goes much further than the reflections contained in the Instructions, because Skarga introduces the notion of a military "vocation" in its strict theological meaning. According to the prayer, the choice of the soldier's vocation by a God-fearing Christian is not a purely arbitrary act of his own, neither is it an acceptance of an inherited legal obligation,

<sup>51</sup> "Wtóra Nauka." Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> "Pierwsza Modlitwa." Ibidem, pp. 28–29.

nor a reaction to the danger of a foreign invader. It is a personal answer to an equally personal call directed to the soldier by God to accept his vocation. This idea is clearly expressed in the concluding words of the prayer quoted above. Thus, Piotr Skarga formulates the spiritual credo of the Christian soldier, which is tantamount to the ideal soldier of God, and then he leads the soldier consequently towards the summit of mysticism of martyrdom. Seen in this mystical perspective, the actions of the soldier take on the form of a military expression of faith, which is nourished by the love of God and by the love of those in whose defense he is willing to shed his blood, up to the point of sacrificing his own life.

### Going to battle

This type of mystical, martyr's delineation of the military ethos, with its deep theological and psychological reflection, is fully expressed in a threefold manner in the Twelfth Instruction under the title: "How to prepare and arm one's soul when going to battle." The first thought is exhortative in nature: "A good soldier is willing and eager to serve the common good, and when he goes to battle his thoughts and words are as follows: «either to die or to win, whatever the will of Heaven is». This is what is said in the Book of Maccabees, and this is what befits a virtuous soldier."<sup>53</sup>

The next idea is pragmatic in nature and, by underlying the most significant qualities of the good and willing soldier, such as his alertness and fortitude, it leads to the second part, which deals with the problem of how the Christian soldier should "prepare himself for death." According to Skarga, he should be wise and experienced in the virtuous life, "being watchful and brave, he prepares himself for death" in the face of battle.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, in the third thought, mystical in its character, Skarga highlights that the soldier, "expressing the faith, is filled with joy and courage by the Holy Spirit, and while holding his weapons firmly and checking the horse straps, he awaits the command of his hetman."<sup>55</sup> This depiction is one of a very practical, down-to-earth

<sup>53</sup> "Dwunasta Nauka." Ibidem, p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> "Dziewiąta Nauka." Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> "Dwunasta Nauka." Ibidem, p. 21.



soldier-mystic, a man of unshakable faith and boundless openness to the will of God, who is not only experienced in life and mature in faith, but also attentive to the technical requirements of his profession.

### After victory

In the Fourteenth Instruction, entitled "How a Christian soldier ought to behave after winning battle", Skarga reflects on the actions that are proper for a Christian soldier after a victorious battle. These are presented as the following virtues: humility, compassion and mercy, humanity, grateful generosity and reliability. The last virtue finds its expression in keeping the oaths made before battle. Skarga instructs the Christian soldier in the following way: "It is fitting and proper to weep over the misery of the defeated."<sup>56</sup> Considering the fact that the fate of the defeated could have well befallen the victors and that victory itself does not imply the moral superiority of the victors, he urges the soldier to celebrate the glory of victory in humility: "do not think to be someone better in God's eyes, whose judgement and governance you do not understand and who could have well punished you instead of him."<sup>57</sup>

But rather than showing ruthlessness and inhumanity, Skarga recommends "pity" (*użalenie*) towards the defeated, which he uses interchangeably with "mercy" (*miłosierdzie*).<sup>58</sup> As he clearly declares in the Instruction, this attitude should be in accord with the Golden Rule found in the Gospel:<sup>59</sup> "the same compassion should be shown to the defeated as one would wish to receive in like circumstances."<sup>60</sup> These attitudes not only shape the ethos of the Christian soldier and are an expression of humanity, which is guided by reason in search

<sup>56</sup> "Czternasta Nauka." Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, pp. 23–24.

<sup>58</sup> In the story of the Muslim Sultan Assam and Byzantine Emperor Diogenes, cited in this Instruction, Piotr Skarga uses the term "mercy" as a synonym for the term "pity", which is under discussion here. Cf. idem, "Czternasta Nauka." Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew and Luke cite this rule, known as the Golden Rule, in their gospels – see Mt 7:12 and Lk 6:31. In Matthew's version it is rendered as follows: "Do to others what you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets."

<sup>60</sup> "Czternasta Nauka", in: P. Skarga SJ, "Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo", p. 24.

of harmony and peace, but they also constitute for the Christian soldier the fulfillment of the God-given commandment about “unity, love and forgiveness of trespasses.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, as the Ninth Instruction argues, they are the expression of the first type of fortitude that should characterize the Christian soldier and which lies in “winning the battle over oneself and conquering one’s evil inclinations, before subjugating the enemies of one’s country.”<sup>62</sup> These evil inclinations are, among others – as one might conclude from the Gospel narrative cited in the Instruction about those whose “blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (Lk: 13: 1–3) and from the story about the Sultan Assam and the Emperor Diogenes – a boastful elevation of oneself above others (rebuked by Jesus), and inhumanity, ruthlessness, hardness of heart (the vices of Diogenes condemned by Assam).

Humility and compassionate humanity shown to the defeated are not the only requirements which comprise the soldier’s ethos “after a victorious battle.” According to the Fourteenth Instruction, “it is completed only by the virtues which verify the authenticity of the relationship between the victor and the One who gave him the victory and preserved his life, namely by grateful generosity and reliability in keeping one’s word.” These virtues adorn the Christian soldier and are vitally important to the full manifestation of faith and piety, which, as we remember, serve as the foundation of the ethos of the soldier’s vocation or, to use theological language, his “calling.” For in their nature they represent a believing soldier’s religious, existential response to God for the support and protection he received from Him during the battle.

In the conclusion of the Instruction, the author stresses the need for a right and responsive spirit, which can be characterized by the virtue of pious gratitude. In order to illustrate his argument, he derives examples from the Old Testament. Skarga exhorts the soldier to be motivated in gratitude by the virtue of generosity: “It is very fitting and proper for the Christian soldier, who knows the Lord clearly and has received greater gifts from Him, to attribute to Him his victory and his emergence from the battle unscathed: and from what he received from God at war, he should offer some part to the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> “Dziewiąta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 15.

Church and the poor.”<sup>63</sup> And he concludes in the following manner: “In the end, after the successful victory, the soldier should fulfill the vows he had made before the war, so that he might show gratitude to the One who led him, guarded him, and listened to his prayers.”<sup>64</sup>

### At home – in time of peace

In his final, Fifteenth Instruction, “The soldier’s leisure at home in time of peace”<sup>65</sup>, Piotr Skarga discusses the life and ethos of men-at-arms in the period between wars. He goes straight to the heart of the matter in the opening sentence: “Just as the soldier must be brave at war, so he must be humble and peaceful at home.”<sup>66</sup> But how to understand these domestic virtues, as contrasted with the martial virtues?<sup>67</sup> Taking the entire text of the Fifteenth Instruction under consideration, one must conclude that the author understands them as personal, civil, and social virtues. Among the personal virtues co-creating the ethos of the Christian soldier in times of peace, Skarga includes the expression of the virtue of fortitude (which was already addressed in the Ninth Instruction)<sup>68</sup>, as the necessary condition for other civil and social virtues to be manifested. The virtue of fortitude, he argues, characterizes “the spiritual soldier,” both in times of war and in times peace and its nature lies in “struggling with evil habits and temptations as if they were enemies on the battlefield.”<sup>69</sup>

As for the other domestic virtues, both civil and social, to be considered by the Christian soldier, Skarga draws our attention in particular to two pairs, which were very important for the Commonwealth at his time. The first pair of virtues is the rule of law and neighbourly friendship, both understood broadly as can be gathered from the following statements: “he is a lion at war but a lamb at home (...) obeying duly the laws and institutions [of the country]

<sup>63</sup> “Czternasta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> “Rozdział XV. Piętnasta Nauka. Bez wojny i doma zabawa żołnierska.”

<sup>66</sup> “Piętnasta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. ibidem.

<sup>68</sup> “Dziewiąta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> “Piętnasta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 26.

and acting as a good and friendly companion to his neighbours.”<sup>70</sup> “At war his weapons are sword and steel, but at home he redresses the injustice suffered from his neighbour by resorting to the law. At war he is quick to wreak havoc on the enemies of the Crown, but he shows patience towards his neighbor and exemplary habits at home.”<sup>71</sup>

The second pair of virtues consists of prudent concern for the Commonwealth, which means being always ready and willing to render service “when the country needs you” and having “an attentive mind to the looming miseries and terrors of war.”<sup>72</sup> This is complemented by the virtue of good and inspiring example, which the God-fearing Christian soldier should give in his domestic and social life. Virtue should be nourished, among other things, by the inspiration drawn from “reading good books or listening to good readings (...) which may strengthen the holy faith in us, and encourage us to pious and virtuous life.”<sup>73</sup> Skarga contrasts this virtue with the vice of “gluttony and pugnaciousness”,<sup>74</sup> at custom widely spread among the Polish nobility and gentry at the time, which lead to the ruin, misery and negligence of duty towards the country.

## 5. The Jesuit inspiration behind the concept and ethos of the “The Devout Christian Soldier”

There is no doubt that the spirituality and mentality of Piotr Skarga, after he had joined the Society of Jesus in 1569, were significantly shaped by *The Spiritual Exercises*<sup>75</sup> – the fruit of the spiritual experiences of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed analysis of *The Exercises*, which have always been the fount of spirituality for the

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, transl. E. Mullan SJ, New York 1914.

Jesuits, including also Skarga. Our intention is to elucidate four specific rules, which in our opinion could have served as inspiration for the author in depicting the ethos of the Christian soldier as laid out in *Soldier's Service*. It should be said, for the sake of clarity, that *The Spiritual Exercises*, written in 1522–1523 and approved by Paul III in 1548, are divided into the following parts: “Presupposition”, “Weeks”, “Three Methods of Prayer” and “Rules.”

Regarding the possible influence of the spirituality of the Society of Jesus on *The Soldier's Service* I think it can already be noticed in the way the author approaches the key concepts of the life of the soldier, such as: the primary goal of the soldier's vocation; the rationality and norms of the military ethos; the status of the soldier's vocation in God's plans; the main reason for undertaking a military action. Let us now address these four issues one by one. The “First Week” of *The Spiritual Exercises* is preceeded by “Principle and Foundation”, according to which: “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.”<sup>76</sup>

By defining the goal of every human life, the rule points to the essential feature of Ignatian spirituality and is the main criterion for assessing all Christian activities. The application of the rule can be found in those arguments that justify the existence of the soldier's profession and explain the intentions behind his actions. The most important thing is always to serve God first, even if this is not clearly pronounced yet encompassed within the service rendered to the country and the Church. The second is the safety of the nation, and the third is the soldier's fame. As it was said before, the Christian soldier “serves God himself when he joins the ranks of the military”<sup>77</sup>, because this service is understood both as a vital necessity<sup>78</sup> and as a part of God's plan.”<sup>79</sup> According to the First Prayer, by following the military vocation, the soldier serves ultimately God himself and by doing that he can earn salvation, as expressed in the words of his supplication, “so that I could receive your salvation and mercy.”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup> “Wtóra Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. “Pierwsza Nauka”, in: P. Skarga SJ, “Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo”, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> “Pierwsza Modlitwa.” Ibidem, p. 29.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem.

The direct or indirect service to God (the latter is rendered by defending the country, the people, and the faith) and the salvation of the soul – these are the two main pillars on which both *The Spiritual Exercises* and the idea of the devout Christian soldier are founded. The convergence of the rules, found in *The Soldier's Service* and *The Spiritual Exercises*, clearly indicates that Skarga was inspired by the "Principle and Foundation" as developed originally by Ignatius Loyola.

The fourth week of *The Spiritual Exercises* is concluded by the section called "Contemplation to gain love"<sup>81</sup>, which says that love "consists in interchange between the two parties."<sup>82</sup> Since God himself is the source of love, we are encouraged by St. Ignatius to contemplate love as it permeates all God's works and is the cornerstone of the entire process of conversion that leads to following and imitating Christ. Similarly, the love expressed in deeds is the main thread that binds together *The Soldier's Service*. We find reference to love already in the First Instruction, where Skarga explains the nature of the soldier's vocation: "for in him the love is grafted, the love for his brother, for the country, for the Commonwealth, for the glory of God, for the Holy Churches, and the Christian faith, for the defense of which the soldier puts at risk his own health and life. And this is the great and glorious virtue of fortitude, inflamed by the love of God, of which Christ the Lord says: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*"<sup>83</sup> Love is also placed at the very center of the Thirteenth Instruction where the soldier is encouraged to apply primarily "love that is miraculously prevailing and strong."<sup>84</sup> Then, he exhorts: "Noble soldier, be aflame with love for the Lord God and his honor, which you strive to achieve with your sword. Be aflame with the love for your country, your brothers, and your household members (...). Be aflame with the love for your knightly fame, and you will see how you charge at cannons and guns, and you will be helped in this necessity by reason and attention."<sup>85</sup> There is also

<sup>81</sup> Cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>83</sup> "Pierwsza Nauka" in: P. Skarga SJ, "Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo", p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> "Trzynasta Nauka." Ibidem, p. 21.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

a reference to “the commandment of love” in the Fourteenth Study<sup>86</sup> matched with the appeal to show pity (*użalenie*), which is the embodiment of Jesus Christ’s commandment to love.<sup>87</sup> Finally, we are taught directly in the Fifteen Instruction that the harm and injustice we suffer from our neighbours does not justify a willful revenge, but “should be settled legally, with Christian love and patience.”<sup>88</sup> This is augmented by an indirect call for “spiritual knighthood” in times of peace, which leads implicitly to a conscientious and peaceful fulfilment of the commandment.<sup>89</sup>

Hence, we can argue that love plays the predominant role both in *The Spiritual Exercises* and in *The Soldier's Service*. In both cases it has its source in God and serves as the main point of reference for the ideas presented. In both cases it is placed in the service of God and humanity. For Skarga, love is also understood in terms of service rendered to the Commonwealth, the common good, the peaceful household. Without love there is no rationale for the Christian soldier. It is without doubt that both Ignatius Loyola and Piotr Skarga attribute in their texts fundamental importance to active love, as the foundation and conclusion of life, which can lead us to the conclusion that in the latter case we are dealing with a thought creatively adapted from the former. In the first of twenty “Annotations”, which precede the “First Week”, Ignatius Loyola explains the term “spiritual exercises”, by which he means “every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one’s life for the salvation of the soul.”<sup>90</sup> Next, in the “Second Week”, he first introduces the follower to the process of “seeking and finding the Divine Will” and it consists of recognizing the times and the signs given to the trainee by God in this respect, and then, having found it, of choosing and accepting them as the calling of God.<sup>91</sup>

The “First Prayer” of *The Soldier's Service* conveys an idea taken from the Second Week of the *Exercises*. It is inspired by Loyola’s

<sup>86</sup> Cf. “Czternasta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. “Piętnasta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>90</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. ibidem.

conviction that every good choice of our life's vocation has to be seen in the light of a conscious acceptance of the call given by God: we must understand this call, we must take it as a noble challenge, we must follow it to the end. Here we encounter the candidate to the military profession who understands his vocation in terms of the Will of God, communicated to him in various ways by God himself. We can deduce it clearly from the following prayer: "I humbly kneel before Your Majesty and plead for Your guidance as I enter the military vocation, to which you have called me through inner inspiration and other signs."<sup>92</sup>

This principle of discerning one's life's vocation with the help of God's inspiration is characteristic of Ignatian spirituality and leads us to the conviction that Piotr Skarga was influenced by the *Spiritual Exercises*. He drew heavily on Loyola both in his understanding of the soldier's vocation as well as in delineating the principles of good choice. According to the latter the choice of our vocation is the fruit of seeking and finding the Will of God in the signs He gives us. Both the founder of the Society of Jesus and his spiritual son understand the choice itself as a fully sovereign act of loving response by the believer to the call of love directed at him by God, whom he recognizes through the eyes of faith as the One who "works and labors for me in all things created on the face of the earth."<sup>93</sup> There is no doubt for Skarga that God does so in battle as well.

It is also worth noticing that the principle of living and acting *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* comprises a very significant feature of Jesuit spirituality. It is present for instance in the contemplation "The call of the temporal king", which opens the "Second Week" of the *Exercises*, and the purpose of which is "to contemplate the life of the King Eternal."<sup>94</sup> In this contemplation St. Ignatius of Loyola recalls the chivalric ethos, which was always dear to him, and which can be described in terms of the soldier's bravery, obedience and generosity of service under the banner of a rightful ruler. He also encourages one to meditate on "a human king chosen by God our Lord, whom all Christian princes and men reverence and obey."<sup>95</sup> All this is done

<sup>92</sup> "Pierwsza Modlitwa", in: P. Skarga SJ, "Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo", p. 29.

<sup>93</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>94</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

<sup>95</sup> Ibidem.



with the purpose of having accustomed the practitioner to contemplating Christ “our Lord” and the Eternal King, who calls every person by name to follow Him and take part in the warfare to conquer the entire world and all enemies, and then in the glory of His victory. This principle was particularly dear to Saint Ignatius and finds its culmination in the Ignatian *magis*, which means striving “more and more” to love, to serve and to distinguish oneself. This is evoked in the prayer that a penitent may be granted the grace of following Christ, who calls everyone to Him for “greater service and praise.”<sup>96</sup> We clearly see this rule mirrored in the Fourth Prayer of *The Soldier's Service*. It is entitled “For the soldier's actions” and begins with the following words: “I pledge before You, the Triune God, that I am not seeking my own personal gain and aggrandizement in this military vocation, but only your greater glory, and to demonstrate love through service to my country to my brothers and to my people.”<sup>97</sup>

## 6. The *Devout Christian Soldier* and the *Eques Polonus* at the turn of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

By focusing on the internal attitude of the person and the spiritual foundation on which this attitude rests, Skarga's concept of the soldier and the soldier's ethos can be seen as Christian and universal. The idea of armed service for the glory of God and the common good is taken mainly from The Old and New Testaments and Jesuit spirituality. There was a wide gap between Skarga's ideal and the reality of the Polish army at the time the text was published. For instance, at the end of the Fifteenth Instruction he severely criticizes the Polish gentry, who were obliged by the law of the land to defend the Commonwealth: “You will find out that many noblemen are without armor, without a good horse, and unready to serve the common good. You can hardly find anybody who is mindful of it, and equips himself and his household with horse and armor. They roam around in their wagons and coaches. The cavalry, which used

<sup>96</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>97</sup> “Czwarta Modlitwa” in: P. Skarga SJ, “Żołnierskie Nabożeństwo”, p. 33.

to be the most famous in the kingdom and feared by enemies, is waning; they harness the best horses to their coaches leaving none for military exercises. They have turned a military expedition into the advance of an army carrying beds, bedclothes, and feather duvets. (...). The *Eques Polonus* is thus similar to an old woman in the wagon. And so are his servants. They are more similar to the spinning and weaving ladies and do not know how to saddle and mount a horse in need. The *Eques Polonus*, pampered with luxurious silk pillows and feather duvets, is rather a cart driver than a horseman. He resembles more a poor infantryman than a dashing, mounted nobleman.”<sup>98</sup>

By juxtaposing the ideal Christian soldier with the corrupted condition of the Polish army at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Skarga confronts the reader with two completely different worlds. The former is characterized by the rule of law, the latter has fallen into a state of lawlessness; the former is based on self-control, the latter has been eaten away by increasingly rampant debauchery; the one is nourished by faith and service rendered to God and country up to the point of death, the other is worn out by impudence, immorality and inhumanity up to the point of drowning one's country in bloody fratricidal war. What is at stake here is eternal salvation or damnation. But even though these two worlds have been moving away from each other for some time, the distance can be shortened if the Polish military enters again the path of the Christian soldier, as delineated by *The Soldier's Service*.

## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis was to examine Piotr Skarga's *The Soldier's Service* in terms of its meaning and argumentation. The martial ideas raised in the text were examined only to the degree to which they were related to the ethos of the Christian soldier. To sum up, the concept and ethos of the military vocation as proposed by Skarga is based on the Roman Catholic tradition and can be interpreted as a developed, exhortatory and ascetic form of Christian humanism. It reflects both the impact of Jesuit spirituality and the influence of the spirit of the age, which was marked by religious disunity and

<sup>98</sup> “Piętnasta Nauka.” Ibidem, p. 28.

political conflicts. However, the question of relevance of his work for contemporaries is not the subject of this analysis and should be covered in a separate study. Also, the question of Skarga's original contribution to the discussion on the soldier's vocation in the context of similar works of his times deserves its own examination.<sup>99</sup> These other works include, among others, books by such prominent writers as: Desiderius Erasmus, *Enchiridion militis Christiani saluberrimis praeceptis refertum* (1501)<sup>100</sup>, which focuses on the spiritual warfare of the Christian; Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, *De Republica emendanda* (1551)<sup>101</sup>, and his fellow Jesuit brother, Antonio Possevino, *Il soldato christiano, con l'instruttione de' Capi dell'Essercito Catolico* (1569).<sup>102</sup>

<sup>99</sup> For a list of Polish and non-Polish works on the subject of the Christian soldier published prior to 1606, as well as contemporary works on this and related matters, see: M. Lenart, *Miles pius et iustus. Żołnierz chrześcijańskiej katolickiej wiary w kulturze i piśmiennictwie dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (XVI–XVIII w.)*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 294–334.

<sup>100</sup> Desiderius Erasmus Rotterodamus, *Podręcznik żołnierza Chrystusowego nauk zbawiennych pełny*, transl. J. Domański, Warszawa 1965.

<sup>101</sup> A. Frycz Modrzewski, *O poprawie Rzeczypospolitej*, in: idem, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1953 (in particular: Book III: *On War*).

<sup>102</sup> A. Possevino, *Il soldato christiano, con l'instruttione de' Capi dello Esercito Catolico. Composto dal R. Padre Antonio Possuino della Compagnia di Giesu. Libro necessario a chi desidera sapere i mezzi per acquistar vittoria contra heretici turchi, & altri infedeli*, Roma 1569.