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THE PRINCIPLE OF *SOBORNOST'* IN THE THEOLOGY AND LIFE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The term *sobornost'* has been widely known not only in the Orthodox Church, but on the whole ecumenical scene for many years. That neologism was born out of the Slavophile movement already in 19th century. Aleksey Khomiakov's (1804-1860) writings can be pointed out as the first where this word had appeared. The Russian word *sobornost'* is closely connected with the Slavonic notion *sobornaia*. One can find this word in the Slavonic translation of the Nicene Creed. "Catholic Church" was translated as "*sobornaia Tserkov*" Khomiakov and his followers were convinced that *sobornaia* surpasses the quantitative aspect of catholicity and universality towards the qualitative aspect: the idea of love-inspired "unity in multiplicity" It is evident if one takes into account that root of the Slavonic word – *sobor* – which is related to gathering together, togetherness, council. To believe in the catholic Church – *sobornaia Tserkov* – it means to believe in a Church which gathering together and unites in time and space, but also in a conciliar Church, which has as the supreme authority the Ecumenical Councils. But what is the decisive criterion of an Ecumenical Council? The answer for that important question gave the Orthodox hierarchs in the Patriarchal Encyclical of 1848: "The guardian of religion is the very body of the Church, that is, the people (Greek: *laos*) itself" For the better clarification of that statement we should ask what is the place and function for *sobornost'* in the theological deliberations and in the life of the Orthodox Church.

I. CHURCH AS A COUNCIL

The Church is primarily the revelation of the Holy Trinity¹ God-Trinity can be known in the unity and diversity of the catholic Church. It is possible because the Son and the Holy Spirit sent by the Father, have revealed the Holy Trinity to the Church, not in an abstract way, as intellectual knowledge, but as the very rule of her life. The Church has been based upon the two inseparable elements: Christological unity and Pneumatological diversity²

As in God each one of the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not a part of the Trinity but is fully God in virtue of His ineffable identity with the one nature, so the Church is not a federation of parts: she is catholic in each one of her parts, since each part in her is identified with the whole, expresses the whole, has the value which the whole has, does not exist outside the whole³

The Church is trinitarian in both "form" and "content" because its main goal is the restoration of man and his life as an image of God Who is Trinity. The Church is fulness – *to pleroma* (cf. Eph 1:23) and completeness in a sense that it is the continuation and fulfilment of the theotropic union between God and humankind. The new life given in Christ is unity and oneness "that they may be one as we are" (John 17:11). This fundamental fact is stressed in the beginning of the famous Khomiakov's essay, *The Church Is One*:

The unity of Church follows of necessity from the unity of God for the Church is not a multitude of persons in their separate individuality, but a unity of the grace of God, living in a multitude of rational creatures, submitting themselves willingly to grace⁴

Presence of God is in love of the whole Body, it is in this relationship of love, which makes from a quantity the unity of conciliar structure of Ortho-

¹ Cf. D. S t a n i l o a e, *Trinitarian Relations and the Life of The Church*, in: *Theology and the Church*, Crestwood, NY 1980, pp. 11-44; V L o s s k y, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, NY 1976, pp. 135-195.

² Cf. V L o s s k y, *Concerning the Third Mark of the Church: Catholicity*, in: *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. by J. H. Erickson and T. Bird, Crestwood, NY 1985, pp. 178-179.

³ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

⁴ A. K h o m i a k o v, *The Church Is One*, London 1968, p. 18.

doxy⁵ The Church is a unity not only that it is one and unique, but mainly because that its very being consists in reuniting separated and divided mankind. In the Church human beings pass over into a higher plane and begin a new manner of life. Quite new existence becomes possible “in unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3)⁶ *Sobornost'* expresses unity of persons who fulfil their personal being in “conciliarity” with other persons so that many are one without ceasing to be many.

He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her, and in unity with all her other members. If anyone believes he is in the communion of faith, if he loves he is in the communion of love. If he prays, he is in the communion of prayer⁷

And this is true conciliarity, that oneness of many has hierchial nature. Father Alexander Schmemmann understood hierarchy as “the total mutual recognition of persons in their unique, personal qualifications of their unique place and function in relation to other persons, of their objective and unique vocation within the conciliar life”⁸ He made clear a distinction between obedience and subordination in his explanation of the principle of hierarchy. The idea of obedience is based on a personal relationship whereas subordination is an impersonal one. It is evident on basis of the New Testament. Jesus is fully obedient to the Father because He perfectly knows the Father as Father, but He is not subordinated to Him because subordination implies imperfect knowledge and relationship and, therefore, the necessity of “enforcement” There are three inseparable dimensions of the Church: conciliar, personal and hierarchial.

Nowadays it seems to be a kind of tension between Church’s goverment and laity. But it is alien to the very foudation of Orthodox ecclesiology, which indicates the real problem concerning the ministry of government and the conciliar nature of the Church. The response should be given on three

⁵ In this perspective, the Church is the actualization of “being as communion” Cf. J. D. Z i z i o u l a s, *Being as Communion*, London 1985, passim.

⁶ Cf. G. F l o r o v s k y, *The Catholicity of the Church*, in: *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Volume One in the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Belmont, Mass. 1972, p. 39.

⁷ K h o m i a k o v, *The Church Is One*, p. 38.

⁸ A. S c h m e m a n n, *Towards a Theology of Councils*, in: *Church, World, Mission*, Crestwood, NY 1979, p. 165.

distinct levels: the parish, the diocese, and the Church Universal (including the metropolitan, district, and the autocephalous Church). Father Schmemmann states that the government of the Church was truly conciliar from the beginning of Christianity. This organic unity of the conciliar and the hierarchial principles within the Church one can describe as “hierarchial council workers” and “conciliar hierarchy”⁹

II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

In Orthodoxy the Church is often described as the Church of councils and its government as *sobornost'*. Canonically the synod is explained as the ‘supreme authority’ in the Church. The traditional Roman doctrine of a personal supreme power is generally contradicting to the Orthodox theory of ‘collective supreme power’. There is still opened the problem of the limits of such a ‘college’. Who can compose it – only bishops or also clergy and laity? The role of the synod is not a power in the juridical sense of this word because there is no external authority over the Church, the Body of Christ. The role of the synod is to be a witness to the identity of all churches as the Church of God in faith, life and love. All churches in and through the synod of bishops acknowledge and realize their ontological unity as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church¹⁰. Bishops meet with each other to make present in council the churches which they serve. So it is obvious that a bishop without a community cannot sit in council of churches. Father Thomas Hopko explains:

The bishop serves as the focus of unity for the Church: the unity of the community which he heads, and the unity of this community with all others which are recognized as sharing the same faith and life. In this way the bishop is the servant of the unity, identity, integrity, solidarity and continuity of each church with itself and with others as being always, in each time and place, the same Church of Christ¹¹

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 166-168.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Schmemmann, *The Idea of Primacy in Orthodox Ecclesiology*, in: *The Primacy of Peter*, London 1963, pp. 43-44.

¹¹ T. Hopko, *On Ecclesial Conciliarity*, in: *The Legacy of Saint Vladimir. Byzantium, Russia, America*, ed. by J. Breck, J. Meyendorf, J. Silk, Crestwood, NY 1990, p. 216.

The life of the Church cannot be subordinated to external law. The ecclesiastical authority even on the highest level (the Council of Bishops) is only the legal organ for the proclamation of the mind of the Church, the expression of the truth of the Church. Every conciliar decision becomes absolute authority only by its reception in the universal Church. The principle of truth is the Holy Spirit living in the Church Who Himself points out the way to unanimity. The Holy Spirit, as the Paraclete of Truth, does not harmonize nor keep the preexisting order of the Church only, and He is not simply an agent of salvation acting in the individuals but He it is Who sets up the historical Church, thus making out of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus the pivot of history. He it is Who leads the Church into the full truth¹² It is obvious the significance of the usual introductory formula to all decisions of councils: "It has pleased the Holy Spirit..." A. S. Khomyakov explains:

These words do not express a haughty claim, but a humble hope, justified or reputed later by the acceptance or nonacceptance of the decisions by the whole people of the Church or, as the Eastern patriarchs put it, by the whole Body of Christ¹³

The Holy Spirit creates and sustains the whole organism of the Church. He is the principle of sobornic variety, that is, of unity in communion. The Church order is maintained by the Holy Spirit. It is the order of liberty and love, an order of sobornicity and brotherhood. Therefore all individual parts of the Body of Christ are not suppressed. The whole organism exists in the variety of its members and ministries¹⁴

Every particular decision of the Council should be considered as a method of achieving it. The Orthodox Church receives only an authority relatively infallible, represented by the legal organs of ecclesiastical power beginning with the Ecumenical Council and ending with the diocesan bishop in the limits of his diocese. Orthodoxy in the sphere of doctrine does not want to increase the number of dogmas beyond the limits of the purely indispensable.

¹² Cf. N. N i s s i o t i s, *Report on the Second Vatican Council*, "Ecumenical Review" 18(1966), No. 2, p. 194.

¹³ A. S. K h o m y a k o v, *On the Western Confessions of Faith*, in: *Ultimate Questions. An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious Thought*, ed. A. Schmemmann, Crestwood, NY 1977, p. 62.

¹⁴ D. S t a n i l o a e, *The Holy Spirit and the Sobornicity of the Church*, in: *Theology and the Church*, Crestwood, NY 1980, pp. 70-71.

The very base consists of the infallible definitions of the seven Ecumenical Councils and certain local councils, for example, the Council of Carthage and the Council of Constantinople of the fourteenth century. The plenitude of life contained in the life of the Church is not completely expressed by the obligatory dogmas it professes. There are rather borders or indications beyond which Orthodox doctrine ought not go, negative definitions more than positive. The actual dogma, the obligatory doctrine expounded in the symbolic books says only a part of the Church's knowledge. The conciliarity of the Church contains and manifests many certitudes which have never been defined dogmatically, (for example: the veneration of saints, the after life, the last judgement). The Church is indefinable in its fullness as it is the Holy Spirit Who lives in it¹⁵ *Sobornost'* is the reality which is not only a passive preservation of the truth, but it is also the active possession of truth, the receiving of the revelation of the Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit is Himself the principle of variety in unity, the principle of sobornic variety, that is, of unity in communion. He creates and sustains the whole organism in which individual parts are not suppressed but instead remain alive and active and finds in fact the very condition of their life and growth¹⁶

Sobornost' is life and there is no place for immobility. The same life in the spirit is revealed in diverse epochs and places. The Church can exist "where two or three are gathered together" in the name of Christ. In the living experience of many in one body of Christ, there appears what is known as *sobornost'* so that *sobornost'* (conciliarity) is the only way and the only form of the Church. The Church as truth is not given to individuals but to a unity in love and faith. It reveals itself as a supreme reality in which its members share the measure of their *sobornost'* As we can see, the Church

¹⁵ B. Bolotov makes distinctions in doctrinal statements on three levels: *dogma* formulated in the creeds and by the Ecumenical Councils, *specific theologies* and between the two, *theologoumena*. He explained his understanding of *theologoumena* as follows: "In essence, it is theological opinion but an opinion which makes more sense for a 'catholic' theologian than for any other. The theologoumena are the theological opinions of the Fathers of the one and undivided Church; they are opinions of men who include those who are rightly called *didaskaloi tes oikoumenes* [...]. The content of dogma is the truth; the theologoumenon conveys probability. The sphere of dogma is that of the necessaria, the sphere of the theologoumenon that of the dubia: *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas*" (quoted by Y. Congar, *Diversity and Communion*, Mystic, Ct, 1985, p. 50).

¹⁶ Cf. S. Tanila, *The Holy Spirit and The Sobornicity of The Church*, pp. 70-71.

is not only an internal conciliarity (a life in the Holy Spirit), but also a collectivity which seeks the same spirit. Significantly both of these aspects find clear expression in the meaning of the word *sobornost'*¹⁷

The conviction of the Orthodox Church that the faithful, the whole people, i.e. the Body of Christ is the guardian of tradition and piety in no way limits the power of teaching given to the hierarchy. It rather indicates that the power of teaching given to the hierarchy is one of the factors of the catholic fullness of the Church. The role of hierarchy is to exercise the power of expressing and speaking the faith and the experience of the Church, which have been preserved in the whole Body of Christ. The hierarchy serves as the mouthpiece of the Church. The hierarchs have the power to teach "with authority" from Jesus Christ, in the Misterium of Orders. Every bishop of the Church has receive full power and authority to speak in the name of his people. But also the flock receives the right of speaking through the bishop. A hierarch must speak not from himself but *ex consensu ecclesiae*, in the name of the Church. The source of power to teach for the bishop flows from Christ through the Apostolic Succession¹⁸

Orthodoxy stresses that in the Church there is not and cannot be any outward authority¹⁹, because it cannot be a source of spiritual life. On the other hand it does not mean that every member of the Church has unlimited freedom of personal opinion. So, what is the solution of freedom and authority? From the Orthodox point of view in *sobornost'* (catholicity) of the Church the difficult duality and tension between authority and freedom is solved. On the personal level the every believer must overcome his subjectivity, surpass psychological limitations, raise the standard of his consciousness to its full catholic measure. Apart from that he must go as deep as possible into the Church experience to understand the fullness of its history. Acquiring truth has been always a very difficult task to accomplish. Truth is conceived

¹⁷ Cf. S. B u l g a k o v, *The Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, NY 1988, pp. 54-86.

¹⁸ Cf. F l o r o v s k y, *The Catholicity of the Church*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁹ "There is no 'universal' head or authority within the Church as a whole, and no episcopal 'magisterium' whose teachings the body of believers is constrained to obey without question. Even an ecumenical council, or a 'great and holy synod', of all the Church's bishops, may prove itself to be unacceptable if it fails to proclaim the Orthodox faith, while doctrinal formulations and canonical legislation of local gatherings of bishops, some of which may even have been originally the position of but a few faithful persons, may come to be universally defended and celebrated in all Orthodox Churches" (H o p k o, *On Ecclesial Conciliarity*, p. 213).

in labour and striving. Subjectivity and particularism are constant temptations of the Church. Therefore achieving the catholicity which has been given to the Church can be possible on the fundamentals of the real humility before God and the full acceptance of His Revelation. Every Christian is called to enter the life of the Church with humility and trustfulness inspite of ones own difficulties and doubts. In such an attitude there is a space for faith and hope that by the heroic effort (Slavonic: *podvig*) of the heart and mind different kind of problems will be finally solved²⁰ There are necessary *koinonia* and concord of the faithful on the road to the realization of the catholic fulness of the Church. As a very good illustration of the spirit of *sobornost'* which appeared among the faithful of the Orthodox Church in Russia one can point out the situation which was in the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century.

III. HIERARCHY AND LAYMEN IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT SITUATION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN RUSSIA IN THE END OF 19TH AND THE BEGINNING OF 20TH CENTURY

From the time of the reforms of Peter the Great²¹, the Orthodox Church in Russia lost its autonomy. It must be stressed that the legal position of the Church was changed. The Church in Russia was reduced to an arm of the state; it was subject to direct government control²² The new organizational structure was designated as the Department of Orthodox Confession. There

²⁰ Cf. F l o r o v s k y, *The Catholicity of the Church*, pp. 54-55.

²¹ The reforms of Peter the Great and their impact upon the church have been crucial for understanding of modern Russian Orthodoxy and modern Russian theology. Tsar deliberately breaking with the Byzantine past, suppressed the patriarchate of Moscow and put the church under the administration of a state committee of clerics, appointed by him, and called 'the Holy Synod' He also imposed a system of schools, based on a model found in the Protestant states of Western Europe (1720-1721), where members of the clergy, now transformed into a hereditary caste, were called to study. Thus the Protestant model for the church government and Latin theology in schools has survived in Russia with gradual modifications until 1917. See: J. M e y e n d o r f f, *Visions of the Church: Russian Theological Thought in Modern Times*, in: *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow. Historical and Theological Studies*, Crestwood, NY 1996, p. 184.

²² D. W T r e a d g o l d, *Christianity and Russia in the Modern Era*, in: *The Millenium: Christianity and Russia (A.D. 988-1988)*, ed. A. Leong, Crestwood, NY 1990, p. 63.

were no councils of bishops during the whole synodal period in Russia (18th – 19th centuries).

In the end of 19th century, started voices for reforms. One can give a few characteristic examples, indicating that the problem of requirement of changes was very burning.

Archpriest Alexander Ivantsov-Platonov published in 1882 a series of 16 articles in the *Slavophile Journal Rus'* They were reprinted in 1898 by the *Porokhovshchikov* Press in St. Petersburg. These articles dealt with some important issues:

1. Restoration of the voice of the Orthodox laity;
2. Restoration of the Orthodox parish as a viable social and legal unit;
3. Granting to the clergy and laity a voice in the selection of bishops;
4. The end of the practice of moving bishops frequently and rapidly from diocese to diocese;
5. Establishment of *sobornost'* on all levels of the Orthodox Church administration.

I hasten to add that *sobornost'* was the term used to describe interchange and exchange among all levels of the Church from the lowest parish to the central administration²³

The principle of *sobornost'* was also stressed by a group of 25 prominent Petersburg priests of the Diocesan Pastoral Council called upon in 1905 to press for the earliest convocation of an all Russian *sobor*. They wanted an inclusion of the widest possible representation of clergy and laity in the Church and the agenda for the council should not be controlled by the procurator's bureaucrats²⁴ The same attitude had Professor Vladimir Zavinevich of the Kiev Theological Academy, one of the foremost Russian Church historians of the early 20th century. In his article entitled *The Restoration of Sobornost' in the Russian Church* he elaborated on *sobornost'* as a continual exchange among clergy and laity as two groups within the Christian community, and between the different levels of the ecclesiastical and civil hierarchy. In the heart of his statement is very stressed a postulate of a *sobor*, because the Russian Church was dying. For Zavinevich was quite clear that "only a *sobor* could restore *sobornost'* as an active principle"²⁵

²³ Cf. J. W. C u n n i n g h a m, *A Vanquished Hope*, Crestwood, NY 1981, pp. 67-78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Orthodox bishops in Russia had also the consciousness of necessary reform²⁶ The statements of bishops in 1905 can find in a most significant publication, the three volumes consist of their official Replies (*Otzyvy*) to an inquiry addressed to them by the Holy Synod²⁷ Bishops were asked to describe those features of Russian Church life which in their view needed reform or alternation. The point to be underlined is that the Replies show the educational and intellectual background of their authors, their spiritual genealogy in the preceding and even centuries, and their remarkable willingness to recognize and grapple with the theological and canonical issues of the day, including the problems of the lower clergy and laity. It does imply that the Orthodox hierarchy shared the optimistically reformist mood of the intelligentsia. Churchmen widely accepted A. S. Khomiakov's idea of *sobornost'* as the necessary framework for any possible schemes of reform. The bishops' Replies included a number of important topics, especially the composition of the future council. In 1905 nearly the entire Russian episcopate demanded restoration of the patriarchate suppressed by Peter the Great. They sharply criticized the "synodal" regime as uncanonical and contradicting the principle of *sobornost'* Of course, clearly the Replies could not address or even more solve all problems of Church authority; they merely anticipated later discussions, which took place in the proconciliar meetings and in the ecclesiastical journals between 1905 and 1917 Great hopes were placed in the convocation of the Local Council. The Holy Synod decided to set up the Pre-Council Committee. That ecclesiastical body included the chief procurator, hierarchs, clerical professor and laymen. It represented almost all the trends within the Church²⁸ The councils of 1917-1918 clearly determined that the patriarch was to be responsible to a council composed of bishops, clergy and laity. A majority of bishops demanded that the clergy be given a voice in the political and social life of Russia, not as spokesmen for class interests but as witnesses of Christ's Gospel²⁹

²⁶ I d e m, *Reform Projects of the Russian Orthodox Church at the Beginning of the XXth Century*, in: *The Legacy of St. Vladimir*, pp. 107-138.

²⁷ *Otzyvy eparkhial'nykh arkhieriev po voprosam o tserkovnoi reformie*, 3 vols., St. Petersburg 1906.

²⁸ P. N. Z i r y a n o v, *The Orthodox Church in the Early 20th Century*, in: *The Russian Orthodox Church 10th to 20th Centuries*, ed. A. Preobrazhensky, Moscow 1988, p. 208.

²⁹ Comp. J. M e y e n d o r f f, *Russian Bishops and Church Reforms in 1905*, in: *Russian Orthodox Church Under the Old Regime*, ed. R. L. Nichols and T. G. Stavrou, Minneapo-

Such hopeful restoration work in the Church was dramatically cut down by the Bolsheviks. The Orthodox Church was accused because it would not embrace the new materialistic ideology, would not censure its faithful for opposing the revolution, and resisted the secularized society the Bolsheviks were creating. The hope for the autonomy and reform of the Church did not find its realization at that time. The Church in the Soviet Union underwent a horrible holocaust. But the new light of *sobornost'* has shone again inspite of all current difficulties and problems. Learning from history it seems to be easier to transform the presence and to enter the future.

ZASADA SOBOROWOŚCI W TEOLOGII I ŻYCIU KOŚCIOŁA PRAWOSŁAWNEGO

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Pojęcie soborowości (*sobornost'*) zrodziło się w kręgach słowianofilów, którzy wywiedli je ze starocerkiewnośłowiańskiego tłumaczenia słów „Kościół katolicki” – *sobornaia Cerkov z Credo nicejsko-konstantynopolitańskiego*. A. S. Chomiakow zapoczątkował rozwój teologii soborowości twierdzeniem, że wskazuje ona na jakościowy aspekt katolicyzmu Kościoła, ideę „jedności w wielości”, ze szczególnym podkreśleniem znaczenia soborów zarówno ekumenicznych, jak i lokalnych oraz roli hierarchii i laikatu.

Autor artykułu w syntetyczny sposób przedstawia zasadę soborowości, wychodząc od rozumienia Kościoła jako soboru i jego odniesień do Trójcy Świętej. Doskonała wspólnota Osób Boskich obdarza wspólnotę Kościoła nowym życiem w jedności Ducha, dzięki któremu urzeczywistnia się jedność całego Ciała w sensie jakościowym. Można wskazać na trzy nierozdzielne wymiary Kościoła: soborowy, osobowy i hierarchiczny.

Problem autorytetu w Kościele, a więc relacji między hierarchią i laikatem, rozważany jest w drugiej części artykułu. W Kościele prawosławnym powszechne jest przekonanie, że wszyscy wierni, tzn. cały lud Boży, są strażnikami tradycji i pobożności. W niczym to nie ogranicza prawa do nauczania danego hierarchii, a jedynie ukazuje, że władza nauczania dana biskupom i kapłanom jest jednym z czynników katolickiej (soborowej) pełni Kościoła. Kierowanie się zasadą soborowości pozwala też znaleźć rozwiązanie problemu napięć pomiędzy autorytetem i wolnością w Kościele.

W trzeciej części artykułu opisano sytuację, jaka miała miejsce w końcu XIX i na początku XX wieku w Rosji. Stanowi ona konkretny przykład budzenia się ducha soborowości w Rosyj-

skim Kościele Prawosławnym, który przez ponad dwieście lat był pozbawiony autonomii. Wołania o reformy tak z kręgów ludzi świeckich, jak i kapłanów sprawiły, że na początku XX wieku biskupi prawosławni w Rosji podjęli konkretne działania, mające na celu przywrócenie patriarchy i zwołanie soboru. Wymownym świadectwem soborowości jest fakt, że w pracach przedsoborowego komitetu brali udział biskupi, kapłani, wykładowcy teologii i ludzie świeccy, którzy reprezentowali wszystkie ruchy reformatorskie Kościoła. Choć ta odnowicielska działalność została dramatycznie przerwana przez bolszewików, to jednak jej osiągnięcia stanowią punkt odniesienia w rozwiązywaniu problemów współczesnego prawosławia w Rosji.

Streściła Jadwiga Leśniewska