Present Condition and Role of the Catholic Church in Poland

Alfred Marek Wierzbicki
John Paul II Catholic University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, Eastern European Studies Commons, and the Slavic Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss5/6
PRESENT CONDITION AND ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLAND

Alfred Marek Wierzbicki

Alfred Marek Wierzbicki is professor of ethics at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. He is a priest, philosopher, poet, essayist and columnist. In years 2006-2014 he was the director of the John Paul II Institute in Lublin and editor-in-chief of the quarterly "Ethos." He published eight books on philosophy, culture, and religion. He is committed to the Catholic-Jewish dialogue in Poland as well as to the dialogue of Christians with nonbelievers. Email: awierzbicki@kul.pl

My remarks about the present condition and role of the Catholic Church in Poland are not based on formal sociological research, for I am not a sociologist. I would like just to share some observations and concerns about the situation in which I live as Christian and priest. My report is mostly based on the personal experience, but in spite of the subjective perspective I seek to objectivize my views as much as possible by taking into account a broader context.

1. Looking through the Prism of Statistics

First let us ask what the statistics say about the Catholic Church in Poland. Viewed in the context of the Western countries of Europe the Catholic Church in Poland manifests to be quite a strong institution and living community of believers. Over 30 percent of the entire population of the Poles are dominicantes communicants which means that they participate in Mass every Sunday. In the south of Poland that percentage is higher and in some places it reaches 40 percent. Though the number of dominicantes and communicants remains

---

1 The article was originally written for Vaticaninsider, and is published with the permission of the author.
exceptionally high, that remarkable tendency is decreasing. In the recent year of 2017 the decline reached 3.2 percent which is alarming.

I am inclined to think that this has been caused by the close ties of the clergy with the political party (Law and Justice Party) which is governing since 2015. I have met personally the people who ceased to take part in the Church service or are about to do so, because they blame their bishop or their pastor for being active supporters of the party which is destroying the foundations of democracy. I know a large number of the lay Catholics who have not abandoned their Church, yet they express the deep disappointment with the silence of the hierarchical Church in face of the present political crisis in Poland. Some of them experience a true conflict of conscience.

Besides the political tensions which have an impact on the decrease of church attendance, there is also an impact of the progress of secularism. It can be observed especially among the young. After the collapse of communism in 1989 the new government, under the pressure of bishops, introduced religion classes or catechism into the state school system. Religion classes are not obligatory and students may choose alternatively religion or ethics. In the big cities sometimes fewer than 50% of the students decide to take a class of religion. By mixing religious instruction with other school subjects, the sense of mystery and religious identity have nearly been lost. Learning religion became like learning physics or biology. Due to the failure of catechism in the school system the number of teenagers no longer frequenting the Church is increasing.

Likewise the number of priestly and religious vocations has diminished rapidly in the recent twenty years. For instance, in the archdiocese of Lublin to which I myself belong there were 208 seminarians in 1998 and 54 seminarians now in 2018. This is also the case of the other theological seminaries; they have increasingly smaller enrollment each year.
Notwithstanding the fewer number of the Sunday Mass participants and decline of vocations, the presence of the Catholic Church is visible and an important factor in the life of contemporary Poles. The pastoral activity of a parish is focused on the sacraments. According to the CBOS poll 67 percent of Catholics went to confession and 55 percent participated in spiritual retreats during Lent in 2018. According to the same poll 90 percent brought the food to be blessed before Easter. This shows the combination of a deep spirituality with some forms of traditional devotion. Almost 100 percent of the baptized children receive their First Communion when they are nine years old, but a few years later, when they receive the sacrament of confirmation, their number is smaller and unfortunately, for many of them, this is the last time they are present in the Church, as if confirmation was meant to be farewell.

After 1989 the Catholic Church in Poland enlarged the activities in the field of education, culture, and charity. Voluntarism was almost unknown before 1989 but now it attracts more and more people. Also, the collection of money for the aid to victims of natural disasters and social needs is growing, perhaps partially due to the improvement of economic conditions of society, and partially due to conscious promotion of the culture of sharing.

The Catholic Church in Poland seems to have many various energies. In the light of the statistics it manifests quite an impressive presence despite the slight fall in the number of its members. But statistics cannot present more than only general sociological tendencies and even they do not pretend to give an adequate account of the reality. At this point we have to turn our analysis to the ideas which constitute a more dynamic and at the same time problematic image of the Catholicism in Poland in 2018.

2. The Church Suspended between John Paul II and Francis

Fundamentally, the present condition of the Catholic Church in Poland may be characterized as the mental suspension between John Paul II and Francis. The open and
explicit contestation of Pope Francis is not so much visible, however, a few months ago the public was shocked by the scandalous statement of a priest from Cracow, a former rector of the Theological Seminary. He announced that he prayed for the conversion of the heretical Pontiff, but if that were impossible he would pray for his departure. In the broad and uncritical opinion, Francis is contrasted with Saint John Paul II. Thus Francis’ break with the hieratic style and his open-minded way of addressing contemporary moral problems is not accepted, I dare say, by the majority of Polish clergy. Even his poverty is ridiculed. Usually the critique of the present Bishop of Rome regards the encyclical Amoris laetitia, the issue of refugees, and the pope’s vision of ecology. Let me comment on each of those questions.

During the synod of bishops in 2015 the Polish bishops participating in it feared a deviation from the teaching of John Paul II concerning marriage and family (Familiaris consortio) and morality in itself (Veritatis splendor). Some were even warning of the betrayal of John Paul II. Such warning was gladly welcomed in different circles of the Catholic opinion in Poland; only Więź and Tygodnik Powszechny examined critically this horrible vision. Unfortunately, instead of discussing the serious pastoral challenges with regard to married, and especially remarried, couples, the Polish Catholics, inspired by bishops, started to defend John Paul II against Francis.

Shortly after Amoris laetitia was published, the Conference of Polish Bishops stated there are no changes in the hitherto obligatory rules with respect to the pastoral care for the persons in the irregular situations. At the same time the bishops declared they would prepare new regulations in the light of Amoris laetitia. It may mean that the present regulations are transitory, though not altered with respect to the previous ones. As a matter of fact, the results of the work of the episcopal commission are not published yet, and it seems that there is no agreement among bishops. Such delay may also mean a lack of courage to open more broadly the gate of mercy in the single cases without rejecting the doctrine on the indissolubility of
marriage. Perhaps the doctrinal rigidity hinders the spirit of accompaniment, discernment, and integration.

In the attitude toward refugees the teaching of Pope Francis is practically contradicted by the politicians of PiS (Law and Justice Party), who, on different occasions, emphasize their Catholic outlook or even claim to be eager to lead the re-Christianization of secularized Europe. They distinguish between the level of the moral appeal to which Church is entitled and the level of the political policy-making decision by the government. Such a distinction is correct in itself, for it is based on the separation and autonomy of Church and State. But when we know that the urgent humanitarian help for the victims of wars and solidarity among the states belonging to European Community is at stake, the position of Polish government should, at least, make us wonder. In fact, it is based on the policy of spreading fear of foreigners and manipulating nationalistic sentiments. The Poles are threatened by “Christian politicians” of becoming targets of Islamic terrorism. Moreover, before elections in 2015 the leader of PiS (Law and Justice Party) Jarosław Kaczyński, depicted the refugees as persons who transfer from abroad insects and diseases. His speech had an immense impact on mass imagination.

The bishops constantly pleaded for the acceptance of refugees on the ethical motives but their call remained without any answer by political authorities; even the proposal of “corridors of charity” which had been launched by bishops as the minimal solution, was overlooked. Until now no Syrians refugees could enter legally the territory of the Republic of Poland. In a sense, this is the most serious sign of the crisis of Christianity in Poland. In spite of many attempts, the Church actually failed to promote the culture of solidarity in front of the strong nationalistic tendencies in politics.

The encyclical “Laudato si” was criticized in the rightist media for its allegedly leftist character and by some reviewers was interpreted to be even “anti-Polish,” due to the fact that
Polish energy policy is predominantly based on carbon exploration. I am mentioning this insignificant opinion because it shows how narrow are the criteria, based on the nationalistic interests, which were applied to interpretation of the Church’s teaching. What is really sad is the fact that such an important contribution of Francis in the current debate about ecology passed almost unnoticed in Poland, as if the issue of the global change of climate was too abstract and too sophisticated. The disease of the Polish soul seems to be a kind of narcissism which consists in exaggerated self-reference which may be easily abused for the political ends whereby the prophetic message of Church is contradicted.

This is a paradox, perhaps not only observed in Poland, that sensitivity to the message of Francis is greater in secular and even leftist media than in the ecclesiastical circles. But in Poland the roots are in a certain fragility of Polish Catholic culture in which the universal elements are in struggle with the national ones. Probably a majority of us do not seek salvation and supernatural grace in Christianity, but treat Catholicism as reducible to the mere factor of the national identity. The synthesis of the universal Christian and nationally particular elements in Polish culture was accomplished in the teaching of Saint John Paul II, but it has been received too superficially and now the eclipse of it emerges in the shape of deeper and deeper national Catholicism.

No doubt, what is needed at the present moment of crisis is very serious intellectual and pastoral commitment in order to point out the continuity and creative development between the teaching of Saint John Paul II and Francis. Otherwise, the Polish Church may run a risk of losing the legacy of the great Pontificate of Karol Wojtyla and interrupting the authentic communion with the ministry of the actual Successor of Saint Peter.
3. The Church Trapped by Politics

That the Polish Catholics are politically divided is nothing strange and they should not be blamed for that, because the political divisions and controversies pertain to the principles of democracy. But in Poland the future of democracy itself is at stake. Some civil liberties are already restricted, separation of judicial power is violated, and the whole political system is on the way to dictatorship. In the beginning of the political crisis in 2015 and 2016 the bishops did not take any stance toward it and their silence was interpreted both by the political opposition and by the ruling coalition to be a sign of a tacit support for the political reforms which violate the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. I think that at the time the bishops did not realize how destructive for the rule of law was this project of political reforms. Because they thought that it would be simply a case of the typical political competition among different parties, they did not intervene directly in this affair. But in 2017 the situation changed when the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, vetoed the bills aiming at the reform of the judiciary system. Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki congratulated the turn of the President of Republic of Poland with a letter in which he outlined the principle of separation of powers in conformity with the Catholic Social Doctrine. His voice breaking the silence of the Catholic Church with regard to the crisis of democracy was followed by sermons delivered by Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz and Archbishop Wojciech Polak, who is a holder of the office of Primate of Poland. The rest of the bishops, however, kept the original silence and alleged neutrality.

The early intervention of the bishops in the Polish political crisis was expected based on the memory concerning the role which Church played in the transition from Communist totalitarianism into democracy under the leadership of the Solidarność movement in the 1980s. After 2015 it was not possible anymore since not only a few bishops and priests actively, although not formally, supported the party which won the elections. The Chief
Bishops of the Polish Episcopate congratulated officially the winners, which was an unprecedented event.

At this point I have to mention also the activity of “Radio Maryja” in Toruń which gathers a great audience among Polish Catholics. It used to present itself as “the Catholic voice at your home.” They broadcast programs which are a mixture of nationalism, anti-liberalism, and Catholic doctrinal conservatism. Obviously such a position is not harmful for the unity of Church as long as it does not exclude other positions. In fact, the huge media conglomerate established by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk (newspaper, radio, television, and school of public communication) imposes its own views and opinions without confronting them with anybody else. Instead of social and cultural dialogue, they cultivate ideological monologue. This attitude is linked also to the politics whereby the media center in Toruń became the propaganda channel of the ruling party. No other opinions are admitted; even the news service is selective. A great number of clergy sees in it the fortress against modernity and secularism which is supposed to be defending the alleged Polish national identity. As a result of 25 years of Radio Maryja’s activity, on the one hand, the Catholic presence in the pluralistic society is marginalized and limited to its own group, and on the other hand, it exercises the direct influence on politics so much so that some politicians owe their election to the support of this media presence and they pay back by granting some economic advantages. At any rate, the direct connection between politics and Church occurs on the ideological platform offered by the media center in Toruń in which also some of the bishops are directly involved. This connection explains to a certain extent the silence of bishops facing the political crisis concerning the principles of democracy and rule of law.

In fact, the activity of Radio Maryja raises the deep divisions within the Catholic world in Poland. These divisions and even mutual hatred are deepened by means of the political attacks on the defenders of democracy who are blamed as national betrayers. It
coincides with the policy of the ruling party which distinguishes true heroic Poles and false Poles being in the service of foreign non-patriotic ideas. It coincides also with the divisions caused by the contradictory interpretations of the crash of the aircraft near Smoleńsk, Russia, in 2010 where President Lech Kaczyński and 95 other passengers died. There are many priests who believe in the collusion of the former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Russian leader Vladimir Putin in eliminating President Lech Kaczyński and they do not hesitate to talk about it in their parishes.

To a great degree the inability of the Church to promote the re-establishment of national unity and above all the unity of Catholics is due to being trapped in the political game. It belittles the social credibility of the Catholic Church and there are reasons to believe, that in the case of the defeat of the present ruling party by means of democratic elections, the main loser may be the Catholic Church and its own religious and cultural mission.

4. Facing the European Union

Generally Poles show a lot of enthusiasm for being integrated in European Union. In 2003, on the eve of the national referendum regarding access of Poland to the EU, the bishops and clergy seemed to be more resistant to that crucial choice than the average citizens of Poland. Bishops were persuaded to say their “yes” only by John Paul II. In his famous speech he made a synthesis of the history of Poland in a short sentence which sounded like a slogan: “Od unii lubelskiej do Unii Europejskiej” – “From union of Lublin to European Union”. Namely he reminded the fruitful historical experience of the real union of Poland and Lithuania in 1569. This union of two states was preserved for almost three centuries until 1795 and it gave rise to a multinational and multi-religious culture. The memory of it constitutes an essential element of Polish cultural identity. Recalling the Union of Lublin, which may be called also Jagiellonian Union, John Paul II, united the past and the future.
Though he was bitterly disappointed with rejection of *Invocatio Dei* in the draft of the Constitution of the EU, he always welcomed the project of integrating states and nations in the broader political, economic, and above all cultural union. He was dreaming about Europe which respires with two lungs and which creates manifold space for the human solidarity. I am deeply convinced that without the wise prophetic vision of John Paul II, Poland probably would not have joined the EU in 2004. His contribution to the collapse of communism and creation of a new political order in Europe adds to his legacy which may be easily lost by the growth of nationalism.

Nobody speaks openly about the eventuality of “Polexit” which might resemble “Brexit.” At the present moment there is nothing but gossip by a few marginal politicians and journalists. We may, however, imagine the situation in which nationalistic policy in Poland arrives to the point of leaving the European Union. Is the Catholic Church prepared to defend Polish integration with the EU?

Also, in regard to this, the opinions and sympathies of bishops are divided. In fact, the Catholic Church in Poland lacks sufficient clarity in which way the sovereignty of a national state and membership in a union are reconciled and mutually conditioned. At times we hear bishops speaking about the EU as a foreign force, as if it were the external political entity to which Poland does not belong or belongs in a compulsory way. Such opinions are loudly spoken out while the tensions between the present Polish government and the European Commission are manifested. In order to illustrate the openly hostile attitude toward the EU, let me quote a speech which was delivered by Archbishop of Cracow, Marek Jędraszewski, on the occasion of the ceremonies of Good Friday. He claimed that Jesus was condemned to death by the people from the street and from abroad (“ulica i zagranica”). Is it preaching of the mystery of salvation or a political speech? I am sure that the hearers of it could easily grasp the actual political message. It overlaps, obviously, with the message of the government
which blames the opposition of using “people from the street and people from abroad” against the policy of violating the Constitution. What matters here is that bishop points out the EU to be an enemy of Poland as dangerous as Pontius Pilatus, who represented the Roman Emperor, was to Jesus Christ. Needless to say how naïve and primitive is that kind of exegesis of Gospel, for absolutely worse is the abuse of Gospel for spreading nationalistic emotions.

Naturally there is quite an active group of bishops, priests, and lay Christian believers who are committed to the idea of community and solidarity of nations and who thereby reject nationalism and isolation. In 2017 the Conference of Polish Bishops succeeded to publish the pastoral letter on the Christian form of patriotism. They praise and recommend patriotism as a Christian virtue based on love toward one’s own Fatherland and at the same time they criticize nationalism for being the expression of pagan egoism. One may only regret that in this letter the object of patriotism is limited to Poland as the Fatherland; such a letter should have provided also an excellent opportunity to extend the concept of patriotism as much to include “European patriotism.”

There is in fact a serious contradiction to be noted. On the one hand, Poles are very satisfied with their membership in EU, for they take all economic advantages which derive from it, but on the other hand, a certain irrational national pride is emerging as well. The background for it is very complex. Here it suffices only to point generally to historical, economic, and cultural factors. Without considering those conditions in details I would like to turn the attention to the fact that the massive appearance of national pride coincides with revival of the Sarmatian forms of Polish Catholic religiosity. Sarmatianism was an ideology popular in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to it, old-style Poles, primarily nobles, are the descendant of the legendary ancient nation of Sarmatians and they are the second elect nation. They are called by God to a special mission with respect to the other
nations. This is obviously a Messianic interpretation of the vocation and destiny of the Polish nation. In nineteenth century, when Poland ceased to exist as an independent state, this idea assumed an explicit doctrinal form of messianic ideology and Poland was proclaimed to be the “Christ of Nations.” One does not need to emphasize that this was nothing but heresy. This pattern of conceiving of Poland’s exceptional, evidently exclusive vocation is very deeply rooted in Polish traditional religiosity and devotion. It comes from the baroque era, but what is paradoxical, is that now it is becoming very attractive as it shows up, for instance, in a very spectacular action, “Rosary up to the borders”.

Though in Poland there are many resources of popular religiosity, they need to be purified from nationalistic deformations, which not only isolate us from other Christians, but they conserve a model of Christianity which is resistant to the real message of Christ. This model of Christianity engenders a battle against modernity in terms of the direct political action whereby the entire religious energy is consumed. Polish Catholicism is, indeed, at the cross-roads. It may pursue a way of the pastoral conversion and new evangelization but it may also deviate, moving toward national sectarian Church.