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THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLAND AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

Tempora Mutantur[1]

By Krystyna Górniak-Kocikowska

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Disclaimer

There are 18 major churches and denominations registered officially on the basis of individual legal acts in Poland as of 2019 (Ćmiel, 2019). The Roman Catholic (Latin rite) Church is by far the largest of them all. The dominant position of the Roman Catholic Church is so strong in Poland that it is quite easy to overlook the other religions and their followers.

I would like to make the readers of this essay aware that, even though I know of the existence of the "minority religions" in Poland, my focus here will be exclusively on the Roman Catholic Church. In particular, whenever I use the words "Catholic" and "Catholics" they pertain to the Roman Catholic Church and to the Roman Catholics. Unless stated otherwise, I do not refer to any of the other Churches with the word "Catholic" in their name (nor to the members thereof), such as Byzantine-Ukrainian, Armenian, Byzantine-Slavic, Old Catholic Maraviate, Catholic Maraviate; and especially to the Polish Catholic Church, whose roots are in 19th Century Polish-American communities.

[1] Latin for "times change." Part of a longer phrase, *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis* meaning "times change, and we change with them."

Quite a different paper

Had I written a paper about the Roman Catholic Church in Poland after the Fall of Communism in 2019, when Paul Mojzes asked me to (thank you, Paul, for your unceasing encouragement!), the writing would have been so much easier than it is now. Not easy, but easier. At that time, the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, just like life in Poland in general, seemed relatively stable, much more so than throughout most of Poland's turbulent history or even during those 30 years since the Fall of Communism. The Church, too, seemed to be on the way to "getting back on track" after having experienced a few somewhat difficult years. In 2019 one could think that all (almost all) is well with the Church in Poland–or, will be well soon.

But now, in 2020, there is the coronavirus pandemic. There is a nationwide lockdown in Poland. The normal – like almost anywhere else in the world – is not normal anymore, and no-one knows what the "new normal" will be like. Not only that. The pandemic forces one to see some things from the past in a different light, and even to reevaluate the past.

Had I written this this paper last year, I would divide the most recent 30 years of the Church's history in Poland into two main phases.

Phase One: from June 18, 1989 – the date of the second round of the Parliamentary elections in Poland, which resulted with the formation of the non-Communist government.

Phase Two: from April 2, 2005 – the date of the passing of Karol Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II. Most likely, I would have then claimed that *Phase Two* would continue. Now, however, I recognize that *Phase Two* ended around March 12, 2020, with the *de facto* closing of Churches for services due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (TVP INFO LIVE, 2020).

From my point of view, that event marked the time when the Roman Catholic Church in Poland entered *Phase Three* of its post-Communist period.

The Three Phases and their significance

I see the first thirty years of the post-Communist period in Poland, especially in relation to the Church, as divided into two phases, but they also belong together in the sense that they both differ radically from *Phase Three* – no matter what *Phase Three* will eventually turn out to be like. Even though they are different, these first two phases belong together because they are linked by the person of pope John Paul II, who played – albeit in different ways – the central role in each of

them with regard to matters related to religion, to Church (as an institution), and to life in Poland. Indeed, his influence extended over the entire Polish society, not only the faithful.

Phase Three, the unexpected one, has just begun. It could be looked upon, at least some aspects of it, as a test of John Paul II's legacy. Most likely, it will also be a huge challenge to the Church in Poland, and to the Polish people.

Following are some of my reflections on the three phases mentioned above. These reflections are presented in a very sketchy way as, I think, is only possible in a paper such as this one. I am convinced that the present pandemic–the initiator of *Phase Three*–and its aftermath will have not only a profound impact on the future but also on the perception and assessment of the past. As such, the thoughts regarding *Phase Three* belong legitimately to an essay on the Roman Catholic Church in Poland after the Fall of Communism. The present way of dealing with the pandemic ensues predominantly from the way Polish society and its institutions, including the Church, evolved during the thirty years after the Fall of Communism, even though the roots of many actions reach oftentimes far deeper into the past. Past, present, and future are intertwined tightly, dynamically, and inextricably.

Phase One

The defining characteristic of *Phase One* was the presence of John Paul II, the living person, in the lives of Polish people; spiritual, and sometimes also physical, his direct guidance, and–just by being there–the constant reminder of what kind of person a good Roman Catholic, whether a lay person, member of a religious order or clergy, should aspire to become. Because of that direct papal influence, the first 15 years after the Fall of Communism had a unique place in the history of the Church in Poland and in the history of Poland in general.

In the early years directly after the Fall of Communism there was the sense of unity and togetherness among the Polish people, whether Roman Catholics or otherwise. As a matter of fact, even if one took into consideration only the Roman Catholics, it would still be a vast majority of Poles, given that, depending on the source and on how one counts, "around 87" (European Commission, 2019) to 97.6 percent (Holy See Press Office, 2016) of the Polish population are Roman Catholics. These statistics are complicated and a little bit "wobbly" mainly because people who do not consider themselves religious but were baptized Roman Catholic as children are considered by the Church as its members. (The story of her baptism, told by the atheist Monika

Jaruzelska (Jaruzelska, 2013), the daughter of general Wojciech Jaruzelski, was not unusual in post-WW II Poland.) A formal act of apostasy, still very rare in Poland today, was exceptional to the point of non-existence until the recent years.

For Poland, *Phase One* has been the phase of euphoria, full of jubilant and victorious feelings, saturated with optimism and–because the Fall of Communism seemed to have been welcomed everywhere in the world–permeated with the sense of "arriving." Being from Poland ceased to mean being an oddity, sometimes unwelcome, sometimes pitied, and sometimes both. People felt that they finally belonged to the community of nations.

Out of 46 European countries, including the world's largest (Russia) and the smallest (The Holy See) Poland, a country occupying an area slightly smaller than New Mexico, locates as the 10th largest in Europe (Briney, 2019). According to the United Nations, Poland's population in 2020 was estimated at 37,846,611, about 0.49% of the entire world population. The population in 1990 was slightly larger, counting 37,960,193 (Worldometer). The government, supported by the Roman Catholic Church and by the vast majority of the Polish people, declared that the time has come for Poland, in the words frequently used then by politicians and journalists, "to reclaim its rightful place in the community of nations." They also had the sense of joining the world community not emptyhanded. Poland gave the world the pope, a hero who had been instrumental in defeating Communism. Poles believed that "Their Pope" was highly respected and popular, even beloved, all over the world. When they heard any criticism of the person, teachings or actions of John Paul II, especially by Roman Catholics, they were stunned, disbelieving, and even outraged.

Those who consider feelings of that kind to be exaggerated need to remember that never in history had a Pole occupy such an important office, religious or otherwise. For the Poles, raised generation after generation to love their country even if the country has not always loved them back (Bukowczyk 2009, esp. Ch 3), and–ever since the end of the 18th Century–experienced more defeats and humiliations than successes, the rise of Karol Wojtyła to an unprecedented, undreamed-of prominence was a miracle, indeed. Except for Mikołaj Kopernik (Copernicus), no other Pole could compare with John Paul II in terms of significance and worldwide impact. He was, and still is, considered by a huge number of people in Poland, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the greatest Pole ever.

Yet with the passing years and with a new generation coming of age–people born into the world in which the pope was "always" Polish, there has been also a gradual shift in the way "Our Pope" (that's how the people called him) has been treated; increasingly more like a rock star than as a source of wisdom and a spiritual beacon, although that has not vanished, either. It seemed at times that the huge crowds John Paul II had always drawn in Poland also expected him to behave rock star-like. That was particularly poignant during the last days of his last visit to Poland (Aug 16-19, 2002) when a crowd of mostly young people would gather below the "papal window" of the residence in Kraków where he stayed. The atmosphere was festive in a rock-concert fashion, with dancing and music and "stay with us" frequently chanted in a loud chorus. A clergyman appeared in the window and begged the crowd to quiet down and let the tired Holy Father rest. At that time, John Paul II had already been visibly unwell–but that seemed not to matter to the people who celebrated.

In *Phase One*, the Church in Poland was the great beneficiary of the changes that took place after the Fall of Communism. It was triumphant, it was victorious, it was beyond reproach. The Church received back its properties confiscated during the communist rule. Religious instruction (Roman Catholic), compulsory to those whose parents so wished, was reintroduced into public schools (level equivalent to K-12). Abortion was delegalized, with the first step in the direction of today's very strict anti-abortion law made as early as 1990. There has been basically no public criticism of the Church as an institution and no criticism of individual clergymen.

The Church was faithful to John Paul II's vision of Christianity, continued and supported it. That included the idea of Poland becoming the initiator of the process of re-Christianization of Europe, one of John Paul II's cherished visions (Casanova, 2003). Throughout centuries, Poland has been unwaveringly Roman-Catholic, even though, with its conversion to Christianity in 966, it was a relative newcomer by the Western European standards. The Reformation movement has been weak in Poland to the point that the Church opted for religious tolerance rather than severe persecutions of the Reformers so common in Western Europe. On the other hand, Poland considered itself as the bulwark of Christendom, especially since the rise of the Ottoman Empire (with which the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth shared the border) and its growing threat to Western Europe. After the Fall of Communism, this idea of the bulwark was modified into a mission to bring Christianity back to increasingly areligious Western Europe. This idea was

coupled with Poland's attempts to join the EU. If Poland could influence the EU countries to return back on the Christian path that would be an immense gift given to John Paul II by his beloved country. That, however, has not happened.

Phase Two

The passing away of the long ailing John Paul II on April 2, 2005, touchingly described by Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz (Dziwisz, 2007), the pope's personal Secretary for almost four decades, was not unexpected. Yet it shook the Roman Catholic Church in Poland to its core; and it had a profound psychological impact on the Polish people, not only Catholics. To them, he was The Liberator, "Our Pope," the Holy Father; but he was also a father figure in the ordinary sense of the word, a beloved father of the Polish people (see Mikołajczak et al., 2009).

Cardinal Dziwisz described how he experienced the moment of the Holy Father's death: "I had the impression that suddenly darkness descended. Darkness above me and in me. (…) I was always with him, and now he left alone." (Dziwisz, 2007, 230-231; My translation from Polish). That was how an overwhelming number of Poles have felt at that time as well.

Gone were the exuberance, optimism, and joy. And it was not only because Poland went into mourning, although mourning for the beloved Holy Father was definitely a huge factor defining the demeanor of the Polish people at that time. (Gorniak-Kocikowska, 2012). Above all – gone was the nation's unity. It turned out that many people were dissatisfied for some time with a variety of things and they were now focusing on what was wrong, instead of what was right. This dissatisfaction included the Church. The media was full of "revelations" about past and present misconducts and downright criminal actions of some clergy; books were published and movies–documentaries as well as feature films–were made, revealing the dark secrets of the Church (for a sample of titles, see Selected Sources at the end of this article). Some of the criticism and (self)accusations came from the ranks of the clergy, something basically unheard of in the past. It seemed like a dam was broken.

The most painful to the Polish people was probably the discovery that not all clergy were as staunchly anti-communist as they appeared. It turned out that a number of priests collaborated with the "*bezpieka,*" which was the nickname for the Ministry of Public Security (secret police) under communism. The case of the then archbishop of Warsaw, Stanisław Wielgus, whom pope

Benedict XVI eventually pressed to resign, had been particularly devastating to the faithful (Isakowicz-Zaleski, 2007; Krasowski, 2007; Olczyk and Wójcik, 2007).

Another big and bitterness-evoking issue was the sexual misconduct of some priests. Father Henryk Jankowski's fall from grace was particularly ugly. He was very famous and popular among the people as a symbol of the Church's support of the Solidarity movement. "In the 1980s, he was a respected leader and excellent organizer for the underground anti-communist opposition. In the 1990s, he mutated into a luxury-loving prince of the Church. When he died in 2010, private donors funded a statue in front of his parish church. Almost ten years later, Jankowski's name made headlines again–this time with accusations of being a sexual abuser for years." (Guzik, 2019) The abovementioned statue of Henryk Jankowski was dismantled in March of 2019. Unfortunately, the case of Father Jankowski was not an isolated phenomenon; as it turned out, pedophilia had not been very rare among priests. The problem attracted a lot of attention in the Polish society. Tomasz Sekielski's documentary "*Tylko nie mów nikomu*" [Just don't tell anyone] about priests guilty of pedophilia, posted on YouTube in 2019, had a huge audience (Luxmoore, 2019). For many viewers, it has been a confirmation of what they had already known or suspected all along.

What was new was the fact that people stopped whispering about these issues and started talking loudly and openly. It all happened after 2005, i.e., after the death of John Paul II. That might be just a coincidence. But it might also be–as many see it–the result of a conscious attempt made by the Poles, not only Catholics, not to trouble the Holy Father by anything negative, especially during the last years of his life. Just like children often do not want to trouble an ailing parent with the news about their own shortcomings. Be that as it may, *Phase Two* turned out to be tumultuous, full of discontent and, yes, hatred.

Some of the scandals, mainly those of a sexual nature, coincided with the wave of similar scandals plaguing the Roman Catholic Church around the same time in many other places, especially in the United States. Like in most other countries, the Church hierarchy in Poland, too, had been defensive for the most part. Like in some other countries, the Church in Poland insisted on treating these issues as an internal affair of the Church, and on acting accordingly. And, also like in some other countries, in Poland too there were transgressions and crimes that could not be contained within the Church.

After the worst scandals seemed to have died, the Church in Poland found a way back to its old position in society. According to all indications, it had weathered the wave of open criticism

that started more than ten years earlier. Moreover, the Church recently assumed the position of a victim, hunted by the post- and neo-communist groups who conspire with the LGBT community and are supported by foreign helpers (such as the American billionaire George Soros) eager to strengthen the influence of LGBT activists in Poland. The Church established a partnership with the new Polish government formed by the Law and Justice (Polish: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) party after the latter's victory in the 2015 election. Among other things, both the government and the Church made a strong "pro-family," "pro (heterosexual)-marriage" stance, with marriage being defined as exclusively heterosexual (Ciobanu, 2020). It gained support from very large segments of the Polish society. The pro-family orientation declared by the government was enjoying complete support from the Church. By the Summer of 2019, the "pro-family" rhetoric had been firmly in place. The Church started to control the narrative again. That narrative seems to still be working well, judging from the fact that it had been used successfully in 2020 to support the bid for reelection by Poland's President, Andrzej Duda (see Santora, 2020).

All these problems did not affect the attitude of the Polish people towards John Paul II, even though "questions had been asked in the Polish media about the late pontiff's failure to tackle abuse, forcing Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, his former assistant, to issue repeated statements in his defense." (Luxmoore, 2019) The star of John Paul II continues to shine with growing intensity, especially after his canonization on April 27, 2014. There are countless physical reminders of him displayed around the public areas. There are monuments, plaques, and pictures, conventional memorabilia, films, publications; there are pilgrimages to places where the Holy Father had lived or just traveled by; there is a multitude of institutions and places bearing his name. Some critics look at them all as being mainly money-making devices. I would like to point out, however, that they genuinely help many people in keeping the presence of the Holy Father tangible in their lives, and his memory alive. This is especially important when one considers the fact that a large segment of the Polish population has an emotional rather than intellectual attitude towards Saint John Paul II.

But there is, of course, a possibility that John Paul II will be seen in people's individual as well as collective consciousness and memory not as he really was and not how he wished to be remembered by his countrymen, but in a way his countrymen want to remember him for a variety of reasons, one of them being their own self-contentment (this seems to be part of human nature

in general). The likelihood of that happening is quite high, especially because of the tendency for a "selective" relation of the Polish people to the Holy Father which has been there even when he was still alive, as attested to by Father Krzysztof Gryz in his introduction to the anthology of statements John Paul II made on various subjects during his visits to Poland: "It is even difficult to grasp mentally such richness of content, hence the enticement to discouragement, which prevents from reaching for papal homilies and speeches. This gives incentive to a reproach, more or less justified, that we listen so readily and eagerly to the Holy Father and at the same time we know him so little." (Gryz, 2010, 9; my translation from Polish.) Gryz wrote these words several years before John Paul II passed away. It seems to me that – while adoring the Holy Father and his memory – many of his admirers are now on the way to becoming satisfied with a one-dimensional image of him and forgetting the immense complexity of his personality as well as the complexity of his message.

There is also yet another angle from which to look at the turmoil in and around the Church in Poland. That turmoil does not have much, if anything, to do with the issues of the Church doctrine as such. The problems Polish people, especially Church members, wrestle with, are of a general ethical nature; they are about human behavior, about honesty, believability and trust. Seen in this light, the outrage at some clergy's misconduct and the sense of betrayal felt by many Poles could be perceived as a testimony to the power and vitality of John Paul II's ethical teachings and to the seriousness with which these teachings are considered in Poland today. Given John Paul II's huge popularity, people could expect his teachings to take deeper roots than actually happened. Hence the heightened sense the Polish people have of being betrayed by those who were expected to follow most faithfully in the pope's footsteps, the clergy.

To wrestle with a problem means often to wrestle with one's own conscience; it can also mean to wrestle with the problem of crossing the border separating an individual human conscience from others; to let one's conscience join – in the words of Father Józef Tischner, a long-time friend of John Paul II – the solidarity of consciences. According to Tischer, "Human dignity rests on human conscience. The deepest solidarity is the solidarity of consciences." And further: "The ethics of solidarity wants to be an ethics of conscience. It assumes that a human being has conscience. (...) We have many ethical systems, but there is only one conscience. (...) Conscience is in a human being an independent reality, a little bit like reason and will. (...) A human being, even when he/she is erring, but has some conscience, surely will admit eventually

his/her error and will be able to change. A human being without conscience is not able to do this." (Tischner, 1981, 8-11; my translation from Polish.) In 1987, the Holy Father expressed a similar view in his homily in Gdańsk, on Westerplatte, when he said: „A human being is himself or herself through the internal truth. This is the truth of conscience, reflected in actions. In this truth, each human is his own (or her own) task to be accomplished." (See: Gryz, 244; my translation from Polish.) I would venture a statement that many of the books and other materials I mentioned in this part of my essay answered the call to follow one's conscience.

Conscience is, of course, very closely related to morality and ethics. Throughout the years, it was clearly visible how much thought and effort John Paul II devoted to the ethical education of his compatriots. The ethics he wanted the Polish people to live by would help them to remain true to their religion and at the same time be capable of successfully navigating the reality of the new Millennium; it would also help them to flourish as an individual human person and to live in a community – a community of faith, a community of nation, a community of nations.

In Poland, the challenges to follow one's own conscience were – and remain today – many and various. They are amplified by the difficult and still unsolved problem, which is somewhat independent from, and yet very tightly linked to the person of John Paul II. It is the problem of making not only the modern concept of democracy and individualism (embraced by a great number of Poles), but also capitalism with its relentless competition and drive for material success, compatible with the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Church often reflected in the way of thinking displayed by many of the Church officials. In other words, the problem is how to fit into the 21st Century world, even flourish, while maintaining at the same time commitment to the values of the past.

Both the Church and the Polish people have to be determined in securing the legacy of "their" Holy Father most fully and in a way most helpful to the flourishing of the Church in Poland as well as the Polish people in the future. Not an easy task in the demanding reality of the ever-changing, pluralistic, and culturally diverse, technology-driven, global society, part of which Poland is now becoming.

Phase Three

At this point in time, almost all that pertains to what I call *Phase Three*, and which I link to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, belongs mostly to the sphere of speculations and guesses. Of course, the pandemic has a global impact and it touches almost all aspects of peoples' lives. For the Polish people, just like for people everywhere in the world, the events belong to "before," "during" and–hopefully–"after" the pandemic. But for the Church in Poland, the pandemic and its aftermath (*Phase Three* in this paper) also marks a new era in another sense. Namely, John Paul II–who for the majority of Catholics in Poland continues to be the highest authority with regard to matters of how to live one's life–was not exposed personally to the reality which the COVID-19 virus has brought about. The Holy Father did not have first-hand experience with such a reality; so understandably, he did not devote any extensive theoretical work to it. Thus, facing this new challenge and a new reality, Poland and the Church in Poland cannot find a clear, straightforward and direct guidance in John Paul II's legacy the way they could in the past. They are now truly and irrevocably on their own.

Fr. John Pawlikowski subtitled his 2012 Inaugural Annual John Paul II Lecture on Christian-Jewish Relations at the Boston College's Center for Christian-Jewish Learning "His Legacy, Our Challenges." (Pawlikowski, 2012) That phrase was certainly true in 2012, but it is even more fitting now. Now, "his legacy, our challenge" is true not only with regard to the Christian-Jewish relations. "His legacy, our challenge" sums up the present situation in general; and it could become the motto of the new reality in Poland. What the Poles have at their disposal presently and what they will have in any future situations is the legacy of St. John Paul II. They can draw their strength from that legacy, and they can learn from it. But the challenges of the present and of the future are theirs to face alone. Moreover, the fact that *Phase Three* has begun just two months before the centenary of John Paul II's birth and almost exactly 15 years after his death and 6 years after his canonization could give that phase a deeper symbolic meaning in the eyes of the Polish people.

John Paul II would have turned 100 years old on May 18, 2020. Poland celebrated that Birthday to the extend it was possible under the COVID-19 restrictions. That was far less than the people and the Church desired and were planning for. The celebration certainly was not as happy as it was supposed to be. The pandemic took away a lot of joy from that festive occasion.

Among other things, the Church celebrated the centenary with a pastoral letter from the Presidium of the Polish Bishops' Conference. The letter was read in churches in Poland on May

17; it focused mainly on the life of Saint John Paul II, his accomplishments and his importance for Catholics world-wide, but especially for Poland. That letter, not surprisingly, was mostly a look back, at the past. There was almost nothing in it about the future and little about the present, beyond statements such as, “In a difficult time for all of us--when we are struggling with the coronavirus pandemic and we ask questions about the future of our families and society--it is also worth asking what he would say to us today? What message would he send to his compatriots in May 2020?” The letter gives the following answer to this question: “We are to first think of the words he said in the homily beginning his pontificate: ‘Do not be afraid, open, open the door wide to Christ. For his saving power, open the borders of states, economic and political systems, broad fields of culture, civilization, development! Do not be afraid! Christ knows what a person carries within him. He knows it!’ (10.22.1978).” The pastoral letter pays tribute to health professionals: “Saint John Paul II understood and valued the work of doctors, nurses, rescuers and medical workers, for whom he often prayed and with whom he met.” The bishops also make connections between the present pandemic and the Holy Father’s perpetual focus on the issue of the sanctity of human life: ”Today, when during the coronavirus pandemic the world is fighting for every human life, it should be remembered that John Paul II demanded the protection of human life from conception to natural death. He emphasized that in no area of life could civil law replace a properly formed conscience.” The letter ends with an appeal to the faithful to pray. “From the death of St. John Paul II on, people from all over the world pray constantly at his grave in the Basilica of Saint Peter. Through him, they ask God for necessary favors. Let us join them and pray–through his intercession–for the intentions that we carry deeply in our hearts. Let us pray for our homeland, Europe and the whole world. Let us pray for the pandemic to end, for the sick, the dead and their families, for doctors, medical services and all those who risk their lives for our safety. Let the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Polish Pope be a call to brotherhood and unity for us. Let it be a source of hope and trust in God's Mercy.” (Presidium of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, 2020, the English language version).

Interestingly enough, there is no mention in the pastoral letter of one particular occurrence which took place worldwide, including Poland, early on in the outbreak of the pandemic, in March, 2020; i.e., the closing of church buildings for services or, alternatively, suspension of the physical presence of worshippers in churches during the services. Yet, the fact that the “church closures,” as that event is now commonly known, took place on such a large scale has a great and multilayered

significance. Inter alia, it marks an important point in the relation between religion and the secular reality.

Immediate and Practical Ramifications of "Church Closures"

The tangible and often immediate impact of "church closures" due to the coronavirus pandemic could be perceived as an issue belonging in the practical realm of the Church or rather, practical expression and logistical solutions pertaining to doctrinal issues and also to the functioning of the Church as an institution, not only in Poland but worldwide. Not surprisingly, different problems generated by that event manifest themselves with different degree of intensity in different countries. The most common among them are (in random order) church-state relations, church attendance and also spiritual, psychological as well as financial issues. I will not discuss them here, because this essay is already very long and, more importantly, these problems are being discussed frequently and thoroughly by many other authors. Instead, I decided to focus only on one topic, which I call here the "big picture." It refers not to the immediate and "measurable" impact of the "church closures" on the life of the Church, but rather to the centuries-lasting process of transformation of the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the secular world, in particular the world of science but also knowledge in general.

"Church Closures" and the "Big Picture"

Seen from the Polish perspective, the act of "church closures" in March 2020 was probably the most unprecedented, unusual, and unforeseen event the Church has had to face since the Fall of Communism. In all the fantasies about the Church in a free-from-communism Poland that abounded thirty-plus years ago, nobody had ever anticipated the possibility of church buildings being closed to worshippers under the pressure from secular powers, even temporarily. That has not happened to the Roman Catholic Church in Poland before, not even during the Stalinist period, when churches were closed in some other Eastern European countries (Luxmoore, April 16, 2020). Parenthetically, Catholic University of Lublin, was also permitted to function. According to the Metropolitan Archbishop of Kraków, Marek Jędraszewski, Stalin himself was against a "frontal attack" on the Church in Poland "as he was well aware of how positively perceived and deeply ingrained in the Polish national mind the Catholic Church really was. Thus, in his opinion, a much better-suited tactic was the methodical weakening…" (Jędraszewski, 2019, 6) Part of that tactic

seem to be the temporary closing–at various times–of selected historic church buildings (officially treated by the state as architectural treasures that merited protection) for renovations, or "renovations," sometimes very protracted. However, that kind of closures did not happen *en masse* and in synchronistic manner the way the recent "pandemic closures" took place.

Still more unthinkable in the past would be the idea that such closures could happen worldwide on the order of the Holy Father. Yet, the "church closures" due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic took place on the order of Pope Francis, even though it was not a decision easily made. (Mares, 2020). And, last but not least, who could imagine thirty-plus years ago that such an action would meet with practically no resistance in Poland from the Church authorities and/or from the people? *Tempora mutantur...*

What is particularly significant is the fact that Pope Francis yielded to the request from secular authorities; those authorities, in turn, were guided by scientists. The information supplied by scientists was sufficient and persuasive enough to cause the suspension of one of the most important practices in the Roman Catholic Church, the presence of the faithful in church during the celebration of the Holy Mass. Thus both, the Church officials and the faithful, accepted the superior authority of science. This is the reason why I consider the "church closures" to be of great significance, even though this significance will probably have no discernable impact on the daily life of the Church. In the long run, however, it is cutting quite deeply into some of the most vital parts of the Church's *raison d'ê·tre*. It is truly momentous that–just like the overwhelming majority of religious leaders worldwide–the head of the Roman Catholic Church acquiesced to the urging of scientists, in this case mainly representatives of medical sciences and biosciences. In this respect, the length of time of the "closures" is irrelevant. That decision itself reflects a tipping point in the centuries-long struggles between Church and science. The "church closures" could be the symbolic reminder that the possibility of the ultimate triumph of the scientific revolution initiated by Copernicus should not be ignored.

The act of "church closures" due to the coronavirus pandemic coincides with the progress of aggressive encroachment of science and technology–most importantly, digital robotics and artificial intelligence (AI), especially strong AI–on people's lives. That process has been underway for some time now, but it is rapidly gaining momentum and becoming much more discernable to the general public because of decisions and actions undertaken in response to the pandemic. Moreover, the human-AI interaction at work and in private life is reaching the stage when it

becomes necessary to have ready answers to profound ethical and existential questions generated by the power of digital technologies. Individuals, organizations, and institutions–including the Church as an institution–will have to wrestle with these questions and find good answers to them. Given the urgency and seriousness of this problem the ethical issues pertaining to the inclusion of AI into the fabric of human lives must not be dealt with superficially, haphazardly, or carelessly. Neither must be the discussions of digital ethics (AI ethics, robot ethics, ICT ethics, computer ethics, and so on) treated as purely academic and/or marginal.

My claim is that *Phase Three* will be profoundly affected by the problem of how this new step in the expansion of science and technology will affect the Church and its place in the Polish society; and also, how the faithful will reconcile their lives in the new reality with the teachings of the Church. In the society where people are used to their religious faith and their Church being challenged by other religions or by political systems, this is basically a new, different kind of challenge.

What will be the significance of John Paul II's teachings and his legacy in this new reality? As indicated earlier, the present crisis belongs to the reality John Paul II not only did not experience, not only did not theorize about; it is possible that he has not even considered the probability of its occurrence. Nowadays, the politicians and journalists overuse the word "unprecedented." But it is true that we live in unprecedented times, and therefore, I think it is justifiable to say that Poland and the Church in Poland crossed the threshold into a world alien to John Paul II.

So, the Church and people in Poland must take upon themselves the challenge of facing up to the problems generated by an unprecedented new reality. Could they find any help in the legacy of John Paul II? According to the pastoral letter quoted earlier, "His teaching is still valid. It is worth reaching out, also through the Internet and social media, using the opportunities created by new technologies. Already in 2002, the Pope called on the whole Church to sail out 'into the deeps of cyberspace'." (Presidium of the Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020) The helpful legacy of John Paul II I have in mind extends beyond what one can find in that passage. From my vantage point, his legacy can be relevant especially in dealing with the ethical issues involving digital technologies, in particular, autonomous humanoid robots equipped with strong AI, which is something of extraordinary importance. One can find many useful pointers regarding that

challenge in the general approach of John Paul II to science and especially in his reflections on biotechnologies and biosciences, especially brain sciences.

I would call John Paul II's approach to natural sciences a cautious one. He was a trained theologian and philosopher specializing in philosophical anthropology, especially personalism and phenomenology; he was also a poet. His expertise and his interests centered on God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and on the human being. He did not approach nature as a scientist. But he was a grown-up man when the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki took place, and he was well aware of how terrible the power of science (in those days, mostly physics) combined with technology can be. He certainly was not dismissive of science. Yet, as much as he understood the power–and the allure–of science, he perceived it as a pretty dangerous tool, one that needs to be monitored and controlled as closely as possible.

When he was a pope, John Paul II carried on periodic meetings with the members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (Stephen Hawking was a member), and also occasionally with other outstanding scientists. He voiced publicly several times his views on bioethics as well as on neuro- and brain sciences; these were the most cutting-edge sciences during his papacy, especially during the last years of his life. Of the greatest interest to him were the questions pertaining to the beginning and to the end of an individual human life. These were the problems, among other issues, he also explored in his theological and philosophical works. Significantly, these are some of the subjects on which Roman Catholic theology and natural sciences are still searching for the common language and understanding.

During the pontificate of John Paul II, computer science and digital technologies were the newcomers, relatively speaking, despite the incredibly intensive research that has been conducted in that area ever since WWII. The awareness of their real potential has not been yet anchored in the public consciousness; even the scientists seemed sometimes to have difficulties in separating science from science fiction. Actually, one of the first places to garner attention to the potential problems generated by the new sciences and technologies was science fiction. Works by Stanisław Lem (who lived in Kraków at the same time as Karol Wojtyła) and by Isaac Asimov, esp. the Three Laws of Robotics coined by him, come prominently to mind in this regard. Science was still persisting to a large extent in its staunch claim to axiological neutrality, a position assumed mainly in the aftermath of Hiroshima. So, it was quite natural that computer science and digital technologies were not at the center of John Paul II's attention. And yet, he had encouraged–as

early as 2002–the whole Church's presence in cyberspace (Presidium of the Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020), a compelling testimony to the intellectual farsightedness of the Pontiff. It is also a challenge to Polish scholars, especially those to whom the legacy of the Polish Pope is dear and who want to enrich it.

Unfortunately, one of the big problems is Poland's vulnerability with regard to modern technology. Poland, like the vast majority of countries in today's world, finds itself on the wrong side of the "digital divide." At present, Poland plays a marginal role in the research, development, and commercial applications of digital technologies. Therefore, Poland's contribution to the creation and application of various forms of digital technology is at best auxiliary and its position towards that technology is–out of necessity–reactive, not proactive. This is, by no means, a new situation. The "digital divide," clearly visible already in the 1990s (Kocikowski, 1995), existed since the earliest days of computer technologies. For instance, even though Polish mathematicians, Marian Rejewski, Henryk Zygalski, and Jerzy Różycki, were the first ones to crack the *Enigma* code prior to WW II (Bowman, 2016), it was Alan Turing and his team at Bletchley Park who had the means and the support needed to continue the work leading to the construction of a computer, which made the *Enigma* code useless to the Nazis. This is just one example out of many that are available.

Poland has no financial means to successfully play the "catch-up" game in this field. The digital divide has not diminished; if anything, it has widened. There are no Polish companies on any list of the top global tech-businesses. There are no Polish organizations comparable to, e.g., the RAND corporation (in existence since the end of WW II and established with the purpose of fostering the development of technologies such as humanoid machines, mainly for military use, based on cutting-edge science). And there are no Polish companies in the same league with Apple, Microsoft, or IBM. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education [*Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego*] published in one of its recent online Bulletins an article about "the image of Polish science at home and abroad" (Tomala, 2020) that emerged from surveys conducted by the *Fundacja Instytut Badań Rynkowych i Społecznych* [The Foundation of Market and Social Research Institute] "between October 2019 and February 2020 in Poland, the European Union and the United States" (Tomala, 2020), which more than confirms my point. There is governmental support in Poland for science and technology, including financial support, to be sure. However,

that support does not suffice for Polish scientists to assume a global leadership position in any of the most cutting-edge areas of digital sciences and technologies or to create such an area.

One more issue puts Polish scholars, like the scholars in a great number of other countries, into a disadvantageous position on the global market of ideas, the issue of language. Polish is not, and has never been, one of the world languages. I think John Paul II, then Karol Wojtyła, addressed this issue best in his 1974 poem *Myśląc Ojczyzna* [Thinking Homeland]. I quote here the relevant passage in Polish and follow it with my translation: *"2. (…) nie podjęły mowy moich ojców języki narodów, tłumacząc „za trudna" lub „zbędna" – / na wielkim zgromadzeniu ludów mówimy nie swoim językiem. Język własny zamyka nas w sobie: zawiera, a nie otwiera. / 3. (…) / Ogarnięci na co dzień pięknem własnej mowy, nie czujemy goryczy, chociaż na rynkach / świata nie kupują naszej myśli z powodu drożyzny słów. / Czyż nie żywimy pragnienia głębszej jeszcze wymiany? / Lud żyjący w sercu własnej mowy pozostaje poprzez pokolenia tajemnicą myśli nie / przejrzanej do końca."* [2. (…) The tongues of nations did not pick up the language of my forefathers, explaining "too difficult" or "useless" – / at the great gathering of people, we speak not our language. Our own language locks us in: it confines, not opens. / 3. (…) / Enfolded day-to-day in the beauty of our own language, we do not feel bitterness, even though on the markets / of the world they do not buy our thought because of the high cost of words. / Don't we desire some deeper exchange? / A nation living in the heart of its own language remains for generations the mystery of a thought not / seen through to the end.] (Wojtyła, 2004, 79)

There is no escape from the future. And even though Poland has no control over the emerging and converging sciences or the newest technologies, especially AI, I think Polish scholars have an opportunity to make significant contributions to these recent human accomplishments and thus to make itself at home in the world of the future. I believe that–with their solid background in the humanities–Polish scholars are well equipped to explore the spiritual, ethical, social, cultural, and other implications of the abovementioned developments. For instance, they could join the global discourse in a meaningful and productive way by bringing the issue of conscience back into it.

To a large extent, Polish scholars could do this thanks to John Paul II, who paved the road for them with his philosophical and theological work pertaining to biosciences, neurosciences, and brain sciences. This is a solid foundation on which to build further scholarship, especially–looking

forward to the future–scholarship pertaining to the ethical and social issues generated by the creation of AI.

In particular, research in the area of moral brain (or moral machines), closely related to the field of the ethics of artificial intelligence could be of great value. John Paul II was exploring, among other things, the relation between a living human being and a dead human body (human person vs human corpse); between the living human brain and the dead human brain. Following his footsteps, Polish scholars could focus on the relationship between the human brain and an artificial brain. Similar to John Paul II's concerns regarding the boundaries between human and non-human (physical) reality, elaborated by him most fully along the lines of human person vs human corpse, there is a problem of the boundary between an AI-equipped mechanical robot and a living human being as well as between an AI-equipped mechanical robot and the non-human reality. These problems do not belong to science fiction anymore; this is an interpretation of science by humanities and social sciences.

The fact that John Paul II already has followers on that path is also very important. One of such followers is Sister Barbara Chyrowicz, who was educated at the Catholic University of Lublin (currently John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin), where she earned degrees in Theology and Philosophy. She is presently the chairperson of the Applied Ethics Department there, and devotes her research mainly to bioethics, ethics, and metaethics, in step with John Paul II's ideas. In 2007, Chyrowicz co-founded *Polskie Towarzystwo Bioetyczne* (Polish Society for Bioethics). Like several other Polish scholars, she is very well positioned to move to the next level, i.e., to use her expertise in bioethics and the biological brain (mainly human) in order to follow John Paul II's 2002 calling on the Church to "sail out 'into the deeps of cyberspace'." That could mean, among other things, exploring the human-made digital world and the artificial brain in comparison with the human brain.

An important and complicated question regarding the ethics of digital technologies is, whose ethics? Once the domain and a "side hobby" of a handful of scholars, computer science emancipated itself into an independent academic discipline attracting a multitude of scientists from all over the world and inspiring the rapid rise of digital technologies. The further development, i.e., the commercialization of these technologies caused the formation of new professions, for instance, software engineering (Gotterbarn, 1992). A natural next step in that development was a

call to establish a code of ethics for computer professionals. That, too, has happened (see, e.g., IEEE-CS/ACM Joint Task Force, 1999).

Digital technologies know no borders, political, cultural, religious, or other. Due to the global character of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and other digital technologies (Górniak-Kocikowska, 1996), or maybe also for some other reason, the ethical investigations in that field are not dominated by one ethical system. And–possibly because religions were not instrumental in creation of these sciences or in development of these technologies–there is no dominant influence on them by an ethics of one religion. Instead, there are several ethical systems influencing the professional codes of ethics; in particular, utilitarianism, deontological ethics (such as Kant's ethics), and virtue ethics.

After examining some of the existing codes of ethics for computer professionals Richard Volkman (Volkman, 2013) noticed a problem in need of a solution. He claims that neither utilitarianism nor deontology fulfil their role well enough with respect to professional ethics. This is mostly because of "a prevailing culture of relativism" (Volkman, 2013) and constant change affecting professions, especially those in the field of digital technologies. Volkman argues that the most universal ethics applicable as a foundation in professional ethics is virtue ethics. According to him, virtue ethics could be the guiding rod in the ethical decision-making process by computer professionals, and it should be the leading ethics guiding the creators of codes of ethics for computer professionals. Along similar lines, Shannon Vallor delivers a much more elaborated argument for what she calls global technomoral virtue ethics. Like Volkman, Vallor takes into account G.E.M. Anscombe's criticism of Aristotelian ethics and claims that "contemporary Western virtue ethics represents not a single theoretical framework but a diverse range of approaches. Many remain neo-Aristotelian, while others are Thomistic, Stoic, Nietzschean, or Humean in inspiration, and some offer radially new theoretical foundations for moral virtue." (Vallor, 2016, 21). She also reminds the reader of the existence of prominent virtue ethics traditions in Asia, "especially Confucian and Buddhist virtue ethics," even though, to her chagrin, "few Anglo-American virtue ethicists have acknowledged or attempted to engage this work." (Vallor, 2016, 22) Consequently, Vallor advocates an inclusive, globally oriented approach to virtue ethics.

My own addition to that claim is that today people in general, not only computer professionals, frequently encounter ethical issues generated by and related to digital technologies, including AI. This is due to the already ubiquitous–at still rapidly expanding–presence of these

technologies in all areas of life. Virtue ethics seems to be best suited to help “civilians” navigate the process of making ethical decisions with respect to digital technologies, just as it does in the case of computer professionals. Due to its universal character, virtue ethics can also be applied globally, breaking the national, religious, and cultural barriers.

Virtue ethics has been promoted for centuries in many civilizations and in many religions, including Christianity. In light of the last few paragraphs and given the importance and urgency of the problem, if Polish scholars could create a universal ethics for the digital era, one that could be accepted globally and globally practiced in the R&D of AI and in digital technologies in general, they would not only make a truly important intellectual “investment” in the future of digital sciences and technologies; they would also find a great way of continuing the legacy of John Paul II. Maybe that legacy is not so fragile, after all. But the challenge would be their own–scientists, engineers, philosophers and theologians. That is also what could give *Phase Three* its true meaning and significance.

A Parting Thought

Tempora mutantur. People who have known Communism from personal experience belong now to the old generation–and there will be fewer of them with each passing year. Eventually, a very important point of reference–the memory of political oppression and what it takes to fight that kind of oppression–will be gone from the collective experience as well as from the collective conscience of those who will play key roles in Polish society. What will the new point of reference be? More importantly, will it be one that, among other things, will keep together the Church, the government, and the Polish people? What kind of faith, what kind of knowledge and understanding will the new generation of clergy and lay people have? How well will they be prepared to flourish in the new reality that is now taking shape? Will Poland, the Church in Poland, the Polish people be “in the midst of things” in this new world? Or will they linger on its outskirts? The answers to these questions are unknown as of yet, but Poland is quickly approaching the fork at which momentous decisions will have to be made.

The legacy of John Paul II does not contain any clear blueprint of how to function in the world ruled by science, dominated by science, even though it contains some guidance for the coexistence of Church and science. For that reason, it is hard to predict now how the Church and its members in Poland will deal with their new challenge, the rule of science. But there is a

possibility of a vigorous debate in Poland on the subject of the new, global society in which humans will have new partners (or foes) in artificial intelligence. The legacy of John Paul II could be a guiding light in that debate; and Poland could possibly become an important contributor to the forming of the new reality. Whether or not that will happen is much too soon to tell right now.

Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis, indeed. But then, there is another saying as well, possibly as frequently quoted as that first one, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.[2] So, one never really knows.

[2] *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (French)–the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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