

The Polish Case

Pedophilia, Polak-Katolik, and Theology of the Nation

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Introduction

In November 2019 a Polish foundation, *Nie lękajcie się* (Do Not Be Afraid), uploaded an interactive “Map of Pedophile Priests”.¹ This map of Poland is a result of the storm that hit the ark of the Polish Church in 2018 and 2019: the revelation of many cases of child abuse. It shows where the crimes perpetrated by Catholic priests occurred. So far, the map contains information about over 520 victims and around 150 perpetrators. Moreover, it lists 24 bishops and cardinals accused of covering up these cases.

In the last thirty years, the child abuse scandals in the Catholic Church have received much attention worldwide. The Polish Church, however, for a long time stayed “pedophilia-proof”, at least officially. This bubble burst in 2018–2019 when two movies addressing the issues of pedophilia and corruption among Polish priests were released: *The Clergy* (*Kler*) and *Tell No One* (*Tylko nie mów nikomu*).² This article, however, does not intend to focus on the problem of pedophilia in the Polish Church, but rather will use this

1. “Mapa pedofilii w Kościele 2020: Gdzie w Polsce dochodziło do molestowania dzieci przez księży pedofilów?”, *Polska Times* 2020-07-01, <https://polskatimes.pl/mapa-pedofilii-w-kościele-listopad-2019-gdzie-dochodziło-w-polsce-do-molestowania-dzieci-przez-ksiezy-pedofilow-raport-lista/ar/c1-13556728>, accessed 2020-07-24.

2. On 16 May 2020, Tomasz Sekielski released a follow-up to his documentary *Tell No One*, entitled *Hide and Seek* (*Zabawa w chowanego*). In the following two weeks, the film had over seven million views.

issue as a lens through which to look at the current state of the Catholic Church in Poland.

Growing secularization, immigration, and multiculturalism form a context in which the Catholic Church is seeking to reinvent its place in a rapidly changing society, also in Poland. The above-mentioned movies illustrate very well how the static institution that could be described as a “church of possession” struggles to become a transparent community of believers. Here, I will not describe this struggle but rather point to one of its fundamental causes, which seems to be a long-established identity issue: the firm gluing of Polish and Catholic identity, known under the stereotype of *Polak-Katolik*, which is still cultivated in conservative political discourses.³

The different reactions of church⁴ officials, state authorities, and media to the revealed crimes of Catholic priests provide an important insight into how Poles perceive their national-religious identity nowadays and their view of the place of the Catholic Church in the Polish Republic. Therefore, they are an excellent lens through which one can study the underpinning of the ongoing discourse of Church and nation, as well as “imagined” Polish Catholicism in its normative dimension. Naturally, it helps to understand how Poles conceptualize their relation to the Catholic Church and the role of the latter in Polish society.

The Movies as a Litmus Test

The first movie to come out was a comedy-drama, *The Clergy* (2018), which was followed a few months later by a documentary about child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, *Tell No One* (2019). While the first was a work of fiction, it was partially based on the real testimonies of the victims of pedophile priests, and revealed other sins of the Polish clergy as well: alcohol abuse, love affairs, and corruption within the Church structures. The second movie featured testimonies of the victims as well as scenes documenting their confrontations with the predators, and unsuccessful attempts to receive help from the Church hierarchy. The main goal of this movie was to attract public attention to the fact that the cases of child abuse were not punished, but rather remained covered up by bishops and other clergy in power. Both films were hits: in the country numbering thirty-eight million inhabitants, *The Clergy* was watched by over five million viewers (more than *Titanic* or *The Passion of the Christ*), and *Tell No One* has reached more than twenty million views on YouTube where it premiered. These numbers

3. This gluing has been the subject of an extensive sociological study by Krzysztof Kosela, *Polak i Katolik: Splątana tożsamość*, Warsaw 2003.

4. Henceforth, “church” or “the Church” signifies the Catholic Church in Poland unless otherwise is indicated.

indicate that both movies covered topics of extreme interest and importance to Polish society.

While the audiences as well as cultural commentators showed strong support for both movies, their reception by the Church, media, and authorities was complex. When it comes to *The Clergy*, the reactions of governmental bodies were negative. Both the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Piotr Gliński, and the head of the Polish national television Telewizja Polska (TVP), Jacek Kurski, criticized the film for being a provocative caricature.⁵ Conservative media, including TVP, referred negatively to the movie, claiming that it attacks the Church and lacks credibility and good taste.⁶ The Catholic Association of Journalists in Poland called for a boycott. In many Polish cities, far-right groups were protesting in front of the cinemas that screened *The Clergy*. On the other hand, the world of culture welcomed the movie as a great artistic achievement.⁷ Moreover, some Catholic publicists (such as Andrzej Czaja, Tomasz Golonka, and Grzegorz Kramer) expressed positive opinions of the movie. Overall, interestingly, the critique stemmed more from the political party at power, Law and Justice, than from the Church itself.⁸ It is worth noticing that the Church hierarchy as such did not refer to the movie.

Tell No One has received more nuanced and serious responses, probably because the topic was much more sensitive and the movie focused on real events. The documentary was composed of a series of stories of victims confronting their perpetrators. The majority of the perpetrators had committed child abuse a few decades earlier and nonetheless had a long and successful

5. “Minister Gliński o ‘Klerze’: z tematu ważnego i poważnego zrobiono karykaturę”, *Polonia Christiana* 2018-10-11, <https://www.pch24.pl/minister-glinski-o-klerze-z-tematu-waznego-i-powaznego-zrobiono-karykature,63395,i.html>, accessed 2020-07-24; “Tandetna prowokacja”. Jak ‘Wiadomości’ TVP przedstawiły film ‘Kler’”, *wyborcza.pl* 2018-09-23, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,23959845,jacek-kurski-o-klerze-to-tandetna-prowokacja.html>, accessed 2020-07-24. For more information about the reactions, see Andrzej Krajewski, “Nawet jeśli ‘Kler’ przyciągnie kilka milionów widzów, PiS nie będzie miał powodu do narzekania”, *dziennik.pl* 2018-10-01, <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/opinie/artykuly/582217.kler-smarzowski-film-kosciol-prawica-lewica-pis-wiara-pedofilia.html>, accessed 2020-07-24.

6. Dominika Wielowieyska, “Dlaczego PiS tak bardzo przestraszył się ‘Kleru?’”, *wyborcza.pl* 2018-10-01, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,23986763,dlaczego-pis-tak-bardzo-przestraszyl-sie-kleru-ta-nieznosna.html>, accessed 2020-07-24.

7. Paweł Pązik, “‘Wspaniały, powalający, ważny i wielki film’ - krytycy filmowi oceniają ‘Kler’”, *Press* 2018-09-19, https://www.press.pl/tresc/54661,--wspanialy_powalajacy_wazny-i-wielki-film-----krytycy-filmowi-oceniaja---kler---, accessed 2020-07-24; “Zachwyty recenzentów i oburzenie na prawicy. ‘Kler’ wywołuje skrajne reakcje”, *The World News* 2018-09-19, <https://theworldnews.net/pl-news/zachwyty-recenzentow-i-oburzenie-na-prawicy-kler-wywoluje-skrajne-reakcje>, accessed 2020-07-24.

8. Wiktor Ferfecki, “Kler nie krytykuje ‘Kleru’”, *Rzeczpospolita* 2018-10-05, <https://www.rp.pl/Kosciol/181009616-Kler-nie-krytykuje-Kleru.html>, accessed 2020-07-24; Wielowieyska, “Dlaczego PiS tak bardzo przestraszył”.

career in the Church. The movie investigated why the reported cases were not acted upon by the Church hierarchy. They were not disclosed to the police, nor were any steps taken to punish the perpetrators within the framework of canonical law.

The weight of the topic, and the precedence of how the Vatican and Conferences of Bishops in other countries had dealt with it, somehow induced Church officials to express their reactions publicly. The primate of Poland, Archbishop Wojciech Polak, has said that he does not see in the movie any attack on the Church and has expressed his apologies for all the crimes presented in the movie.⁹ Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki thanked the director of the film, Tomasz Sekielski, and also expressed his apologies on behalf of the Church hierarchy.¹⁰ However, Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk, known mostly as the founder of the conservative Radio Maryja, claimed that the movie “is an attack on the Church, calculated to destroy it”.¹¹ Another rather prominent figure, who had been directly involved in covering up one of the cases, Archbishop Sławoj Leszek Głódź, did not even find the topic important and claimed that he did not see the movie because “he has no time for watching baloney”.¹² Eventually, he reconsidered and apologized, but his first reaction is symptomatic.

Although many reactions to these movies were quite balanced, the mechanism of defense traceable in the reactions of Rydzyk, TVP, and the Catholic Association of Journalists shows that many members of the Church do feel that its position is currently threatened. The reaction of Głódź seems to be stemming from the same syndrome of a besieged fortress. When speaking about himself not watching the movie, he added: “Do not attack me and do not provoke me because I am not as naïve as you think”, implying that the journalist asking about his impressions had a hidden agenda and was trying to undermine Głódź’s (episcopal) position.¹³ In order to understand

9. The official statement of Polak is available in both video and text: “Oświadczenie Prymasa Polski ws. filmu Tomasza Sekielskiego Tylko nie mów nikomu”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCMuxdkpZKs>, accessed 2020-07-24; “Prymas: Film ‘Tylko nie mów nikomu’ dowodzi jak wiele Kościoł powinien się nauczyć i zmienić”, *gosc.pl* 2019-05-18, <https://www.gosc.pl/doc/5569424.Prymas-Film-Tylko-nie-mow-nikomu-dowodzi-jak-wiele-Kosciol>, accessed 2020-07-24.

10. “Abp Gądecki: dziękuję Tomaszowi Sekielskiemu”, *Rzeczpospolita* 2019-05-12, <https://www.rp.pl/Kosciol/190519918-Abp-Gadecki-dziekuje-Tomaszowi-Sekielskiemu.html>, accessed 2020-07-24.

11. “‘To walka z Kościołem obliczona na jego zniszczenie’. Ojciec Rydzyk o filmie Sekielskiego”, *Do Rzeczy* 2019-05-16, <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/102814/To-walka-z-Kosciolem-obliczona-na-jego-zniszczenie-Ojciec-Rydzyk-o-filmie-Sekielskiego.html>, accessed 2020-07-24.

12. “Abp Głódź o filmie Sekielskiego: Nie oglądam byle czego”, *Do Rzeczy* 2019-05-12, <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/102488/Abp-Glodz-o-filmie-Sekielskiego-Nie-ogladam-byle-czego.html>, accessed 2020-07-24. My translation.

13. “Abp Głódź o filmie Sekielskiego”. My translation.

the origins of this syndrome and the general context of the reception of the movies, it is useful to have a closer look at the situation of the Polish Church today.

The Particularities of Polish Catholicism

The perception of Poland as a Catholic nation is no novelty, and the latest surveys confirm it. With a population that is 87 % Catholic, Poland appears to be the most Catholic country in Europe, followed by Croatia (84 %) and Italy (78 %).¹⁴ Moreover, the denomination is tied to a high level of religiosity overall. According to the Pew Research Center, Poland is among the eight most religious countries in Europe, closely followed by Ireland.¹⁵ Contrary to Sweden, for the majority of Poles religion belongs in the public sphere and the religious character of public events is not controversial. Among such events can be included: the religious character of military oaths, religion (i.e. Catholic Catechism) classes in public schools, participation of Church officials in state ceremonies, blessing newly opened public facilities, and so on.¹⁶

Not only are Poles comfortable with showing their religion publicly, they also value private devotion and faith. Apparently, 42 % of Poles attend weekly worship and 61 % attend at least monthly. In 2015 more than 90 % of Poles described themselves as believers.¹⁷ Personal faith, however, does not always translate into trust put in the Catholic Church as an institution, or observance of the Church's teachings: only 42,7 %, a number corresponding roughly to the number of those who attend services weekly, declared themselves to be faithful to Church doctrine. Almost half of the population (49,7 %) stated that they "believe in their own way".¹⁸ But even if their beliefs do not fully correspond with what the *magisterium Ecclesiae* teaches, they remain members of the Catholic Church.

In addition, many Poles perceive negatively the political engagement of the Church. In a 2010 survey, 27 % of the respondents claimed that it is decisively too strong and 39 % assessed it as rather too strong, which means

14. Kelsey Jo Starr, "5 facts about Catholics in Europe", *Pew Research Center* 2019-12-19, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/19/5-facts-about-catholics-in-europe/>, accessed 2020-07-24.

15. Starr, "5 facts about Catholics".

16. Janusz Mariański, "Katolicyzm polski w procesie przemian", *Władza Sądzenia* 6 (2015), 30–45; Janusz Mariański, "Kościół Katolicki w Polsce w procesie przemian", *Sociologia a społeczność* 3:1 (2018), 25.

17. Mariański, "Kościół Katolicki", 25.

18. "The Age Gap in Religion Around the World", *Pew Research Center* 2018-06-13, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/>, accessed 2020-07-24.

that a total of 66 % of Poles evaluate the activities of the Church as being too politically involved. At the same time, 45 % of the population thinks that the state should follow the Catholic magisterium on social issues.¹⁹

Moreover, the term “church of possession” applies literally in the Polish case: in Poland, the Church is the largest real estate owner next to the state itself, owning about 160,000 hectares of land and 17,500 churches and chapels.²⁰ Its total annual income is estimated at six billion złoty (approximately 1,36 billion Euros).²¹ It can also be described as the biggest company in the country. All of the above often draws sharp criticism, especially from socialist and left-wing circles who would prefer to see the Church as a spiritual entity, not a rich worldly corporation and an actor on the political scene.

These numbers provide a glimpse of the complicated relation of the Poles to their Catholic Church. Catholicism is still the default religious option in Poland; however, the phenomenon of Euro-secularism is becoming a noticeable tendency.²² This entails an independent approach to faith and a tendency towards deinstitutionalization. Therefore, on the one hand, Poland remains nominally the most Catholic country in Europe, with very strong markers of individual faith; on the other hand, one can easily observe increasing individualistic tendencies, i.e. unwillingness to accept the institutional framework of the Church and a preference for “believing in my own way”. At the same time, Poles would like the Church to be more separated from the political scene and thus the state to have a more secular character, yet still be guided by Christian principles of mercy and social justice. These declarations translate into how Poles vote in their elections.

***Polak-Katolik* in the Realm of Politics**

When observing the political choices of Poles in the recent decade, one can notice that the differences between the two most powerful fractions in the country – Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) and Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) – are ideological, and therefore correspond to what one could call the two types of “Polish conscience”. The socio-economic agendas of both parties are in fact quite similar, apart from their views on ecology. The issues that divide Poles today concern same-sex

19. Mariański, “Katolicyzm polski”, 28.

20. Cezary Łazarewicz, “Prześwietlamy majątek Kościoła”, *Polityka* 2018-03-18, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1509032,1,przeswietlamy-majatek-kosciola.read>, accessed 2020-07-24.

21. “Kościół w Polsce zarabia ponad 6 mld zł rocznie?”, *Rekin Finansów* 2019-10-22, <https://rekinfinansow.pl/kosciol-polska-zarabia-6-mld-zl-rocznie/>, accessed 2020-07-24.

22. I use the term “Euro-secularism” after Janusz Mariański, who uses Peter Berger’s theoretical framework. Mariański, “Katolicyzm polski”, 31.

marriage, abortion, and accepting the Western secular paradigm of the public sphere. Therefore, it is not accidental that the conservative camp produces narratives combining the issues of Catholic identity with patriotic traditions. Rather, these values somehow seem to be threatened and are being perceived as in need of defense.

The political fight in Poland closely relates to issues of identity: the conservative camp wants to preserve the patriotic-national ideals that can be gathered under the umbrella term *Polak-Katolik* values. *Polak-Katolik* is a stereotype, which can be applied descriptively or normatively, referring to the Catholic character of the Polish nation. In order to understand better its complexities, I will adduce to the distinctions made by Brian Porter-Szűcs, which I find helpful in this case. He links the concept of the *Polak-Katolik* to the assertion that Poland is Catholic and indicates at least five possible meanings of such a phrase:

1. Political observation: Catholicism is treated as if it were the official religion of the Polish state, for example the state supports religious education and crosses and pictures of John Paul II (1920–2005) are on display in public places;
2. Demographic observation: The vast majority of Poles are Catholic;
3. Historical observation: The Catholic Church has played an important role in Polish history;
4. Anthropological observation: Catholicism serves as a marker of Polish identity in daily life (in some parts of Poland);
5. Prescriptive rule: Poland should be Catholic, and a true Pole should be Catholic.²³

The latter meaning became a fixed element of the ideological discussions about the shape of independent Poland in the twentieth century. After Poland had regained its independence in 1918, it became home to a multi-ethnic population out of which only about 65 % were ethnic Poles. During the two interwar decades (until 1939) one of the prevalent discourses was that of Roman Dmowski (1864–1939) – leader of the National Democracy political movement – who saw Poland as a country for Poles, and *Polak-Katolik* in that period was used as a criterion of exclusion of those who were “false” Poles: Bolsheviks, communists, Jews, Freemasons, and so on.²⁴ All

23. Brian Porter-Szűcs, “The Birth of the Polak-Katolik”, *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa* 49 (2017), 6–9.

24. His most known publications are Roman Dmowski, *Mysli nowoczesnego Polaka*, Warsaw 1903; Roman Dmowski, *Niemcy, Rosja i kwestia polska*, Lviv 1908; Roman Dmowski, *Polityka polska i odbudowanie państwa*, Lviv 1925; Roman Dmowski, *Przewrót*, Warsaw 1934.

of them were seen as enemies of the Polish nation, who, by attacking Polish Catholic morality, sought to destroy the national spirit and introduce foreign control over the nation, and therefore were directly aiming at the destruction of Polishness in general.

Interestingly, this argumentation has survived until today and is mirrored in the discourses of right-wing politicians and in certain Church circles. Going back to the two clashing visions of Poland, it is worth remembering that conservative politicians very strongly underline the connection between the nation and the Church (based on the notion of *Polak-Katolik*), sometimes using the Church instrumentally to pursue their own agenda, while the liberal camp envisions a Euro-secular state. As a result, those who feel threatened by Western secular ideals often use a discourse employing military vocabulary: attack, offensive, threat, and so on. If they perceive the influx of Western ideas as an attack, they define both the Church and Poland as its subjects.²⁵ Jarosław Kaczyński (former prime minister and the leader of PiS) has explicitly stated this ideological unity between Church and state, for example in 2012: “The Church is the only depository of the system of values known by all Poles; it [the value system] is not always kept, it happens to be broken. He who attacks the Church attacks Poland, attacks the foundations of our social life.”²⁶

Western ideas of a secular state, liberal sexual morality, and gender theories are seen as a threat to the Catholic Church in Poland, to Catholic morality, and therefore to Poland itself. The clash between “Western values” and the “values known by all Poles” resonates with the memory of the past *Kulturkampf* and immediately provokes a strong defensive reaction in conservative circles. If one wants to understand the *raison d'être* of this way of thinking, one has to go back in time and have a closer look at the historical development of a theology of the nation in Poland.

Historical Conditioning

The origins of Polish statehood date to the period preceding the Christianization of Poland.²⁷ However, Poland enters the European political scene as

25. See the opinions of Rydzyk in “Biskup do Rodziny Radia Maryja: Trwa atak na Kościół, na ojca dyrektora. Nadszedł czas walki”, *dziennik.pl* 2019-07-13, <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/602526,bp-frankowski-o-rydzyk-lgbt-kosciol-rodzina-radia-maryja-atak-tvp-walka.html>, accessed 2020-07-24; “O. Rydzyk: Najgorszy grzech jednego kapłana nie oznacza, że wszyscy tacy są”, *Do Rzeczy* 2019-05-26, <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/103853/O-Rydzyk-Najgorszy-grzech-jednego-kaplana-nie-oznacza-ze-wszyscy-tacy-sa.html>, accessed 2020-07-24.

26. “Kaczyński: Kto atakuje Kościół, ten atakuje Polskę”, *Gazeta Prawna* 2012-03-17, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/603469,kaczyński-kto-atakuje-kosciol-ten-atakuje-polske.html>, accessed 2020-07-24. My translation.

27. This section offers a subjective summary of historical events that in my view contributed to the later nineteenth-century development of a theology of the nation and were

an independent country, united under the rule of Mieszko I (c. 931–992), only after the so-called Baptism of Poland (966). Accepting Christianity from Rome, not from Byzantium, was a deliberate political choice and conditioned the fate of Poland for centuries: it would always aspire to belong to the West, even though Polish culture was subject to many eastern influences (in language and dress, for example). With time, the geopolitical circumstances strengthened this choice even more.²⁸

For many centuries Poland was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During the reign of the Jagiellonian dynasty (especially after the Reformation) it became home to all sorts of confessions (except Arians) and became known for its religious tolerance.²⁹ Poles (or rather the Polish nobility) did not participate *en masse* in the medieval crusades but they had their own wars against the infidels a few centuries later, which contributed to the strengthening of Polish-Catholic identity, and coincided with the development of the Counter-Reformation in the Catholic Church.³⁰ The latter provided rich ideological underpinning for the Polish wars with Muslims (Ottoman Turkey), Protestant Swedes, or Orthodox Muscovites and Cossacks. The conflicts were political but religious differences helped to create ideological narratives encouraging fighting the infidels.³¹ Especially the Muslim threat lurking in the East contributed to the coining of the notion of *Polonia antemurale Christianitatis*, Poland the bulwark of Christendom. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was perceived as a defender of Europe from Muslim invasion and a *semper fidelis* daughter of Rome.³²

used as historical arguments in the relevant narratives to prove that Polishness is closely tied to Catholicism.

28. On the history of Poland, it is worthwhile consulting Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, Oxford 2005; Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present*, New York 2001.

29. See the Act of the Warsaw Confederation in 1573 – one of the first acts in Europe granting religious freedoms: equal treatment regardless of religious beliefs and state support for non-Catholics as well as the guarantee that the state will not join the Church in persecuting non-Catholics.

30. The acts of the Council of Trent were officially accepted by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1577 thanks to the initiative of king Stephen Báthory (1533–1586), who also became an active promotor of the Jesuits in the Commonwealth. He also tried to organize an anti-Turkish league but died before accomplishing the task.

31. Famous seventeenth-century author of memoirs (and soldier) Jan Chryzostom Pasek (c. 1636–1701) describes, for example, how Swedes and Danes used evil spirits as home servants, which can be read today as a folk story but gives an insight into religious patterns of othering. Quite typically, he also often describes God as cooperating with Polish armies and confusing the enemies. See Jan Chryzostom Pasek, *The Memoirs of Jan Chryzostom z Goslawic Pasek*, New York 1978.

32. See for example the anti-Turkish league envisioned by Pope Sixtus V (1521–1590) and Stephen Báthory. It was supposed to include Spain, Venice, Poland, Germany, and Moscow,

Later, when by the end of the eighteenth century the Commonwealth ceased to exist and was partitioned by the three neighbouring political powers – Protestant Prussia, Orthodox Russia, and Catholic Austria – the Catholic Church gradually started to gain a unique position in Polish society. It became a shrine of the Polish national identity, where Polish national ideals were preserved and conveyed to coming generations.³³ This does not mean that Rome supported the Polish national cause, but nonetheless many local Catholic priests did.³⁴

The nineteenth century brought a number of Polish national insurrections and a development of the Polish messianic idea, fuelling the ideology of Polish independence. The main theoretician and prophet of such messianic thought was Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), one of the three most important Polish poets of the era.³⁵ In fact, Mickiewicz's ideas, ascribing soteriological value to the suffering of partitioned Poland, became a foundation of Polish national identity and the understanding of Polish patriotism for the following generations of Poles. This approach became particularly prominent in the period from the November (1830–1831) and January (1863–1864) Uprisings until the defeat of the Warsaw Uprising (1944), a span of more than a century.³⁶

The Polish independence movement employed the idea of Poland being the Christ of the nations: that the Polish struggle for freedom is meaningful for all nations and eventually will help to bring freedom, justice, and independence to all oppressed nations. In fact, many Poles fought in the national insurrections of other nations: The United States, Australia, Greece, and

and therefore corresponded roughly to the Holy League from the time of the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and the Great Turkish War (1684).

33. Today this function of the Church is often preserved in Polish parishes abroad: they serve both as points of religious reference and as centres of patriotic instruction and preservation of the Polish national identity.

34. On the stance of the Vatican regarding the Polish national cause, see the papal encyclical *Cum primum*, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Greg16/g16cumpr.htm>, accessed 2020-07-24. On the involvement of the Polish clergy in the Polish national cause, see for example Mieczysław Żywczyński, "Kościół i duchowieństwo w Powstaniu Styczniowym (Stan badań w zarysie)", *Przegląd Historyczny* 34 (1937–1938), 512–525; Wojciech Saletra, "Duchowieństwo obszaru między Wisłą a Pilicą wobec Powstania Listopadowego 1830–1831", *Teka Komisji Historycznej* 8 (2011), 141–160; Sabina Bober & Zygmunt Zieliński, "Kościół a odzyskanie niepodległości przez Polskę", *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 31 (2018), 61–80.

35. For a general understanding of the idea of Polish messianism, see Łukasz Kowalik & Paulina Litka, "Polski Mesjanizm Romantyczny", *Przegląd Filozoficzny: Nowa Seria* 27:1 (2018), 67–91; Andrzej Walicki, *Filozofia a Mesjanizm: Studia z dziejów filozofii i myśli społeczno-religijnej romantyzmu polskiego*, Warsaw 1970; Marek A. Cichocki, "Między polskim mesjanizmem a misjonizmem: Rozmowa z Andrzejem Walickim", *Teologia Polityczna* 4 (2006–2007), 30–41. For Mickiewicz's messianism, see for example Andrzej Walicki, *Mesjanizm Adama Mickiewicza w perspektywie porównawczej*, Warsaw 2006.

36. Cichocki, "Między polskim".

others, under the slogan “For your and our freedom”. This attitude necessarily implied that the Polish nation, as one having a unique mission, must be characterized by very high moral standards. Freedom fighters have to be not only military leaders but must also be able to guide others on the moral and spiritual level towards establishing a new and fair socio-political order. Moreover, the conviction that Poland has an important historical mission to fulfil made it possible to maintain the claim that Poland should be restored as an independent state. Thus, Polish aspirations of independence became sacred, and as such found their fixed and undisputed place in popular Polish Catholicism. It was thanks to messianic ideas that Polish politics became ethicized and gained moral value.

Interestingly, the sacralization of patriotism was not always connected to nationalism or ethnic exclusivity. Until the defeat of the January Uprising, ideas of a multicultural Poland were still vivid; the term *Polish* could mean anyone who participated in Polish national culture and was tied neither to ethnicity nor to religion.³⁷ A Jew engaged in the Polish national cause would make as good a Pole as a Polish nobleman.³⁸ Unfortunately, this attitude started to change after the Polish uprisings failed and in consequence, the partitioning powers started to apply many restrictions on and punishments of those who defended the Polish cause. Some were sent to Siberia, some lost their estates, and some underwent the death penalty.³⁹ Polish cultural independence was heavily oppressed. Poles started to feel the weight of their defeat; and at the same time, minorities like Jews and Germans had many occasions to prosper economically, because they were not subject to equally harsh restrictions. It was then that the concept of the *Polak-Katolik* as we know it today started to emerge, denoting the ideal of a perfect (or true) Pole.

When Poland had regained independence in 1918, it was far from being a cultural or ethnic monolith, as only two-thirds of the inhabitants were Polish, and even those who were, were raised and shaped by three different

37. Cichocki, “Między polskim”, 2.

38. Worth noting is the fact that “Polishness” was largely a product of the Polish nobility (*szlachta*) – they produced the dominant Polish culture and shaped the national ideals preserved until this day, such as honour, valour, hospitality, and generosity. Polish bourgeoisie was predominantly ethnically foreign, consisting originally of Germans, Jews, Armenians, Italians, and many other nationalities. With time they became polonized, but they never achieved a cultural influence equal to that of the nobility. The large masses of the peasants started to participate in Polish culture only in the nineteenth century, therefore they inherited many of the nobility’s ideals of Polishness rather than developing their own.

39. One of the most monumental figures who lost their life was the dictator of the January Uprising, Romuald Traugutt (1826–1864). His execution was public and gained not only patriotic but also religious significance: after he had kissed a crucifix, he was hanged in front of a crowd of 30,000 people who sang the Trisagion as he was being executed.

political traditions: Russian, Prussian, and Austrian. A multicultural society was not the only challenge. The Bolshevik revolution was spreading and it seemed that independent Poland soon could be overthrown and incorporated into the Soviet Union. This situation of a sudden threat is almost an archetypical pattern that Poles recognize immediately, and as history has proven, they can react swiftly and mobilize their forces. Therefore, in the lurking danger of a Bolshevik invasion, the Polish episcopate made it clear that “the Catholic Church will become the national shield and a fortress against the inundation of anarchy and evil”.⁴⁰ Worth noticing is that the victory over the Bolsheviks in the Battle of Warsaw (often called miraculous) took place on the great Marian feast of the Assumption, 15 August 1920, and was seen as a divine intervention. Poland, again, fulfilled its role as *antemurale Christianitatis*.

During the following two decades of independence, all the enemies of Poland were often personified by the Jews, as in a letter by Cardinal August Hlond (1881–1948) written in 1936:

It is a fact that Jews are waging war against the Catholic Church, that they are steeped in free-thinking, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, the Bolshevik movement, and revolutionary activity. It is a fact that Jews have a corruptive influence on morals and that their publishing houses are spreading pornography. It is true that Jews are perpetrating fraud, practicing usury, and dealing in prostitution. It is true that, from a religious and ethical point of view, Jewish youth are having a negative influence on the Catholic youth in our schools.⁴¹

Hlond, who served as the primate of Poland, saw atheism, the Bolshevik movement, and revolutionary activity as tools aiming not only for the deprivation of Polish youth but also as an attack on Polish independence through a weakening of the Polish spirit.⁴² Thus, one who threatens Catholic morality becomes an enemy of the nation. Two Polish spiritual giants would continue this line of thought later under the communist regime: Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński (1901–1981) and Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II).

40. Brian Porter, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, New York 2011, 329.

41. Quoted in Ronald E. Modras, *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland, 1933–1939*, Chur 1994, 346.

42. Grzegorz Bachanek, “Kardynał August Hlond w walce o duszę narodu w latach 1945–1948”, in Wojciecha Polaka, Arkadiusz Czwolek & Sylwii Galij-Skarbińskiej (eds.), *Czas próby: Kościół katolicki w okresie PRL*, Toruń 2017, 15–25.

Wyszyński, Wojtyła and the Theology of the Nation

The tragic events of the Second World War⁴³ and the following change of Poland's borders resulted in post-war Poland becoming an ethnically monolithic state with a vast majority of its inhabitants being Catholics. However, the communist rule thwarted the National Democrats' dream of Poland being a country of *Polak-Katoliks*. The Church was constantly under the radar, and various oppressions ensued. During this period, the Church constituted a sort of ideological counterbalance to communist propaganda, and all opposition, no matter if Catholic or not, became to a certain extent politically Catholic. On an ideological level, Wyszyński and Wojtyła created a very sophisticated theology of the nation during this period.⁴⁴ They both claimed that the nation was both material and spiritual, created by God, and as such belonged to the realm of natural law – unlike the state, which is just a product of human agreement.⁴⁵ For Wyszyński, every nation is educated by God and given a specific task in God's salvific plan for the world. However, when nations do not obey God's calling and sin against Him, they perish.⁴⁶ This understanding of the nation is very biblical: a nation is a natural extension of a family, a group created by God, and chosen by God to fulfil a specific mission (ideas very similar to those present within Polish messianism) and to be faithful to God, thereby giving witness before the other nations.

This is the reason why Wyszyński directed so much effort at denouncing and condemning Polish sins: alcohol abuse, petty theft, dishonesty at work, sexual immorality, and so on. For him, they, as sins, posed a serious threat to the continuity of the Polish nation and its freedom (understood spiritually, but accompanied by a conviction that this is the only way to achieve political freedom). In this vision, the Church becomes a sacrament of the nation,

43. Usually, the number of Polish victims of the Second World War is estimated at three million Jews (90 % of the entire Jewish population of Poland) and three million non-Jews. However, it remains unclear how many Polish citizens really perished in the Second World War. It is known that out of a population of 35 million in 1939, 24 million remained in 1948. When considering these numbers, one should also take migration and changed borders into account.

44. See Stefan Wyszyński, *Miłość i sprawiedliwość społeczna: Rozważania społeczne*, Poznań 1993. This book was written in the 1940s but published much later. Wojtyła's thoughts on the theology of the nation were expressed in the most detailed way in his book written as John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium*, Rizzoli 2005.

45. For more on their understanding of the nation, see for example Jerzy Lewandowski, "Teologia rzeczywistości ziemskich w kerygmacie Stefana Kardynała Wyszyńskiego", *Studia Prymasowskie* 1 (2007), 165–197; Paweł Machalski, "Naród, pamięć i tożsamość w nauczaniu społecznym św. Jana Pawła II", *Analecta Cracoviensia* 46 (2014), 63–82; Paweł Skibiński, "Naród oczami przyszłego prymasa: Rozważania Ks. Stefana Wyszyńskiego w książce *Miłość i sprawiedliwość społeczna*", *Teologia Polityczna* 4 (2006–2007), 270–282.

46. Lewandowski, "Teologia rzeczywistości", 166; Porter, *Faith and Fatherland*, 350–351.

where the national values become purified, sanctified, and fortified by the transformative light of divine revelation.⁴⁷ At the same time, everything that is not Catholic is understood as opposing the essential nature of the nation and thus constituting a threat to its well-being. What is not morally acceptable from the Catholic point of view is seen as fundamentally harmful to the nation, because it kills its spirit. Therefore, the good of the nation and of the Catholic Church become one.

Also for John Paul II, the fate of the nation was intrinsically connected to God's salvific plan, but maybe even more in the eschatological dimension. In his famous homily given in Warsaw during his first pilgrimage to Poland as a pope, he stated:

It is impossible without Christ to understand and appraise the contribution of the Polish nation *to the development of man and his humanity* in the past and its contribution today also [...]. It is necessary to follow the traces of what, or rather who, Christ was for the sons and daughters of this land down the generations. Not only for those who openly believed in him and professed him with the faith of the Church, but also for those who appeared to be at a distance, outside the Church. For those who doubted or were opposed.

It is right to understand the history of the nation through man, each human being of this nation. At the same time man cannot be understood apart from this community that is constituted by the nation. [...] *It is therefore impossible without Christ to understand the history of the Polish nation* – this great thousand-year-old community – that is so profoundly decisive for me and for each one of us. If we reject this key to understanding our nation, we lay ourselves open to a substantial misunderstanding. We no longer understand ourselves. It is impossible without Christ to understand this nation with its past so full of splendour and also of terrible difficulties.⁴⁸

John Paul II ties the history of the Polish nation to the history of salvation and indicates that in Christ, Poles can find the fullness of their national identity. For him, even those Poles who “doubted or were opposed” to the Church remain part of the nation, seen biblically – as a community that is predestined to be saved as a group. Therefore, every Pole somehow remains engrafted in Christ. He highlights that Poles cannot understand their

47. Lewandowski, “Teologia rzeczywistości”, 170–171.

48. “Homily of His Holiness John Paul II”, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790602_polonia-varsavia.html, accessed 2020-07-24. Italics in original.

identity and the history of their nation without Christ, as if He was the inner nature of a bond keeping the nation together.

It is impossible to understand this city, Warsaw, the capital of Poland, that undertook in 1944 an unequal battle against the aggressor, a battle in which it was abandoned by the allied powers, a battle in which it was buried under its own ruins – if it is not remembered that under those same ruins there was also the statue of Christ the Saviour with his cross that is in front of the church at Krakowskie Przedmiescie.⁴⁹

Christ shares in the suffering of the Polish capital, in the defeats and triumphs of the nation. Somehow, the Church is a visible sign of this presence of Christ. From the apostolic letter “Tertio millennio adveniente” one can also learn that the Pope is sure of the eschatological role of the nations that are supposed to give witness to Christ and as communities are responsible for reconciliation, peace, and social justice in the world.⁵⁰ Thus, one must conclude that Polishness, which cannot be interpreted rightly without Christ, finds its fullness only within Catholicism.

Naturally, these ideas have been reflected also in the documents of the Polish Conference of Bishops. Already in the 1970s, the Polish Episcopate stated that “destroying religion would constitute the destruction of the foundation of the Nation. For the bond between the faith and Polishness was and is so strong, that undermining one leads to the ruin of the other.” The same conviction was expressed in the claim that, “in Poland attacks on Catholicism are simultaneously attacks on the national spirit, on the national heritage – they are attacks on our very selves”.⁵¹

Conclusion

Grounding national unity in Catholicism, as Wojtyła and Wyszyński did, had to result in complications and tensions between the religious and the national component of Polish identity. When one becomes familiar with the ideas discussed above, it is not surprising to hear Jarosław Kaczyński say that attacking the Church is tantamount to attacking Poland. He says nothing new, but merely reflects decades of discourse on the theology of the Polish nation.

49. “Homily of His Holiness John Paul II”.

50. “Tertio millennio adveniente”, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html, accessed 2020-07-24.

51. Porter, *Faith and Fatherland*, 349–350.

This understanding, although it might seem shocking or even heterodox to some Western Catholics, has a deep historical conditioning. The messianic ideas developed during the times of the partitions had a great impact on the sanctification of the nation and resulted in gluing the Polish national and Catholic identities together. This state was enhanced and preserved through the political oppressions of the twentieth century: the Bolshevik threat, the Second World War, and finally the Communist regime, when the Church served as a sacrament of the nation, preserving the national ideals and incorporating them in the sphere of the *sacrum*. The nation was understood as God's creature, entrusted with a mission in the history of salvation. Whether this understanding is specific to Poland only, I leave for further comparative investigation.

Today the political circumstances seem far from the severity of the Communist regime. Nonetheless, the defensive mechanism, linking attacks (real or imagined) on the Catholic Church to attacks on the Polish nation, prove that the concept of *Polak-Katolik* still underpins public discourses. The reactions to the films raising issues of immorality in the Polish Church are an excellent illustration of this phenomenon.

The aim of this short article is not to evaluate whether the Polish-Catholic glued identity is a positive or a negative phenomenon *per se*. Shocking as it may sound to a Swedish reader, it is a legitimate approach (one of many) to lived religion, filtered by national sensitivities and shaped by history. However, it has to be noticed that when it came to the recently revealed cases of child sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests, *Polak-Katolik* identity did not help to establish transparency and open dialogue. Rather, it facilitated politicization of the discourse and digging even deeper into the trenches of the old familiar narrative that the good of the Church (as an institution) is joined to that of the nation. It is a sign of hope for the Church that its hierarchy (for example Archbishop Wojciech Polak) seems to be less attached to the idea than some of the politicians. ▲

SUMMARY

This article is a reflection on contemporary Polish-Catholic identity. It begins by reflecting on how a gluing-together of national and religious identity is evident in discourses about the most pressing challenge of the Catholic Church in Poland today: the child abuse scandals. The revelation of these crimes is bound up with the premieres in 2018 and 2019 of the movies *Clergy* and *Tell No One*. The reactions generated by the movies betray a set of ideas that assumes equality between the good of the Church and the good of the nation. Critique of the Church is seen as an attack,

both on the Catholic Church and on the Polish nation. The article then proceeds to unpack the theology of the nation that underpins public discourse on the place of the Church in Polish society today. The main point of reference is the historical development of the notion of *Polak-Katolik* as a normative term describing who a real Pole is. The article presents a subjective choice of the historical circumstances that were most formative of this permanent *synechia* of the national and the religious: the partitions of Poland, the Polish fight for independence, the ideas of Polish messianism, and the theology of the nation developed by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II).