

GRANDIOSE VISIONS: CHANGES IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLAND AFTER 1989

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The country of Poland and the Polish Catholic Church have existed for an equal length of time—just over a thousand years. The vast majority of Poles proclaim themselves Catholic. The Church has after played a pivotal role in the country's history, and it is not uncommon to find stereotypical descriptions of the two as synonymous entities. But, in fact, the Catholic Church in Poland has had numerous enemies throughout the centuries, both internal and external. Whereas domestic opposition was never strong enough to endanger the existence of the Church, external forces have repeatedly attempted to deprive the Church of its autonomy. Such was the case with Lutheran Swedes in the seventeenth century, Orthodox Russians in the subsequent two hundred years, and with the Communist regime of the post - World War II period. Finally, after the political changes of 1989 in Eastern Europe, it would seem that the Church can at last return to its symbolic coexistence with the political authorities in a climate of mutual trust and democratic spirit. One could not be further from the truth.

The fall of Communism in Poland after the summer of 1989 created a social void to be competed for by two distinct ideologies - democracy/capitalism and Catholicism. The two are by no means mutually exclusive, as many disciples of each institution will claim. But sharp polemics, as well as protracted antagonism and a confrontational approach to the situation, evident on both sides, have led to a state of discord between the Catholic Church and the governing political spheres. This schism runs down the entire length of the social fabric, dividing the country along religious lines, as only one of many planes of conflict in the post-Communist society in Poland.

But to depict the confrontation as a simple democracy versus clericalism dichotomy would be a gross oversimplification of the actual situation. In reality, the existing divisions are much more subtle and interconnected so that many individuals find themselves at a loss as to which camp should be awarded greater support. The majority of the citizens is ready for a *modus vivendi*.

Background

The Catholic Church has always presented a formidable institution on the Polish political scene, enjoying the privileged position of *primus inter pares*. It was strong enough to withstand the winds of reformist change blowing from the West, and it also proved too solid for the Communists to subdue. By gaining small concessions from the government and securing a coexistential compromise with the authorities under its spiritual leader Cardinal Wyszyński (primate of Poland from 1953 until 1981), the Church was able to retain a degree of autonomy and become the only legal opposition to the regime in the country. "Because there was no other institution or association in postwar Poland that could perform as a censor of the regime, the Church became ipso facto a quasi-political opposition." In this capacity, it acted as an umbrella organization for such groupings as the Committee for the Defense of Workers (Komitet Obrony Robotników - KOR) and the Movement for the Defense of Human and Citizen Rights (Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela - ROPCIO), which were predecessors of the Free Workers' Union Solidarity. Thereafter, the Church portended to act as an arbiter between the movement and the politicians, with the trend continuing after the declaration of Martial Law and the banning of Solidarity in December 1981. Although the Church did not participate directly in the Round Table talks between the government and the opposition, behind the scenes it always remained an important element in the forging of the new political and economic order.

The Round Table Agreement brought the first semi-free elections since the Communist takeover (shortly after the conclusion of World War II), which swept in a non-Communist Sejm (lower house of the parliament) but retained a predominantly Communist Senate. According to some accounts, the initial stages of a future Church-government conflict could already be perceived at this point. It was vested in

the lack of resistance to a politically leftist government and legislature on the part of the Church, and the subsequent legislative proposals, standing in open disagreement with certain aspects of the Church doctrine.

A Time of Revival

The Church's return onto the public arena after the social atrophy of the Communist years was perfectly normal. It began deriving immediate benefits from the quickly changing political picture. Restoration of Church property, confiscated during the reign of Stalinism, began in late August of 1989 on the power of law enacted in May of the same year. Another clause from 1991, regarding state-Church relations, allowed for a free grant of 15 hectares of land to individual parishes and up to 80 hectares to parishes with seminaries by local authorities. Through the first quarter of 1994, the Church has regained a total of some 18,000 hectares of agricultural land. For the most part, restitutions are proceeding amiably, with concern for the prestige of both negotiating sides. However, eager critics denounce the Church's acquisition of property as greedy and certain cases are likely to prove emotionally inflammatory.

Although the lower house of parliament repealed the Church's former tax privileges, such as non-taxable profits from economic activity and alms collections in the Church, the Senate opposed the bill and redrafted the privileges into it. During the same period, relations between Poland and the Vatican were officially restored. The two states exchanged diplomatic delegates, with Father Jerzy Kowalczyk becoming the apostolic nuncio in Warsaw. The State Radio and Television Council awarded wavelength concessions to twenty-five different radio stations free of charge, with an additional request for a national television station coming from the Church. The Catholic Church is the only institution in Poland allowed to operate radio and TV stations. Catholic and Church (institutional) newspapers sprang back to life across the entire country on both the local and the national level. With the help of the American Catholic Church, the Catholic Information Agency (KAI) was created, one of only twenty in the world and the first such institution in Central-Eastern Europe.

Nostalgia for the Past

But the Church's improved international and domestic standing came at a price. Partly as a result of the regular course of events associated with democratic freedoms and termination of cultural isolation, partly as a result of the Church's meddling in national politics and applying pressure on believers to pay greater heed to the Church doctrine, increasing numbers of parishioners became alienated from the institution of the Church:

Ninety-five percent of [Polish] citizens declare themselves as Catholic, a substantially smaller number believes in God, the majority ignores the moral teachings of the Church, . . . and only an inconspicuous minority supports an active role of the church in public life.

Calling to service in monastic orders is also decreasing, especially among women.

It is obvious that the opening of the state's borders to the world and with the recognition of broad civil rights, competing ideologies and viewpoints, including other religions, will penetrate the society. Moreover, the possibility of freely expressing one's opinion has provided numerous political and social forums - apart from the Church - for voicing one's discontent with the current state of affairs. Also, new alternative concepts of spending time (e.g. watching television or going for an outing) have replaced the traditional Mass on Sunday among the less devout. People are suddenly presented with options heretofore unknown.

Part of a Greater Whole

As yet, Catholic Church in modern-day Poland has not secured for itself (and most likely never will) an officially privileged position within the religious community. It dominates the local scene by sheer numbers, and although such cases as Catholic religious instruction in public schools do provide the Catholic Church with an unfair advantage, present law-makers are aiming towards placing all denominations in Poland on a more equal footing. despite initial protests from a group of parishioners, the following eastern religions have been recognized by the authorities and granted legal status: the

Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church, which obtained its first bishop (Jan Martyniak) in August of 1989. Bishop Martyniak became an auxiliary bishop to the Primate of Poland. There are also numerous Protestant sects present in the country, as well as some 5,000 practicing Buddhists, assembled in six different groups. In the democratic spirit of greater tolerance and equal rights for minority groups (evident also in the arena of domestic politics), the Church empowered bishop Alfons Nossol to hold Masses in German parishes throughout the region of Upper Silesia, where a substantial minority of some half a million ethnic Germans resides. Masses in Lithuanian are also held in certain parishes in the northeastern part of the country, where a small Lithuanian minority resides permanently. A number of Catholic Church buildings have been relinquished to other religious organizations, primarily to the Greek Catholic and the Orthodox Church.

The episcopate also emphasizes involvement of wider circles of laics in the daily life of the Church through number of Catholic lay organizations and social movements, such as the Catholic Youth (Młodzież Katolicka) and the Catholic Action (Akcja Katolicka). The latter in particular has been the object of much ecclesiastical activity and extensive media coverage in recent months. The initiative was taken up by Pope John Paul II in early 1993 at a meeting with Polish bishops in the Vatican, when he directly suggested a revival of a powerful pre-war lay Catholic organization. The current movement will be modeled on its former embodiment from the interwar period, when the membership numbered 750,000, and it permeated the entire Polish society. The organization will constitute a group of lay people, who together with the clergy should actively take part in the apostolic task of the Church. Individual cells will be located in public institutions and places of work, including the sick, unemployed, and the poor. The movement will be apolitical, transgressing even Catholic parties, although "a Catholic has the right and the duty to participate in political life." The Church authorities consider this project as one of its primary tasks from now until the end of the decade. In addition, a twenty-member National Council of Lay Catholics was called to life, to expedite cooperation between lay Catholic organizations and the Church hierarchy itself.

There are discrepancies between the Primate Jozef Cardinal Glemp and younger bishops as to the organizational methods of parishioners, but they all agree that the aim of these organizations is to prohibit the Republic of Poland from becoming a secular country with a division of Church and state.

Some people, already sensitive to the Church's attempt at regaining the unofficial power it wielded in the Communist era, view such proclamations as new methods of clericalization of the society, and wonder how they differ from those practiced by the Communists themselves. The Canon Law (Code) forbids priests to engage in political activities (which apparently they are unable to resist on occasions), rendering alternative methods of extending the Church's influence more palatable to the populace.

To mend its reputation as an institution concerned primarily with the spiritual and physical well-being of the citizens, the Church has again begun to assume the role of an extrapartite mediator between the leading economic and political echelons and the working class. One instance of such community involvement occurred during the course of the summer of 1994, when bishops mediated between the striking Warsaw steel mill workers and mill administrators. In a more recent case, the episcopate indicated its willingness to mediate a conflict between the President and the Prime Minister over candidates for the ministerial positions in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, and Defense.

The Church is also hard at work building up a new image as a modern institution with appeal to vast numbers of people of all ages. With increasing popular concern for the immense ecological damage bestowed as a dowry upon the young state by the former regime, the Christian dogma of Personalist ethics (i.e. the notion of people's superiority over all other beings) had been criticized in the process. The Catholic Church in Poland took its first feeble step towards "reconciling the principles of Christian ethics with the principles of ecological ethics" by supporting a national ecological campaign "Cleaning up the World," which took place on 17-18 September 1994.

Present: Church vs. State

The current conflict between the Church and the state revolves around the incompatibility of the Catholic

Church doctrine, as defined by the Vatican and the Polish episcopate, and the tenets of democracy as defined by the legislative and executive bodies of the Polish ruling authorities. In the Church's dictionary, democracy means theocracy. Around this core has been spun a web of miscommunication, misinterpretation, and antagonism on both sides. A very important part of the continuing polemics is the degree of separation of the Church from the state, with leftist liberals arguing for a completely secular state, while the clergy warn against a revival of institutionalized agnosticism.

The Church bases its teachings on the law of nature, i.e. on objective, unchanging moral norms, such as the right of every human to life. Democracy, on the other hand, is also grounded in the natural right of every human being to choose one's path in life. (The choice is often reduced to electing political rulers, who in turn are responsible to the people to fulfil their demands. Choice, however, can also be made through other political means, such as plebiscites or referenda.) Efforts undertaken by the Church authorities to model lay laws along the lines of religious teachings, will be perceived by the latter as an interference with the sovereign state. Tension grows along the edges of the various value structures and systems, wherein the values themselves may have many things in common.

A perfect example of the secular and the ecclesiastic coming to loggerheads is the issue of abortion. Shortly after the abolishment of Communism, the Church submitted a legislative proposal to the new parliament, regarding protection of the life of an unborn child. After a couple of years of an on-and-off debate, the parliament finally approved a version of the law, making abortion a virtual crime, punishable by two years of prison and a fine for both the doctor and the patient. Legal abortions can only be performed in case of rape. After its 1993 victory in parliamentary elections, the present post-Communist coalition set its sights upon liberalization of the abortion law--an undertaking strongly opposed by the Church and President Walesa. A national referendum was proposed by the parliament, but despite a majority of public opinion in favor of liberalization of the law, no referendum has yet taken place. Nevertheless, the parliament passed legislation liberalizing the one currently in force, only to be vetoed by the President. The proposed amendment of the existing legislation would allow for abortion on social grounds, e.g. a single unemployed or low income parent. The debate continues.

Another bone of contention took on the form of the concordat. A concordat is "a public treaty or agreement, with the force of international law, between the Church and state, regulating relations in areas of mutual concern." The contracting parties consist of the universal Catholic Church (i.e. a society organized for a spiritual purpose) and a sovereign state. Between those two bodies, concordats regulate mixed matters (civil and religious), including the rights and liberties of the Church; appointment of bishops, pastors, and chaplains; ecclesiastical immunities, Catholic schools and religious education; as well as questions pertaining to marriage. Through the institution of the concordat, the Holy See obtains the right to free exercise of its spiritual power over the faithful, while the state tries to secure various privileges and guarantees from the Church. As an international law, a concordat prevails over a conflicting national law.

Given the official non-politicization of the Church, some people believe that it would do well to eschew such pacts with civil societies, for they necessarily involve political manoeuvring and sharp practices of human diplomacy. This would make the spiritual nature and mission of the Church more apparent.

In the case of Poland, the concordat was signed on July 28, 1993 and represents "the fruit of long negotiations," which "on the one hand distinctly divides competencies between Church and state, whereas on the other hand it defines the terms of cooperation on such issues as family, upbringing, social help, or care for the national culture." From the viewpoint of the signatories, the concordat enhances resolution of contradictory issues. However, ratification of the concordat has been stalled in the parliament (justification given is that it is pending the passing of a future constitution), while politicians argue over details with the clergy. The Polish episcopate is obviously not a player in this game, but it constantly refers to and agitates on the subject.

. . . [Polish] bishops expressed the opinion that the concordat has been made the object of a political game and that the negative attitude of the vast majority of the parliamentarians towards the

concordat is an indication of their dislike of the Church as an autonomous institution, Questioning the basis of the independence and autonomy of Church and state stirs the basis for fear that the general direction is subjugation of the Church to the state.

Instead of engaging in constructive discussion, to correct the concordat's shortcomings, which spawn public antipathy, the episcopate has chosen to treat the issue in terms of 'cold war' rhetoric. Meanwhile, the Vatican has expressed its readiness to ratify the accord as soon as it is ratified by the Republic of Poland, thus closing the vicious circle. The Vatican does not expect any privileges on the part of the Polish state in connection with the concordat, and it does not wish to interfere in the ratification process, seeing how this matter lies solely within the competence of Polish state institutions.

One readily identifiable shortcoming of this document is the lack of specific directives as to taxation policies with regards to the Church. Members of other denominations tend to look on the concordat with dissatisfaction, but according to its signatories, the document can only be a positive example for other religions as to depiction of norms in future negotiations between the state and non-Catholic denominations. The concordat rests upon the firm foundation of religious equality. The loopholes are simple enough to rectify, if signatories to the concordat exhibit a bit of good will to smooth them out. Most recently, a special parliamentary commission finally proclaimed the concordat to be in accordance with the constitution. For all practical purposes, ratification of the concordat would amount to official recognition and institutionalization of the current status quo. It is supported by the center-right and center-left parties, but opposed by the extreme left and former Communist parties. As far as the general public is concerned - public opinion polls indicate that the amount of people supporting a rejection of the concordat is substantially higher than the number of respondents, who understand the "concordat."

1995 - A Year of the Constitution

All this leads to a disagreement of higher nature, namely one over the shape of the future Polish constitution, which is scheduled to be instituted by the end of 1995. One of the primary concerns is: how big of a political role should the Catholic Church play in the realm of the state? According to the wishes of the Church, the new constitution would have to make reference to such issues as protection of unborn children and the concordat, as well as guarantee religious instruction in schools and human dignity in the media. Church officials claim that it is both sinful and impossible to create a completely secular state, denigrating religion to a status of each individual's private decision, although some bishops are willing to consent to a "state with a neutral world outlook" (but under no circumstances secular), where the state and the Church would be "independent, autonomous, and cooperating" entities. Religious officials fear that a constitutional separation of those two bodies could in the future provide the state with means of restricting the Church from the public sphere--an argument, which seems hardly realistic.

The Church hierarchy further justifies its intrusion into the constitution-writing process with the claim, that a constitution describes methods of realizing common good, for which the Church, also feels responsible (together with the state). "As bishops and citizens, we have the right and the responsibility to care for moral rules, governing public life as well as values, which will shape the attitudes of millions of people."

The present government, in spite of its secular convictions, is prepared to negotiate with ecclesiastical authorities on the issue of separate spheres of influence, with the clause depicting the state as neutral in world views and guaranteeing denominational freedom to its citizens, being the most likely candidate for a compromise. The government certainly does not wish the Church to outright refute the entire constitution draft, but tensions over the exact wording of their official future relationship are bound to persist through the coming months. Either way, it is in the interest of both institutions, not to create the appearance of a privileged position of the Catholic Church or its adherence to the state. Above all, the Church should remember that its foremost task is to uphold the religious sense of its mission and activity, regardless of its official status.

The Church in Politics

As soon as political rights were gained on a national and individual level, allegations appeared of the Church's blatant appearance on the country's political scene. In the course of the past few years, however, once the public interest in politics waned, such calls on the part of the state and conversely, the Church's attempts at securing political power, have also diminished. Individual bishops and clergy, nevertheless, continue to warn people of faith against falling into the category of second-class citizens and urge them to become active in public life in order to permeate daily life with the spirit of Evangelism. "It is the right and duty of a Catholic to participate in political life." They also reserve the right to be openly critical of governmental authorities.

Clerical involvement in politics has been much more covert than overt, using right-wing parties for promotion of its goals. The Canon Law prohibits priests from engagement in party or union activities, but it does not deter some zealous priests from openly using church facilities for agitation in favor of "Christian-inclined" political parties. Additionally, Catholic electoral committees, which were created under the auspices of Catholic social movements, have also fielded their political candidates in the past.

This, actually, may have been more of a disservice than help to the Church's cause, for none of the parties depicting themselves as "Christian" won parliamentary seats in the last elections of 1993. This could well have contributed to further undermining of the Church's moral authority and certainly reduced its options of actively exerting influence on the political life. The episcopate is, therefore, unlikely to publicly endorse any of the presidential candidates for the upcoming elections at the end of 1995, least of all for reasons outside their field of competence. Despite Primate Glemp's proclamation, that "we need the right very much," the episcopate has distanced itself from the Christian-Democratic faction and its role as a mediator between the Church and the government as a direct result of this outcome and has shifted its tactics to utilizing Catholic organizations (discussed above) to act in such capacity. This option may prove much more adequate, due to the more submissive and less politicized character of these organizations.

The Church hierarchy also feels that it must also make its presence felt in the realm of Polish foreign policies, ensuring that the country presents itself as a Christian nation to the outside world. It endorses the state's attempts at quick integration into the West European political and economic structures, but has certain reservations about a potential loss of identity in the process.

We would like to be in Europe, but remembering, that in the European cultural heritage there is a certain Polish 'specificum', especially pertaining to loyalty towards Christian roots of the European culture.

At the World Population Conference in Cairo (December 1994), the hierarchy pressed the government delegation towards arguing for a declaration with evidence of the Catholic doctrine. It is needless to extrapolate on the Church's conservative stand with regards to promulgation of contraceptives, which it tries to limit as much as possible on the public market.

In the ongoing battle, there have also been tensions with the Ministry of Defense over the role of chaplains in the military. At present, there are 107 chaplains, serving in 31 garrison churches. The Ministry has accused the Church Field Ordynariat of an "imperialist stand" vis-a-vis the military and of forcing the soldiers to pray and accept Holy Communion. So far, there is no provision for other denominational services.

In spite of such controversial behavior, the Church had obtained 57% approval rating for its activities in a recent public opinion poll; 49% of the respondents believe that the Church serves the public well, while simultaneously 72% thinks that the Church plays too great a role in politics.

The Church in Economics

Being a religious institution, the Church must concern itself with the spiritual aspect of the society. Existing as a physical entity in an increasingly capitalistic country, the Church is also obliged to act as an economic actor. Beyond the property acquisitions derived from the restitution process, the Church has also begun to engage in market activities, such as the launching of an investment fund by the Economic Council Foundation of the Catholic Church, in partnership with the Austrian Creditanstalt Bankverein

and the Polish Bank Gospodarki Zywnosciowej. Each partner will have a 33% stake in the fund, with a capital of US\$3 million. The fund was scheduled to become operative at the beginning of 1995. The Church defends this venture with lack of funds for developing its missionary work in the country and abroad. Its role in marketing the fund could be received as "totally unethical and could prove to be extremely controversial."

The Role of the Pope

It would be naive to presume that the Polish Church hierarchy does not look to the Vatican for support in its endeavors. The fact that the Pope is Polish and of a conservative nature only expedites this fact, although the Pope, in the capacity as head of the global Church, must restrict his rhetoric to advise when dealing with state authorities.

The Pope's first visit to democratic Poland took place at the beginning of June 1991, during which he issued an entire array of "guiding view points" from matters regarding the individual to issues of national politics, in his sermons. His tone was conciliatory and saturated with calls for cooperation between the Church and the state, but he, nevertheless, illuminated concrete Church policies, which should be pursued by the Catholic Church in Poland--both the hierarchy and the lay members. The Pope, predictably, addressed the question of religious instruction in schools, religious services in the military, abortion, the media, agriculture, etc. He directed his speeches towards the theme of not only strengthening oneself as a Christian individual, but also spreading Christianity (and specifically Catholicism) to all sectors of private and public life. For instance, he indicated the possibility of indoctrinating young recruits in the army at a time, when they are psychologically broken down and searching for an inner order.

He declined any suggestions that the Church is striving to establish its power over public domains that lie outside its competencies, simultaneously emphasizing that the Church and the state share a common concern over human values in the society. Those values should also be respected by the media, which themselves ought to be permeated with the "saving word of Christ." (This was at the time directly related to the Polish episcopate's demands for a law on abidance of "Christian values" on the radio and in the TV.) The Pope also spoke on behalf of the entire Polish Catholic community, irrespective of individual views, on such issues as the degree of state-Church separation. His support for democracy was uncharacteristically evident, although he cautioned his audiences to preserve human dignity in a system of developing political and economic openness.

At the same time, however, the Pope spoke out against any form of religious fundamentalism and encouraged people to sacrifice for the sake of the needy, such as AIDS patients or drug addicts.

Into a Brighter Future?

The case of the Polish Catholic Church's future role in the country, whether it will consist solely of spiritual service and moral teachings for the parishioners, play an active role in the country's politics, achieving some sort of a religious state along the lines of Ireland, or find itself somewhere between the two extremes, will remain unresolved for a time to come yet. The first two options seem very unlikely. Over the centuries Poland has been far too saturated with Catholicism to denigrate the Church now to a position of a crippled servant. On the other hand, many Poles have found alternative interests and possibilities to religion, now that their political and economic options are much more extensive. Moreover, the Catholic Church is steadily losing its influence over the society, due to its often blatant policies of circumnavigating the existing laws, forcing through its idealistic and institutional interests, the obscurity of some of its representatives, and sensing everywhere an 'anti-Polish, Jewish-Communist plot' against it. Thus, some type of a middle ground, where the Church does not directly participate in the forging of the country's policies, yet its presence and influence can be felt, is the most probable scenario for a future compromise.

One of the main problems of the Catholic Church in Poland - a problem it shares with many of the country's citizens - is that it still needs to learn a great deal, before it can function efficiently in the

changing reality of today's Poland and today's world. The forty years of Communist stagnation only partially explain the dearth in intellectual cadres and political astuteness both in lay and ecclesiastical circles. The rest of the explanation lies in the country's de facto division into the center and the provinces, in its 'gentry' and populist tradition, and the general insufficiency of quality education among the clergy, who lack the fortitude to develop their individual theological concepts.

After five years of coexistence, we can safely conclude that the conservative Church does not pose a threat to the democratic processes presently occurring in Poland. However, that coexistence is far from ideal for both the state and the Church. Further collisions along this course towards a (perhaps never attainable) optimum may still prove numerous, although not destabilizing to the political destiny of the country.

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