

The Ambivalent Attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland Towards the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Grzegorz Ignatowski

This paper discusses restrictions enforced by the Polish authorities following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Catholic Church's position on it. The article addresses attitudes to vaccination held by the believers and the hierarchy. Subsequently, it assesses the church's decline, which in Poland dates back to the times before the pandemic. Finally, it addresses the common practice of receiving the holy communion in the hand as well as ecumenical engagement during the pandemic. While the former is a serious obstacle to combating the spread of the virus, the latter seems insignificant for a sizable group of traditional Catholics.

Key words: Catholic Church, COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination, decline in support for religious life

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Introduction

The extremely difficult situation in which the Catholic Church in Poland and other churches and religious associations found themselves in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the legal restrictions introduced during the pandemic is unprecedented in recent history.¹ Such an opinion is justified even if we take into account the fact that Christians in Poland, regardless of their religious affiliation, had to live through the post-war period of restrictions and ideological indoctrination. Never before was the participation of the faithful in religious ceremonies so decisively restricted, regardless of whether they took place inside church buildings or in the open air. We can therefore speak of a unique period in the life of the Church², even during the smallpox epidemic, which broke out suddenly in Wrocław in July 1963. For a short period of time, one of the largest cities in Poland in terms of population was cut off from the rest of the country.³ At that time, vaccination was made mandatory for all residents, and 98% of people were vaccinated. Those who were not vaccinated were banned from entering the city. Meanwhile, during the current COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions applied to both Sunday liturgical services as well as ceremonies, such as funerals, which are mostly held in the open. As far as the restrictions themselves are concerned, it should be remembered that they were changing, depending on how the SARS-Cov-2 virus spread. The issue of restrictions in religious life is not the only problem faced by the clergy and laity of the Catholic Church as well as all religious denominations in

Poland. The Church's approach to vaccination is also noteworthy. On the one hand, there is no lack of strong support for vaccination as an effective tool in the fight against pandemics. On the other hand, there were isolated cases of disapproval. Not only the limitations, but also the progressive decline in participation of the faithful in religious life presents another challenge, especially at a time when direct contact is difficult. This phenomenon, however, did not begin during the pandemic, but has a much broader context. These include declining support for the actions of church leaders, accusations of covering up sex offenders, and undoubtedly the slow process of secularization of society as a whole. Finally, one cannot forget about the pastoral activities carried out, where traditional beliefs and practices (which do not help in the fight against the pandemic) clash with the opposite - modern initiatives testifying to the openness of the Church to contemporary challenges.

The Position of the Church on the Restrictions in the Access to Religious Life of the Faithful

The World Health Organization declared a pandemic of the infectious disease COVID 19 caused by the coronavirus SARS-Cov-2 on 11 March 2020. With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth noting that the Church authorities have generally cooperated with state institutions in this regard from the very beginning. The situation did not change in 2021, when the Metropolitan of Poznań and President of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, strongly distanced himself from the introduced restrictions and asked whether their introduction without consultation with the Church is not a breach of the provisions contained in the Concordat ratified by the Holy See and the Republic of Poland in February 1998. Let us give some examples of the restrictions being put in place and the clergy support for them.⁴ On 13 March 2020, the Minister of Health issued a decree on the declaration of an epidemic emergency state on the territory of the Republic of Poland. This document banned all gatherings, including religious gatherings, that would exceed 50 people, including organizers and those acting on their behalf. Another regulation of the Minister of Health was issued on 24 March 2020. According to this document, between 25 March and 11 April only 5 people could participate in the ceremony, with the exception of those conducting the religious ceremony. Subsequent documents were also strict. Thus, in the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 19 June 2020, participants in assemblies were required to maintain a two-meter distance between each other. The Council of Ministers Ordinance of 16 October allowed the holding of worship services, but under the condition that in buildings and other objects of religious worship, the spacing between worshippers is a minimum of 1.5 meters. A division into yellow and red zones was introduced. In the yellow area, four square meters per person were designated in buildings where religious gatherings were held, and in the

red area 7 square meters. The number of attendees of communion and wedding receptions and consolations was drastically restricted. Further restrictions came into effect on 1 December 2020 and lasted until 27 December 2020, thus covering the significant Christmas season for Christians. The distance between worshippers had to be at least 1.5 meters, but no more than one person per 15 square meters could participate in the service. Religious worshippers and, in the case of a funeral, attendants were not included. Before entering a religious facility, it was ordered that information about the required limit of people be posted and that measures be taken to ensure that the provisions were implemented. Persons performing religious worship were not included in the total number of participants in religious ceremonies. Let us add that another restriction was issued on 21 December, effective in the period from 27 December 2020 to 17 January 2021. During this time, one and a half meter spacing was in effect, and the number of worshippers was determined by the volume of the building. There were 15 square meters per person, excluding those in religious worship. As before, information about the number of people was to be posted at the entrance to religious buildings. At the end of June, the number of worshippers allowed to attend religious services was increased, and worshippers were still required to cover their mouths and noses with masks inside buildings. Outside, there was an obligation to keep at least 1.5 meters distance between the participants of the services. In all of these documents, participants in religious assemblies were obligated to wear masks, even outdoors. The only people exempted from this obligation were those who performed religious cult.

In view of the restrictions, it should be noted that no religious buildings were ever closed, as was the case in Orthodox Greece.⁵ In the Catholic Church in Poland, there were no such spectacular actions. It should be added, however, that the bishops generally promoted and recommended the observance of appropriate restrictions. Thus, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, the President of the Polish Episcopate, had already asked the bishops and the faithful to comply with the regulations of 13 March 2020, limiting the number of participants in gatherings to 50 people due to the introduction of an epidemic emergency in Poland. He also urged diocesan bishops to issue decisions limiting the number of faithful to 50 people. Grzegorz Ryś, the Archbishop of Łódź, wrote to the faithful that they are going through a time of trial. He asked that they comply with the rules set by the authorities. He asked, especially the elderly, to remain in their homes. Homes were to be the most important and active sanctuaries during the pandemic. The ministry of the clergy and the administration of the sacraments should be carried out with all personal hygiene measures. According to the archbishop, clergy should place containers of disinfectant liquid at the doors of churches and be the first to set the example of using it. On 7 August 2020 Archbishop Gądecki appealed not only to the faithful, but also to priests. The latter were to remind participants in religious gatherings

of the need to observe the restrictions and to create the possibility of receiving communion by hand, according to specific diocesan regulations.

*The epidemic is not over and therefore - out of concern for the health of all, especially the more vulnerable - he asked for prudence and the consistent application of sanitary recommendations.*⁶

Similar appeals were made by all the archbishops and bishops in their dioceses. This was especially true of Easter, All Saints' Day, and Christmas. There were only a few cases in which the rules were broken and state decisions were deviated from. Such situations were encountered during the first period of the pandemic, and other Christian denominations were not free from them. In studies conducted in the first period of the pandemic, many clergymen indicated the possibility of cooperation with the secular authorities in maintaining the rules governing social life, and even permitted the closing of churches.⁷ The bishops also pointed out the need for moderation and distance in other liturgical activities. Dispensations were systematically issued from the obligation to attend Sunday and holy masses. This was also the case during the major Christian holidays such as Easter and Christmas.⁸

In view of the above restrictions and appeals of the clergy, an article published by the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference is worth recalling. It should be noted that we are not dealing with an official position but with an article published first by Catholic News Agency and then on the website of the Archdiocese of Poznań. In the article, "Pastoral Care after the Pandemic," the President speaks of the unprecedented treatment of the Church by the state. The archbishop wrote that services have essentially become inaccessible to the faithful. He stressed that a similar situation had not occurred in the previous history of the Church in Poland. He asked whether such radical decisions are not contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the Concordat. The article reads that the sovereignty of the Church has been violated. It adds that

*priests and believers have, after all, the right to defend themselves against interference in religious life, and churches, - as sacred places - should enjoy autonomy according to the law.*⁹

He points out that the restrictions were imposed unilaterally, without consultation. Moreover, the Church was treated worse than commercial enterprises, as an insignificant institution in people's lives. Finally, a conciliatory tone follows. The President writes that the Church is submitting to these unilateral decisions as it does not want to undermine the decisions of the state authorities in an extremely difficult situation. However, the restrictions require analysis and drawing the right conclusions. In fact, it is about the good of democracy and the need to preserve religious freedom.

The Question of Vaccination Against COVID-19

The pandemic caused by SARS-Cov2 virus affects the religious life and ethical choices of people not only in social life but also in religious life.¹⁰ Vaccination also has an important place in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ Therefore, the position of the Church and its most important institutions is not indifferent in this regard, as a significant number of the faithful continue to follow its advice. The Catholic Church in Poland, in the persons of the most important hierarchs, has supported, not always decisively, the pro-vaccination activities of state institutions. It is worth noting that the example of Pope Francis I was often invoked. Specifically, on 9 January 2021, Pope Francis I gave an interview to Italian TV Channel 5, during which he strongly advocated vaccination against SARS-Cov-2. The Pope said he had reserved a place to receive the vaccine as part of a vaccination drive at the Vatican. He urged everyone to take the vaccine in order to protect not only their own health but also other people. He stressed that, ethically, everyone should accept the vaccine. We cannot ignore the fact that, despite their declared fidelity to the Holy See, a certain group did not necessarily notice this statement. We cannot exclude the fact that there are also such believers who will trivialize the Pope's words. They will say, after all, this is not the opinion of a medical specialist. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that a large group of Catholics in Poland, especially since the times of John Paul II, often follow the advice of popes. As far as the vaccination against SARS-Cov-2 is concerned, also Polish bishops and priests have expressed their readiness to accept the vaccine. This includes, for example, the Polish Primate, Bishop Wojciech Polak, who saw vaccination as an expression of concern for the weakest, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Warsaw, Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz, and the Auxiliary Bishop of the Warsaw-Praga Diocese, Jacek Grzybowski. The team of experts on bioethics of the Polish Episcopal Conference took a similar stance. Also worth noting is a statement made by the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference on 8 July 2021. Of course, Gądecki mentioned Pope Francis.

The Archbishop of Poznań reminded the audience that the COVID-19 vaccination is an important tool to help fight the spread of infections, and many people see it as a hope for a return to normal society. He expressed support for all those who have accepted the vaccination. He pointed out that "vaccination should not lead to the neglect of other elements important in limiting the spread of SARS-Cov-2 infection". Two things are important to note in this context. First, a large percentage of unvaccinated people live in the south of Poland, the most religious areas of the country, and therefore the most committed to the Holy See. This fact leads to questions about the relationship between Catholic teaching and the ethical choices of the faithful. Second, the strong support for vaccination does not mean that so-called "covid passports" will be introduced in connection with the fourth wave of the pandemic. This was clearly emphasized by Archbishop Wojciech Polak, who noted that religious communities follow rules, and these include the obligation to

wear masks and disinfect hands. Churches will be open to the faithful regardless of whether they have a “covid passport” or are recovered.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Decline in Religious Participation

As is known, in the case of COVID-19, a significant transmission of the virus occurs during close contact between people, forcing countries to take drastic restrictions on personal relationships.¹² No doubt religious practices will be affected, if only because religious life is largely based on interpersonal relationships and gestures. From a Catholic perspective, almost all religious practices have a communal dimension. Meanwhile, studies show that in European countries we still encounter a decreasing participation of the faithful in church religious life. The number of consecrated persons is also decreasing every year.¹³ These processes also concern Poland, considered as a country with a high involvement of the faithful in religious life. Of course, the decline in support for the Church is not only due to the situation with the pandemic, but rather to the rather open cooperation of the superiors with the government and covering up cases of sexual abuse of minors. Not without significance are the cases of cooperation of some hierarchs with the former communist regime, which have been made public. One should also not forget that the process of secularization, independent from the pandemic, has a significant impact on the life of European and world religious communities. However, it would be a mistake to think that a clear decline in support will take place in the short term.

In this context, the statements of writers, celebrities and singers, who publicly declare apostasy, that is, leaving the Church and abandoning Catholicism, become important. The reasons given most often include the Church's attitude towards women, same-sex relations or non-believers. It is worth noting that these arguments are not always supported by previous analyses of documents and the official teaching of the Church. Nor are these declarations always understood by the hierarchy. For example, in a letter addressed to the faithful on the occasion of the beginning of Lent in 2021, Archbishop Stanislaw Gądecki stated that there is always a way back for apostates. Since it leads through conversion, therefore “I am requesting prayer and fasting for such intentions”.¹⁴

Let us recall that just before and during the pandemic, numerous research centers conducted studies on religious life in Poland. According to a 2019 study conducted by the Centre for East European and International Studies, the Catholic Church in Poland was not highly trusted among young people, who increasingly consider themselves less religious. The survey included 16 to 34 year-olds living in major metropolitan areas. Slightly more than 70 percent of respondents indicated that they are Catholics, and about 20 percent declared that they do not follow any religion.¹⁵ However, one should not forget that there is a belief among a large group of young people that a strong faith can protect them from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perhaps this is related to the traditional “the image of God as a good and merciful father who will be able to save us from all evil and suffering”.¹⁶

Regardless of all this, the Catholic Church is still the largest community of believers in Poland. According to data released in 2018 by the Central Statistical Office, more than thirty-two million people were baptized in this Church. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, in 2018, almost 40% of the faithful attended Sunday mass, with a much higher rate in the southern part of the country. In large cities such as Warsaw or Łódź, the statistics in this regard are much lower. They do not exceed 20%. These data are much more meaningful when we recall that the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church has over 150 thousand members, the Evangelical-Augsburg Church over 61 thousand, and the Evangelical-Reformed Church less than five thousand.

In conclusion to this subsection, let us say that, given the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to judge what percentage of the faithful will return to regular religious practices after the pandemic restrictions are revoked. However, we can expect that some percentage of the faithful will “wean” themselves from regular attendance at Sunday gatherings. It should also be noted that leaving the Church is not an abrupt process, at least in the group dimension.

Between Tradition and Modernity - Selected Aspects of Religious Life

The Catholic Church in Poland still has to face the tension that exists between the traditional approach of its faithful and the challenges that were outlined after the Second Vatican Council. This applies to all aspects of life, including changes in the liturgy and attitudes towards other faiths and religions. These tensions have been made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷ These include the virtual participation of the faithful in liturgical gatherings and the problem of the physical possibility of receiving communion.¹⁸ Examples of other difficulties and tensions include the manner in which communion is received and inter-religious dialogue. Thus, it should be recalled that a significant group of the faithful, apart from small communities in Poland, continue to receive communion in the mouth. This issue takes on particular importance in the context of a pandemic, where the possibility of infection and spread of the virus increases.¹⁹ The bishops encouraged the reception of communion by hand, keeping in mind the health of both the faithful and the clergy. The Archbishop of Łódź wrote that the virus is transmitted airborne by respiratory droplets, so care should be taken not to put others at risk. Once the pandemic subsides, it will be possible to return to previous practices. The position of many bishops was related to the actions of the Father Piotr Skarga Society for Christian Culture, which sent letters to many parishes urging both the faithful and clergy to maintain the traditional way of distributing and receiving communion. On 3 October even Bishop Adam Bałabuch, Chairman of the Commission for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments of the Polish Episcopal Conference,

intervened. He pointed out that both ways of receiving the Eucharist are worthy.

On the other hand, the Commission for Dialogue of the Polish Episcopal Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council, which cooperates in the field of doctrinal dialogue and in the organization of joint services also functions during the pandemic.²⁰ The cooperation of the Churches during the pandemic should be particularly visible in joint actions at the local level. In Poland, the importance of ecumenical dialogue and mutual cooperation is emphasized during traditional ecumenical services, which are held from 18 to 25 January each year. In 2021, many of the services were abandoned. Instead, a central service was held on 23 January 2021 in the archdiocese of Łódź. The sermon was given by the President of the Polish Ecumenical Council, the head of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church, Bishop Jerzy Samiec. He emphasized that all actions and words which are full of hatred, hostility, aggression, exclusion, xenophobia, and fanaticism, even when they are uttered allegedly in the name of Jesus, do not come from Him. On the following day, a service was held at St. Matthew's Evangelical Church. The Lutheran pastor, Michał Makula, asked about the meaning of ecumenism and stressed that it cannot concentrate on facade gestures. Ecumenism is needed because mixed religious couples have to struggle with divisions. Everyone, including clergy, should learn ecumenism from mixed marriages. It should not be forgotten that ecumenical prayers of Christians were held in Kalisz, Żychlin, Strzyżew, Cracow, Lublin, Janów Lubelski, Opole, Kamiień Śląski, Poznań, Szczecin, Katowice and Częstochowa, Kielce, Gdańsk, Warsaw and Wrocław.²¹ Let us add that the Way of the Cross on Good Friday and the Way of Light on the first Sunday after Easter are also broadcast on social media.

Undoubtedly, interreligious dialogue plays an important role during the pandemic. Followers of different religions should

*come together in promoting the life and dignity of the human person, a sense of community and participation, respecting the rights and responsibilities of each person.*²²

On 17 January every year the Catholic Church in Poland organizes the Day of Judaism. In 2021 it was held for the twenty-sixth time. Both Jews and Catholics participate in prayers organized in churches and synagogues. They are accompanied by concerts, lectures, symposia and recollections of places where Jewish religious life was vibrant before the war. This year's celebrations were preceded by a press conference with the participation of Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, Bishop Romuald Kamiński, Ordinary of the Warsaw-Praga Diocese, and Bishop Rafał Markowski. Moreover, on the day following the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the 21st Day of Islam in the Catholic Church was held. Similarly to the Day of Judaism, the celebrations were broadcast on social media. The Day of Islam is a pioneering Church initiative on a global scale. In 2021, celebrations were also

organized in Lublin and Cracow.

We can say that the COVID-19 pandemic has not prompted a certain group of believers in the traditional approach to receiving communion. However, the superiors tried to maintain a certain restraint in encouraging the faithful to change their attitude. This moderation did not make itself known in ecumenical events.

Concluding Remarks

During the pandemic the Catholic Church uses public television and private broadcasters in reaching out to the faithful to transmit its services. It increasingly uses social media, where sermons, services and numerous publications are posted. During the pandemic, it had to abandon, as did other religious associations, many traditional forms of pastoral care, such as visiting Catholic homes just after Christmas. It is also important to remember that clergy are falling ill and dying from coronavirus. The Church continues to support hospices and health care. Yet it should not be forgotten that moral scandals of the clergy are constantly being revealed. The Church does not have the best reputation due to the revealed cases of collaboration of the hierarchy with the communists. The negative opinions of Poles about the political engagement of their superiors are alarming. This does not change the fact that the Church is the most numerous and still has significant social support. Of course, there are individual public dissents from the Church. However, these phenomena are not widely known, if only due to the involvement of society in the fight against the pandemic.

About the author

Grzegorz Ignatowski is a professor at the University of Social Sciences. In his academic work he mainly deals with ethics, corporate social responsibility, family businesses, and issues related to the importance of religion in professional life. His most recent co-authored publications: *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization of Religious Behaviour in Different Christian Denominations in Poland*, *Religions* 11, no 5 (5 May 2020): 254, *The Perception of Organisational Nepotism Depending on the Membership in Selected Christian Churches*,” *Religions* 11, no 1 (18 January 2020): 47, *Brand Management of Catholic Church in Poland*, *“Religions”* 11, no 11 (November 14, 2020), *Risk of Increased Acceptance for Organizational Nepotism and Cronyism during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, *Risk in Contemporary Management*, *Risk* 9, no 4, (March 24, 2021):59. At the University of Social Sciences, he serves as Dean of the Faculty of Management and Chair of the University’s Ethics Committee. He is a reviewer of numerous papers in the field of professional and social ethics.

Endnotes

- 1 This article is significantly expanded and a revised version of my text: Grzegorz Ignatowski, “Die katholische Kirche in Polen zu Zeiten der Pandemie”, *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* 49, no 3, (2021): 12-14.
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