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From Pilgrimage to Pilgrimage. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland During the Political Transition (1987–1991) – Selected Issues

According to analyses conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), since 1987, the level of Poles' approval for the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland was systematically increasing. In November 1989, its actions gained unprecedented, almost universal social acceptance. Almost 90% of respondents considered that it "serves society well and acts in its best interests". However, in the following months and years, CBOS analysts noted a drastic drop in approval for the activities undertaken by the Church. By the end of 1992, only 46% of respondents considered its activities desirable.[1]

This article is an attempt to answer, within the framework of historical analysis, the following research questions: What factors played a decisive role in the change of the public perception of the Church over those five years? What role did the Church play in the process of political transformation? To what extent was it prepared to function in the rapidly changing reality at the turn of the 1990s? The main aim of the article is to present – based on selected issues – the complex situation of the Church during the political transformation and the dynamics of its influence on Polish society. The chosen time-frame has a symbolic significance – it refers to two pilgrimages of John Paul II to Poland, which took place in 1987 and 1991, under completely different socio-political-economic conditions.

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Two myths are still present in the Polish public sphere to this day. The first one speaks of the Church's unconditional support for Solidarity and the opposition activities that led to Poles regaining their freedom in 1989. The second one, conversely, indicates that the Church, by conducting a regular dialogue with the authorities, in fact legitimized communist rule, inhibited independent activities, toned down social moods, and ultimately, during the period of political transformation, facilitated a "soft landing" for party activists. Both of these views are untrue; the reality was much more complex.

The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland towards Solidarity and its postulates was ambiguous. In the years 1983–1987, the Primate of Poland Józef Glemp was convinced that the union's approach had failed and that a general social understanding had to be built on the basis of other structures under the patronage of the Episcopate.[2] *"We must abandon the word »Solidarity«"* – emphasized Cardinal Glemp in September 1983. Although not all Polish bishops agreed with this view, the main policy of the Episcopate on this issue was based on the opinion of the Primate.[3] The Church redefined its relationship with Solidarity under the influence of John Paul II, who in the second half of the 1980s still saw the great social movement initiated in August 1980 as the main force offering a chance to change the system of government in Poland. The Pope clearly manifested his position in June 1987 during his third pilgrimage to Poland.

The communist state did everything it could to prevent John Paul II from coming to Gdańsk – the cradle of Solidarity, one of the strongest opposition centres in the country. According to pre-

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1 Falkowska 1994: 11–12; Grabowska 2013: 8.

2 Stachowiak 2020: 140.

3 Łatka 2019a: 639.

served documents, the authorities were particularly afraid of "oppositionists gathering around the Pope with pro-Solidarity banners and emblems".[4] Ultimately, after long and arduous negotiations, the Pope was permitted to include Gdańsk in the pilgrimage plan. In an analysis conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre a month before the planned visit, 83% of respondents claimed that the pilgrimage would "lift people's spirits", and 75% believed that the presence of John Paul II in Poland would strengthen the position of the Church in the country; only 23% thought that the Holy Father's visit would activate and strengthen the political opposition in Poland.[5]

On 12 June, during the high point of the visit – Holy Mass for working people in Zaspa in Gdańsk –, John Paul II emphasized:

> *"There can be no struggle stronger than Solidarity* (...). *There can be no program of struggle beyond the program of Solidarity."*[6]

After the Eucharist, a crowd of thousands gathered behind a huge Solidarity banner to form an anti-communist demonstration. The day after the end of the pilgrimage, CBOS conducted a survey about the Pope's visit to his homeland. When asked about the direct effects of the pilgrimage, 67.2% of respondents answered: "It will cause an increase in patriotic feelings", whereas 50.5% believed that the visit of the Holy Father "will help the majority of Poles to agree on the most important issues".[7] In turn, a few days after the end of the pilgrimage the Security Service (SB) reported that the Pope's words

> *"significantly strengthened the position of political opposition, especially Lech Wałęsa, both in terms of moral fortitude and propaganda".*
>
> *"Representatives of illegal structures believe that from now on they have the right to conduct their activities officially* (...). *Activists from the Coast state that thanks to the efforts of Western media outlets, the whole world saw the power of Solidarity, and they refer to John Paul II as its father."*[8]

The Italian daily paper *"Il Giornale"* wrote that *"the Pope beatified the Solidarity movement, adopted its idea as his own and endowed it with a universal dimension, exceeding the Polish context".* In turn, the West German *"Deutsche Welle"* pointed out that John Paul II *"unequivocally demanded recognition of the right to join free trade unions as a natural human right".*[9] Representatives of the government had a similar view of the papal visit. *"I think that the victory belongs to the Pope and the Church. There is no doubt that the Pope has valorised the opposition and set a militant tone for the Church"*, wrote Mieczysław F. Rakowski.[10]

The pilgrimage of John Paul II proved crucial in the context of the perception of Solidarity by the Polish Church. The Pope, contrary to Primate Glemp, pointed to the social movement initiated in Gdańsk as a key factor in the realization of the Poles' hopes for freedom, without which national understanding would be impossible to achieve.[11] The change in the Church's policy required adopting a different approach to the government's initiatives and the socio-political situation in the country. From that moment on, the Episcopate took on the role of a mediator between the communists and Solidarity, at key moments taking the side of the social movement as it was returning to official activity.[12] The Church, contrary to the government's

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4 AIPN BU 0449/4/8. Information on anti-government demonstrations organized in Gdańsk in connection with the Pope's visit, 30 May 1987; AIPN Gd 003/200 vol. 1. Motion to initiate an object case codenamed "Zorza II", 9 March 1987.

5 APG 2384/15329. The third visit of John Paul II in public opinion.

6 Qtd. after Kowal 2012: 228.

7 APG 2384/15329. The third visit of John Paul II in public opinion.

8 AIPN BU 1585/16065. Attachment to the daily information. Comments from leading opposition activists in the Tri-City on the visit of John Paul II, 17 June 1987.

9 Qtd. after AIPN BU 2191/107. Information no. 15, 13 June 1987.

10 Rakowski 2005: 90.

11 AIPN BU 01439/56. Material for the speech of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 12 May 1988; Dudek 2012: 184–185; Łatka 2019b: 17.

12 Dudek 2004: 90.

expectations, did not get involved in the referendum of November 1987, and was critical of its attitude towards the spring-summer strikes of 1988. Primate Glemp also regularly refused the offers of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Wojciech Jaruzelski, to directly participate in the reforms planned by the government that bypassed Solidarity. At the same time, he emphasized – for example in an interview for "Die Zeit" in March 1988 – the need for reconciliation and "taking constant, persistent actions in this area".[13]

Analyses conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs after the end of the spring-summer strikes of 1988 indicated the growing influence of the Church on the socio-political situation in Poland. Officers of the communist services considered some Polish hierarchs and priests to be ready for dialogue with government representatives; at the same time, they drew attention to a number of "anti-socialist initiatives and actions".

> *"These clergymen, despite the progressive stabilization of life in the country, remain belligerent, exerting a destructive influence on the churchgoers and often encouraging behaviour directed against the state."*[14]

Among the "radical priests" mentioned were, i.a., Fr. Henryk Jankowski from Gdańsk and Fr. Kazimierz Jancarz from Kraków.

> *"For many years, a certain group of priests, known for their negative behaviour and attitude, have allowed the use of religious gatherings (pilgrimages), services (»for the homeland«) and structures of community-workplace pastoral care to conduct open political activity. Various types of events (meetings, discussions, speeches, lecture series) are organized in church facilities, in which activists of the former Solidarity and the so-called opposition actively participate",*

stated one of the materials.[15]

A special location on the map of the opposition in Poland was the parish of St. Bridget in Gdańsk, which hosted regular meetings with Lech Wałęsa, his advisors and intellectuals supporting Solidarity.[16] One of the regular speakers in the square in front of the church was Adam Michnik, oppositionist, author of the famous book *Kościół, lewica, dialog* [The Church, the Left, Dialogue], and editor-in-chief of *"Gazeta Wyborcza"* since 1989. During public speeches, he emphasized that the involvement of the Church and the clergy was of key importance for the hopes for freedom of Poles and, even more broadly, the people of the so-called Eastern Bloc.[17] The anti-system activity of priests and their connections with anti-socialist opposition activists were systematically analysed by the SB. Department IV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, responsible for the "church section", complained about the passivity of the Episcopate, which *"does not take effective disciplinary actions to eliminate this political activity of priests".*[18]

The negotiations initiated on 31 August 1988 between the state and the opposition, which eventually led to the "round table", were regularly held through the Church and with the participation of its representatives. As Antoni Dudek and Ryszard Gryz aptly noted:

> *"From that moment on, the presence of Church representatives at all important talks became the rule (...). For Solidarity, the participation of clergy was a kind of insurance policy against accusations from anti-communist radicals (...). For the communists, on the other hand, the Church hierarchy was to become the guarantor of the political contract that was to be negotiated."*[19]

Years later, one of the participants, Tadeusz Gocłowski, Bishop of Gdańsk, thusly assessed his own role during the talks:

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13 Qtd. after Łatka 2024: 323.

14 AIPN BU 01439/56. Material for the speech of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 15 August 1988.

15 AIPN BU 01439/56. Material for the speech of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 15 August 1988.

16 APG 2384/2250. Confidential information, 23 January 1987.

17 AIPN BU 1585/16101. Attachment to the daily information. Activities and initiatives of the Roman Catholic clergy, 28 June 1988.

18 AIPN BU 01439/56. Material for the speech of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 15 August 1988.

19 Dudek–Gryz 2006: 434.

"Father [Alojzy] Orszulik and I did not speak out unless we came to the conclusion that the earlier arrangements were different (...). We were witnesses who tried to guard the truth during these difficult talks." [20]

In reality, the Church did not remain a mere passive observer, watching over the clarity of the negotiations. As the actual guarantor of the success of the talks, it played its own "game" calculated to achieve the greatest possible benefits. This was expressed by Primate Glemp in an interview for the Italian magazine *"Il Tempo"*, on 3 March 1989, in which the Cardinal showed himself as a supporter of the negotiations, an opponent of communism, and at the same time a distanced supporter of Solidarity, pointing out the need for the Church to seek a "third way". In this way, he announced that the Church is a participant of the ongoing talks, which each of the parties – if they want to bring the negotiations to a happy ending – should treat seriously.[21]

However, the position of an arbitrator taking advantage of the dialogue with the government and indirectly supporting Solidarity did not guarantee the Church in Poland any protection from the state and its repressive apparatus. Many priests were still under surveillance and harassment. On 20 January 1989, Fr. Stefan Niedzielak, the guardian of the "Katyń Family" community, was brutally murdered.[22] Ten days later died Fr. Stanisław Suchowolec, chaplain of Solidarity and the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN) in Białystok and initiator of the memorial room and symbolic grave of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, also murdered by the communist services.[23] On 11 July 1989, the body of Fr. Sylwester Zych was found at the bus station in Krynica Morska.[24] During the martial law period, he was the pastor of an underground youth organization, and in the second half of the 1980s, the chaplain to the workers of the Warszawa Steelworks and the KPN.[25] The prosecutor conducting the investigation into his death did not take into account the marks on the victim's body that had already been found during the autopsy – several dozen injuries and bruises around the mouth, neck, torso, head and ribs around the spine.[26] The official cause of death was excessive alcohol consumption.[27] All three priests were victims of "unknown assailants" and were repeatedly harassed by the SB before their deaths. If the secret police were behind the murders of the socially and politically engaged priests, as many indications suggest, one can hypothesize that their deaths were intended to deter other clergymen from getting involved with Solidarity.

The hierarchs endured harassment by "unknown perpetrators" too. The auxiliary bishop of Łódź, Bohdan Bejze, at the beginning of 1989 regularly received anonymous threatening phone calls. The other suffragan bishop of Łódź, Adam Lepa, was allegedly also intimidated in this way ("wrong number" calls with blasphemies, "silent" calls).[28]

As a result of the "round table" talks, a decision was made to hold the first partially free elections to the Sejm since World War II. In an effort to ensure the neutrality of the Church, the authorities decided to regulate the legal status of the Church in Poland. It was no coincidence that the final negotiations on this matter were scheduled in parallel with the election campaign. Finally, on 17 May, the Sejm adopted a set of three laws guaranteeing the implementation of most of the demands raised by the Church for decades – legal personality, creation of Catholic organizations and freedom of pastoral activity. The Church obtained the right to have its own radio and television stations, as well as printing houses, cinemas, theatres and film studios.[29] The laws also became the

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20 Hlebowicz 2008: 125.

21 AIPN BU 01439/56. Interview with Cardinal Józef Glemp published in "Il Tempo", 3 March 1989.

22 AIPN BU 2202/1. Report on the conducted experiment for case no. D-IV-114/89, 20 March 1989.

23 AIPN BU 2202/1. Report on the research, 27 February 1989.

24 AIPN Gd 1095/10. Confidential information no. 2479 regarding the discovery of the body of Fr. Sylwester Zych, 20 July 1989.

25 AIPN BU 024/46. Security card for Fr. Sylwester Zych.

26 AIPN Gd 417/8. Cryptogram, 18 August 1989.

27 AIPN Gd 516/29. Letter regarding the death of Fr. Sylwester Zych, 25 August 1989; AIPN Gd 417/8. Cryptogram, 13 July 1989.

28 AIPN BU 01439/56. Excerpts from conversations with Bp. Bohdan Bejze, 1 January 1989.

29 Dudek–Gryz 2006: 437.

basis for the return of the Church's property appropriated by the communist state. This was never achieved by the Church in the Czech Republic, excluded from the reprivatisation process by the centre-right government of Vaclav Klaus, hostile to Catholicism.[30]

The solutions adopted in the *"May laws"* were *"modern and proved to be a lasting basis for regulating the relations between the state and the Church in the new political reality".*[31] The communist government was convinced that it was a bundled transaction – the Church, in exchange for legislation opening up many new fields of activity, was expected to remain neutral during the election campaign.

Contrary to the hopes of the government, the Episcopate limited itself to emphasizing the significance of the upcoming elections and the resulting chance for full empowerment of society; but it did little to stop the clergy from engaging in the creation of Solidarity Citizens' Committees (KOS) on a mass scale. Presbyteries and other church buildings hosted pre-election meetings with Solidarity candidates. Churches provided parish notice boards and display cases for political agitation. Priests informed about the formation of committees during masses as part of parish announcements. With the help of clergy, signatures and funds for the election campaign necessary for the registration of candidates were also collected. The lack of acceptance of a local parish priest for a given activist often eliminated his chances of finding himself on the election list.[32] The SB in Warsaw reported:

> *"Of the total number of 116 religious buildings in Warsaw and 128 in the capital province, approx. 70% are used to campaign on behalf of opposition candidates."*[33]

Seeing the Church's involvement on the side of Solidarity, the communist government felt cheated. When subsequent "preventive talks" with bishops did not yield the desired result, it began to resort to threats.

> *"We have noted* (...) *a twofold increase in agitation in favour of Solidarity* (...)*. We have factored in the political neutrality of the Church into the contract. A tilt* (...) *favouring the opposition will have very sad consequences"*

– warned Stanisław Ciosek; his threats, however, did not bring the expected results – many clergymen still supported KOS.[34]

The government blamed the bishops for the final electoral defeat of the state camp. "The Church is the main culprit in what happened" – believed Mieczysław F. Rakowski.[35] This opinion was also shared by Wojciech Jaruzelski and Stanisław Ciosek.[36]

The defeat of the communists in the June 1989 elections marked the turning point of the gradual surrender of power by the ruling camp. The choice made by the Poles proved decisive for the transformation in Poland. As Paweł Kowal aptly noted, from that moment on

> *"began the process of handing over the power seized by the communists after 1944 to institutions with appropriate legitimacy (parliament, government and president)".*

A series of events was set in motion that was no longer under the control of Jaruzelski's team. *"It led to the creation of a new state on the ruins of the totalitarian system."*[37]

One of the areas the communists were forced to abandon was the Catholic Association "Caritas" (ZKC), which had existed since 1950.[38] The organization, which took over the nationwide struc-

30 Górny 2003.

31 Łatka 2015: 119.

32 Codogni 2012: 162.

33 AIPN BU 0236/410. Signal report no. 205 for the object case codenamed "Coalition", 11 May 1989.

34 Qtd. after Łatka 2019a: 769.

35 Rakowski 2005: 440–441.

36 Codogni 2012: 272–273.

37 Kowal 2012: 481.

38 Hlebowicz 2024a: 226.

ture of the church "Caritas", for four decades had brought together Roman Catholic clergy who, under the guise of charitable activity, openly cooperated with the communist state by engaging in a number of political and propaganda initiatives.[39] Based on the provisions of the Act of 17 May 1989 on the Relationship between the State and the Church, the church "Caritas", taken over by the state, was reactivated. As a result, two different institutions with almost identical names and scope of activities operated in the country. In the hands of the secular ZKC remained 210 care and education facilities financed from the state budget, employing 7 200 people. Inspectors of the Supreme Audit Office, during an audit covering the years 1989–1990, revealed gross mismanagement on its part. As a consequence, on 15 November 1990, the Ministry of Finance decided to suspend subsidies from the state budget for the operation of the ZKC. A few months later, on 17 May 1991, the Provincial Court in Warsaw decided to dissolve the secular ZKC, although the legal battle dragged on until 1997, when its actual liquidation began. Out of 210 care and education facilities, 198 were returned free of charge to religious congregations and diocesan organizations of the church "Caritas" on the grounds that they had been taken from them *"during the period of the Polish People's Republic and handed over to the Catholic Association »Caritas«"*. Twelve facilities were transferred to local administration units.[40]

The pro-government ZKC never managed to achieve the overriding goal set by the communists – to bring about a permanent split within the Church and a deep division among the clergy. The organization failed to become truly widespread as well as to take over key church positions. The situation was different in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where similar movements of priests collaborating with the communist regime did weaken the position of the institutional Church.[41]

The Church was entering the new socio-political-economic reality, strong and confident of its position among Polish society, but at the same time still subject to control by the communist SB, which operated until 31 July 1990. Threats made by communist activists at the highest level, as well as analyses suggesting further political involvement of the clergy, mobilized the SB to take actions against the priests. On 11 November 1989, Jan Rokita, a former activist of the anti-communist Freedom and Peace Movement and at that time a member of parliament for the Civic Parliamentary Club, informed the deputy minister of internal affairs, long-time communist activist Div. Gen. Lucjan Czubiński, about the disturbing situation of Fr. Kazimierz Jancarz, a parish priest in Luborzyca near Kraków. The priest, a workers' chaplain and opposition activist during the Polish People's Republic, was, according to Rokita, still systematically spied on by SB officers.[42] When visiting the priest, Rokita apparently noticed "two individuals who, according to him, were undoubtedly eavesdropping on their conversation", looking into the rectory window. Rokita added that recently the surveillance of the clergyman had become "ostentatious and somewhat aggressive".[43] Not only Rokita, but also other political activists were afraid of more "mysterious deaths" of clergymen. On 1 March 1990, a rally was held in Warsaw, during which people demanded the disclosure of details about the murders of priests Niedzielak, Suchowolec and Zych, as well as the dissolution of the SB and the "punishment of criminals".[44] Just over four months later, on 20 July, the Senate Human Rights and the Rule of Law Committee ruled that

> *"the cases of these three deaths should be treated as connected, because they share important elements, such as the unusual circumstances of the death, earlier anonymous and threatening phone calls, and a sense of threat."*[45]

Additionally, a request was made to the Ministry of Justice to supplement the investigation, pointing out a number of shortcomings and gaps.

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39 For more, see Zamiatała 2021: 227–252; Hlebowicz 2024b: 84–105.

40 AAN 2173. The Catholic Association "Caritas" in liquidation, A brief historical outline.

41 Boryszewski 2001: 247–248; Kopyś 2016: 118–119.

42 Father Kazimierz Jancarz died suddenly on 25 March 1993, at the age of 46.

43 AIPN BU 01439/56. Note from a conversation with MP Jan Rokita, 11 November 1989.

44 AIPN BU 1585/16147. Daily information from the office of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 2 March 1990.

45 Qtd. after Branach 1999: 110.

Despite being under pressure, the Church did not intend to give up its role as an entity shaping the socio-political reality of Poland, now changing under the influence of transformation processes. On 11 September 1989, the director of the Department of Studies and Analysis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs warned against attempts to

"involve organizations associated with the Church in activities and initiatives preparing the election campaign for local governments".[46]

A few months later, the intelligence service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Department I) reported that John Paul II was seeking to establish a political movement – a Christian Democratic party led by Aleksander Hall, based on representatives of Catholic academic youth.

"The Pope recommends that the Church hierarchy in Poland (and Nuncio [Józef] Kowalczyk) support this movement as a basis for a future Christian party (...). At the current stage, it would function as a pro-government party, and ultimately occupy a centrist position as a moderator between right-wing and left-wing trends."[47]

And although a Christian democratic party led by Hall and directly linked to the Church hierarchy was never founded,[48] a political milieu supported by the Church appeared on the political scene aspiring to such a role. Bishop Józef Michalik, ordinary of Zielona Góra and Gorzów, supported the creation and activity of the Christian National Union, and during the founding congress of the party Primate Glemp celebrated Holy Mass for its activists.[49] Other hierarchs also saw nothing wrong with giving their patronage to political initiatives that grew out of Solidarity. Some bishops, in a more or less direct way, supported the Centre Agreement of Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński, others – the Democratic Union of Tadeusz Mazowiecki.

Already on 2 May 1990, the Episcopate proposed to restore religious education in schools. Prime Minister Mazowiecki agreed almost immediately, hoping that in this way he would win the hierarchy over to his side in the upcoming presidential elections.[50] A few months later, the Minister of Education, Henryk Samsonowicz, issued appropriate instructions on this matter. In 1990–1992, the CBOS asked Poles several times about their views on religious education in schools. 69–76% were in favour of such classes (compulsory or not), while 22–30% wanted to eliminate religious education from schools.[51] As such, although the majority of society approved of the resumption of religious education in schools, the decision of Prime Minister Mazowiecki, upheld by the Minister of Education, sparked violent opposition from leftist and anti-clerical circles. The procedure for introducing religious education classes was also questioned by the Commissioner for Human Rights (in 1990 and 1993), which in turn the Church interpreted as an expression of bias and lack of objectivity.[52]

In June 1990, the Church also spoke out on the future shape of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. The Episcopate appealed for the rejection of the

"erroneous and harmful simplification established (...) in the social consciousness, according to which the secular nature of the state is presented as the fundamental and almost the only guarantee of freedom and equal rights of citizens".[53]

Further, the bishops pointed to the need to emphasize in the Constitution the necessity of cooperation between the state and the Church, and thus to exclude from it the provision

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46 AIPN BU 01439/56. Cryptogram, 11 September 1989.

47 AIPN BU 01439/56. Information on the involvement of John Paul II in building a Catholic party in Poland, 7 December 1989.

48 Aleksander Hall became the leader of the Democratic Right Forum (1990–1991) and then served as deputy chairman of the Democratic Union (1991–1992).

49 Dudkiewicz 2024: 94.

50 Dudek 2007: 156–157.

51 Grabowska 2013: 18.

52 Wielowieyska 1992.

53 Libera–Rybicki–Łącki (eds.) 2003: II. 2450–2454.

regarding the separation of these two entities, which – as the bishops argued – evoked associations with the totalitarian period.

A few months later, in January 1991, the Church actively supported a Senate bill banning abortion (except in cases where the pregnancy endangered the mother's life or was the result of a crime). The hierarchs and parish priests motivated the churchgoers to send letters to parliament expressing their approval of the document's provisions. However, according to a CBOS poll, at the beginning of 1991 almost 60 % of society was in favour of the law permitting abortion, and one third of society was against it.[54] As it turned out, the sentiments of the Polish, mostly Catholic society did not coincide with the position of the Church.[55] As a result, the Episcopate opposed holding a referendum on the matter, and in May 1991 the Sejm passed a resolution not to consider any bill concerning abortion.[56] The dispute was adjourned, becoming a flashpoint in subsequent election campaigns.

The attitude of Poles towards the issue of abortion was a shock not only for the Polish hierarchs, convinced of the overwhelming influence of their own teachings on Polish society, but also for John Paul II. A month after the Sejm's decision, which the Church found unsatisfactory, on 1–9 June the Pope made his fourth pilgrimage to Poland – the first since the collapse of communist rule. The Holy Father's visit took place in completely different circumstances than those in 1987. Observing the socio-political situation in his homeland, the Pope, making the Decalogue the leitmotif of his homilies, appealed to Poles not to depart from the foundations of the Christian faith. The Pope's words did not arouse the same great enthusiasm as those referring to the ethos of Solidarity four years earlier. "Outside the truth, freedom is not freedom. It is a guise, and even enslavement", he said in one of his homilies.[57]

At the end of the pilgrimage, the Pope was reported to have confessed: *"Not everyone liked my speeches."*[58] Explaining the ambiguous reception of the papal message, Fr. Józef Tischner in *"Tygodnik Powszechny"* weekly pointed out that John Paul II came "with a program for the Polish faith", proposing a "thinking faith" that was not met with understanding by some of the audience:

> *"When the Pope said »truth«, they heard »ideology«, thought about religious education in school, about the anti-abortion law, about the threat of clericalism and God knows what else."*[59]

The 1991 visit must have affected the Pope himself, who expressed his regret four years later in a letter to Jerzy Turowicz:

> *"The regaining of freedom paradoxically coincided with an intensified attack by the secular left and liberal groups on the Church, the Episcopate, and also on the Pope. I sensed this especially in the context of my last visit to Poland in 1991. The idea was to erase from the public memory what the Church had been in the life of the Nation over the past years."*[60]

The bishops' support for certain political groups, the way in which religion was introduced into schools, the attempt to influence the shape of the new Constitution of the Republic of Poland, the return of chaplains to hospitals, prisons or the army, and the involvement of the hierarchy in the discussion on the permissibility of abortion indeed caused dissatisfaction among some circles in Poland and, as a consequence, their firm resistance. It was no coincidence that at that point the post-communist, clearly anticlerical weekly *"Nie"*, promoting the slogan of a new "black totalitarianism", edited by the former spokesman of the martial law government, Jerzy Urban, gained popularity, achieving record sales. Various sides – including the post-Solidarity milieu – were bringing accusations of clericalism, the hierarchs' desire

54 CBOS 1991: 3.

55 Falkowska 1993: 6–7.

56 Rakowiecki 1991.

57 Jan Paweł II 1991.

58 Svidercoschi 2007: 166.

59 Qtd. after Ritter 1992: 338.

60 Qtd. after Dudek 2007: 159–160.

to rule Poland, and the suppression of Poles' hopes for freedom. On the other hand, some former oppositionists reacted to the sudden change in the attitude of some post-Solidarity circles towards the Church with disbelief.

> *"We held the Church hierarchy in high esteem and I don't think it ever occurred to anyone* (...) *that in the near future the same people who used rectories all over Poland to deliver patriotic lectures would be saying that the Church should step aside",*

emphasized Piotr Semka, a member of the Young Poland Movement in the 1980s, who supported the KPN election campaign in 1989.[61]

The involvement of the Episcopate and the clergy in socio-political matters was not, however, the only factor deepening the aversion of Poles to the Church. The Episcopate also failed to fulfil the hopes placed in it by society in connection with the economic transformation of the country.

At the end of 1989, Poles were optimistic about the future. They were convinced that the coming year would be "much better and calmer than previous years".[62] They pinned their hopes on, i.a., the announcement by the Minister of Finance, Leszek Balcerowicz, of a transition to a market economy based on ownership. However, with the entry into force on 1 January 1990 of a new economic project decentralizing the economy after several decades of the command-and-distribution system, hope and optimism quickly gave way to fear, and soon to social discontent.[63] In January, prices of goods that were already in short supply rose sharply.[64] As reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, *"many concerns in employee circles are raised by job cuts and unemployment, which has been growing since mid-February".*[65] Mass protests and strikes were organized in workplaces throughout Poland. Farmers expressed their dissatisfaction by blocking the roads.[66]

At the turn of the 1990s, the Church was one of the few stable structures still functioning in public life. Crisis-stricken Poles – remembering the statements of the clergy (including hierarchs) from the 1980s about the dignity of human work, workers' rights, including the right to strike, the need for free trade unions, etc. – hoped that the Church would support them in the difficult economic situation in which they now found themselves. Meanwhile, in March 1990, the bishops supported the liberal path of economic modernization chosen by Mazowiecki's government. *"One cannot repair in a few months what has been in ruins for decades"*, they pointed out. Moreover, one of the instructions stated that demonstrations and strikes held in workplaces were "very dangerous and harmful". Elsewhere, the growing unemployment in Poland was called "a temporary (and very bitter) remedy, which should be understood as employment restructuring".[67] The parish clergy had a different view on the economic reform, personally feeling its negative effects (decreasing faith among their parishioners, unwillingness to invest due to inflation).

> *"The priests are concerned about the size of the price increase. They fear that society will not be able to keep »tightening the belt« at this pace"*

– wrote the Ministry of Internal Affairs, referring to the Elbląg province.[68]

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61 Hlebowicz 2019: 114.

62 Przeperski 2024: 150.

63 Burakowski–Gubrynowicz–Ukielski 2021: 120–121.

64 AIPN Gd 07/10/8. Cryptogram, 26 January 1999.

65 AIPN BU1585/16147. Daily information from the office of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 1 March 1990.

66 AIPN BU1585/16147. Daily information from the office of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 1 March 1990; AIPN BU 1585/16147. Daily information from the office of the Minister of Internal Affairs, 3 March 1990.

67 Qtd. after Gowin 1995: 183–184.

68 AIPN Gd 07/10/8. Cryptogram, 1 March 1990.

The Roman Catholic Church directly influenced the shape of the political transformation in Poland. An important role in this process was played by John Paul II, who, during his third visit to his homeland, unequivocally sided with Solidarity.[69] Under the influence of the Pope, the Episcopate took on the role of an intermediary and mediator in the difficult talks between the government and the opposition, which ended with a binding agreement. As such, as Rafał Łatka rightly noted, it contributed both to the peaceful change of the political system, and to covering up the sins of the communists, because as

> *"a key factor for the success of the systemic transformation it did not clearly indicate the moral (and political) responsibility of the government of the Polish People's Republic for the condition of the state and its crimes",*

including those committed against the clergy – even on the threshold of a socio-political breakthrough.[70]

Ultimately, the Church's attitude was assessed positively by the vast majority of Poles, which was reflected in a survey conducted by the CBOS.[71] The Church entered the 1990s victorious. *"Everyone stood by it, regardless of whether they had faith, sought it, or were indifferent to it. The time of triumph had come"*, wrote Teresa Bogucka in *"Dialog"* in January 1991.[72] The communist state did not manage to divide and marginalize the Church with the help of the clergy and Catholic circles working with the government, as was the case in other countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc. It looked to the future with a deep sense of having played a historical role – without our involvement, the change from totalitarian to democratic system in Poland would not have taken place, it would claim. Thus, convinced of its strong influence on society, the Church did not give up its direct influence on political reality.[73]

Bishops, with a vision of bursting churches characteristic of the last decade of the Polish People's Republic, were convinced of the real social support for the ideas they proclaimed. In the 1980s, Catholicism was inextricably intertwined with Polishness as a sign of resistance, becoming less and less a requirement of faith.[74] As such, the Holy Mass – an event fundamental for religious life, was often treated more as a kind of historical-patriotic-martyrological academy aimed at the communist government. Churches were bursting at the seams, because they were considered the only space of freedom. Seeing the gathered crowds gave the clergy a sense of real influence on the formation of Poles in the spirit of Catholic values. In the 1990s, the Church quickly realized that this was only an illusion. It turned out that although the vast majority of Poles declared themselves to be Catholics, they did not necessarily identify with the teachings contained in the homilies of Polish bishops, including John Paul II, who visited Poland in 1991.

Some Polish citizens, including those declaring attachment to the Catholic religion, having lived for over forty years in a totalitarian state, remembering the martial law regime and the omnipresent censorship, did not intend to feel in any way limited by the requirements, expectations, orders and prohibitions formulated by the Episcopate or the Pope. Increasingly often, their attitude to life was marked by relativism – the ideology of Western democracy, which, on the one hand, opposed totalitarianism, and on the other, complemented the model of consumer society in which Poles were beginning to function.[75]

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69 Podgórecki 1995: 169–170.

70 Łatka 2022: 126–127.

71 Falkowska 1994: 1–17.

72 Bogucka 1997: 33.

73 Nosowski 2021.

74 Pasierbek 2015: 137–138; Bogucka 1997: 37.

75 Buttiglione 2018: 47. John Paul II drew attention to the symptoms of the spiritual crisis of Westerners during the World Youth Day in 1991, which took place in Częstochowa and for the first time gathered young people from both sides of the so-called Iron Curtain, see: Hlebowicz 2012: 226.

All this leads to the conclusion that the Church entered the political transformation unprepared, still using old mechanisms – tested in the conditions of the so-called People's Poland, but inadequate for the emerging democratic political order. The fundamental mistake was the failure to develop a new model of its relationship with the state and the lack of a precisely outlined approach to the rapid economic modernization and socio-cultural changes. Bishops (though, of course, not all of them) engaged in activities suggesting a desire to directly influence the government, less concerned with evangelization and support for Poles who found themselves in a difficult economic situation. In line with that, *"Pismo Okólne Biura Prasowego Episkopatu Polski"* contained more articles about the consecration of subsequent buildings or banners than texts containing in-depth reflection on the tasks facing the religious community in the new socio-political situation.[76] At the same time, the Church treated almost every criticism, even justified, as an attack, holding on to its "siege mentality" typical of the period of the Polish People's Republic.[77] Such rhetoric only served to strengthen their conviction that Catholicism and its teachings were once again in danger in the conditions of regained freedom. And thus, as Jarosław Gowin correctly diagnosed, grew the spiral of fears and mutual accusations.[78] Often exaggerated and hurtful criticism of the Church aroused among its representatives' traumatic associations with the times of communist enslavement. Fearing the marginalization of Christian values in Polish society, the Church took action to institutionally secure the presence of Catholicism in public life. This, in turn, confirmed its adversaries' conviction about the Church's intention to establish an ideological monopoly.[79]

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76 Gowin 1995: 28.

77 Ibid.

78 The culmination of mutual accusations was the high-profile case of the attitude of the former Solidarity chaplain, Fr. Henryk Jankowski, who, speaking about certain representatives of the Polish political class, said, i.a., that *"we cannot tolerate the rule of people who did not say whether they come from Moscow or Israel"*. After the public apology of the clergyman, who was accused of anti-Semitism, his behaviour was commented on in *"Gazeta Wyborcza"* by Adam Michnik: *"Father Henryk Jankowski (...) overcame the fear of himself, of the power of darkness that was in him and can be in each of us. By apologizing for his absurd statements, he did a favour not only to himself, but also to every citizen of the Republic of Poland"* (AAG. Records of the press office of Abp. Tadeusz Gocłowski. Article *Ks. Jankowski przeprasza* from *"Gazeta Wyborcza"*, 5 July 1995.

79 Gowin 1995: 39.

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