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The Role of Laity in the Catholic Church in Poland from the Second Vatican Council to the Death of Primate Wyszyński

Abstract: The role of the laity in the Church has been changing over the previous century. An important impetus for change was the Second Vatican Council. Local churches in different countries implemented the Council's provisions to varying degrees. Poland had special systemic conditions because of the communist rule. The Primate of the Polish Church Stefan Wyszyński led a bold and consistent effort to renew the face of the Church and increase its moral and social role. He implemented the model of the folk Church, based on traditional forms of religiosity, respect for the hierarchy, and a clear division of roles between the clergy and the laity, where there was no room for dialogue. The Primate's programme of rebuilding the Church centred around the idea of the Great Novena preparing the entire nation for the festive celebration of the millennium of Poland's baptism. At the same time, it was a great national examination of conscience, aimed at individual and communal struggle against sin and the restoration of the moral authority of the Church as the spiritual guide of all Poles.

At the same time, however, a second trend appeared and developed in the Polish Church, consciously and directly referring to the conciliar teaching on the role of the laity in the Church. This current used new forms of pastoral work, different from the traditional forms of piety, activating the laity to a greater extent, preferring dialogue over leadership, and aimed at deepening religious awareness by spreading knowledge and encouraging the intellectual development of faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*). An important precursor and creator of this trend was Rev. Franciszek Blachnicki, founder of the Light-Life Movement, also known as the Oasis of the Living Church. A characteristic feature of Polish post-conciliar religiosity was the complementary coexistence of these two currents, which, thanks to their rather radical differences, were able to encompass with their influence the vast majority of the nation.

Keywords: laity, Church, Second Vatican Council, Stefan Wyszyński, Franciszek Blachnicki

Introduction

The model of pastoral work in the Catholic Church has changed many times throughout history. It has also taken various forms depending on the conditions prevailing in a given place and time. The subject of this article is the transformation of the role played by the Catholic laity in Poland under the influence of the new vision of the Church developed by the Second Vatican Council and as a result of the creative tension between the style of ministry of the Primate of Poland Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and the growing subjectivity and deepening religious awareness of individual secular communities. The basic idea is to show that a unique social climate developed in post-war Poland, one that could not be found in any other European country, and that this specific situation had a significant impact on the model of relations between the clergy and the institutional Church on the one hand, and practicing believers on the other. This uniqueness stemmed from the fact that, on the one hand, the Polish state found itself on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, within the immediate sphere of political and ideological influence of the Soviet empire, but on the other hand, the Catholic Church in Poland enjoyed much greater freedom and autonomy than it did in other countries of the communist bloc. Another significant factor was the outstanding personality and consistent manner in which Primate Wyszyński conducted the affairs of the Church in Poland, and an additional important variable – something that Wyszyński called “the soul of the nation,”¹ namely, a strong attachment to the traditions of independence and religion, which Poles had to defend for centuries. The interaction of these key elements paints a dynamic picture of the changes that shaped the face of the Catholic Church in Poland at the end of the 20th century.

The debate about the role of the laity in the Church began as early as the end of the 19th century, during the pontificate of Leo XIII, who addressed the subject, among others, in his 1901 encyclical *Graves de communi re*.² Subsequent popes added their bricks to the construction of a modern awareness of the ways in which the laity can participate in the life

¹ See: S. WYSZYŃSKI: *Kazanie*. Warka, May 7, 1961, <https://idziemy.pl/kosciol/prymas-wyszynski-o-kosciele-ktory-jest-sila-narodu> [accessed 18.12.2025].

² “*Graves de communi re*.” *Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Christian Democracy*, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18011901_graves-de-communi-re.html [accessed 6.03.2025].

of the Church,³ but the real progress in this matter was made through the work of the Second Vatican Council. As Paul Skibiński writes, “The Second Vatican Council was undoubtedly an important moment in the history of Catholic theology and spirituality, especially when it came to defining the place and function of the laity in the Church. One of the factors that distinguished the Second Vatican Council from previous Universal Councils was its attention precisely to the place and tasks of the laity in the Church.”⁴

The Council’s deliberations took place from October 11, 1962 to December 8, 1965. Delegations from almost all countries of the world took part in them: cardinals, archbishops, bishops, prelates, religious superiors, experts, laity auditors and observers. Sixty-seven people came from Poland: nineteen ordinaries (including Stefan Wyszyński, Primate of Poland since 1948, Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Kraków, and Archbishop Antoni Baraniak of Poznań), forty-two auxiliary bishops, including Herbert Bednorz, two bishops residing in Rome – Józef Gawlina and Władysław Rubin, one Polish missionary bishop, an employee of the Press Office of the Council Secretariat Rev. Szczepan Wesoły; three higher religious superiors; Council experts from Poland: Fr. Feliks Bednarski OP, Rev. Andrzej Maria Deskur (later a cardinal) and Rev. Bolesław Filipiak; laity auditors: Stefan Swieżawski, Mieczysław Habicht (an emigrant living in Belgium). As Ewa Czackowska writes, “In addition to Wyszyński, eight more Polish hierarchs took part in all the sessions of the Council: Archbishop Antoni Baraniak, Archbishop Karol Wojtyła, Bishop Herbert Bednorz, Bishop Franciszek Jop, Bishop Piotr Kałwa, Bishop Michał Klepacz, Bishop Kazimierz Kowalski, Bishop Antoni Pawłowski. Only to them the PRL authorities issued passports for all sessions.”⁵ The others participated only in some of the Council events.

³ “The process of laicization of society, which has taken place over the past two centuries, has presented the Church with the task of fighting to preserve and reclaim social space for Catholicism and for Catholics, so as not to be ‘locked in a porch’, which was strenuously pursued by anti-clerical circles of liberal, Masonic or socialist and communist provenience. In this area, the Popes recognized the special role of the laity and sought their religious activation on the one hand, and on the other, for lay Catholics to occupy the most central place in social life.” – P. SKIBIŃSKI: “Soborowa teologia świeckich i jej paradoksalne skutki.” *Christianitas* 10 (2016), <https://christianitas.org/news/soborowa-teologia-swieckich-i-jej-paradoksalne-skutki/> [accessed 6.03.2025].

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ E. CZACKOWSKA: “Ojciec Soboru Watykańskiego II,” <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/watykan/82946,Ojciec-Soboru-Watykańskiego-II.html> [accessed 6.03.2025]. The reason was that “the Communists used the obligation of their participation in

Some of them, however, took an active part in editing the Council documents, including those that included new thoughts on the place and role of the laity in the Church (these were the dogmatic constitutions *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, the decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem* and the declaration on Christian education *Gravissimum educationis*. On occasion, they demanded that the documents take into account the special situation of Catholicism in communist countries: “Cardinal Wyszyński and the Polish bishops were among some 450 participants in the Council from 86 countries around the world who demanded that the chapter [of the Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae*] on atheism include an amendment containing the Church’s position on communism. The Poles even addressed a petition to the Pope on this issue.”⁶

The Council’s ideas gradually spread throughout the world, generating curiosity, healthy intellectual ferment, but also resistance and opposition at times. The Vatican was like an epicentre from which seismic waves spread, causing upheavals in various countries and environments. Such a wave also reached Poland, despite communist censorship. The most active preachers of the new trend in the Church were Karol Wojtyła, the Metropolitan of Kraków, and Stefan Swieżawski, a professor at the Catholic University of Lublin (the only lay conciliar auditor from all of Eastern Europe), while the main centres of consideration and dissemination of the conciliar ideas were the curia of Kraków and its guests, the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia in Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, Poznań, and Toruń, and the progressive part of the academic community of the Catholic University of Lublin, from where – through Rev. Franciszek Blachnicki, then an assistant professor at the Faculty of Theology, the spirit of the Council penetrated the Oasis movement throughout Poland.

Primate Wyszyński was also aware of the importance and significance of the Council’s deliberations and their results. This is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that (taking up Maria Okońska’s initiative⁷) he

the Council for a kind of ‘passport game’.” When asked by the secretary of the Episcopate, Bishop Zygmunt Choromański, whether the bishops would receive passports to go to the Council, the then director of the Office of Religious Affairs, Tadeusz Żabiński, replied: “Not all of them deserve it.” A. WARSO: “The Sandomierz bishop and his auxiliary bishops in the era of Vatican II.” In: *Studia Soborowe. Historia i recepcja Vaticanum II*. Ed. M. BIAŁKOWSKI. Toruń 2014, p. 183.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Krystyna Czuba writes: “The Bishops’ Conference took up Maria’s idea, and regulations were issued. Poland lived the Council. [...] The Vigils of the Council revived the Great

introduced a programme of Parish Council Vigils at Jasna Góra, inaugurated on December 8, 1962, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and also the day of the Primate's arrival in Poland after the first Council session. The prayerful content of the vigils included two slogans: "pojednanie między ludźmi w intencji Soboru" (reconciliation among people for the sake of the Council) and "zwycięstwo nad sobą na rzecz Soboru" (victory over self for the sake of the Council). The fact that the thought of reconciliation between people was close to the Primate and his entourage is clearly evidenced by the unprecedented appearance at the end of the Council's deliberations of the Message of the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops, published on November 18, 1965, signed by 34 bishops present in Rome, edited in the spirit of the evangelical reconciliation of the Polish and German peoples. The slogan about victory over self can be understood in at least two ways: either in the spirit of the Great Novena of the Polish Nation, as a call for a national examination of conscience from common sins, or as a proclamation of intellectual-spiritual victory over the idea of the pre-conciliar Church.

Another initiative worth noting, undertaken by the Primate in cooperation with his closest circle, was the proclamation of 1965 as the Year of the Polish Woman, in reference to the millennium of the arrival at the court of Mieszko I of Princess Doubravka of Bohemia, called the "Godmother of Poles." It is significant, after all, that the leading theme and event in the Year of the Woman was to become the act of surrender into the Maternal Bond of Mary. This sheds some light on the perception of the role and position of women at the time.

The Polish reception of the Council's ideas took place in a rather peculiar set of political and ideological circumstances,⁸ the culmination of

Novena and gave a new current to the work of the Church in Poland." – K. CZUBA: *Maria Okońska. Święci są wśród nas*. Warszawa 2020, p. 120.

⁸ "The Second Vatican Council, which became a remarkable event in the history of the universal Church, began from the point of view of our history at an unfavourable moment. Unlike many of the world's Catholic nations, including those outside Europe, Polish Catholics and their bishops had to contend in the 1960s with a communist regime whose religious policy was fixated on trying to eliminate Catholicism from public space and constantly harassing the Church. The October days of 1962, therefore, were for the Polish episcopate a period of, on the one hand, final preparations for participation in the historic event of the universal Church, and on the other hand, persistence in a daily life marked by vigilance against the repression applied by the Communists." J. ŻARYN: "Otwarcie Soboru Watykańskiego II w perspektywie zniewolonej Polski." *Studia Prymasowskie*, t. VII–VIII (2022–2023), pp. 100–101.

which was to be the year 1966. According to the findings of historians, that very year was the thousandth anniversary of the baptism of the Polanian prince Mieszko I and his court, an event to which two radically different meanings were attributed: for the Church it was the date of the baptism of Poland and the beginning of the work of Christianization of the Polish lands, for the state authorities – the symbolic beginning of the Polish State, whose first historical ruler was Mieszko.

Both the Church and the state authorities prepared for the millennium celebrations with great vigour, but by no means in cooperation and harmony. On the contrary: the party-state apparatus tried to do everything to diminish the religious significance of the anniversary, while for the Church authorities it was an excellent opportunity to expose the strength of the Polish people's attachment to the Catholic faith, and at the same time to strengthen this faith and link its moral requirements to the everyday life of Poles. This was largely the purpose of the pastoral programme devised by the Primate while he was still interned, covering the period from September 25, 1953 to October 28, 1956.⁹ Even before his release, on the Feast of Our Lady of Częstochowa on August 26, 1956, the Jasna Góra Vows were made at Jasna Góra, which initiated the Great Novena preparing the Polish nation for the 1966 celebration of the Millennium of Polish Baptism.

During this – crucial for the post-war history of Poland – period of the ongoing conciliar deliberations at the Vatican and simultaneous preparations for the solemn Millennium celebrations, two tendencies collided sharply within the bosom of the Polish Church. One was an invigorating wave of conciliar inspiration, carrying with it a project for a new face of the Church: integrated horizontally rather than vertically, open to grass-roots initiatives of the faithful, developing activities in the lay apostolate, the universal priesthood, building a broad dialogue and community based on reciprocity rather than subordination.¹⁰ The other wing was the perfectly prepared programme of Primate Wyszyński – the programme of the Great

⁹ In the *Kalendarzyk łaski* (The Pocket Diary of Grace), written during his internment, dated August 26, 1956, Wyszyński noted: "I did what I could for your glory: on May 16, I prepared the text of the oath, I wrote state adorations: for priests, for young people, for husbands and mothers. These words will speak for me to the people." – S. WYSZYŃSKI: *Z głębi duszy. Kalendarzyk łaski*. Warszawa 2019, p. 151.

¹⁰ See D. LIPIEC: "Apostolskie zaangażowanie laikatu w Kościele w Polsce." In: *Duszpasterstwo w Polsce. 50 lat inspiracji Soboru Watykańskiego II*. Ed. M. FIAŁKOWSKI, Lublin 2015, <https://wydawnictwo.kul.pl/teologia/2816-duszpasterstwo-w-polsce-50-lat-inspiracji-soboru-watykanskiego-ii.html> [accessed 6.03.2025].

Novena of the Church in Poland,¹¹ which was written out with bookkeeping precision for the entire decade of 1956–1966, and implemented with great passion, commitment, a lot of daily sacrifices and enormous risks.

This programme was created and implemented with an in-depth knowledge of the realities of the People's Republic of Poland¹² – both geopolitical and moral and cultural. It was oriented toward two main goals, both extremely important: the first was the restoration of morality in a highly demoralized postwar society and the revival of religious life on a nationwide scale, using mass forms of piety and drawing on the traditions of popular religiosity. The second – to regain the “government of souls” in the broad strata of the nation, that is, the power over the consciences and beliefs of the Poles, badly strained and overblown for many decades, largely as a result of confrontation with various currents and variants of leftist sensibilities.

Wyszyński alone found himself in an extremely difficult position. On the one hand – he was at the head of a small, but very dedicated and faithful staff of people, thanks to whom the programme of the Great Novena gained tremendous momentum and impetus at the end.¹³ On the other hand, he witnessed and actively participated in an unprecedented process of change in the perception of the Church and its place in the modern world, in the definition of new pastoral tasks and the emergence of new tools for formation work. He must have known that these two currents could not be harmoniously reconciled, but he also realized – thanks to his system of communication with the “periphery” – that the breath of post-conciliar hopes could not be contained. He knew that he had to lead his Church to another Victory on the ramparts of Jasna Góra,¹⁴ but he also

¹¹ See B. CZYŻEWSKI: “Wielka Nowenna 1957–1965,” <https://nawiedzenie.archidiecezja.pl/wielka-nowenna/> [accessed 6.03.2025].

¹² Anna Rastawicka writes about how deep and grounded in both experience and intellectual reflection was Wyszyński's knowledge of the daily concerns of the people and the problems of the working world in People's Poland: “The Social Formation of Father Wyszyński.” In: A. RASTAWICKA: *Ten zwycięża, kto miłuje*. Warszawa 2020, pp. 253–272. Ewa Czaczkowska underscores: “The Primate towered over other members of the episcopate. He developed an offensive programme in the form of the Great Novena and had a holistic vision of the Church.” – E. CZACZKOWSKA: *Kardynał Wyszyński*. Warszawa 2009, p. 384.

¹³ The history of Primate Wyszyński's cooperation with his closest circle of devoted collaborators is described by Jadwiga JEŁOWICKA: *Wspomnienie po pół wieku. Na 60-lecie istnienia Instytutu Świeckiego Pomocnic Maryi Jasnogórskiej, Matki Kościoła*. Warszawa 2002.

¹⁴ This phrase alludes to the frequent references in pastoral language of the time to the reign of King John II Casimir Vasa from 1648 to 1668, when the Polish nation,

did not want to lose his influence on the native intelligentsia once again – for it was in this stratum that the greatest enthusiasm for post-conciliar renewal was born.¹⁵

Looking from a historical perspective, we can see this split and, to a certain extent, understand the motives guiding the Primate. He felt a great degree of personal responsibility for the work that he himself had begun, fighting despair and a sense of hopelessness in the dark hour of internment, and which, thanks to the mass involvement of a large number of Polish Catholics, grew and flourished. So, it was apparent that the strategy employed was working, and that the means and tactics used – mass, popular, traditional piety, centralization and hierarchization of authority in the Church – were yielding unexpectedly good results. But he must also have known that the world is evolving, times are changing, and the changes initiated by the Council, pointing in directions different from those contained in his vision of the Church, cannot be stopped in the long run. Perhaps his statesmanlike wisdom consisted in the fact that (in accordance with the principle of personalism) he “allowed to be” those movements and circles in the Church that enthusiastically joined the current of post-conciliar renewal, and this current – especially in the 1970s and later, already after the Primate’s death – flowed in an ever wider and faster current.¹⁶ The following will present the most important features characterizing the two visions of the place of the laity in the Church under Primate Wyszyński, which coexisted in the post-conciliar Polish reality.

First current – around the Great Novena

The programme developed by the Primate and carried out under his spiritual and institutional leadership was aimed primarily at the spiritual and moral renewal of the entire nation. It had a mass character, was not differentiated or nuanced so as to reach different environments through

plagued by numerous invasions by enemies, united and won under the slogans of defending the Catholic faith (*in hoc signo vinces*).

¹⁵ See M. LIBISZOWSKA-ŻÓŁTKOWSKA: *Postawy inteligencji wobec religii. Studium socjologiczne*. Warszawa 1991.

¹⁶ See M. BIAŁKOWSKI: “Recepcja Soboru Watykańskiego II w latach 1972–1978.” *Studia Pelplińskie* (2018), pp. 29–80.

different routes, but operated in a language that was simple and understandable to everyone and used forms of mass pastoral care. These included pilgrimages, peregrinations of images, large gatherings at national shrines, letters and messages addressed to all Poles. The impact of this programme was very wide indeed. Pastoral actions gathered millions of the faithful, participating in them with great commitment. The religious, moral and social content proclaimed in the Primate's programme directly addressed human sins, weaknesses and negligence – both individual and collective – and called for fighting them through conversion, persistent work on oneself and active participation in religious practices.¹⁷

At the same time, this trend had a second, hidden face. It was clear to most of its participants and recipients that the undercurrent, but equally important meaning of all the activities undertaken, was to constantly oppose the propaganda efforts of the communist government, aimed at remodeling the consciousness of society in the direction set by socialist ideals in their current version and conjunctural interpretation, imposed by the ideological line of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) – the party holding real power in the country. This was a very serious, powerful and strenuous struggle, in which both sides engaged all available forces and resources, because the stakes in this game were very high.¹⁸ It was about the “government of souls” of the entire nation – a motif that refers to the Romantic tradition, deeply rooted in the consciousness of Poles, associated with the struggle for spiritual and national independence, but also about the legitimacy of spiritual leadership in this struggle. In the 1960s, every high school student in Poland learned by heart excerpts from the monologue of Konrad, the hero of Adam Mickiewicz's drama *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*): “Give me souls'-rule! / [...] 'Tis rule I want; such power is my lot – Give it to me, or but point out the road / [...] I want to rule as Thou dost, / from on high, and as Thou dost, / I want to rule the soul.”¹⁹

¹⁷ See content of the Jasna Góra Vows of the Nation, written personally by Stefan Wyszyński, solemnly made on August 26, 1956: <https://liturgia.wiara.pl/doc/419339.Jasnogorskie-Sluby-Narodu> [accessed 11.03.2025].

¹⁸ “Now face the reality of your homeland and ask yourselves: What kind of Poland do I want? [...] A son of the nation who loves his homeland is speaking to you. And to love it means to love everything that constitutes Poland. [...] Respect this heritage of the nation! Open your hearts to it, love it, and defend it” (author's own trans.). S. WYSZYŃSKI: *Kocham Ojczyznę więcej niż własne serce*. Częstochowa 2020, p. 71.

¹⁹ A. MICKIEWICZ: *Forefather's Eve: Dresden Text*. Trans. CH. S. KRASZEWSKI. London 2016, pp. 51–52.

The communist authorities were extremely anxious to control the consciences of citizens, but they lacked the courage to openly and frontally attack the Church. This is because the rulers knew that a full-scale war against Church structures would have to end in their defeat. This fact distinguished People's Poland from all other countries in the so-called camp of people's democracy, namely, those politically subordinate to the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Polish authorities used the most varied tactical maneuvers and resorted to limited but severe and precisely targeted violence on a case-by-case basis, hoping to gradually and slowly gain the upper hand.²⁰ This tactic was recognized fairly quickly by Church leaders, and the response to it included a nationwide pastoral programme, disseminated through Church channels and sent for implementation in local structures, primarily parishes. The programme was conceived and planned in such a way as to expose the faithful as little as possible to persecution by state authorities; explicit provocations and unambiguous political emphases were therefore avoided.

It was noticeable that the arrangement of organizational and communication structures within the Church was generally more efficient and effective than the nationwide network of party cells and executive branch institutions. This was partly due to the strongly instilled obedience among the clergy, and partly due to the strong and sincere commitment of the faithful, while only fear of persecution, or opportunism and careerism had an effect in party work, which did not provide such a strong motivation. Therefore, instructions and suggestions for pastoral work, coming from "headquarters," that is, from the Primate's Palace in Warsaw, were actually taken up and implemented in the "field," that is, in the local diocesan and parish structures. However, the situation of constant confrontation on the ideological front had a strong influence not only on

²⁰ "The Communists did not seize power in Poland, [...] but they got it from Stalin. [...] Poles understood that it was an imposed power, and they did not accept it. This real weakness of the communists, the fairly widespread public resentment they faced, meant that they initially played a game of pretenses. They hid their real goals and programme [...]. At the same time, however, the authorities tried to limit the influence of faith on people's lives. The new 'belief' was to become a communist ideology, the citizens of post-Yalta Poland – under the guise of 'liberation' – should reject faith in God, and accept 'faith' in the inevitability of historical necessity and communist slogans. [...] The communists began to intensify their terror against the Church in Poland from the autumn of 1947." – F. MUSIAŁ: "Proces kurii krakowskiej. Komuniści w walce z Kościołem." *Biuletyn IPN* 1–2 (2023), <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/historia-z-ipn/archiwum/179745,Filip-Musial-Proces-kurii-krakowskiej-Komunisci-w-walce-z-Kosciolem.html> [accessed 6.03.2025].

the forms, but also on the content of pastoral activities – this is where their mass and popular character came from: it seemed natural that in People's Poland a popular Church should develop, which meant in particular that the pastoral programme was to be universal, not intelligentsia-elite. To sum up, this made profound sense and ensured that pastoral work was highly effective.²¹

What was the “folk character” of the Church in the People's Republic supposed to consist in? The answer to this question requires a brief reconstruction of the model of the Church, assumed in the pastoral programme of Primate Wyszyński.²² This programme, officially inaugurated with the solemn Jasna Góra Vows in front of the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa in the chapel of the Jasna Góra Sanctuary on August 26, 1956, despite the absence of the Primate (who at that time was still – until October 28, 1956 – in the internment centre in Komańcza), was aimed

²¹ Aniela Dylus writes: “I have long argued [...] about the condition and potential of the folk Church in Poland. I myself grew up in such a Church; in a family and social environment where religion was the air – one inhaled it, and the saying ‘without God nor to the threshold’ was fulfilled every bit as much. The religiosity formed in the folk Church was colourful, lively, laced with various customs, novena, processions, pilgrimages. Within its framework, God was present in everyday life: in the sign of the cross made by a mother on the foreheads of children leaving for school or on a loaf of bread before it was sliced, in prayer before and after meals, and in many other small and serious matters. It was something natural to invite God to accompany people ‘in the hours of respite, in the days of work’ – as sung in a popular religious song. Although I also knew the weaknesses of this religiosity, I did not understand a certain distance and skepticism towards it. Yes, the folk Church, abandoned by elites who had largely succumbed to the ‘Hegelian bite’ during the communist period, needed intellectual deepening, and mass, traditional, emotional religiosity needed to be balanced by individual, conscious faith decisions. Nevertheless, it seemed that the nation-bound folk Church in Poland, which had happily survived partition by non-Catholic powers and two anti-Christian totalitarianisms, was also capable of defending itself against secularizing pressures.” A. DYŁUS: “Z troską o Kościele (ludowym) i o Polsce z nim związanej.” *Chrześcijaństwo Świat Polityka. Zeszyty społecznej myśli Kościoła* 22 (2018), p. 132.

²² The Primate explained his understanding of the “folksiness” of the Church in, among other places, his Second St. John's Day Sermon on January 6, 1980, where he said: “Today, I would like to look at the most general principles of the existence and activity of the Holy Church in our baptized homeland, at our lives and the cooperation of God's people with reality. [...] The essential elements are: God – recognized and loved; man – respected; the homeland – served; authority on earth – exercised in love, justice, and truth. [...] Hence – the primacy of man in the universal and national system of life and work. We must concern ourselves most with man, his place in the national community” (author's own trans.) – S. WYSZYŃSKI: *Drugie Kazanie Świętojańskie Prymasa Polski*. Poznań–Warszawa 1980, pp. 3–5, 11.

at the Jubilee of the Millennium of the Baptism of Poland, scheduled for May 3, 1966. Behind the totality of this programme is a specific vision of the hierarchical Church. It was to be a Church that was both hieratic and majestic, in which priests, by the power of the sacrament of the priesthood elevated to a higher level than the lay faithful, because they had been called to higher purposes – one might even say, “a little lower than the heavenly beings” (Psalm 8) – play a primary role.

Indeed, at the time, the general perception of the Polish masses was that the priest was an extraordinary person, belonging to the sphere of the sacrum, excluded from the everyday order of the *profanum* and endowed *a priori* with considerable authority. In contrast to the position of the priest, the lay faithful, that is, the People of God, were almost completely deprived of causality and subjectivity within church structures; it is true that they kept hearing from the pulpits that they were called to salvation, but this was accompanied by a full awareness that the indispensable intermediary on the road to salvation was the institutional Church and its pastoral instruments – from the sacraments to the liturgy to various organized and communal forms of piety. This model generally met with approval, as “the religiosity formed in the popular Church was colourful, lively, laced with various customs, novena, processions, pilgrimages,”²³ and therefore – attractive.

A frequent motif in the sermons and public statements of Primate Wyszyński, compatible with the discussed model of the Church, are the figures of the shepherd and his sheep. This symbolism carries a twofold content. On the one hand – the priest is the evangelical Good Shepherd, who loves and knows his sheep, smells them, and is willing to die for them or take great risks to follow a strayed sheep and bring it back to the flock [John 10:11–16; Luke 15:4–6]. On the other hand – the shepherd is the one who knows the way and the intentions of the Host, knows everything better, leads his sheep to their appointed goals and demands obedience from them. Admittedly, not obedience to himself, but to the Supreme Authority, which, however, in practice comes out the same, since he – the shepherd – is the representative of the Divine will and Divine majesty on earth, so all causality is in his hands, and the sheep are to listen and obey.

Behind the relationship of the clergy and laity within the Church community, so framed, lies a centuries-old tradition of feudal system, preserved

²³ A. DYŁUS: “Z troską o Kościele (ludowym) i o Polsce z nim związanej.” *Chrześcijaństwo Świat Polityka. Zeszyty społecznej myśli Kościoła* 22 (2018), p. 132.

in the structures of *Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae*, in which Poland has been stuck since the time of Mieszko I. This is evidenced, among other things, by the etymology of the basic terms of the Polish language that describe this reality. The word “priest” is a circumflex form of the term “prince” and originally meant “ruler.”²⁴ In turn, the word “church” is a Polonized form of the Czech “kostel,” derived from the Latin *castellum*, meaning ‘castle, castle, residence’²⁵. In harmony with this Roman tradition is the institutional model, in which the pastor, or – literally: the shepherd of souls, or in other words, the “master priest,” exercises authority (spiritual and formal) over the people, or sheep.

However, it is important to keep in mind the fundamental difference that separates the communist-era Church from the feudal Church of centuries past. It is about the relationship between the laity (state) authority and the Church hierarchy. In pre-communist times, not much has changed from the era of Mikołaj Rej (1505–1569) to the time of Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), since a character in Rej’s *Krótką rozprawą między trzema osobami, Panem, Wójtem a Plebanem* complains with the words: “Ksiądz pana wini, pan księdza, a nam prostym zewsząd nędza” (The priest blames the lord, the lord blames the priest, and to us simple people there is misery everywhere).²⁶ And in Wyspiański’s *Wesele* (The Wedding), more than 350 years later, Czepiec complains: “Who’s stealing all my hard-earned pelf? The Jew or you, reverend shelf?”²⁷ These utterances prove that the people for centuries remained in double dependence, and their oppressors pursued common interests at the expense of the people. In the communist state, the situation was radically different: it was the Church and the people who formed a united front, largely united against – imposed by force and against the will of the majority of the people – a form of state system. Therefore, the “sheep” were relatively eager to follow their shepherds, knowing that the latter were leading

²⁴ “Ksiądz oznaczał jeszcze w XVI wieku nie tylko duchownego, lecz [i] świeckiego panującego” [‘Ksiądz’ denoted still in the 16th century not only a clerical, but [also] a secular ruling] – *Słownik etymologiczny*. Ed. A. BRÜCKNER. Warszawa 1957, p. 277.

²⁵ See ibidem, p. 260. For comparison, in the Cyrillomethodian tradition, the term “orthodox church” (*cirkev*) became widespread; it derived from Greek *kyriakon*, from: *kyriake oikia* = ‘house of the Lord’.

²⁶ M. REJ: *Krótką rozprawą między trzema osobami, Panem, Wójtem a Plebanem*, <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/krotka-rozprawa-miedzy-trzemi-osobami.html> [accessed 10.03.2025].

²⁷ S. WYSPIAŃSKI: *The Wedding: a drama in three acts: first presented in Cracow, 1901*. Trans. C. NOEL. London 1998, p. 54.

them in the right direction, and, moreover, clearly feeling that they were genuinely committed to pastoral work to the point of willingness to make the supreme sacrifice.

On this occasion, it is worth exposing one more feature conducive to the persistence of the clerical model of the Church during and after the Council. Both the Primate and most of the bishops regarded with great resistance and reluctance attempts to involve the laity more deeply in formation work. This was most often due not so much to distrust of the laity, but rather to fear of unnecessarily exposing those not belonging to the clerical state to repression by the authorities. Priests were sometimes entrusted with dangerous tasks, the performance of which could draw the ire of party and state functionaries, and consequently, persecution and harassment.

The reason for such risky decisions may have been the fact that not many years earlier, during the Nazi occupation of 1939–1945, priests had repeatedly given evidence of heroism and steadfast fidelity to the Gospel, exposing themselves to arrest, exile to a camp or martyrdom; so even in the new, post-war times, one could count on the steadfastness and loyalty of the clergy. It was something else, however, from a moral point of view, to expose the ordinary faithful to the risk of persecution, which could be even more severe than in the case of the clergy due to a kind of unwritten immunity, which from the post-conciliar years onward was violated rarely and rather only in exceptional cases.

This is the picture of the Church, guided by the strong will and firm hand of Stefan Wyszyński. The Primate of the Millennium was an exceptionally independent person, yielding neither to foreign influence nor to political pressure, threats and blackmail. He was guided by his own authorial vision of the theology of the nation, taking into account the political and historical conditions of a particular historical moment. However, gradually another new tendency began to overlap this picture, directly related to the wave of spiritual upheaval triggered by the Council's final resolutions and the post-conciliar documents promulgated at the Vatican, and their subsequent progressive reception in Polish Catholic circles.

The second current – around the ideas of the Second Vatican Council

Poland has become one of the countries where, slowly and not without resistance, but systematically, there has been a growing readiness on the part of the laity to make changes in living and practicing the faith, as well as introducing new forms of organizing religious life. This became apparent primarily in the growing circles of committed Catholic intelligentsia, both among adults and youth. The persistent reaching back to traditional forms of popular piety and the firm domination of a simple, catechismic, heavily dogmatized and increasingly archaic style and language for the transmission of religious and ethical content began to raise questions and objections.

Aniela Dylus writes: “The folk Church, abandoned by elites who had largely succumbed to the ‘Hegelian bite’ during the communist period, needed intellectual deepening, and mass, traditional, emotional religiosity – balanced by individual, conscious decisions of faith.”²⁸ So it turned out that “Christianity for all” was not necessarily “Christianity for everyone.” There was a growing need to develop special forms of pastoral work for communities that needed in-depth reflection and wanted to see in the institution of the Church a partner for open dialogue, not avoiding difficult questions and capable of providing thoughtful answers, and not just a top-down authority operating with ready-made, well-worn formulas.

This current of “contestation” dovetailed perfectly with the new spirit of faith flowing from the Second Vatican Council. Paweł Skibiński notes that the most important result of the Council was the real empowerment of the laity, which made it possible to formulate their expectations more easily and effectively, including in the spheres of formation and liturgy.²⁹ The bigger problem was on the side of the clergy, where the ideas of emancipating the laity encountered great resistance and numerous

²⁸ A. DYLUŚ: “Z troską o Kościele (ludowym) i o Polsce z nim związanej...,” p. 132.

²⁹ A new perspective on the role of lay people in the Church is presented by *Dogmatic Constitution “Lumen gentium.”* For example: “Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect” (no. 11), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html [accessed 10.03.2025]. See also P. SKIBIŃSKI: “Soborowa teologia świeckich i jej paradoksalne skutki...,” p. 247.

misunderstandings. The result of the grassroots activation of the laity – it should be added, however, that actively supported by priests, more sensitive than others to the “breeze of the conciliar spirit” – was, among other things, the emergence (from different motivations and inspirations) of a whole series of movements and communities, pursuing their own path to deepen their faith and practice Christian virtues in connection with the institutional Church.

This process can be shown using the example of the Upper Silesian Church. Stanisław Puchała, a long-time academic pastor of the Archdiocese of Katowice, in his article on Catholic associations and religious movements in the Diocese of Katowice, lists and describes some thirty forms of lay activity in the local Church: Academic Pastoral Care, the Caring for Life movement, the Society for Responsible Parenting, Marriage Encounter Retreats, Hospice, Catholic Academic Union “Gaudeamus,” Catholic Intelligentsia Club, Caritas Academica, the Light-Life Movement, Domestic Church, the Children of Mary Movement, the Movement for Renewal in the Holy Spirit, the Focolari, the Legion of Mary, the Pontifical Missionary Works, the Apostolate of the Sick, the Neocatechumenal Movement, the Schoenstatt Movement, the Movement of the Families of Nazareth, the “Toward a Civilization of Love” Movement, the “Faith and Light” Movement (so-called Moomins), the Family of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Franciscan Ecological Movement, the Confraternities of Sobriety, the Association of Catholic Families, the Catholic Association of Polish Physicians, state pastoral ministries, such as those for families, teachers, working people, health care, lawyers, business and creative circles.³⁰ The post-conciliar achievements of the Church in other dioceses are similar (or even richer).

As an example of a new model of thinking and acting on the question of the place of the laity in the Church, let us use the Light-Life Movement (ΦΩΣ-ΖΩΕ), initiated and moderated for many years by Father Franciszek Blachnicki (1921–1987), born in Rybnik in the Katowice diocese. From the first years of his priestly ministry, the young pastor put a lot of effort into searching for new methods of work, which he began with young people – first with altar boys, then also with girls, then gradually with more and more groups and communities. After several years of pastoral

³⁰ See S. PUCHAŁA: “Związki katolickie i ruchy religijne w Diecezji Katowickiej.” In: *Kościół Śląski wspólnotą misyjną*. Eds. W. ŚWIĄTKIEWICZ, J. WYCISŁO, Katowice 1995, pp. 221–261.

experience, he began efforts to create a diocesan centre that “[would] become a place of activity and intensive cooperation between clergy and laity. One of the goals of the centre was to educate lay leaders for parish life.”³¹ At the same time, he began developing a new form of youth retreats, which he called “experiential-educational” and was based on careful listening to the spiritual needs of children and young people.

These needs precluded “conducting retreats in the traditional form [...] of silence, inner recollection, reflection on the state of the soul, prayer and listening to retreat teachings.”³² The intense search for new forms that would enable active experience of religious practice and conscious growth in faith led in time – through a number of forms of pastoral activity and scientific reflection in the area of pastoral theology – to the creation of the Oasis movement, which spread to more and more dioceses until it became one of the most popular forms of active participation of children, youth and adults in the life of the Church. By the mid-1970s, the movement, by then known as the Light-Life Movement, covered all dioceses, and its forms of work included both summer Oasis retreats and year-long cycles of meetings in individual parishes involving different age groups. One of these forms was the “Domowy Kościół,” which consisted of circles of families – small communities of two to five families with their children, meeting regularly throughout the year under the pastoral care of one of the parish priests and following a specific formation programme.³³

At the core of the movement’s pastoral idea is Rev. Blachnicki’s original theological and philosophical anthropology, a systematic exposition of which is contained in his book *Kim jest człowiek* (Who the Human Being Is),³⁴ a succinct characterization of which is as follows: “He characterized the new Man as a person who possesses himself in the giving of himself. The addressee of this going outward can only be the other person, hence the conclusion that man can really be himself only in dialogue with his neighbour – this is how Rev. Blachnicki defined the relationship of love. This dialogue is most fully realized in relation to God [...]. Through faith in Him, man is born again to life. The principle of this [new life] is the Holy Spirit, who empowers one to make one’s own life a gift

³¹ A. ADASZYŃSKA-BLACHA, D. MAZUR: *Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki. Biografia i wspomnienia*. Kraków 2016, p. 51.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 52.

³³ See P. WOLSKI: “Domowy Kościół – gałąź rodzinna Ruchu Światło-Życie,” <https://www.dk.oaza.pl/> [accessed 10.03.2025].

³⁴ F. BLACHNICKI: *Kim jest człowiek*. Krościenko 1999.

to others and to God. [...] It is worth resounding here the key term for Oasis pedagogy: agape, or selfless love of neighbour.”³⁵ As the authors of the *Biography* add, “the thoughts quoted above were translated into specific attitudes that Oasis formation was to transmit, especially to the youngest retreatants, in order to protect them from the dangers of the world in which they live.”³⁶

The second foundation for the formation of the Light-Life Movement is the spirit of the Vatican Council. At the second meeting of the National Congregation of Responsible of the Living Church Movement, which he appointed, in Krościenko in 1977, Blachnicki “defined the Light-Life Movement as a movement of conciliar renewal in Poland. [...] He postulated that all [...] renewal movements present in the contemporary Church [...] gathered together serve the renewal of the parish, [and] to recognize the teaching of the Council as the great Word of God addressed to the Church.”³⁷

As an interesting fact, it is worth noting that Rev. Blachnicki – like Primate Wyszyński – in his pastoral work abundantly benefited from the help of a group of dedicated women who, over time, formed a community, first called the Team of the Immaculate and then the Institute of the Immaculate Mother of the Church.³⁸ Its co-founder and long-time leader Zuzanna Podlewska in her memoir about the priest emphasizes the innovative role played by the works he moderated in the Polish Church: “He was characterized by an extraordinary gift for convincing [the laity] to get involved [in various concrete works and tasks]. [...] The evangelical way of life releases

³⁵ A. ADASZYŃSKA-BŁACHA, D. MAZUR: *Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki...*, pp. 113–115.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 115.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 130. He was referring primarily to the summons: “The term *laity* is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. [...] Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer” (*Lumen gentium*, no. 31). Cf. F. BŁACHNICKI: *Aktualna świadomość zadań Ruchu Światło-Życie. Wskazania II Krajowej Kongregacji Odpowiedzialnych Ruchu Światło-Życie*, in: *Światło-Życie. Teczka Oazy Żywego Kościoła*. Krościenko 1977.

³⁸ One of the Institute’s co-founders Dorota Seweryn talks about the circumstances of its inception and constitution in her memoir “Dziewczęta z Tychów,” published in: A. ADASZYŃSKA-BŁACHA, D. MAZUR: *Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki...*, pp. 178–184.

joy, enthusiasm and is something contagious. This experience later proved to be very effective in [different] age groups. And so, slowly, youth oases, adult oases, family oases, that is, the Light-Life Movement, were formed. All this was of great importance for the Church in Poland, which was then restricted in its activities by the totalitarian system. The movement also played an important role in disseminating the thoughts of the Second Vatican Council. Father Francis [...] was, in a sense, a prophet who sees farther and wider; he sees the dangers that must be countered and the calls that must be taken up.”³⁹

I think that the words about living the Gospel, which releases joy, enthusiasm and is something contagious, could just as well come from the lips of one of the ladies who actively accompanied the initiatives and works of Rev. Stefan Wyszyński for many years. Just as the Institute of the Immaculate Mother of the Church gathered around Blachnicki, so in the life and pastoral work of the Primate a huge role was played by the ladies of the Primate’s Institute of the Vows of the Nation at Jasna Góra, established on May 3, 1957, and still operating today under the new name of the Primate’s Institute of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, and which is a continuation of the lifelong commitment of a group of women who, even before the end of World War II, associated their activity and ministry with the person of Rev. Wyszyński.

The work began with the programme of the “New Mobilization of Fighting Warsaw” during the Warsaw Uprising, then in 1945 a group of “eight girls who adopted the programme of the eight beatitudes”⁴⁰ was constituted at Jasna Góra and were called the “Eight”. From the very beginning, the group was associated with Stefan Wyszyński, whom Maria Okońska – the leader of the Ósemka – met on November 1, 1942, in Laski, where he was then chaplain of the Home Army and gave underground lectures on Catholic social teaching.⁴¹ After the war, “when Bishop Stefan Wyszyński became Primate of Poland, Maria and all of the Eight gave their all to God through the mediation of Mary for his mission in the Church and Poland. They understood that the rebirth of the Fatherland would come through Jasna Góra and the ministry of Primate Wyszyński.”⁴²

³⁹ Z. PODLEWSKA: “Miał w sobie coś tajemniczego.” In: A. ADASZYŃSKA-BŁACHA, D. MAZUR: *Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki...*, pp. 173–177.

⁴⁰ J. JEŁOWICKA: *Wspomnienie po pół wieku*. Warszawa 2002, p. 11.

⁴¹ See K. CZUBA, M. OKOŃSKA: *Święci są wśród nas*. Warszawa 2020, p. 47.

⁴² S. BUDZYŃSKI: “Posłowie.” In: M. OKOŃSKA: *Wszystko postawił na Maryję*. Warszawa 2021, pp. 76–77.

The above fragment begs for a comment: Stefan Wyszyński – in accordance with his own declaration, which he made on February 14, 1953 – put everything on Mary⁴³; but at the same time – exactly like Franciszek Blachnicki – he put a lot on Polish women, entrusting them with important, often crucial tasks, without the implementation of which it would be impossible to fulfill the pastoral programme of the spiritual rebirth of the Fatherland. This undoubtedly testifies to his courage and innovative thinking about the Church as a community of the faithful of all states.

So much for the similarities. Unfortunately, there were also differences, and they were so profound that they apparently prevented a deeper cooperation based on the merging of the two great visions of Church renewal. The impossibility of agreement is evidenced, among other things, by the following fact: in August 1960, there was a massive action by the Citizens' Militia (MO) against the Temperance Crusade, the latter led by Blachnicki. The Temperance Crusade headquarters was closed and sealed, its employees were thrown into the street, the work itself was declared illegal and anti-state, and Rev. Blachnicki was taken into custody.

Before his arrest, with the support of the Bishop of Katowice Herbert Bednorz, he decided to intervene in the situation with the highest church authorities: "he asked the chairman of the Pastoral Commission of the Polish Episcopate, Bishop Bolesław Kominek, to include the Crusade in the work of this Commission, and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński to approve the activities of the Crusade as an auxiliary work of the Jasna Góra Vows. Both hierarchs did not agree [...]. Their reserve in approaching the matter was most likely due to fear of overly inflaming the dispute between the Church and the communist authorities."⁴⁴ It cannot be ruled out, however, that this was not the only reason for the Primate's distancing himself from the actions of the rebellious priest from Silesia and, consequently, his passive approval of his imprisonment, *nota bene* in the same prison in Katowice where he was incarcerated in 1942 for actively speaking out against the German Reich.⁴⁵ An additional reason may have been the divergence of assessments as to the preferred strategy for adapting the pastoral mission of the Church in Poland to current realities.

The question of who was right in this dispute is meaningless. From a historical perspective, it is clear that Poland and the Church needed both

⁴³ See S. WYSZYŃSKI: *Wszystko postawiłem na Maryję*. Warszawa 2007.

⁴⁴ A. ADASZYŃSKA-BLACHA, D. MAZUR: *Ks. Franciszek Blachnicki...*, pp. 70–71.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

ways, so that every believer and seeker of mature faith could find the most appropriate path for himself. However, the emergence of many currents of renewal at the time testifies quite clearly that the model of a centralized Church, controlled from above and managed by directives and pastoral guidelines, proposed as the only solution to the coming changes, did not stand the test of time. The Church had to open up – and indeed did so – to new challenges and new forms of work in which the faithful themselves co-shape and animate the various tasks.

How could the difference between the two formations be most briefly conveyed? It can be stated that the Church, carrying out its mission as a “family of families,” has gradually transformed into a “community of communities.” Of course, this diagnosis is accurate, provided that we understand “family” in a way that is already archaic today, as a hierarchical institution in which supreme power is exercised by the father who has the prerogative to decide on all matters, and family members are obliged to obey in a dimension that depends on the position occupied, stronger or weaker, while by “community” we will understand a collectivity of people based on a conscious and voluntary bond, respecting without coercion a set of the most important values that make up the community ethos. It is worth considering on this occasion what is evidenced by the seemingly minor fact that Cardinal Wyszyński was called Father by all those closest to him,⁴⁶ and Cardinal Wojtyła was called Uncle.⁴⁷ Does this not prove that the relationship model was different?

In conclusion, I would like to recall an excerpt from Chapter 18 of John Paul II’s Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*: “People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission. [...] Christians and Christian communities are very much a part of the life of their respective nations and can be a sign of the Gospel in their fidelity to their native land, people and national culture, while always preserving the freedom brought by Christ. Christianity is open to universal brotherhood, for all men and women are

⁴⁶ “I never addressed him: ‘reverend professor’, but immediately said: ‘father’,” mentioned Maria Okońska – M. PIWOWAR: “Prymas był jak ojciec,” <https://www.rp.pl/kosciol/art7371921-prymas-był-jak-ojciec> [accessed 6.03.2025]. Similarly, Jadwiga Jełowicka, also a “dziewczyna z Ósemki”: “Nasz Ojciec, czyli ksiądz Stefan Wyszyński...” – cf. J. JEŁOWICKA: *Wspomnienie po pół wieku...*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ See P. ZUCHNIEWICZ: *Wujek Karol. Kapłańskie lata Papieża*. Warszawa 2007.

sons and daughters of the same Father and brothers and sisters in Christ. The Church is called to bear witness to Christ.”⁴⁸

Witnessing, freedom, fraternity, subjectivity and causation are words that aptly characterize today's way of active laity presence in the Church – and praise be to God that we have lived to a time when such a lifestyle is possible and acceptable.

Conclusions

The article examines how church authorities in Poland and certain secular circles, particularly among the Catholic intelligentsia, responded in the 1960s to news from the Vatican regarding the work of the Second Vatican Council and subsequently to the content of the post-conciliar documents. The key role of Stefan Wyszyński's pastoral initiatives is highlighted. Their format testifies to the Primate's profound understanding of the spiritual needs of the Polish nation, his diplomatic finesse in dealing with the communist authorities, and his great sensitivity in responding to the changing dynamics of the universal Church. An analysis of the course of historical events and their spiritual significance leads to the conclusion that the personal charisma and diplomatic genius of the Primate of the Millennium contributed significantly to strengthening the social position and moral and intellectual authority of the Church in Poland throughout the history of the Polish People's Republic. Thanks to this, the Church was also able to play a leading role in the next era, when, after the fall of communism, a process of political transformation began, accompanied by a spiritual crisis and doubt afflicting many citizens.

The author also draws attention to the tension that began to grow in the course of the Primate's pastoral plan between his vision of the folk Church and the specific forms of mass action adapted to this vision, and the growing aspirations of an increasing number of modern-minded Catholics who expected a significant expansion of the repertoire of pastoral measures and a change in the clerical model of relations within

⁴⁸ JOHN PAUL II: *Redemptoris missio. On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, 42, 43, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html [accessed 11.03.2026].

the community. The conclusion from these considerations is that, thanks to this tension and, at the same time, thanks to Wyszyński's high personal authority, the Church in Poland managed to develop a successful model of *modus vivendi* between seemingly contradictory visions of the Church. There was room both for forms of mass piety, which attracted large numbers of the faithful focused on cultivating age-old traditions, and for a whole range of new forms of work carried out in small communities and adapted to the specific expectations of those communities. This made possible the harmonious coexistence of those who saw the Church as a "family of families" and those for whom it became a "community of communities."

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