



# Between Structure and Secularization: The Catholic Church in Poland's Political Field

## Pomiędzy strukturą a sekularyzacją: Kościół katolicki na polskiej scenie politycznej

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the institutional and political influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. The author examines how the hierarchical structures of the Church – parishes, dioceses, and the Polish Bishops' Conference – seek to maintain the moral authority and social significance of the institution despite advancing secularization. Based on historical analysis and secondary data, the article places the Church in Poland in the context of global Catholicism, highlighting its dual religious and political role. The conclusions indicate that although the Church maintains a dense organizational network and the ability to exert political pressure, its credibility and recruitment capabilities are weakening under the pressure of secularization, mediatization, and generational changes.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, secularization, Poland, institutional continuity, political influence

### Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wpływ instytucjonalny i polityczny Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce. Autor bada, w jaki sposób hierarchiczne struktury Kościoła – parafie, diecezje i Konferencja Episkopatu Polski – starają się podtrzymywać autorytet moralny i znaczenie społeczne instytucji, mimo postępującej sekularyzacji. Na podstawie analizy historycznej i danych wtórnego artykułu umieszcza Kościół w Polsce w kontekście globalnego katolicyzmu, ukazując jego podwójną rolę religijną i polityczną. Wnioski wskazują, że choć Kościół zachowuje gęstą sieć organizacyjną i zdolność wywierania nacisków politycznych, jego wiarygodność i możliwości rekrutacyjne słabną pod presją sekularyzacji, mediatyzacji i zmian pokoleniowych.

**Slowa kluczowe:** Kościół katolicki, sekularyzacja, Polska, ciągłość instytucjonalna, wpływ polityczny

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## Introduction

The primary objective of this article is to outline the historical, institutional, and sociopolitical dimensions of the Catholic Church in Poland. The analysis will focus on the Church's attempts to preserve its unique role in domestic affairs in the context of an evolving social landscape, marked by the progression of secularization. This study proceeds from the assumption that historical and institutional trajectories of the Polish Catholic Church are a fundamental factor in understanding its contemporary political and social character. Thus, this point of departure provides the framework for examining the ways in which historical developments have influenced the Church's role in the formation of national identity and its structure of governance. In the contemporary setting of Polish politics, one way that the institution attempts to retain its position in society is through its hierarchical structures, including parishes, dioceses, and the Polish Bishops' Conference (PBC), all of which tend to serve as mechanisms for religious and political engagement. Yet, recent developments including rapid secularization (especially of the young), the revelations of the clerical abuse scandal within the Church, and episodes of overt political engagement by clergy in politics, negatively affect the overall status and prestige of the institution, while at the same time hollowing the above-mentioned structures from within.

The article is structured around the following interrelated research questions. First, which historical processes produced the Catholic Church's current institutional configuration in Poland? Second, given that configuration, how do secularization, mediatization, and diminished public legitimacy condition – and in some arenas constrain – the Church's capacity to convert organizational resources into political influence? Consequently, the two working hypotheses are as follows:

- Hypothesis 1 (Historical endowments): The Church's present status in Polish public life draws on its historic nation-building role – especially during periods of foreign domination – which supplies symbolic capital and a dense institutional network of structures; however, this legacy is neither uniform nor sufficient on its own to secure influence today.
- Hypothesis 2 (Institutional mechanics under constraint): The hierarchical architecture (parishes, dioceses, PBC) preserves access and coordination capacity, but its conversion into political influence is conditional – and often constrained – by recent secularization, mediatization, and diminished public legitimacy.

The methodological orientation of this article employs an integrative literature review and a secondary-data synthesis focused on Poland. As such, the article reviews relevant domestic and international scholarship on church–state relations, secularization, mediatization, and Catholic media, alongside official statistical series on religious practice and public opinion. Sources are selected for conceptual

relevance (institutional power, legitimacy, political communication) and more recent data is incorporated, including the post COVID-19 pandemic statistics.

The study begins with a delineation of the historical trajectory of the Polish Catholic Church, and the extent to which it engaged with a variety of state-building endeavors. This outline underscores how the historical role of the Church and its clergy served as an antecedent to the development of contemporary structures. Subsequently, the article expounds on a series of longitudinal trends and developments that track the vitality of the Polish Church. The emerging evidence suggests that while the current institutional configurations of the Church remain extensive, they are also experiencing a shortage of human capital. The final section of the article discusses the organization of the Polish Bishops' Conference and the numerous trends that challenge the contemporary Church in Poland. These trends include secularization, mediatization, and declining levels of trust and support. The overarching findings of the article are discussed in the conclusions.

## Historical Overview

Catholicism has constituted an integral component of Polish national identity since its inception in 966, when Duke Mieszko I accepted baptism for himself and the country. Mieszko's decision had significant long-term implications, as it transformed Poland into an integral component of Western civilization through the integration of its religion, language, and cultural heritage (Koneczny, 1905). Indeed, the consequences of this resolution can be compared to the historical progression of Poland's eastern neighbor, Russia. Arguably, the separation of Christianity into Roman Catholicism in the West and Orthodox Christianity in the East in 1054 led to the development of unique national and cultural lines in Russia, which in turn resulted in a divergence from Western values (Huntington, 1993), while the opposite trajectory occurred in Poland.

In 999, Pope Sylvester II sanctioned the initial institutional structures of Roman Catholicism in Poland with the establishment of the Archdiocese of Gniezno. The bishops who presided over the inaugural archdiocese were acknowledged as the *de facto* leaders of the Polish Church. The title of Primate has remained with the Bishop of Gniezno until the present day, and he continues to occupy a distinguished position among Polish bishops (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2009, § 3). Until recently, the position exerted a significant influence on the religious landscape of Poland, particularly in the political sphere. For instance, Primate Wyszyński (1948–81) played a pivotal role in safeguarding the Church's prerogatives against the encroachment of the communist state, while his successor Primate Glemp (1981–2009) was instrumental in facilitating Poland's transition into

a democratic society. In the era of democracy, however, the role of the Primate has been much more symbolic.

In 1795, the Third Partition of Poland ended its sovereign existence for the next 123 years. In the early 20th century, with the possibility of an international conflict on the horizon, many Poles believed that independence could be reclaimed (Kershaw, 2016). Indeed, the Second Polish Republic was established at the conclusion of World War I in 1918. During the interwar period (1918–1939), the Church participated actively in a variety of state-building efforts. However, these developments gave rise to a new church-state model, one that was characterized by competition rather than cooperation, and which closely mirrored the developments observed in other Western European countries (Kalyvas, 1996).

The interwar period concluded in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II. The Nazi regime in occupied Poland was marked by a particularly brutal campaign of repression and violence, resulting in the deaths of approximately one-third of the clergy in Poland (Nowak, 2011). After the War, when the country fell under the influence of Soviet Union “even Stalin understood that a publicly active Catholic Church is the price he had to pay for making Poland a buffer against German or Western aggression” (Judt, 2006, p. 172). The limited autonomy that the Church was able to maintain is also the reason why those who study comparative politics classify the Polish state after the Second World War as an authoritarian regime, rather than a totalitarian one (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The Soviet-backed communist leaders also endeavored to eradicate the Church (Nowak, 2011). In 1978, Cardinal Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II. In the relatively brief period of less than one year after his election as Pope, John Paul II made an official visit to his native Poland in June 1979. His pilgrimage arguably empowered the nascent civil society. In 1980, Lech Wałęsa and other social activists achieved a significant triumph when the Solidarity trade union was formally acknowledged in August of that year, while the country officially democratized in 1989.

Today, the Catholic Church still continues to affect the country’s cultural, social, and political landscape largely due to its distinctive history (Tatarczyk, 2020), although its role is no longer hegemonic. In a statement that captured the essence of this dynamic, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, the former President of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, observed that:

The history of the Catholic Church in Poland is a process of continuity. Not everyone realizes that the Church is the only institution, which is constantly operating in Poland. All other institutions, including the State (due to partitioning), have a pause in its course (Gądecki, 2015).

The Church’s high level of moral authority, acquired through its resistance to foreign powers, can be attributed to the actions of numerous bishops and priests, whose individual decisions collectively shaped the institution’s reputation (Grzy-

mała-Busse, 2015). A similar observation is noted by another scholar who writes that “the Catholic Church in Poland has been guided, at least over the past 90 years, by prelates of distinction – men of honour, characterized by integrity, courage, and, as already stated, political acumen” (Ramat, 2017, p. 5). It becomes clear, therefore, that historical precedents continue to mold the contours of contemporary political debates (Slater and Simmons, 2010), and this also applies to Poland where the trajectories of the Roman Catholic Church and the nation-state have been inextricably intertwined for centuries. This kind of continued socio-organizational interplay is especially important in Central and Eastern Europe, which has had a very limited experience with institutional continuity (Ekiert and Ziblatt, 2013). The Polish Catholic Church serves as a notable exception to this generalization with its long history of institutional longevity. Recently, however, its robustness and durability have been put to test by the advancing secularization and overall pluralization of the Polish society. Not long ago, almost nine out of ten people identified as Catholic, and 45% of them attended mass on a weekly basis (Pew Research Center, 2017, pp. 9–11). The historical equation that “Pole = Catholic” (Polak Katolik) was not an outdated relic of the past as 64% of respondents said that being Catholic is very or somewhat important to truly being a national of their country (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 12). Nevertheless, recent observations indicate a paradigm shift, marked by a significant disaffiliation from Catholicism among the youth demographic and a precipitous decline in other religious indicators.

## Institutional Context and Structure

Some scholars trace the origins Catholic of monopoly in Poland back to the Second World War: “As the result of the devastation of World War II and the population transfer that followed, postwar Poland became a homogenous Catholic nation – one where communism was seen as an alien imposition that violated tenets of sovereignty and faith” (Grzymała-Busse, 2015, p. 150). As already mentioned, by actively protecting the Polish nation from hostile foreign regimes, the Church has made it possible for political and religious identities to fuse over a relatively short period of time (Grzymała-Busse and Slater, 2018). The fusion, in turn, created a demand for robust and extensive institutional structures to serve the needs of Polish Catholics.

In essence, the Church is structured in a hierarchical manner, with the parish representing the most fundamental administrative unit. Although the term “parish” is typically associated with a church building, its precise meaning pertains to a specific geographical territory and a priest who is responsible for providing

pastoral services to the local population. As such, parish is the primary setting for Catholics to engage with their faith, and it is often the sole institutional structure of the Church with which they interact. The diocese is headed by a bishop and is the central administrative unit of the Catholic Church, and in theory, diocesan bishops respond only to the Pope. In practice, however, some dioceses are of greater importance than others, and thus, as a result, some bishops are more influential than others. The diocesan bishops are very powerful and can shape the life of their diocese in many ways. Here is how one scholar describes what a diocesan bishop does:

[he] determines which priest is assigned to which parish; which parishes may be closed or clustered, and which new parishes may be opened; which practices of prayer and worship are permitted (within the basic guidelines set by the Vatican); who may be invited to speak at church events, which textbooks can be used in schools, and how the funds of the diocese will be spent (Allen, 2014, pp. 17–18).

In the majority of cases, the ultimate responsibility lies with the diocesan bishop. Some of them adopt an authoritative approach to governance, whereas others espouse a more collegial style. A group of dioceses is constituted into a metropolis, with an archdiocese designated as its capital. An archdiocese then “refers to an especially large diocese, and its leader – the archbishop – exercises a degree of authority over the bishops of smaller diocese in its vicinity” (Allen, 2014, p. 18). However, the extent to which this occurs is contingent upon the idiosyncratic leadership style of the individual archbishop in question.

When thinking about individuals who make up the Church, a distinction has to be made between those who serve in the official capacity and those who do not; that is between *clergy* and *laity*. The clergy is composed of three distinct spheres of individuals. First, there are deacons. When (usually) young men enter seminaries, they will at some point in their training become deacons. This progression grants them limited pastoral privileges (e.g., giving homily), but they are not fully priests yet, and hence cannot administer certain sacraments (e.g., confession). It used to be the case that being a deacon was a stepping-stone on the road to priesthood. Increasingly, however, being a deacon is a calling in itself and, in contrast, to priests, deacons can marry. Priests are the workhorses of the Catholic Church. They are responsible for providing pastoral services to their flock and are very often trusted with managing a parish. In the Roman Catholic (Latin) rite, priests take vows of celibacy, that is they renounce the possibility of being married.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there is the episcopate, officially understood as the col-

<sup>1</sup> There are twenty-three separate churches that collectively make up the one Catholic Church. The “Latin” church is by far the largest and is associated with the mainstream form of Catholicism. There are, however, twenty-two other, “Eastern,” churches that nonetheless accept the pope’s authority. The three largest Eastern Catholic churches include the Ukrainian

lective body of bishops. Only bishops can administer the sacrament of the Holy Orders to appoint new priests and other bishops. Becoming a bishop is difficult, because one has to be appointed, and unlikely; in 2011 there were just over 5,000 bishops worldwide (Allen, 2014, p. 31).

Even though Vatican II re-shaped the relationship among bishops by emphasizing co-governance and collegiality, some bishops are nonetheless more important than others. The pope, of course, is at the top of the hierarchy. Then there are the cardinals. The collective body of cardinals (the College of Cardinals) elects the new pope in an event called a conclave. There are about 200 cardinals around the world at any given time, but only those below eighty years of age are eligible to vote (approx. 120 cardinals). Given their status, cardinals also advise the pope on important theological and political matters. An archbishop is usually in charge of an archdiocese, but there are exceptions to this rule. Pope's official ambassadors, known as nuncios, also hold the rank of archbishop even though they do not govern any particular territory. Lastly, there are many different types of regular bishops (diocesan, auxiliary, coadjutor, emeritus). Considering that the Church has 1.2 billion members, bishops constitute a minuscule part of the overall Catholic population.

The laity is by far the largest group within the Church (about 99.95%) and refers to those Catholics who were baptized and believe the articles of faith outlined in the Nicene Creed (Allen, 2014, p. 33). Barring extreme circumstances, lay members cannot administer sacraments. This means that nuns – even though they take the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience – are also considered as part of the laity. Conversely, this is also true of religious brothers who do not feel the call to the priesthood but take the same three vows (Allen, 2014, p. 32).

Table 1. Description of Catholic Structures and Assets<sup>a</sup>

	Number of Parishes	Number of Dioceses	Number of Archdioceses
Globally	–	3,157	630
US	17,651	196	25
Poland	10,339	45	15
	Number of Bishops	Number of Archbishops	Number of Cardinals
Globally	5,473	–	216
US	446	53	13
Poland	152	32	3

<sup>a</sup> Greek Catholic Church (4.5 million members); the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church (3.9 million members with its center in India); and the Maronite Catholic Church in Lebanon (3.3 million members) (Allen, 2014, pp. 24–5). Some of the Eastern Churches allow their priests to marry, so in technical sense celibacy is not absolute in the Catholic Church.

	Number of Priests	Number of Seminarians	Number of Deacons	Number of Nuns	Number of Religious Brothers
Globally	412,000	—	275,000	—	—
US	40,262	5000	17,400	57,100	4,600
Poland	25,016	2,300	-	18,197	1,313
	Number of Catholics			Percent of Catholics	Ratio of Priests to Catholics
Globally	1.2 billion			16%	—
US	67 million			21%	approx. 1:1300
Poland	33 million			87%	approx. 1:1000

Sources: Allen (2014); Catholic-Hierarchy.Org (2018); ISKK (2018); Pew Research Center (2017); USCCB (2018)

<sup>a</sup> Information presented here reports observations from different points in time, from 2012–2018.

Table 1 provides a country-level overview of the Catholic Church's institutional presence in Poland, while the US and global columns are included only as scale references. The picture is one of high network density and layered capacity. Poland comprises 10,339 parishes that collectively serve approximately 33 million Catholics. This results in a fine-grained territorial grid, with approximately one parish for every 3,200 Catholics. Given Poland's total area, this translates to approximately 29.5 square kilometers per parish. The coverage of clergy is also substantial, with an estimated 25,016 priests, which equates to approximately 2.4 priests per parish. This ratio indicates approximately one priest for every 1,300 Catholics. The episcopal tier, comprising 45 dioceses and 15 archdioceses, is staffed by approximately 140 bishops, and provides administrative bandwidth for coordination and national-level representation.

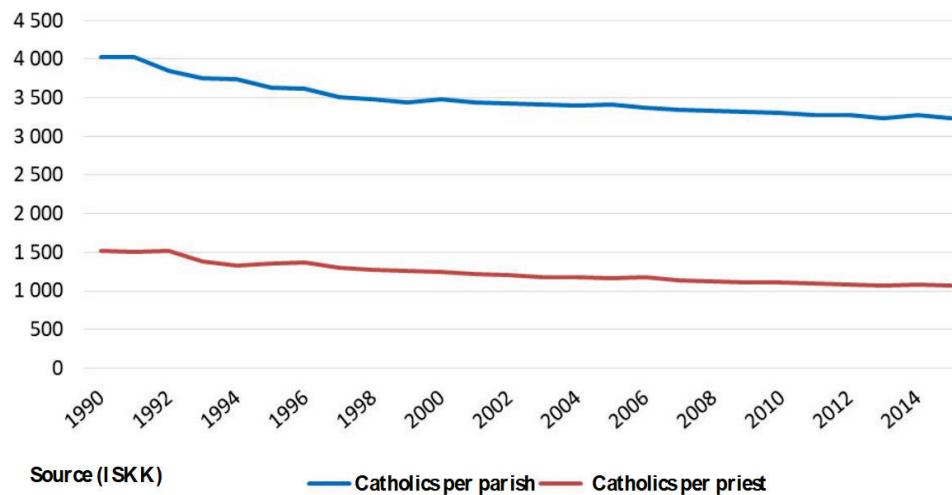


Figure 1. Ratios of Catholics per Parish and per Priest in Poland

While the presence of extensive institutional structures in the Polish Catholic Church is an important outgrowth of its historical significance, of even more importance for the prestige of the institution is the actual behavior of the faithful. In essence, the absence of utilization renders structural elements virtually devoid of meaning. As illustrated in Figure 1, the analysis focuses on two longitudinal trends, specifically the ratio of Catholics per parish and the ratio of Catholics per priest. It has been observed that both trends have exhibited a slight downward trajectory since 1990, signaling a general trend related to country-wide secularization.

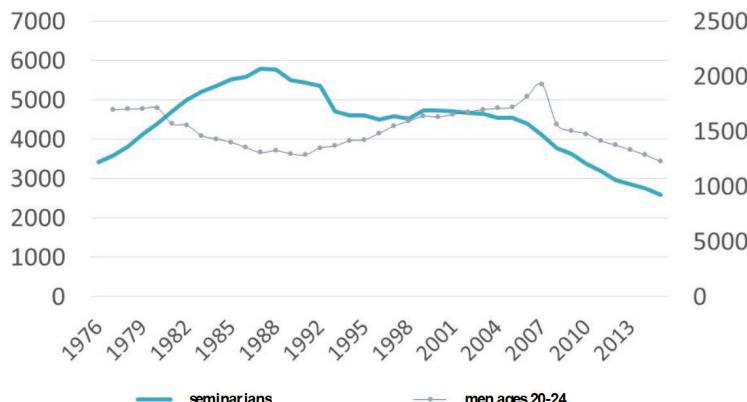


Figure 2. Number of Seminarians in Poland (1973–2015)

Source: ISKK.

Figure 2 delineates a prolonged arc of the number of seminarians in Poland. The figure indicates that following an expansion from the 1970s through the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the number of seminarians experienced a marked and continuous decline through 2015. This contraction in entrants already results in a corresponding decrease in priests in the future and helps to explain the tapering off in Catholics-per-priest shown in Figure 1; there are fewer priests but even fewer Catholics lately. Hence, while the organizational structure – a dense parish network and hierarchical tiers – remains largely unchanged, the replenishment mechanism is weaker, pushing the Church toward adaptation: redistributing tasks, expanding lay roles, and relying more on national coordination and media channels for mobilization. In summary, the vocational pipeline has undergone a transition from an expansionary phase to a contractionary phase, resulting in a tightening of future capacity despite the presence of a substantial infrastructure. As late as 2016, 3,253 individuals or 27% of Polish religious friaries worked abroad (ISKK, 2018, p. 18), but, given the internal dynamics at home, the Polish Church will soon – if not already – need to worry about staffing its domestic needs.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Religious friars are priests who belong to a religious order (e.g., Jesuits, Dominicans, etc.). This means that they answer to the superiors within their orders and the Pope, and not

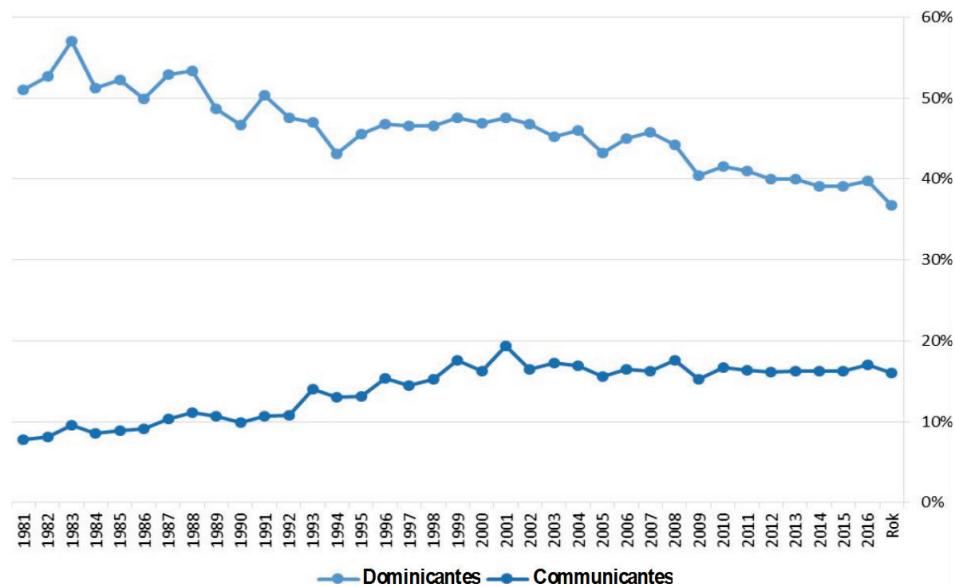


Figure 3. Dominicantes and Communicantes in Poland (1980–2016)

Source: ISKK.

As illustrated in Figure 3, two measures are presented: *dominicantes*, which refers to Sunday Mass attendance, and *communicantes*, which refers to the reception of Communion. The former metric demonstrates a downward trend over an extended period, while the latter (the reception of the Eucharist) exhibits greater stability and reduced negativity. It is interesting to note that *communicantes* is comparatively more stable than *dominicantes*, implying higher intensity among those who still attend. Therefore, while the weekly mass attendance is shrinking slowly, the Church is also gaining more cohesion because those who attend Catholic masses also participate in its sacramental life. Catholic theology provides guidelines that need to be followed before one can receive the Eucharist. Assuming that these guidelines are followed, the *communicantes* measure can effectively be interpreted as an indicator of commitment to faith with all of its political implications. More cohesion and commitment translate into social and political influence because strict churches are strong (Iannaccone, 1994).

On the one hand, Polish Catholics are considerably more religious than their European counterparts. In the Netherlands, only 5% of Catholics attend mass weekly. In Belgium and France, the numbers are 8% and 13%, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 8). The percentages are a little bit higher in traditional Catholic strongholds such as Portugal (28%), Spain (21%), Ireland (21%), and Italy (25%), but nowhere near the 41% level exhibited in Poland not long ago (Pew

Research Center, 2017). On the other hand, however, figures 1–3 read together, describe a system that is extensive in its breadth yet operating under tightening human and social constraints: fewer Catholics per parish and per priest (Figure 1), with a fast-shrinking pipeline of seminarians (Figure 2), and thinner mass practice alongside higher intensity among attendees (Figure 3). The resulting picture illustrates that while the Polish Church still enjoys a unique position in a national religious market square, its position is also crumbling from within. Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, one can observe a marked decline in indicators. By 2022, for instance, the *dominicanos* and *communicantes* measures dropped to 29.5% and 13.9%, respectively (ISKK, 2022). Furthermore, other substantial measures of institutional religiosity – including the number of new priests and baptisms – also exhibited a decline (ISKK, 2022, p. 3). Similar patterns of declining religiosity have been reported in the Polish society at large. Since the late 1990s up until 2019, over 90% of Poles self-identified as deeply religious, however, in the first year of the global pandemic, this number dropped below the 90% threshold and has been declining yearly since (CBOS, 2024, p. 1).

These changes are not only recent, but they also appear to alter the fundamental make-up of Polish society. The socio-political background is altered to the point where secularization emerges as one of key trends in the society (Mariański, 2017). Moreover, when taking into consideration a wide-variety of bio-political issues, an increasing number of Poles, and even many Catholics, begin to diverge from the Church's doctrinal teachings on these issues as a result of increasing pluralization (Borowik and Grygiel, 2023). It becomes apparent, therefore, that the religiosity of Poles is changing, while the future trajectory of the current trends is still very much an open question (Mariański, 2021). This is all the more important, considering that youth and young adults in particular are becoming increasingly detached from religion in general, and the Catholic Church in particular (Kaźmierska, 2023).

## The Organization of Polish Bishops' Conference

Given its vast reach, coordination is one of the main challenges that the Catholic Church has to contend with and National Bishops' Conferences are part of the solution. National Conferences are sanctioned by the Vatican and serve as the official communication points between the particular Churches (e.g., Polish Catholic Church) and Rome, and among particular Churches as well. Their origin resulted from two simultaneous processes, the rise of nation-states and the separation of church and state (Reese, 1992, p. 31). Consequently, bishops and their churches found themselves locked into new geographical units and

separated from official political powers, and thus the need for Conferences was further solidified. The Second Vatican Council made them even more vital, as the Church moved away from Latin as its official language vernacular translations were needed and National Conferences (e.g., Polish Bishops' Conference) were particularly well equipped to provide this service. National Conferences are also combined into continental units, such as the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE). However, Conferences are also kept in check by the Vatican to avoid the danger of excessive nationalism, and doctrinal pronouncements have to be approved by the Vatican before they become official (Reese, 1992, p. 33).

The Polish Bishops' Conference is organized vertically, and so it inevitably makes some bishops more influential than others. The conference was first established in 1919, and its current charter was last updated in 2009. The three bishops forming the presidium have considerable national influence given their frequent media appearances, and their impact is also significant within the PBC.

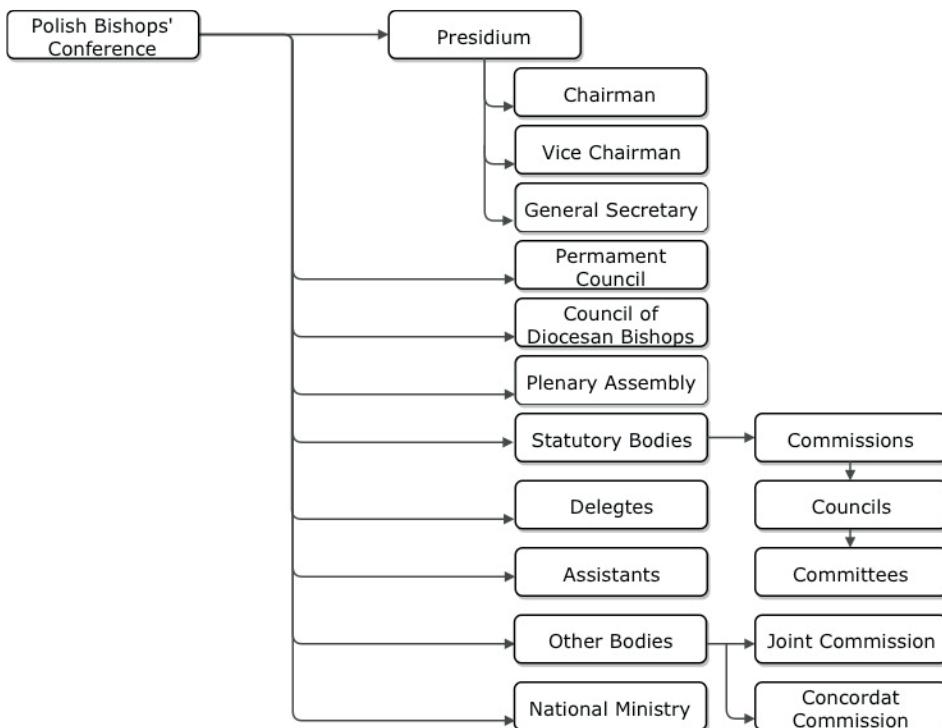


Figure 4. Structure of the Polish Bishops' Conference

Source: (PBC).

The chairman's role entails representing the PBC in external settings, which renders him particularly prominent in national media outlets. The primary responsibilities of vice-chairman and secretary general are to support the chairman

in his activities. The chairman's power within the PBC is also substantial; he convenes the permanent council, a plenary meeting, or the council of diocesan bishops, and chairs the meetings. In "exceptional and special cases" he invites other persons to the PBC meetings (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2009). The presidium presents candidates for the commission, councils, committees, rectors of Polish Catholic institutions, and other important functions. The thirteen highest ranging bishops currently form the permanent council. The permanent council possesses strong agenda-setting powers, as it prepares programs for plenary meetings and the council of diocesan bishops. It also supervises the implementation of decisions of the Conference and the council of diocesan bishops. The members of the presidium however, also have the ability to take a position on public matters without the need of consultation with other bishops. In instances where anti-abortion legislative initiatives required an official endorsement, such as in 2016, the Catholic Church frequently relied on the presidium to provide it (PolsatNews, 2016).

The council of diocesan bishops includes only bishops who are in charge of individual dioceses (45 in total).<sup>3</sup> These bishops are the workhorses of the Polish Catholic Church, and they are the singular leaders of their respective dioceses. These bishops decide, for example, if a particular abortion-restricting project should receive PBC's official endorsement. The plenary assembly, on the other hand, contains the whole body of Polish bishops and usually meets twice a year. There are also 11 commissions, 12 councils, and 17 committees, and they deal with a wide range of issues, including relationships with other Conferences, inter-religious dialog, ecumenism, media, and family life. Commissions, councils, and committees have identical structures (chairman, members, consulters). The roles of chairman and members are reserved to bishops alone. The function of consulters is open to priests and Catholic laity and includes pro-life activists, university professors, and other individuals.

Overall, the PBC engages in a variety of political efforts and the existing structures allow Polish bishops to coordinate their activities. But while the Polish Bishops' Conference ensures coordination and institutional access, public messaging is not uniformly collegial. Consider that a letter expressing a concern regarding the German synodal path was issued by the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference alone (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2022), while Nordic bishops published a collective concern (Vatican News, 2022). Consequently, such leadership-centric statements signal potential internal divisions and underscore the fact that the Conference does not always speak with a single voice in high-salience disputes. This moderates communicative leverage even as organizational channels of access remain in place.

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<sup>3</sup> The council also includes the bishop in charge of Military Ordinariate of the Polish Army and diocesan bishops of the Eastern Greco-Catholic rite.

Religious communication becomes even more challenging in an ever-changing media setting. The media environment increasingly shapes religious communication, often encouraging personalization and controversy-driven framing, while the idea of religious marketing and advertisement is a novel development in itself (Guzek, 2015). If such attempts at marketing religion are to succeed however, they need to maintain an element of *sacrum* (Stępniaik, 2018), otherwise religious messaging risks being reduced to banality. This mediatization raises the reputational stakes for national-level messaging and can polarize audiences, which in turn affects the Church's capacity to translate organizational density into broad public legitimacy. Despite its universal, even global, appeal, the overarching theme of these developments is that it makes people even more individualistic and disconnected from metaphysics couched in the post-truth and postmodern setting (Leśniczak, 2022). One consequence of these developments has been that Catholic media became politicized, which in turn undermines its credibility (Leśniczak, 2024).

The organizational structure of the Polish Bishops' Conference is sufficiently intricate to facilitate institutionalized access to government officials and politicians, thereby enabling bishops to raise issues that are of concern to them, particularly through the use of the Joint Committee (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). Recent public controversies however, affected both trust and perceived legitimacy of the Polish Catholic Church. The revelation of a sexual abuse scandal involving some members of the clergy in Poland, coupled with the subsequent mishandling of the crisis, has led to a significant erosion of the institution's legitimacy and credibility, both among its adherents and the general public (Guzik, 2020). Moreover, recent data on public opinion indicates that a significant proportion of individuals are disaffiliating from the Polish Catholic Church, specifically due to their lack of trust in the institution and their criticism of its actions (CBOS, 2022). Accordingly, institutional responses (or the absence thereof) are of consequence not only from a moral and pastoral perspective, but also from a political standpoint. Credibility conditions the efficacy with which coordinated statements or access channels can influence the direction of politics in the country.

## Conclusions

The present article has demonstrated that the Polish Catholic Church's organizational continuity – comprising its dense parish grid, layered episcopal tier, and national coordination through the bishops' conference – remains intact, thereby affording the Church the opportunity to remain as a significant social institution. Furthermore, the Church's organizational structures have been shaped by, and are

a product of, its distinctive interaction with the Polish state and society. However, the emerging empirical evidence is unambiguous. The prevailing organizational structures, while characterized by their complexity, are also undergoing a process of internal dissolution. This phenomenon can be attributed to the increasing service loads and staffing shortages. These phenomena occur concurrently with the narrowing of the vocational pipeline. A comprehensive analysis of the aggregate data reveals an institution that, despite its extensive and nationwide reach, operates within the confines of mounting human and social limitations.

In the contemporary socio-political environment, the influence of the Polish Catholic Church has not disappeared; rather, it has undergone significant constraints. Consequently, the leaders of the Church must become more discerning in their initiatives to minimize their social and political costs. At present, however, a considerable number of actions undertaken by the Polish Bishops' Conference appear to indicate a lack of organizational unity and coordination, while Catholic media and the broader society appear to be undergoing a process of politicization and polarization.

The present article, analyzing the historical path as well as the current state of the Polish Catholic Church, is based on an integrative literature review and secondary data, but it also contains certain limitations. For instance, it does not trace micro-level causality within decision venues. Future research endeavors should aim to disaggregate diocesan variation, monitor cohort dynamics among youth, and examine media developments surrounding the Polish Catholic Church. In all likelihood, the Church's contemporary political role in Poland is contingent not solely on historical endowments, but rather on three interwoven factors: credibility, coordination, and constituency. How these variables are developed and utilized by the leaders of the Polish Catholic Church remains an open question.

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