

## Polish Church under growing pressure

By Adam Easton  
BBC News, Warsaw

**Twenty years have passed since the end of communism in Poland and there are signs that the institution that led the struggle against the regime, the Catholic Church, is under threat in the modern democratic consumerist society.**

Under communism, becoming a priest was a step up the social ladder.

But now the number of young men entering seminaries is falling, and a survey suggests that more than half of the country's serving priests would like to do away with celibacy to have a wife and family.

According to the findings of Professor Jozef Baniak, a sociologist who specialises in religion at the department of theology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, more than 12% even admitted they were presently living in stable relationships with women.

### POLISH PRIEST SURVEY

- 53.7% said they would like to have a wife and family
- 12% said they were living in stable relationships with a woman
- More than 30% said they had had sexual relations with a woman *Source: Survey of 823 Polish priests by Professor Jozef Baniak*

In the land that once the late Pope John Paul II, most churches are still full on Sundays.

But Polish society has been changing rapidly, and according to Father Wieslaw Dawidowski, an Augustinian friar in Warsaw, that is reflected in the behaviour of its priests.

"What worries me is the number of priests who are living a second life that is working as a Catholic priest which presumes to be a celibate, and at the same time having an affair with a woman," he said.

### 'Double life'

Jozef Strezynski had served his Warsaw parish for 12 years when he met a woman and fell in love.

**" I decided that it would be pointless carrying on as an unhappy priest, and so after 16 years, I chose to give up the priesthood and start a family "**  
Jozef Strezynski Former Polish Catholic priest

"As a priest I was very happy and fulfilled. But there came a time when I began feeling lonely. When I met a woman whom I fell in love with I had to choose. I had to decide which path to follow," he says.

After struggling with his decision for four years, he says he could no longer lead a "double life".

"I decided that it would be pointless carrying on as an unhappy priest, and so after 16 years, I chose to give up the priesthood and start a family," he adds.

Father Wieslaw says the survey's findings on priests' attitudes to celibacy do not surprise him.

"It reflects the society of today," he says.

"More than 60 or 70% of people in the West or in Poland have committed adultery."

"Priests live in the world just as it is, so therefore taken from that world they bring into priesthood the heritage of the current culture. We are not water resistant," he adds.

### 'Strange'

At Warsaw's Dominican church in the capital's Old Town, dozens of people turn up to an evening Mass despite the winter cold.

Afterwards, I ask a member of the congregation, Ela Machala, if she thinks priests should be allowed to marry.

"For me it would be strange. Catholic priests in Poland never had families," she says.

"I know that it's different for Protestant priests but it would be a big change which Polish society is definitely not ready for... I think I would have difficulty accepting it," she added.

But Slawbor, a student, disagrees.

"Personally, I think 'yes'," he says.

"They would serve better for society if they had families, really, because they would understand more things that they are preaching about."

**" I think that we will face in 10, 15, maybe 20 years the problem of empty churches "**  
Szymon Holownia, Religia.tv

Szymon Holownia, the young Catholic face of the country's Religia.tv television channel, believes celibacy is just one of many challenges now facing the Polish Catholic Church.

"As a Church we are facing the bend of the road and when you are facing the bend on the road when you are driving, you should reduce your speed, you should think what gear would be the best to pass this," he says.

"But we are doing nothing and probably we could end on the side of the road."

"I think that we will face in 10, 15, maybe 20 years the problem of empty churches," he adds.

The status and respect accorded to priests has diminished since the fall of communism.

This has left some priests feeling a sense of emptiness which more and more believe could be filled by having a family.

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## The Catholic Church in Poland

## The Battle for Souls

By Jan Puhl

**The Roman Catholic Church sees itself as the custodian of Polish culture. Even today, it still carries weight in the nation's politics. But fewer and fewer people are obeying its commandments.**



AFP

Polish Cardinal Jozef Glemp: A moral obligation

Wilanów has joined the West. People who have made it in today's Poland move to this hightoned neighborhood on Warsaw's southern outskirts. People like the former president Aleksander Kwasniewski and his wife, Jolanta. Wilanów boasts trees, bike paths, reduced traffic zones and even receptacles for canine droppings - real rarities in a bustling, deafening city that is bursting at the seams.

From the midst of this showcase suburbia, massive concrete pillars rise toward the heavens. Cardinal Józef Glemp, Archbishop of Warsaw and Primate of the Polish Roman Catholic Church in Poland, has decreed that the Basilica of Our Lady of Divine Providence be erected here. It is the largest church construction project in Poland since Prussia, Russia and Austria carved up the country in the late 18th century. The dome will jut 200 feet into the sky.

The gentrified Poles sipping cappuccino in Wilanów's shopping arcades irreverently deride the cardinal's pet project as "Glemp's pyramid." The Primate of the Polish Roman Catholic Church hardly sees things that way. "After the collapse of communism, we have a moral obligation to build the cathedral," he has said. And not only God is on his side. Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczyński recently declared his solidarity: "The basilica is a project close to our hearts."

The church and state have been close allies in Poland since 966. And in the postcommunist era, as political analyst Dominik Hierlemann has argued, "The church has skillfully adapted to the new system, and remained one of the most powerful social and political organizations."

Nonetheless, the Polish episcopacy cannot simply assume that its followers will go where it leads. For centuries - through the country's multiple partitions, the Nazi occupation and the communist rule - the church fought to save the Polish nation, paying a heavy price in the process. Today it is fighting to prevent its flock from being shepherded to the verdant pastures of capitalism. A battle has begun, with minds and souls at stake: the new Poland, intoxicated by its freshly acquired wealth, is battling the millennium-old Roman Catholic Church.

Ninety-five percent of all Poles are Roman Catholics, and well over half say they attend mass at least once a week. The Poles, along with the Irish, are among the most pious members of the European Union. But the fact remains that "the majority of the Polish faithful have grown impervious to the moral teachings of the church," according to Warsaw sociologist Pawel Spiewak.

Almost three out of four young Polish Catholics approve of premarital sex. Tens of thousands skillfully circumvent the extremely harsh abortion laws. Experts estimate the number of illegal abortions per year at 80,000 to 200,000. And while Polish Pope John Paul II vigorously opposed the death penalty, some 70 percent of his compatriots want it reinstated, with the most vocal support coming from the nationalistic Catholic League of Polish Families. Sixty percent of Poles believe that priests should keep out of politics, that a strict line should be drawn between the pulpit and the state: a bitter pill for a church so deeply rooted in national tradition.

Take the fabled miracle of Jasna Góra. The Czestochowa monastery was locked in a life-and-death struggle in November 1655. An army of 3,000 heavily armed Protestants from Sweden laid siege to the cloister. Much of the kingdom, including Warsaw, Kraków and Poznan, had already been seized by the Scandinavians. Poland appeared to be vanquished. Fearing for their lives, those trapped inside the monastery prayed to the Virgin Mary - and miraculously survived the onslaught. The invaders were ultimately driven out of the country.

These events produced a cult of the Virgin Mary that is characteristic of Polish Catholicism. It also cemented the Counter-Reformation and reinforced the church's position in the state. One year later, in an outburst of religious and patriotic fervor, King Jan Kazimierz proclaimed the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Poland.

But the Madonna's imputed power soon waned. By the end of the 18th century, Prussia, Russia and Austria had partitioned Poland. Above all during the occupation by the Russian Orthodox and Protestants in the west of the country, the Roman Catholic Church emerged as the guardian angel of all things Polish. From then on, being Catholic meant being Polish.

But during the Second Polish Republic, this equation no longer added up. Between the world wars, one-third of Poland was made up of ethnic and religious minorities. The concept that only Catholics could be true Poles became a rallying cry of the extreme right wing - and was used, for instance, to segregate the Jewish population. The farther the Warsaw government tended to the right in the 1930s, the greater the Catholic Church's influence became. The constitution of 1935 established Catholicism as the state religion.

After Germany invaded Poland, the Nazis closed the churches and murdered thousands of priests and Catholic intellectuals. The communists, too, dealt brutally with the church, imprisoning its clergy and seizing its property. It was not until the end of the Stalinist era in 1956 that they permitted a few safe havens. Once again, the mounting opposition movement regarded the church as the only true custodian and champion of Polish tradition, pitted against a communist regime perceived as a puppet government with the Russians pulling the strings.

Cardinal Karol Wojtyła of Kraków was elected pope in October 1978, unleashing an outpouring of national joy. Overnight - many felt - the Polish fight for freedom had gained a new ally, Christ's representative on Earth.

Catholic-spirited intellectuals - among them Tadeusz Mazowiecki - were responsible for midwifing the peaceful revolution in 1989. Paradoxically, though, the triumph over communism produced a dramatic decline in relevance for the church. "The transition to freedom 'freed' the church of its privileged position as the country's only free institution," Hierlemann wrote.

By 1990, a bitter controversy had erupted over the role of the state church in the young democracy, sparked by the reintroduction of religious education in schools. Newspapers postulated a "Polish Kulturkampf." People took umbrage at the means the church used to attain its ends. Bypassing parliament and the public, the Polish Bishops' Conference had taken its case straight to the government, which had obediently decreed that religion be included in the syllabus.

In 1993 the church chalked up another success: Poland adopted arguably the strictest anti-abortion legislation in Europe. The reality is that very few powers-that-be within the Catholic hierarchy are open to dialogue. Many of the bishops share Cardinal Glemp's view of the West and its democratic system, namely as a den of iniquity infested with decadence, materialism, godlessness and pornography.

Even today, priests use the pulpit to endorse political candidates in the runups to elections. In 1997 some segments of the clergy portrayed the referendum on the new constitution as a showdown between "neo-heathenism and Stalinism." The church apparatus generally took a skeptical view toward Poland's membership in the European Union. Had the Polish pope not stood steadfastly by the EU proponents, the June 2003 referendum certainly would have failed. The sharpest rhetorical razor was wielded by "Radio Maryja."

Father Tadeusz Rydzyk runs his empire in Toruń like a gated community. Cameras scan the streets outside the studio complex. Antennas and satellite dishes rise in the distance - the reverend capitalizes on the fruits of globalization to get his nationalistic message across to an audience of some 3 million. The Redemptorist priest set up his station almost 15 years ago. Radio Maryja broadcasts an exotic cocktail of self-help tips, mournful hymns and the occasional anti-Semitic conspiracy theory.

Today, Rydzyk can even call on the resources of a full-fledged media company, complete with newspapers and the television station "Trwam" ("I will persevere"). This past summer, one of the fanatical father's publications printed the names of German journalists who had openly criticized the government in Warsaw, together with a chilling warning: "No one insults Poland without being punished."

The state church under Cardinal Glemp has been very slow to distance itself from this black sheep, a position which - according to experts - some one-third of the bishops sanction. With many fearing a schism, very few have voiced their concerns.

Warsaw's new fraternal rulers, Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, have embraced the station's propaganda potential. During the election campaign, Jaroslaw - today's prime minister - frequently took to the stump before the mikes in Toruń. There were no limits on broadcast time, and no piercing questions to interrupt the flow. In the process, prominent studio guests helped shift the ambitious priest and his media company away from the obscurity of the lunatic fringe and into the limelight.

Since spring, however, a board of highranking church officials has been keeping an ear on Radio Maryja. Its initiator is a German - Pope Benedict XVI.

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## Volume On High

By ANDREW PURVIS / Warsaw

Poland's Roman Catholic station Radio Maryja (pronounced Maria) has always blended the sacred world of faith with the profane arena of politics. Its archconservative commentators love to slag off the "evils" of the free market and the perils of joining Europe. But this month they acquired an opponent tough for them to dismiss. After one pundit declared that Jewish groups were "humiliating Poland internationally by demanding money" for property expropriated during World War II and likened their efforts to a "holocaust industry," the Vatican itself decided this was the last straw. It instructed the Polish Catholic church to prevent its station from mixing prayer and politics.

The trouble for Poland is that Radio Maryja's excesses are a disturbing straw in the wind. The country's new government is using the broadcaster as its outlet of choice in a campaign to "purify" Poland, an effort that has included attacks on critical journalists, on an "alcoholic" civil service, on the former communist "establishment" and on the central bank. This fragrant brew of right-wing populist causes is likely to become more pungent this week, when talks to form a coalition government could result in an important post — Deputy Prime Minister — for Andrzej Lepper. Leader of the Self-Defense party, Lepper is a radical populist who has been convicted of assault (the conviction was erased when he entered parliament) and is under investigation for allegedly libelous attacks on his opponents. He made his name in violent street demonstrations in the mid-1990s and has blasted free-market reforms and E.U. membership for Poland. Only this month he was criticized for declaring that he had wanted to slap a television journalist during an interview. Even so, an official from the ruling center-right Law and Justice party (pis) said it had "no alternative" but to invite Lepper into government because it could not find another partner to form a majority. The country's new leadership, as a result, could be as welcome in the rest of Europe as the proverbial Polish plumber. "Poland's image has been damaged," Leszek Balcerowicz, governor of the central bank and architect of Poland's postcommunist reforms, told Time last week. "The governing party's strategy is to win votes by demonizing the transformation [to free markets]."

So far that strategy has worked just fine for the pis, which was elected last September (with 156 out of 460 seats in the Sejm) and is led by identical twin brothers Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski. They promise to get tough on corruption, crime and ex-communists, and build a "strong state" that promotes Polish national interests; Jaroslaw is party leader and Lech President. The hung parliament has hampered policymaking, but the brothers' combativeness has kept the political pot boiling. They've picked their biggest fight with Balcerowicz, the polarizing symbol of post-communist economic reforms that have resulted in 40% growth in gdp since 1989 — but also 18% unemployment. Widely respected abroad, Balcerowicz has stood up for the independence of the central bank and also for Europe-wide merger rules. So when he opposed what he saw as an attempt by the ruling party to block a planned merger of Polish branches of the Italian banking giant UniCredit earlier this year, he was excoriated. President Kaczynski said he would not renew Balcerowicz's appointment. Lepper called for his removal. Last month, the parliament established a commission to probe the bank's role in 17 years of privatization. "It's a sort of harassment, a brutal infringement on the political independence" of the bank, Balcerowicz says.


But that isn't all: the government has mounted a legal challenge against the European Commission for approving the UniCredit merger, prompting the Commission to file a counterclaim of its own. "That's a very symbolic gesture, and a bad signal," says Aurore Wanlin, a fellow at the Center for European Reform in London. "It's much better to simply talk through the problem. The government has a lot to learn." According to critics, the suit shows how out of step the government has become with the rest of Europe and its own pro-Western urban élite. But it appears to revel in contrariness. "It's incredible how many conflicts they have produced in such a short time," said Jan Rokita, leader of the opposition Civic Platform party.

The government has courted further controversy by setting up an "anticorruption" police force, controlled by the ruling party, with sweeping powers to probe serving officials and even private citizens. It re-opened an investigation into former (and still popular) President Aleksander Kwasniewski. Meanwhile, Poland's conservative press has declared a small culture war on "liberal" groups including gays, artists and feminists. Example: Kazimiera Szczuka, 39, a literary-talk-show host and prominent feminist, recently made gentle fun of a girl who leads prayers on Radio Maryja by imitating her reedy, childlike voice on a satirical TV show. The girl is disabled, though Szczuka was unaware of this fact. A column in the radio station's sister newspaper called her a "representative of the civilization of death." The government's media oversight board slapped an unprecedented \$154,000 fine on the TV station for "mocking the disabled and their prayers" (though it has imposed no fine on Radio Maryja for its anti-Semitic outbursts). Szczuka's face was splashed across the right-wing press. "It was horrible, a crazy attack," she said last week. "It reminds me of socialism of the 1970s and '80s."

These controversies do not appear to have lost its core support in rural Poland. There, unemployment and poverty levels are higher than in the cities, and many are ready to blame free-market reforms for their woes. Though the Kaczynskis' personal approval ratings have fallen, new elections today would provide the same result as six months ago, pollsters say. But neither has the government gained support; Poles still largely support the E.U., for example. "There is no groundswell of dissatisfaction," argues Balcerowicz. "What is happening now comes from the top down."

In an interview with Time last week, hours before agreeing on a governing program with the pis, Lepper took pains to sound statesmanlike: "We want to reassure Western capital. Our party wants Western capital in Poland. But we want it on equal conditions with Polish enterprises." He said he did not propose "grabbing the reserves of the central bank" or "destroying the E.U. accession treaty," but only wanted the bank to share "co-responsibility" with the government for the economy, so that it "should be awakened to make money to cover the social sphere." Growing animated, he added: "We are not announcing some kind of revolution."

Ironically, the reforms Lepper and the Kaczynskis denounced on their way to power have made the economy so resilient that their fulminations have not managed to shake investor confidence. Political shocks such as questioning the central bank's independence or promising new programs without new revenues are being largely absorbed. "The fundamentals are strong," says Balcerowicz. But if the government continues on its present course, for how long?

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