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Polish church faces demands to confront sex abuse

Jonathan Luxmoore | Jan. 13, 2012

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The Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist is seen in a view of Przemysl, Poland. The Przemysl archdiocese includes the village of Hludno, the site of a high-profile case of clerical sex abuse. (Wikimedia Commons/Ferdziu)

WARSAW, POLAND -- When Bartek Obloj, a 13-year-old altar boy, hanged himself in his home village of Hludno just before Christmas 2007, he left a letter to his mother complaining of being molested by his parish rector. Police were called and his shocked parents blamed the priest for their son?s death.

A month later, Poland?s Catholic *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly reported that Fr. Stanislaw Kaszowski had been moved to a parish 20 miles away after personally saying the boy?s funeral Mass. He?d denied the accusations, the paper added, and defiantly failed to appear at a court hearing.

Hludno?s mayor, Stanislaw Gladysz, testified that locals had long complained of the priest?s ?sadistic behavior? and ?sexual exploits,? adding that for a decade he?d asked the local ordinary, Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemysl, to move the priest. However, Michalik, president of the Polish bishops? conference, had given Kaszowski his full confidence, the mayor said, and refused to discuss the claims.

When Poland?s Catholic Wiez monthly published a special issue on clerical sex abuse this summer, it was the first time a Catholic publication had dared tackle the subject. ?The harm caused by sexual molestation of children is unquestionable ? but the evil is much greater when pedophilia occurs in the community of faith, and when, in a falsely conceived defense of the church, the authorities hide the facts, conceal the perpetrators and ignore the suffering victims,? the Warsaw-based journal said in its editorial.

?In Poland, church superiors react in different ways. Sometimes sentences are passed on the quiet against pedophile priests in secular courts, and sometimes everything is consistently denied. Should a church that demands so much from others not be demanding more from itself??

The journal said it had sought to ascertain how far the Polish church was complying with May 2011 instructions from the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which called for ?clear and coordinated procedures? for protecting children, dealing with accused priests and cooperating with civil authorities.

Leading Catholics, including the country?s children?s rights spokesman, have been urging the Polish church to adopt procedures for handling abuse claims since 2002, when Archbishop Juliusz Paetz of Poznan resigned after being accused of molesting seminarians. But media inquiries have been stonewalled and whistleblowers warned off. While millions of words have been devoted to denouncing abortion and defending family values, no Polish church leader has ever spoken up at his own initiative on behalf of victims of abuse.

Paetz himself has continued to appear at high-profile church events, while priests and lay Catholics who helped expose his abuses have faced censure. In 2006, he was shown on TV chatting at length with Benedict XVI during the pope?s Polish pilgrimage. In 2009, a handwritten telegram from Benedict, praising the disgraced archbishop?s ?fruitful service? to the church, was published at Paetz?s request in Poland?s Catholic *Przewodnik Katolicki* weekly.

The situation may change.

Parliamentary elections in October returned a small lobby of militant members of parliament, who?ve pledged to raise questions about the murkier aspects of church life. But Jakub Spiewak, whose Kidprotect Foundation runs a hotline for abuse victims and seven separate child protection programs, is doubtful.

?People are getting restless here ? any criticism of a priest, even by loyal Catholics, is treated as an attack on the church and faith, and the worst church penalty a pedophile priest can expect is to be moved to another parish,? Spiewak told *NCR*. ?If the church doesn?t deal with this problem and stop sheltering its priests from canonical and criminal responsibility, it will sooner or later face the same crisis as the church in other countries. But its leaders have avoided many of the issues faced elsewhere, and seem to think they can do the same with this one.?

Ordinary perpetrators of abuse are treated severely in Poland. Under criminal code amendments in September 2009, the country became Europe?s first to permit the chemical castration of convicted pedophiles; and on Dec. 21, a Catholic parish worker from Tarnow was given a 10-year jail sentence and ordered to undergo treatment for molesting adolescent boys.

When it comes to Catholic priests, however, accusations of inaction and indifference have multiplied.

In March 2008, Poland?s Dominican provincial, Fr. Krzysztof Poplawski, publicly rebuked Archbishop Zygmunt Kaminski of Szczecin-Kamien, after Kaminski issued a pastoral letter denouncing an order member for exposing abuse by the priest in charge of local Catholic schools. The Dominican, Fr. Marcin Mogielski, submitted a formal testimony to prosecutors. He was then accused of undermining the church?s authority and forced to leave his monastery.

A month later, Bishop Piotr Libera of Plock, a former bishops? conference secretary-general, said he had passed the cases of several Catholic priests to the Vatican after they were accused of ?reprehensible behavior? with children. However, local clergy told Poland?s *Rzeczpospolita* daily that other priests implicated in the scandal had not been called to account.

Tadeusz Bartos, a leading Thomist theologian who quit the priesthood in 2007 after criticizing church leaders, says the latest Vatican guidelines have made little difference in Poland. As long as investigations are left to individual bishops, he predicts, most abuse claims will go on being ?covered up for the good of the church.? No discussions have taken place at family and school level, and no formal church help has been offered to victims. Although a group of priests? victims was formed recently with backing from U.S. advocates, its approaches to local dioceses have been left unanswered.

Relatively few abuse claims were made against Polish priests from the 1950s to 1980s, Bartos points out, because the church?s schools and orphanages were confiscated by the communist regime and only returned after 1989. But cases of abuse occurred, even when Pope John Paul II was archbishop of Krakow.

?The strongest mechanism blocking exposure is the wish to settle things discreetly so images don?t suffer,? Bartos, who now teaches at Pultusk Academy of Humanities, said in a 2010 interview. ?Victims generally haven?t come forward or considered lawsuits, because the church in Poland has such a strong position and

they?re afraid they?ll be ostracized and vilified if they confront it. This is why the church isn?t reacting ? it isn?t threatened with loss of face or with having to pay damages.?

In its editorial, *Wiez* said the Polish church faced a choice between ?procedures that one can long hide behind, or a clear, transparent, firm and swift witness.? It remained to be seen, the journal added, whether the church would be ?wise before being damaged.?

Fr. Hans Zollner, the Jesuit pro-rector of Rome?s Papal Gregorian University, told the Catholic monthly the situation was comparable to that of Germany before a wave of abuse scandals in 2010. He believes the same crisis will erupt in the Polish church if it fails to ?confront the reality? of abuse.

?If the church doesn?t know how to react to such situations because it hasn?t bothered to ascertain the facts,? the Jesuit warned, ?its image will suffer much more than if it had said, ?Yes, we had such cases ? they were very painful, but we tackled them.? ?

Spiewak of KidProtect agrees.

He said the Polish church has shown ?extraordinary laxity? in handling abuse cases and hopes for a more up-to-date church with accountable leaders. But he fears ?fortress mentalities? will kick in as complaints and accusations spread, fueling a growing anticlerical backlash.

?It?s natural for any great institution, especially a hierarchical one, to want to settle problems silently within its own ranks rather than go public and change its norms of behavior. But I?d prefer the church to draw conclusions from the mistakes of others, rather than waiting to make its own, since people will be hurt when it does,? Spiewak said.

?While the church is a separate institution under the pope, its priests are citizens of this country, and should be subject to the same penalties if they commit offenses. People won?t tolerate a situation in which [priests are] above the law, answering only to their bishops and claiming different rights and duties than other citizens. But it sometimes seems the church is thinking like a child ? that if it closes its eyes, the danger will go away.?

The tragic case of Bartek Obloj, the altar boy from Hludno, was covered at length by Poland?s official press agency, PAP, and became the subject of a Polish TV documentary. Four years on, however, Obloj?s grieving parents still await answers.

The parish priest, Kaszowski, appeared in court in July 2008, charged with ?psychically and physically torturing? the boy. But his trial was delayed pending a psychologist?s report on the 13-year-old prior to his suicide. Although this was filed last February, it wasn?t made public, and while the trial has now started again, it?s being held in camera, without access for the public. The priest, for his part, is refusing to submit a testimony and still working at the nearby parish.

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