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Clerical power thwarts victims in Poland

Jonathan Luxmoore | Feb. 8, 2012

Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemysl, Poland, gives the final blessing during Mass at Holy Trinity Polish Mission in Chicago in April 2011. (CNS/Karen Callaway)

This is the second of two-part series looking at clergy sex abuse in Poland.Read part one here.[1]

WARSAW, POLAND -- When Ewa Orlowska, a mother of nine, decided to confront her local priest for sexually abusing her as a child, she had little idea what was to follow. The priest, Msgr. Michal Moskwa, had been the parish pastor for three decades in the southern town of Tylawa, and Ewa had been just one of his victims. But when she?d told her mother about the abuse, her mother beat her and ordered her to apologize.

When the case came to light in 2001, Orlowska reluctantly agreed to give a statement to prosecutors. ?I thought: When I stand before God and he asks me what I did for those other defenseless children, still threatened by the priest?s pedophile tendencies, what would I say?? she remembers. ?Would I say I lacked courage, hadn?t the strength, was afraid of my own shadow??

Moskwa was convicted in 2004 and given a two-year suspended jail sentence and an eight-year ban from teaching children. He ignored the teaching ban, suffered no canonical sanctions, and his ordinary, Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemysl, returned him to his parish.

The judge reprimanded Michalik, who is president of Poland?s bishops? conference, for ignoring repeated requests to deal with Moskwa ?in the way required by Christian morality.? On the contrary, Michalik assured the convicted pedophile of his ?sympathy? in an open letter, protesting the affront ?to the good name of our priests.?

Orlowska, now in her late 40s, hasn?t returned to Tylawa in seven years. Local parishioners, encouraged by clergy, turned violently against her; her own parents disowned her after the priest visited them.

When the Vatican issued instructions on handling abuse cases last May, Michalik insisted that the Polish bishops? conference had worked out its own guidelines in 2009.

Although prosecutors have brought charges against dozens of Polish priests, securing sentences has been

difficult. When imposed, these have mostly been light, suspended jail terms. Most convicted clergy are still serving in parishes, often working with children, while their victims face hostility and exclusion.

Last February, the rector of a parish at Debnice in northern Poland, who had already served a four-year sentence, was found guilty of plying a 15-year-old altar server with alcohol, abusing him and then inciting him to attempt suicide.

The boy hanged himself, but the priest stopped the suicide. The court ruled that the priest, identified in news reports as Fr. Piotr T, had not committed a crime since the boy was more ?emotionally dependent? than the pastor had realized. An attempted murder charge against the priest was dropped on technicalities.

In May, when the rector of St. Wojciech Parish in Kolobrzeg, Fr. Zbigniew Ryckiewicz, was charged with abusing two local boys, local media reported that he had been allowed to remain at his parish for a decade, until his bishop, Edward Dajczak of Koszalin-Kolobrzeg, suspended him for ?violating celibacy? with a married male parishioner.

The priest?s main victim, repeatedly abused as a 13-year-old, told the *Glos Koszalinski* daily that his school had ignored his complaints, telling him it was ?impossible? a priest could ?have such a thing on his conscience.? When he sought damages to pay for therapy, diocesan authorities accused him of ?swindling? the diocese. His abuser, whose trial opened Jan. 6, has continued to greet him in the street with the words, ?God be with you.?

In June, the pastor of St. Jadwiga Parish in Bojano, convicted of molesting a 15-year-old girl after getting her drunk, received a 16-month suspended sentence and a two-year ban from teaching children. The judge at the trial, which was held in camera, confirmed that local clergy had ?incited? the girl?s parents not to report the crime.

Local newspapers covered all of these cases, but KAI, the Polish church?s official Catholic information agency, ignored them. KAI regularly reports on abuse scandals in the United States, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Ireland. In May, it ran a lengthy backgrounder on the abuse crisis internationally but made no mention of Poland.

An accompanying analysis insisted Poland?s bishops had no obligation to pass on information to civil authorities, since the Polish constitution did not list sexual abuse among 10 ?grave crimes? requiring denunciation. There might be a ?moral obligation? or ?social duty,? the KAI conceded. But this was a complex matter, since bishops had no ?investigative apparatus.?

Nor, KAI insisted, did bishops have any obligation to compensate victims, even when priests were convicted and sentenced. ?In the case of pedophilia by its clergy or laypeople, the church itself is the victim,? the Catholic agency concluded.

Jakub Spiewak, director of Poland?s KidProtect foundation, said police and civic officials have been afraid to challenge priests suspected of abuse in villages and small towns, where Catholic clergy are ?often the most powerful people.? Although his organization runs a campaign, ?Silence is not golden,? encouraging victims to come forward, very few have done so.

?The Catholic church occupies a special position here, but this could change. It could well end up damaging itself and becoming engulfed in affairs and scandals if its leaders fail to take this problem seriously,? Spiewak said.

To date, church leaders appear not to be doing so.

The Vatican?s May instructions require bishops? conferences to have abuse guidelines in place by May 2012.

They encourage bishops and their representatives to meet with victims and their families, ensuring that ?spiritual and psychological assistance? is offered to them and people making accusations against a priest are treated with respect.

The instructions also call on church leaders to introduce child protection programs, exercise special care when accepting priesthood candidates, and exchange information about candidates transferring between dioceses or religious houses.

There are no signs that the Polish church is taking any such steps.

Psychologist Ewa Kusz wrote in the Catholic magazine *Wiez* last summer that the Polish church lacks psychological checks for seminarians and priests, ?transparent norms? for vetting lay and religious employees, and any ?information policy? for handling abuse accusations.

She also highlighted the ?lack of cooperation between church and state? on abuse issues, and said church cooperation with psychologists, psychiatrists and sexologists ?leaves much to be desired.?

If the country?s bishops did draft guidelines in 2009, they have not made the guidelines public. Nor will they, according to Archbishop Andrzej Dziega of Szczecin-Kamien, who chairs the bishops? conference?s legal council. There is no need to publish the guidelines, Dziega told *Wiez*, since they conformed to canonical norms and these were well-known.

Abuse accusations are best handled with pastoral care and ?appropriate therapy,? Dziega told the magazine.

Poland?s bishops have their own ?competence and experience? on sexual molestation, the archbishop said, so they do not need a commission to examine abuse cases like the one the bishops established in neighboring Germany.

?Personally, I?m in favor of totally separating church and secular procedures,? Dziega continued. ?The duty to handle cases, appropriately establish the truth and define the scope of responsibility of concrete people lies with the church superior -- but this remains an internal church activity and doesn?t replace the competence of the wider judicial process.?

This will do nothing to help Ewa Orlowska.

She needed two years? therapy to give up contemplating suicide. She rarely goes to church and is afraid of meeting the people who denounced her, none of whom ever apologized even when Moskwa, her abuser, was convicted.

The Przemysl diocese?s website lists Moskwa as a dignitary, an honorary canon and ?Chaplain of His Holiness.? Meanwhile, the Council of Catholic Episcopates of Europe elected Michalik as its vice president in September, and in October he celebrated the anniversary of his consecration with a hundred fellow bishops.

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