

Secularizing pressures hit Polish church

Jonathan Luxmoore | Dec. 19, 2012
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When a Polish bishop was arrested in late October for drunkenly crashing his Toyota into a street lamp, it was the latest incident to scratch the church's once-pristine image in Europe's most Catholic country.

Bishop Piotr Jarecki, a Warsaw auxiliary, apologized to local Catholics and offered his resignation to Pope Benedict XVI. But the indiscretion embarrassed a church already smarting under the pressure of public disillusionment, which shows little sign of abating in the current Year of Faith.

If statistics were all that counted, the Polish church could be well-satisfied.

Twenty-three years after the collapse of communist rule, baptized Catholics still make up about 95 percent of the country's population of 38 million, of whom at least a third attend Mass weekly in its 9,000 parishes.

The Polish church still provides a quarter of all Catholic vocations in Europe and a large proportion of all priests in one-time Soviet republics from Estonia to Kazakhstan, as well as a substantial clergy presence in Western countries from Austria to Britain.

Its historical record in defending human rights and national sovereignty remains the stuff of legend, climaxing in the spectacular role played by the Polish Pope John Paul II.

Yet some have detected a sense of drift since John Paul's death in 2005, as high-profile disputes have eroded the church's authority. Although secularizing pressures tell part of the story, human misjudgments appear to have played a part as well.

"Modern reforms have certainly been delayed here, while the church lags behind the West in its organizational structure," explained Fr. Henryk Zielinski, editor of Poland's top-selling Catholic weekly, *Idziemy* ("Let's Go").

"This may not have mattered much when our church had a strong personality at its head like [John Paul]. ... But today, the church's leaders are elderly and lacking in dynamism -- they either have good qualities but lack strong positions, or have strong positions but lack charisma. Meanwhile, much of the media has turned hostile to the church -- you could sometimes get the impression that Polish priests do nothing all day but plan wicked deeds."

For two decades, the church has faced criticisms over its largest broadcaster, the Redemptorist-run Radio Maryja, which has been warned by Poland's State Media Council against airing racist and nationalistic content.

A year ago, its flamboyant director, Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk, was accused of "preying on the poor" by Danuta Walesa, wife of Poland's former president and Solidarity union leader, Lech Walesa, who has himself urged the authorities to remove the radio's license for "stirring hatred."

However, just a month later, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone praised the Torun-based radio's "message of salvation and honest information" in a letter, and said Pope Benedict XVI himself welcomed Radio Maryja's success in "strengthening the faith."

Some Poles think the controversy over Radio Maryja, whose media empire includes a TV station and daily newspaper, has been something of a sideshow, diverting public attention from more serious problems.

The Polish church's image has also been tarnished by claims about its former infiltration by communist secret police, by charges that its religious orders made millions of zloties speculating on land awarded as compensation for communist-era seizures, and by allegations that it has covered up child abuse by Catholic clergy.

Meanwhile, critics have accused the church of showing insufficient regard for social problems.

Although Poland's clergy have campaigned tirelessly against the evils of abortion, they've said little about economic hardships in the country, which has the European Union's highest rates of child poverty and lowest levels of family support.

While huge sums have been spent on new churches -- including Warsaw Cardinal Jozef Glemp's lavish state-funded \$90 million Divine Mercy basilica in the Polish capital -- little has been said about poor housing, which is also the EU's worst.

Malgorzata Glabisz, a Catholic presenter with Polish Radio, thinks the church has been caught between rival public expectations. "On one side, there are complaints of a lack of authority in the church, while on the other it's seen as interfering in people's personal affairs when it takes a firm stand on important questions."

At the same time, priestly vocations have fallen by a third over the past decade; 804 ordinands began training in 2011, compared to 1,501 in the year of John Paul's death.

With more than 6,000 students in its 84 diocesan and order seminaries, Poland is still the envy of the church throughout Europe. But recruitment to the country's 130 female orders has plummeted by two-thirds since 2005, and for the first time, signs point toward a significant fall in church attendance.

Poland's bishops have blamed social and cultural changes, as well as falling population and mass migration, insisting the rate of decline is nowhere near that of other traditionally Catholic countries such as Spain or Ireland. They say the drop-off is helping separate the genuinely religious from those participating for social or political reasons.

But politicians have used the uncertainty to oppose the church, hoping to win votes by tapping into widespread anticlericalism.

Since 2005, Poland's opposition Democratic Left Alliance, led by former communists, wooed supporters by promising to bar clergy from state ceremonies, curb church tax exemptions and scrap Poland's 1999 concordat with the Vatican.

In elections a year ago, a new movement headed by maverick millionaire businessman Janusz Palikot campaigned with pledges to secularize public life, liberalize abortion and make religious education voluntary. The movement won third place.

Though other parties have moved to isolate and discredit the Palikot Movement, which also seeks to legalize gay marriage and soft drugs, media commentators say it brought to prominence a new generation of anticlerical Poles who are unconnected with the communist past and could effectively combat the church's influence. In a recent article, the mass-circulation *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily said debates on a secular state were now "unavoidable."

Pro-atheist billboards have appeared in Polish cities, including Czestochowa, where Poland's sacred Black Madonna icon is housed at the national sanctuary of Jasna Gora.

Although most Poles still revere John Paul II, some local councilors have objected for the first time to the renaming of streets in honor of the late pontiff, who has also given his name to 900 state schools nationwide, a dozen in Warsaw alone.

Church leaders have threatened to deny sacraments to members of parliament who support liberalizing Poland's strict 1994 abortion law, which has cut annual legal abortions to around just 100 nationwide. This October, Polish parliamentarians rejected a Palikot Movement bill that would have allowed abortions on demand through the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and required "reproductive rights" to be included in school sex lessons.

However, they also voted down a church-backed bill to tighten the law by banning terminations involving sick and handicapped children.

During the same month, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Poland to compensate a Lublin teenager who was refused an abortion, ruling that her rights had been violated, while the Polish Episcopal Conference condemned a decision by the liberal government of Premier Donald Tusk to allow state funding of in vitro fertilization for married and unmarried couples.

Last February, the bishops' conference president, Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemysl, told Catholics in a pastoral letter their church was under attack by "atheists and freemasons" when Poland's largest satellite Catholic TV station, Trwam, was refused a digital license on technical grounds by the Media Council.

Trwam, a Radio Maryja offshoot, was rated Poland's "least trustworthy" channel in a mid-November survey by Warsaw's Center for Public Opinion Research. However, church leaders are campaigning to reverse the Media Council decision.

They're also locked in tense negotiations with the Tusk government over its plans to replace direct state subsidies to the church with a share of taxes. The government is offering 0.3 percent. But the church is seeking 0.6 percent after originally demanding much more.

Some Poles think the current disputes are a necessary stage in Poland's emergence as a stable democracy, in which the Catholic church will occupy a strong place but also allow civil society space to live and breathe.

But much trouble still lies ahead.

After the 2011 elections, the parliament's deputy speaker, Wanda Nowicka, accused the church of "preventing a pluralist society" and wielding "too much power over laws."

"The bishops should deal with sacred matters, and politicians the lay sphere," Nowicka said in a radio interview.

Michalik told journalists such views "brought disgrace on themselves" and would "degrade culture and any

sense of responsibility," while showing "the abyss and darkness we must guard against."

With such rhetoric exchanged daily between the church and its critics, dialogue and compromise will not be easy.

Glabisz, the radio presenter, thinks a balance will eventually be found, allowing "politicians to defend their political positions, and the church to defend its rights and uphold its authority as an equal partner under the law."

Zielinski, the *Idziemy* editor, is more cautious.

In the years after communism, he pointed out, politicians and media editors harshly attacked the church for its stance on abortion and other issues, accusing it of "imposing a black dictatorship in place of the red."

If it survives the latest assaults, it'll have to wise up on the new realities, and make clearer judgments about its possibilities and its limitations.

"While today's young generation rejects the negative inheritances of the past, there are plenty of people here who find the church inconvenient and would like to see it eliminated from national life," Zielinski told *NCR*.

"To survive such times, we need dynamic, energetic leaders who are up-to-date with technology and information. That's the challenge facing the church everywhere. But it's a particularly striking challenge here in Poland."

Jarecki, who at 38 was Poland's youngest bishop when he was ordained in 1994, faces a four-year driving ban and eight months' community service for his ill-fated late October drunk-driving excursion. As of press time, there was no word of the pope's response to Jarecki's offer to resign.

In a statement, the 57-year-old, who recently resigned as vice president of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, said he hoped to "receive specialist help as soon as possible." It was the kind of indiscretion today's Polish church can ill afford.

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