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Ousted Polish priest takes his case to Rome

Jonathan Luxmoore | Aug. 12, 2013
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When a Polish priest was barred from talking to the media by his archbishop and forced out of his parish in July, the news made headlines and touched off bitter recriminations.

A month later, Fr. Wojciech Lemanski awaits an appeal ruling from the Vatican in a case that has highlighted tensions in Europe's most disciplined and inscrutable Catholic establishment.

"Here as elsewhere, the media love conflicts like this in which a priest has spoken out and been hounded for it," Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska, a Catholic reporter with Polish Radio, told *NCR*.

"But the church also faces serious problems in knowing how to deal with such cases when people who merely raise issues are treated as rejecting Catholic orthodoxy," she said.

In a statement, the Polish church's Warsaw-Praga archdiocese said Lemanski, rector of the Lord's Nativity Parish at Jasienica, spread "disorientation and anxiety in broad ranks of Polish society" and "inflicted great damage on the church as a hostage of the media."

It was the latest chapter in a saga that made the priest a rallying point for supporters of change after he criticized church policy on issues ranging from ties with Jews and to in-vitro fertilization.

Lemanski became active in Catholic-Jewish dialogue after 2001, when Catholic anti-Semitism was put in the spotlight by revelations that Polish villagers had massacred 340 Jewish neighbors at Jedwabne in 1941. He became one of a few priests to commemorate the atrocity each year, also staging prayer meetings at the site of the nearby Treblinka concentration camp in memory of the 3 million Polish Jews killed in the Holocaust by the occupying Nazis.

Although honored by the state for his work, it made him unpopular with fellow clergy members, and in 2006, Bishop Slawoj Glodz moved Lemanski from his parish at Otwock.

In 2010, Glodz's successor, Archbishop Henryk Hoser, accusing the priest of "lacking respect and obedience" for church teaching on bioethics and again tried to move him. Hoser backed off after Lemanski appealed to the Vatican, but he still stripped the priest of his license to teach and formally reprimanded him twice.

In June, Hoser dismissed Lemanski and barred him from further contacts with the media, though Lemanski denied any wrongdoing.

In a statement published July 21, the archdiocese said Lemanski violated canon law by "causing social conflicts" and "depreciating the service of bishops and priests" and had cooperated with immoral newspapers and magazines whose "caricatured view of the church suits their ideological prejudices."

It added that Lemanski had made slanderous accusations against Hoser, who headed the Pallotine order in

Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, and depicted the Polish church as "a center for rapists, pedophiles, hypocrites, extortioners and drunkards."

"Fr. Lemanski is in many respects lost and needing spiritual integration," the archdiocese said.

"He's made himself the church's mentor, not only for his own diocese, but also for the church in Poland and universally, giving lessons to the faithful, priests and bishops from the position of accuser and investigator of sins."

Lemanski called the charges "sad and incomprehensible," telling Poland's *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily he never questioned Catholic teaching, only the harsh, unremitting language used by the Polish church to uphold it.

He said Hoser, chairman of the Vatican's Pontifical Mission Works before his 2008 Warsaw appointment, deliberately gathered material against him and ignored the support shown for him by local parishioners, teachers and parents.

All he had done, Lemanski said, was press the church to react to abuse in its own ranks rather than covering them up and to stop using "dangerous rhetoric" against those judged to violate its teaching.

"It isn't and never was my aim to damage the Church -- but my duty of humility and obedience can't mean agreeing to the injustice and harm I've experienced," Lemanski told the newspaper.

"Times have changed, and information is now so universal that no scandal can be locked up in a parish or curia, or in the Bishops Conference [headquarters]," he said.

Despite angry reactions among his parishioners, Lemanski obeyed the dismissal notice and vowed to work on in the church. But he again appealed to the Vatican, asserting his canonical right, and urged Hoser to rescind the gag order.

As secular media took the priest's side, thousands nationwide signed an Internet petition to Archbishop Mauro Piacenza, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, saying Lemanski's treatment risked "serious damage to the church's image."

Here was a priest who stood for an "open, thinking church," the petition said, "one of the church's enlightened, merciful and tolerant faces, drawing in even those who had little in common with Catholicism."

However, most Catholic officials attacked the priest, and the church's information agency, KAI, accused him of creating a "lynch atmosphere."

"He doesn't live in the world of facts, only of his own visions," one Catholic editor, Tomasz Terlikowski, wrote of Lemanski. "There's no point talking to this priest, because he manipulates every event and instructs the liberal media to talk about it."

Support for Lemanski came from Poland's small surviving Jewish community. In a July 15 statement, the Jewish co-chairman of the country's Council of Christians and Jews, Stanislaw Krajewski, thanked him for his contribution to interfaith dialogue and "exceptional achievements" in helping preserve the memory of the nation's exterminated Jewish population.

However, the council's Catholic co-chairman, Fr. Wieslaw Dawidowski, rejected the statement and resigned in protest, along with two other Catholic members.

Parish priests often are dismissed in Poland. As recently as Aug. 7, for instance, parishioners picketed their

church at Kazimierz Wielki to protest the removal of their rector by the bishop of Kielce. Other priests and lay Catholics also have been given the cold shoulder for having close relations with Jews.

Poland is also home to hundreds of former clergy who quit the priesthood for personal reasons. Although most have quietly disappeared from public view, some have been shunned for speaking out, leaving them a life of hardship after public conflicts with the church hierarchy.

Almost 25 years after democracy and pluralism returned with the collapse of communist rule, some observers say the powerful Polish church has yet to find ways of coping with independent, dissenting opinions and still sees them as expressions of betrayal and enmity.

They say current attitudes conflict with the new atmosphere fostered by Pope Francis, who's faced criticism from conservative Polish Catholics for his comments on homosexuality and priestly lifestyles.

Moreover, the Polish church seems set for increasing conflict with the civil society around it. In 2011, Poland's Marian order barred its former international superior-general, Fr. Tadeusz Boniecki, from speaking to the media, despite a petition from thousands of supporters, after he accused some bishops of "overreacting" to criticism.

In 2009, a professor at Poznan's Theology Faculty, Jozef Baniak, was forced to withdraw a survey suggesting half of Polish priests favored an end to compulsory celibacy.

Two years earlier, Fr. Tomasz Weclawski, a professor of dogmatic and fundamental theology and a member of Rome's International Theology Commission, left the church and changed his last name after he helped force the resignation of Archbishop Juliusz Paetz of Poznan, who was accused of sexually molesting seminarians.

Fr. Tadeusz Bartos, a leading Thomist scholar and former Dominican, also left the priesthood under pressure the same year after publishing a best-selling book, *John Paul II: A Critical Analysis*, which questioned standard Polish church views about the late pontiff.

Polish church leaders deny muzzling alternative views and say cases of conflict and dissent are approached on their merits. Privately, however, some say the policy of excluding and discrediting dissident voices has a familiarity to those who lived through communism.

"We expect criticism and can deal with it," Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, a former Episcopal Conference secretary-general, told *NCR*.

"But attitudes differ here when it comes to knowing how to react. While some bishops accept that every institution needs a creative variety of voices, others see every difference of opinion as an act of disloyalty and potential schism," Pieronek said.

With Poland still providing about a quarter of Europe's Catholic vocations, what happens in Poland is important for the church everywhere.

But Glabisz-Pniewska, the Polish Radio presenter, said she thinks the lack of provision for loyal criticism poses a serious problem.

The rhetorical polarization that characterized the communist past was still very much in evidence, she says, when the church closed ranks in the face of repression and had no space or inclination for internal dissent.

Having come under attack by communists, the church now feels under attack by "liberals," she said. The imperative of demonizing those judged disloyal, far from softening over the years, has been inherited by a new

militant generation of Catholic clergy and laity.

"Whenever some conflict erupts, everyone comes under pressure to declare which side they're on -- there can be no middle ground," Glabisz-Pniewska told *NCR*.

"The church forgets that truth is something to be sought continually, not something you possess once and for all and then defend. The psychological mechanism of constantly rooting out enemies has placed the church on a road to nowhere."

She said she hopes Lemanski will stay in the church and not allow himself to be pressured to leave the priesthood.

She also said she hopes his pastoral commitment will be acknowledged rather than brushed aside in a drive to discredit him.

For his part, Lemanski said he followed appropriate procedures in his conflict with Hoser and said he hoped his latest appeal to Rome will show "law is law and justice is justice."

The outcome of that appeal could further affect attitudes to Pope Francis in Poland and give some indication of the Polish church's future direction.

"If I can follow this path, it'll be a clear signal that people who feel unjustly treated can and should use it, too," the priest told *Gazeta Wyborcza* recently.

"Many hierarchs are trembling that it may show other priests this gateway exists in the church and can be passed through. But you can't just elbow someone aside, telling him 'I'm your superior -- you must be silent,' " Lemanski said.

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