

The Roman Catholic parish in Poland as the local community

ABSTRACT

In the Roman Catholic Church a parish is the smallest legal unit and it is the milieu for religious, social, and cultural activities for a group of people joined together in a geographical area. The purpose of this article is a sociological study examining the Catholic parish in Poland as a local community. Today a parish along with its community is exposed to social change and to myriad forces characteristic of the postmodern culture. In Poland two opposite forces characterize the life of a parish community: on the one side, secularization and individualization, and on the other side, socialization and evangelization. The subjective dimension of a local community, which is related to identification of people with a local parish, along with social bonds with the parish as a local community, are discussed in the first two sections of the article. In subsequent sections some issues related to common activities, membership in movements, religious communities, and Catholic associations within the parish will be presented. While the agency of people in the parish community is theoretically acknowledged, it is still not fully implemented. The discussion is based on the data obtained from major public opinion institutes in Poland.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically speaking it was as early as the second century when local Christian communities began to be called “parishes” and the word then used was the Greek noun *paroikía*, which denoted “those living near or beside” (Coriden 1997, p. 19). In Catholicism the parish with its local community is the basic institutional unit of the Church. It is an institution in which Catholics have an opportunity to establish direct contacts; hence it is often referred to as an institution of first contact. In addition to strictly religious and ecclesiastical functions, a parish fulfills many other tasks: cultural and educational, administrative and economic, recreational, organizing pilgrimages, and providing advice and counseling (Świątkiewicz 2004, p. 282). As a community of religious and social life, a parish today is subjected to two opposing tendencies: secularization and individualization, and on the one hand, and to socialization and evangelization, on the other. The clash of these two forces shapes parish community life in Poland.

One must not ignore the fact that according to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, the parish is not only a social institution, but also a religious one. It is said that affiliation to communities and religious movements and Catholic associations functioning in parishes are fundamental to the development of the religious and spiritual life of believers. In an uncertain, fragmented, and complex postmodern world that is constantly undergoing political, economic, social, and cultural changes, the parish is no longer a haven of safety for religion. The free market of ideas, values, norms, and patterns of behavior creates new problems and new challenges for Catholic parish communities. The contemporary and future condition of the Catholic Church in Poland takes place in parishes. However, this future does not lie so much in the hands of the Church hierarchy, but rather in the hands of priests, who are like front-line soldiers, or first contact persons.

Theologians say that a parish is not only a portion of a diocese associated with the universal Church, but also a community and a place where the Church's life is being realized; the parish is a community of faith, worship, and love, and at the same time, the furthest "outpost" of the Church in her contact with the world. Just as in the case of the Church so also in the parish one can distinguish its two dimensions: the institutional and the communitarian. Both dimensions are important; the parish as an institution and the parish as a community form the total reality of the parish. With the institutional (the visible) element, the parish is a socially tangible reality, concrete, integrated into the socio-cultural context, and subject to the laws of growth and development. The second dimension – the internal and to some extent invisible – makes the parish a community of faith, worship, and sisterly and brotherly love (the theological dimension of the parish). This inner element shapes and somehow transforms the entire parish reality (Kamiński 1993, p. 64–65).

Sociologists point to both the religious and also the social dimensions of the parish, which is rooted not only in the local community, but in the tradition of the Church (church community). In this way a parish forms a community of symbols, rituals, unchanging ceremonies that are useful in building firm personal religious and Church identity in a pluralistic society. Parishes in Poland are territorial in nature. The local nature of the parish ensures that no one can feel excluded from the parish, and that everyone also has the right to participate in the life of the parish, unless one withdraws from this participation (Potocki 2007, p. 295). Parishes are like a little Church, the Church in a miniature, multi-dimensional reality, i.e., religious-ecclesiastical and social.

Practical activities of the Catholic Church take place in parishes. In the past 20 years, these microstructures of the Church have been strengthened. Parishes compose the Church and the family community. The faithful are able to experience the Church not *in abstracto*, but precisely, within parish communities. Accord-

ing to the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland in 2009, the country had 1,151 deaneries (in 2000 – 1,099), 10,157 parishes (in 2000 – 9,950), 30,208 priests (in 2000 – 27,993), 3,595 diocesan seminarians (in 2000 – 4,745); for every priest there were 1,115 faithful (in 2000 – 1,239). The years 1989–2009 marked some positive structural changes, in regard to the parish: a parish network has been developed, some mega-parishes with more than twenty thousand people have been divided. But during the same period of time the number of diocesan seminarians had decreased (Rocznik Statystyczny 2010, p. 58).

The slight decline in priestly vocations has not yet had a negative influence on the functioning of the administrative structure of the parish. In this context, however, a question comes to mind, whether within this well-established structure there is a corresponding spiritual strength, i.e., strong belief in God, or in other words, whether there is an overgrowth of the structure over the spirit. The correct answer to this question, however, could be determined only upon conducting proper sociological research.

In spite of the secularizing and even secularistic trends that are slowly reaching Poland, the Catholic parish provides a venue where people have a sense of belonging and where they experience community. Identification with a parish is based on a variety of subjective and objective bonds, along with a complex system of social control sanctioning various forms of these bonds (Firlit 1993, p. 96).

The purpose of this article is to present several features of the Roman Catholic Parish in Poland as a local community. It discusses some elements of the parish bonds that are important to both a strong parish and to a local community, and these are: a) a sense of belonging to the parish (a subjective aspect of parish bonds); b) declared activities and behavior towards the parish and for its benefit; c) membership in communities and in Catholic religious movements and associations, d) willingness to participate in the

decision-making of the parish community; e) what role does new media technologies play in the life of the parish?

2. IDENTIFICATION OF PEOPLE WITH THE PARISH

The parish is a social group or institution of fundamental importance for the Church; it is the primary place of ongoing evangelization. It is within the parish community that initial religious socialization takes place (the child's baptism, kindergarten catechesis, etc.); to a significant extent the parish is also responsible for the religious and moral condition of the believers as well as for communication with the universal Church. Each parish fulfills these functions from the very beginning of its existence. However, activities of the Catholic communities will vary, depending on socio-cultural contexts; parish life and its affairs will be run in one way in a traditional society, a bit differently in the industrial and urbanized postmodern society, another way in a totalitarian society, and yet another way in a post-communist society, like the current situation in Poland, which is in the phase of building a democratic society.

Important manifestations of the people's ties with the parish are statements about their sense of local belonging. According to an August 2008 survey carried out by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center) – 32.4% of adults reported having a strong feeling of being a member of the local parish, 41.3% – rather strong, 14.3% – rather not, 10.7% – definitely not, and 1.3% – it's hard to say. In a poll conducted by CBOS in September and October of 2011, 35.9% of adult Poles declared a strong feeling of being a member of the local parish, 35.7% – rather strong, 14.1% – probably not, 13.4% – definitely not 0.4% – it's hard to say, 0.5% – no answer. Overall, 71.6% of respondents felt related to the territorial parish, while 27.5% did not feel connected. The latter gave the following reasons for the lack of identity with the parish: another religion

– 8.5%, non-believers – 18.1%, non-practicing believers – 57.4%, ties with another parish – 14.8%, do not like the parish priest or other priests in the parish – 22.3%, poor cooperation between priests and parishioners – 14.9%, in the parish laity have no say in running the parish, – 14.0%, demand excessive financial contributions – 18.1% nothing happens in the parish – 16.6%, other reasons – 14.0%. The vast majority of Catholics practiced in their local parish – 69.8%, in another parish – 6.6%, in various parishes – 6.1%, did not participate in religious services – 15.3%, it's hard to say – 1.7% no answer – 0.6% (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 257 / 2011, p. 18-19 and 29).

A high percentage of parish membership was shown in the national survey carried out by the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church, SAC. In 1991, nationwide, the index of people's identification with the local parish in Polish society was as follows: yes – 51.8%, yes, but to a certain degree – 33.9%, no – 12.2%, no response – 2, 0% (in 1998, respectively, 51.0%, 34.0%, 13.3%, 1.3%, in 2002 – 54.9%, 29.3%, 15.3%, 0.5 %) (Firlit 2004, p. 149). In a 2012 survey 43.2% of Catholics nationwide fully identified themselves with the local parish, 31.9% – in part or yes, to some extent, 24.3% – did not identify themselves with their parish, and 0.6% – did not respond (information obtained from Fr. prof. Witold Zdaniewicz). Aggregate indicators of identification with the parish in the four studies were as follows: 85.7%, 85.0%, 84.2%, 75.1%. The data indicate a clear change in the intensity of identification of Polish Catholics with the parish.

In large cities the ties of people with their local parish become slightly weaker. The reason for this is the patriarchal and authoritarian style of running parish communities. It entails the fragmentation of parish life (social passivity of the faithful), and even initiates the process of distancing of people from the religious community (observers, standing outside). Pastoral ministry in Poland could do with a little more of sociological imagination and willingness to learn, including the loosening of excessive

centralization of parish leadership. Another thing that is not discussed here is the personnel strategy of Church authorities regarding appointing the right people in the right place. Parish ties are weakened by the slow bottom-up process of “creeping” secularization that is taking place in Polish society.

A sense of belonging to the parish community is fairly common of Polish society. About 75% of Poles declare a bond – at least a formal one with the parish. In the years 1991-2012 the parish membership rate fell by about 10%. In any case, even if the Catholic parishes in Poland have become less numerous, it could be that the mutual bond of those who remained in the parish became more mature and more stable. In Poland, belonging to the parish is still a kind of internalized cultural pattern, perhaps a kind of cultural self-evidence. Also, a declared partial, conditional, and limited membership is more common than not belonging to a parish at all. The combined percentage of passive and active belonging to the parish is significantly lower in the young than among the adult population. Among those who declare parish membership there are also those who are only formally members of the parish and who to a lesser or greater degree distance themselves from the daily religious and social life of the parish. The social range of the parish is different in rural and in urban parishes; particularly in the latter, religious life is not confined to the inner circle of the dwelling place (the parish structure alone is not enough).

3. SOCIAL BONDS OF PARISHIONERS WITH THEIR PARISH

Social bonds in the parish manifest themselves in various ways, including among others participation in joint activities of the parish. Undertaking common actions is a constitutive element of any social group. With regard to the parish, we talk of joint actions which parish members undertake on their own initiative. This

will be, on the one hand, to participate in religious practices and parish rituals (e.g., church fairs, pilgrimages), and on the other hand, to be active in various associations, parish celebrations, and various initiatives and events organized by the parish. Financial contribution to the parish is also important, as well as personal cooperation with the clergy in the implementation of the objectives and tasks of the parish (Piwowarski 1996, p. 115). Some of these common parish activities have a distinctly religious-ecclesial character, but there are also predominantly cultural, social, and even economic undertakings.

Catholic parishes in Poland, in addition to Masses and other religious services *sensu stricto*, offer their members a variety of services such as counseling, providing assistance, etc. According to a CBOS survey as of September and October 2011, the Polish respondents told about the various activities of the parish as follows: help for the poor – 58.3%, help for the unemployed – 22.6%, care for the elderly and infirm – 32.9%, nursing and hospice care – 24.3%, child care – 31.0%, various youth activities, such as clubs, scouting, etc. – 43.1%, family counseling (family breakdown, problems with child upbringing, drug addiction, violence, etc.) – 30.7%, medical advice – 9.3% holiday trips for children and youth – 49.4%, pilgrimages abroad – 54.9%, domestic pilgrimages – 79.1%, sport and tourism events – 33.2%, job training courses, language and computer courses, tutoring – 7.0%, cultural events, such as concerts, exhibitions, theater, choir – 39.2%, rental books – 16.6%, the parish magazine – 59.9%, parish cafe – 7.9% pensioners club – 11.2%, other ventures – 6.3%. The rest of the respondents stated that the parish does not organize such events, or they had no knowledge of them. (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 257 / 2011, p. 20-22). The average index of parish activities for 2008 was 29.3%, whereas for 2011 it was 32.5%.

The range of parish services is addressed to all the parishioners, but only a certain proportion of them take advantage of them. The local parish undertakes many initiatives and projects

that are intended to benefit parishioners. In addition to religious needs the parish also takes care of some social and cultural needs of the parishioners.

Opinion polls reveal a range of different proposals and parish initiatives. According to a poll conducted by CBOS in September and October 2011 adult Poles declared using the parish services as follows: domestic parish pilgrimages – 27.1%, pilgrimages abroad – 4.0%, holiday trips for children and youth – 7.8%, sport and tourism events – 10.7%, cultural events, such as concerts, theater – 15.2%, rental books – 5.1%, job training courses, language and computer courses, tutoring – 1.1%, financial assistance – 1.8%, material assistance (medicines, food, clothes, etc.) – 5.0%, child-care – 1.1%, care for the elderly and infirm – 1.1%, care of the sick – 1.4%, various youth activities such as clubs, scouting, etc. – 6.7%, family counseling (family breakdown, problems with child upbringing, drug addiction, violence, etc.) – 0.9%, medical advice – 0.9%, activities in the club of pensioners – 0.5%, other projects – 2.1% (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 257/2011, p. 22-24). The rest of the respondents either had not used these services or did not have opinion in this regard, or stated that parishes do not offer such services and do not carry out such projects. The average index of parish activities for 2008 was 4.2%, whereas for 2011 it was 5.4%.

The parish operates on behalf of its members, but also expects them to contribute in various ways to the parish, not only financially. Interestingly depicted it the declared participation of parishioners in organizing help and various parish activities in favor of the parish. According to a poll conducted by CBOS in September and October 2011, parishioners organized or participated in the following events or parish initiatives: religious ceremonies and their liturgical setting, music, singing, etc. – 20.9%, care for the church and its surroundings, such as the cemetery – 64.7%, construction, renovation, and maintenance – 23.2%, raising money for the church – 24.5%; holiday trips for children and youth – 3.6%,

pilgrimages – 6.0%, sporting events, tourist excursions – 3.0%, cultural events, such as concerts, theater, etc. – 4.4%, rental books – 0.7%, job training courses, language and computer courses, tutoring – 0.3%, help for the poor – 11.0%, care for the elderly and infirm – 1.8%, childcare – 1.8%, various youth activities, such as meetings, clubs, scouting, etc. – 4.0%, family counseling (family breakdown, problems with child upbringing, drug addiction, violence, etc.) – 0.3%, medical advice – 0.2%, the parish bulletin – 2.8%, other undertakings – 2.5% (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 257/2011, p. 25-27). The rest of the respondents either had not used these services or did not have opinion in this regard, or stated that parishes do not offer such services and do not carry out such projects. The average index of parish activities for 2008 was 11.4%, whereas for 2011 it was 9.8%.

The data provided above shows that the widest range are parish services and projects in favor of its members; that not many of the parishioners get directly involved in the organization of these actions or projects, and that even fewer of them actually use the parish services and initiatives. The beneficiaries of the various forms of assistance are mostly the unemployed. Manifestation of the parishioners' bonds with the parish is through their financial generosity to the parish. This is linked to the fifth Commandment of the Church, which obliges the faithful to provide for the needs of the Church. When asked by CBOS in 2011 about how much money adult Poles give monthly to the Church and the parish, 57% of all respondents mentioned a specific amount, 8% said it varies, 10% responded it was hard to say, 25% did not contribute at all. In the years 2008-2011 the percentage of people who do not support their parish financially increased (from 20% to 25%). The detailed calculations show that the average monthly church collection was 20.2 zloty in 2008 and 18.9 zloty in 2011 (Boguszewski 2011, p. 13-14).

An important task of the Church and the parish is associated with charity and its function in the life of the people. From a so-

biological point of view charity is to fulfill a humanizing function. Roman Catholic parishes are not engaged in spiritual matters only; they do charity work, run schools, organize social and cultural activities, and at times engage also in economic activities. Various parish services and initiatives are addressed to all the faithful of the parish, but only certain groups of parishioners would use them, and these are people involved in religious practices, the elderly, and those who struggle with life's difficulties. Catholic parishes have much to do in the area of social welfare, especially in places where the state bureaucratic system is not sufficient enough.

The majority of Polish people approve the Church's charitable functions. According to the survey by the Institute of Public Opinion Research GfK Polonia from 2007, 48.4% of adult Poles totally agreed with the statement that the Church should help to remedy poverty, 36.6% – agreed, 9.8% – neither agreed or disagreed, 3.7% – disagreed, 1.5% – totally disagreed. The answer to the question "Should the Church teach people how to help the needy?" was respectively, 56.7%, 36.7%, 5.0%, 1.2%, 0.4% (information obtained from GfK Polonia). A telling sign of the times is the growth of volunteering in the parishes, especially in works of charity (Mikrut 1997, p. 246-261).

A dynamic parish that organizes a variety of activities enjoys considerable popularity. Declared subjective bonds with a parish are to certain degree reflected in the objective bonds. The participation of parishioners in favor of their parish is more evident in inactive forms (Sunday collection and donations for church renovation), than in active forms (personal assistance at the church, participating in charity). Most Polish Catholics financially support parish activities according to their means. Parish activities and initiatives are also partially supported by persons who are undecided in matters of faith, by the indifferent, and by unbelievers, i.e., people who, in fact, do not identify themselves with the Church and the parish. Those who are totally disinterested in the

life of the parish and whose bonds with the parish are practically nonexistent constitute a minority of Polish Catholics.

Most Catholic parishes in recent years have worked well; however, one could only wish that Catholic parishes in Poland were more open to the issues of the universal Church, and were able to act and work in accordance with the saying “think globally, act locally,” transforming their local activities into global thinking and action. “Parishes, our home” – means to act locally, “the Church, our home” – means to think globally.

4. MEMBERSHIP IN MOVEMENTS, RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, AND CATHOLIC ASSOCIATIONS

A parish becomes not only the venue for a multitude of different Christian movements, groups, and apostolic associations, but also a source of material and spiritual support in the service of evangelization. In fact, a parish is the first field of endeavor in the lay apostolate within the Church community. Church movements and associations present an opportunity for more active involvements of the laity in the life of the Church, as well as in public life. Within Catholic parishes various types of councils, counseling centers, church associations, movements and religious communities operate. While the members of associations and movements have formal objectives and principles underlying their actions, they are at the same time less formal in their structure, attracting those lay Catholics who desire to live and work communally. All Church religious groups are an expression of the greater or lesser depth of the religious life and activities of Catholics. When carrying out sociological studies it is necessary to ask about the functioning of these organized groups within the Church, and about participation in them of believers both in the parish and beyond parish levels. In Poland, the main area of the apostolic commitment of lay people was and still is a parish that is slowly

becoming a community of communities. It is, for example, within the parish structures that the Catholics through participation in parish councils take a concrete form of responsibility for the life and development of their parish and diocesan communities.

In October 2011, adult Poles were aware of the existence of the following associations and organizations in the parish: Parish Pastoral Council – 48.6%, Parish Economic Council – 8.3%, Parish Team Charity – 23.8%, Parish Family Counseling – 18.9%, Parish Catholic Action Circle – 16.9%, religious communities, such as the Living Rosary, Family of Nazareth, Focolare, Oasis, etc. – 64.7%, the Friends of Radio Maryja – 19.0% (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 257 / 2011, p. 27-28). More respondents chose the answer, “it’s hard to say” rather than they “do not exist”.

In the years 2005-2011 the index of knowledge regarding the existence of parish associations and organizations decreased by a few percentage points. With regard to Parish Family Counseling, the index of positive responses decreased by 13 percentage points, Parish Team Charity by 10 points, Parish Catholic Action Circle by 7 points, and Parish Economic Councils by 6 points. The negative trend was marked not only among the respondents, but also among those who are attached to the local parish (Hipsz 2011, p. 2-5).

One may speak about certain lack of enthusiasm in terms of joining movements and associations in Polish parishes. Priests no doubt need the laity, most of whom are confident about their rights in the Church. There are probably many causes which contribute to the underdevelopment of the Parish Councils, and their failure cannot be attributed only to the clericalism of priests (Rémond 1986, p. 4-5). It is significant that respondents more often mentioned the Parish Pastoral Councils than Economic Parish Councils, although in fact the latter often operate in parishes than the former. Parish Team Charities are perceived by the Catholic respondents in different ways in each diocese and in the whole

country. However, various forms of parish volunteer work are growing very quickly.

Movements, religious communities, and Catholic associations fill the social void existing in many Polish parishes between parishioners or Catholics and the wider social structures. All these organizations contribute to the development of religious life and prevent treating the Church as “service agency.” They become active players in the Church, active participants in direct evangelization as well as vehicles of social and moral renewal. Strengthened and vibrant religiosity and often missionary zeal for parish ministry are the fruits of the work of these renewed groups and communities. Through activation of small religious groups in the parish the laity becomes more active, and efforts of many people around the common good also become harmonized. Changes will take place at a slow pace as there is no method for rapid and effective change.

According to a poll conducted by CBOS in September and October 2011, 6.8% of adult Poles reported that they belonged to a religious community, such as the Living Rosary, the Family of Nazareth, Focolare, Oasis, etc. in their parish, and 1.0% in another parish (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 257 / 2011, p. 29). In the years 2005-2011 the index of membership in religious communities in the Catholic Church remained at the same level. Members of religious communities and movements are primarily people who are involved in religious practices several times a week (49%), those aged 65 years and older (23%), retired persons (18%), those with primary education (15%), the poor (14%), those declaring right-wing political views (11%), women (11%). Adult Poles adhere to the following communities: Rosary Circles (about 6% of respondents), as well as members of the Liturgical Service of the Altar, the Eucharistic Community, Renewal in the Holy Spirit, Student Chaplaincy, etc. (Boguszewski 2011, p. 4-5). According to a CBOS survey of June 2012 regarding leisure activities, 5.8% of adult Poles said that in their free time they regularly participate

in the activities of a group or religious community, 2.1% – from time to time, 0.7% – rarely and 91.3% – have never participated (Wyniki badania, *The Results of the Polls*, No 265 / 2012, p. 26).

Belonging to the movements, religious communities, and Catholic associations in Poland does not exceed 10% of Catholics, but the actual membership is estimated at the level of about 7%, being slightly higher among young people. It seems that in recent years the activity of Catholics in the Church and in religious groups has weakened slightly. Specific reasons for the reluctance of young people to get involved in movements and religious associations is inadequate response of the Church to the spiritual and religious needs of young people, lack of the habit of organizing themselves in groups and communities, ignorance of the existence of movements and religious communities in the parishes, religious indifference, and many other reasons. Accurate statistics on this issue are not known.

New religious movements and Catholic associations pose an opportunity to change the traditional Polish folk Church into the Church of choice. In Catholic parishes the percentage of membership in various religious organizations is rather low, and the above-mentioned organizations are not only the most popular, but they also represent the traditional mainstream of Polish Catholicism. Parishes in Poland are being “filled” too slowly with smaller communities and groups. In addition to that, possibilities of new ways of being Catholic in the Church and parish are little publicized, and are still in the growth phase. Much has yet to change so that lay Catholics felt that they are real actors in the life of the Church, and so that they undertake co-responsibility for the parish, as well as the diocese.

5. INFLUENCE OF PARISHIONERS ON THE AFFAIRS OF THE LOCAL PARISH

The most telling indicator of the participation of the faithful in parish life is their involvement in decision-making, and a sense of their impact on local parish affairs. Awareness of one's influence on parish life, and declared aspirations in this regard, may indicate an emerging or already formed sense of being an actor or subject in parish life. Catholics who play an important role in various social environments could introduce a number of initiatives into the life of the parish community, if they were also active there. Due to the personal involvement of the faithful in the local Church, a parish as a community may be formed. Parish participation presupposes something that could be called an active trust. Such a trust resting at the base of social involvement does not result from already existing social positions in the parish, but must be worked out, freely chosen, and implemented. Parish participation signifies a departure from the vision of the Church, in which the clergy were active subjects of pastoral care, and the laity were a passive and peripheral mass.

According to a poll conducted by CBOS in February 2005, 2% of adult Poles stated that they have a decisive influence on the affairs of their local parish, 13% – rather, 40% – probably not, 40% – definitely not and 5% – hard to say. So only one in seven parishioners felt his or her influence on what is happening in the parish; the vast majority did not feel they have any influence (80%). A sense of influence on local affairs of the parish was the greater, the more frequent was the participation in religious practices. More likely such influence was felt among mid-level employees, managers and professionals, people with higher education, farmers, people with right-wing political views and the elderly (Boguszewski 2011, p. 17-18). In August 2008, 1.9% of adult Poles declared in a decisive manner that they have an influence on the matters of their parish, 11.1% – rather, 39.3% – probably

not, 43.3% – definitely not, and 4, 4% – hard to say (Aktualne problem, *Current Issues*, No 219 / 2008, p. 19).

Parishioners not only have no influence – according to their own feelings – on the course of parish affairs, but they did not aspire to such influence. In 2005, 19% of adult Poles, according to a CBOS survey, declared that they would like to have an impact on the affairs of their local parish, 71% do not want this, and 10% are undecided (in 2008, respectively, 14.7%, 74.8%, 10.5%). In 2011, 12% of respondents declared that they have an influence on the local affairs of the parish, 12% have no influence, but would like to have it, and 76% neither have an influence nor would like to have it (in 2005, respectively 15%, 17 %, 68%). In recent years, more and more people feel both the lack of a sense of being a participant in the parish, and the need for co-molding the parish environment. Perhaps the number of those who treat the parish as a service institution, designed to meet religious and non-religious needs, without specific commitments on their part, is increasing (Boguszewski 2011, p. 19-20).

Polish Catholics surveyed in 2012 by the Center for Social Opinion poll OPINIA, to a greater extent declared, that they have some influence on parish decisions than did Poles surveyed in the whole country. To the question: “Tell me, do you have influence on various decisions in reference to your parish as a community of believers?” The following answers were obtained: yes – 6.7%, in part – 21.8%, no – 70.8%, no response – 0.8%. On the second question, whether the respondent would like to have an influence on various decisions regarding the parish, similar responses were obtained: definitely yes – 9.9%, rather yes – 22.7%, probably not – 34.5%, definitely not – 20.8%, it’s hard to say – 10.1%, no response – 2.0%. Approximately every fourth respondent was aware of exerting some influence on the decisions of the parish, and about one in three would like to have an influence on what happens in the parish (information obtained from Fr. Prof. Witold Zdaniewicz).

The attitudes of many parishioners towards decision-making activities in terms of parish leadership could be described as “gentle indifference”. Rarely do priests themselves invite the faithful to discuss parish affairs and decision-making. For a majority of the clergy, communication with the parish community is like a one way street: there is an attempt to inform parishioners about decisions already taken, but listening to the parishioners’ opinion regarding their preferences, actions and initiatives seem to be insignificant. Generally, the faithful themselves do not claim the right to participate in the decisions of the parish; their passivity is a reflection of the wider parish social mentality, characterized by “deficiency” of social and civic commitment. The dominant model of parish life in Poland remains “the pyramid”, where the lay people at the bottom take a passive attitude towards priests, who “serve” them from the top through their ministry. Many parishioners are not even able to imagine their participation in the decisions of the parish (“slimness” of social parish *imaginarium*), and do not feel invited to take co-responsibility for the life of the parish and the Church.

The mobilization of religious, social, and civic potential in the parish depends on many factors. In parishes, there are still specific psychological and social barriers to the involvement of the laity in direct cooperation with the clergy. One of them is without a doubt the fear that the laity will try to model their own image of the parish, according to their own will and their own ideas. On the other hand, many lay people do not think about the idea of “the good Church” or “the good parish” and some of them would find such reflection a waste of time. While one acquires an regular position somewhat automatically (by baptism and by residence in a given area), social status, like participating in the decision-making of the parish, is primarily achieved by being elected. What is needed is a departure from the image of the Church as an institution of “religious services” or “the administering of sacraments” to a Church of mutual responsibility and

missionary zeal. The paternalistic style is not conducive to parish involvement, where the power of the clergy and obedience of laity are like two opposing classes within the local Church. There are still many indications pointing to the fact that in this area the Church in Poland is still far from the desired model. The new image will have to be worked out not only by bishops and priests, but also by all the faithful.

6. VIRTUAL CATHOLIC PARISHES

The media our times are important tools in the activities of the parish that give tremendous opportunities to the Church, but they are also one of the main challenges and threats. The Internet brings many threats to religious life (e.g., promoting content insulting human dignity), but also many opportunities (promotion of religious content, information about the life of the church and parish, publishing texts in the field of Christian philosophy, theology, and Catholic social teaching, preaching homilies and retreats). Thanks to new technologies proclamation of the Gospel becomes more global, and it provides opportunities to reach many people in different social environments. The new media and digital culture become more and more a place of public, social, but also religious and Church life. It becomes an area of life that should be included in the new evangelization.

The new media and digital culture are undoubtedly a challenge for the Church and for the Catholic parish. In addition to the numerous benefits it brings numerous challenges. One of them is the emergence of so-called ephemeral culture, instantaneity and a pretense of reality, or fashioning of a society incapable of memory and without the ability to build the future. This could have far-reaching implications for religion and for the relationship with the Church and the parish. The virtual world of pretense of reality cannot be held as more important than the world of real

human interactions. Concern for humanization of technology and overcoming the negative occurrence of “digital culture” is a challenge for the Church. However, the Internet provides ample opportunities to develop new forms of evangelization.

The mass media, which have evolved immeasurably in our time, must be seen in a positive way, as useful in the proclamation of the Gospel, even though in reality they contain significant potential for good and evil. They can be useful to do things both positive and harmful. The Church tends to use mass media in the service of the Gospel, for a more efficient proclamation of religious content in order to penetrate the entire culture with the Christian spirit. Mass media as such also have an increasing impact on the life of the Church. The Church is not afraid of the media but also needs them to carry out her mission of salvation, or evangelization. The Church proposes improvement of the quality of transmitted programs by endorsing the content that complies with natural law and is rich with human and Christian values (Porter-Szűcs 2011, p. 53).

On the web there are not only believers, members of the Church, but the Church herself, which is open to new media. In addition to traditional methods (liturgy and rituals, religious education, pastoral personal contacts, etc.), the media are becoming an important tool of evangelization. The network becomes the environment of the Church. The internet brings many threats to the Church, such as disseminating immoral content, relativization of values and standards, the promotion of anti-Church and anti-religious content, the explosion of the ideology of various sects and new religious movements (Sokołowski 2005, p. 66-71), but also many opportunities. Thanks to new technologies proclamation of the Gospel becomes global in nature, providing an opportunity to reach many people and in different environments (Zeler 2006, p. 39-44).

In addition to traditional methods (liturgy and rituals, religious education, pastoral personal contacts, etc.), an important tool for

parish activities are new technologies of communication. The Church in the network is a proof of its modernization, but may perhaps at times be a manifestation of the trivialization of religion and faith. One can only with difficulty imagine the existence of a virtual parish, with all its pastoral functions, but religious portals, forums of believers, priests' private websites, are burgeoning at an incredible pace. The digitization of our lives is not bypassing the Church. Estimates say that religion, next to pornography (quite strange configuration), dominates the Internet. If you type in the search engine the word "religion", you get over 23 million results, and when you enter the words "Church" and "God" you get half of that number (Rozej 2009, p. 44).

The Catholic Church along with parishes in Poland has joined in the public network. In 1991 the Diocese of Tarnów, under the leadership of then Bishop Józef Życiński, introduced Informatics as a subject in the seminary education program. The seminary in Tarnów was the first in Poland which had a computer lab; it was also in the Tarnów Diocese where in 1997 the first Diocesan website was created. According to a 2005 survey covering all dioceses of Poland, in which more than half of the priests took part, 76.8% of the surveyed parish priests used the Internet (daily – 21.5%), and 87.2% of assistant priests (daily – 50.0%). Out of 224 parishes surveyed 23.2% of rural parishes had their own website, and 53.8% of urban-rural parishes and urban parishes. The diocesan website was used by 71.0% of parish priests, and by 73.9% of assistant priest. Two years later, the number of parishes having their own website had increased by 100%, and priests increasingly see the Internet as an important medium of communication with their parishioners (Smoleń 2008, p. 118-128).

At the end of 2008 in the Archdiocese of Lublin out of 264 parishes, 84 had their own websites (31.8% of all the parishes of the Archdiocese). Since 1993, Poland's first computer catechetical program has been functioning, supporting the work of catechetical departments and catechists. This program has also been accepted

by several dioceses in the country. Their own websites in the Archdiocese of Lublin have nine University and College chaplaincies, most Christian movements, religious communities, and Catholic associations. New media technologies in the Archdiocese of Lublin not only provide information about the life of the parish, but also are used for evangelization (catechesis, the Bible Study, Spiritual Conferences, formation materials, etc.).

According to the research of the Institute of Catholic Church Statistics SAC, from October 2010, 40.4% of all parishes in Poland (without the Archdiocese of Lublin) had a website – from 77.9% in the Archdiocese of Katowice, to 19.4% in the Diocese of Kielce. Slightly more parishes owned email address (41.9%) – from 94.5% in the Archdiocese of Gdańsk to 11.6% in the diocese Drohiczyn (information obtained from Fr. Prof. Witold Zdaniewicz). The Church through the parishes should settle in the “new areopagi” and find ways and means so that even in these ultra-modern places the Gospel message could be proclaimed. There are signs that the Church in Poland (parishes) and clergy recognize the challenges and opportunities created by the Internet and, more generally, new media technologies.

It should be noted, however, that the faithful themselves are moderately interested in new forms of communication with the parish. According to the Center for Social Opinion Poll OPINIA from 2010, in the Diocese of Warsaw-Praga only 23.7% of Catholic respondents declared their interest in contact with the parish by Internet, 42.9% were not interested, 26.5% not necessarily, and 7.0% of respondents chose the answer “I do not know” (Firlit 2011, p. 175). In the Diocese of Płock only 16.8% of Catholics surveyed were interested in obtaining the contact via the Internet (e-mail) with one’s own parish, 25.7% identified their interest as “unnecessary”, and 50.8% answered negatively (Zdaniewicz 2010, p. 169).

It should be noted that the use of the Internet in the parish usually has a one-way dimension, or another words the interactive capabilities of this medium are rarely used. Despite the lack of

accurate statistical data on the parish websites, or more broadly, the new digital techniques, it can generally be said that the parish websites are developing very dynamically, and are treated as part of the parish ministry. Parish web sites offer many new opportunities for cooperation with the faithful; however, they cannot replace direct human contact with people (direct interpersonal communication).

An important way to use the Internet for religious purposes is the creation of virtual religious communities. Despite the geographical remoteness, people belonging to these communities are spiritually connected with each other. Certainly the Internet will not replace participation in traditional religious communities, including those in the parish. The virtual parish should be considered only as a kind of extension of or addition to a real local parish as a community of believers. There is no indication that the virtual church (e-church) and virtual parish (e-parish) would threaten traditional religious communities, even though they are already an important addition to the religious landscape (Kloch 2001, p. 90-101). Catholic parishes will not become virtual parishes, but they are called to use modern media and technology to spread the Gospel, with these tools becoming an integral part of their evangelization mission.

In modern parish societies new networks and new social bonds are being formed. Changes in the functioning of the parish generated by new media technologies, especially the Internet, are difficult to describe, especially in view of the impact on their subsequent performance. New specialized networks, new communities and movements of a virtual character will form. Dangers associated with using the Internet cannot be "an excuse to reject the new forms of communication between people, as well as not to use this new agent of communicating in the apostolic work of the Church" (Budzik 2011, p. 173-185). The impact of the parish should be directed primarily to the real human being, not virtual entities.

7. TYPOLOGY OF PARISHIONERS

Catholic parishes in Poland are not homogeneous local communities in structural and functional terms. One can – generally speaking – distinguish several types of attitudes toward the parish. These types are not completely uniform, but they have many features in common, and this similarity of their characteristics permits considering them together. The typology of belonging to the parish, which is presented here, is admittedly quite general and not entirely precise; it does not provide strict criteria to qualify individual parishioners to any of the differentiated types, but it shows clear stratification of the belonging and relationships in parish communities.

a) Parishioners who very strongly or strongly identify themselves with the parish, who are involved in the projects and actions organized by the parish. Some of them belong to religious movements and religious communities as well as Catholic associations. Many of them would want to have a greater impact than heretofore on decisions pertaining to parish life. They support a variety of initiatives of the priests and maintain social and religious contacts with them. Some of them deepen their faith, using different forms of spiritual life, developed in parishes or outside of them, in retreat centers or formation centers. Active parishioners are “linked with the parish clergy not only by formal ties, but also by personal collaboration; they know and understand the needs of the parish, consider those needs as their own, and they are trying to address them in some way. Not only do they live in a parish community, but they form with it <one>; they experience the issues of the parish community, and are really and actually a part of it” (Majka 1971, p. 138). On the Polish national scale, the involved and active parishioners represent no more than 20% of the total.

b) Ordinary parishioners, who attend Sunday Mass regularly or irregularly and who declare that they belong to the parish for-

mally and emotionally. They contribute to the collection during Sunday Mass and otherwise; they join in some parish activities but on a temporary basis. They are more an object than a subject of the parish pastoral influence. They have no influence on what happens in the parish, nor do they desire to have it. They are rather passive members of the parish. They do not always observe the Sunday practices in their local parish; generally, however, they are attached to the religious ceremonies. They are under the influence of the parish community but more as passive recipients. Their participation in parish life is dependent on whether they are personally invited to a particular parish activity. This type of parishioners in Poland can be estimated at about 40% of the total population.

c) Parishioners-sympathizers, who do not formally belong to a given parish, but who sympathize and identify with it spiritually and socially. They attend Sunday Mass, sometimes regularly, at a given parish or rectoral church. They even participate financially in some initiatives and projects of the parish of their choice. The parish, to which they do not formally belong, becomes their normative reference group. Parishioners-sympathizers can be found particularly in urban environments, especially metropolitan ones. It is estimated that they represent about 5% of the total. The Church with its local social base is not significant for them; they chose their own pastoral communities.

d) Nominal parishioners, who still formally consider themselves as members of the parish, but do not participate in group activities of the parish and only support the parish financially from time to time. It is only the place of residence and the use of certain services performed by parish priests, such as the baptism of a child or the funeral of a family member that connects them with the parish. They basically gave up contacts with the clergy, even the Christmas time pastoral visit known as *kolęda*. Some of them still go to church on Christmas and Easter, or they par-

participate temporarily at the time of critical life events or in crisis situations – e.g., earthquakes, catastrophes.

The relationship of nominal parishioners with Catholicism at the most general level (“I am a Catholic”), do not entail in their lives identification with the essential content of the Christian message, and certainly they do not identify with the local manifestation of the Church – the parish. Their impact on the religious life of the parish is minimal; they do not have ties with the parish community, although they are not outside the Church. Sometimes their attitudes can be described as practical atheism, which is the life posture in which the person, in his or her choices and decisions, does not relate to the transcendent reality (God). Nominal parishioners are estimated to represent about 20% of the total.

e) “Borderline” parishioners, who are baptized in the Catholic Church, but who have broken ties not only with the parish, but also with the Church itself. They often declare themselves as religiously indifferent or even non-believers. Their contact with the parish may be purely incidental, e.g., a child’s baptism. Sometimes they identify themselves as cultural Christians, Catholic non-believers, non-believers with Church ties, persons who distanced themselves from God, non-religious persons, persons with no religion, atheists with strong Catholic roots, etc. In Polish society, they represent about 10% of the total. Some of them, even if they do not practice religion or even do not believe in God, would be inclined to agree with the view that it would not be good to live in a society in which faith in God does not exist (an atheistic society). Still others consider their membership in the parish and in the Church as merely acceptance of common moral and national values (cultural Catholics). This category may include a sociologically interesting type called “practicing non-believer,” or a person using religion for more or less non-religious purposes.

The typology of parishioners includes all those who exhibit at least formal identification with the Church, that is, that they were baptized in the Catholic Church. Polish society also includes those

who do not belong to the Catholic Church. Those are Christians of other denominations, members of non-Christian communities, non-believers, those who renounce Catholicism, those who manifest hostility to the Church and religion, non-baptized members of Catholic families, and those not affiliated with any religion. It is estimated that they represent just above 5% of the total.

The social reality of the parish demonstrates a far-reaching stratification and heterogenization of the attitudes and behaviors of its members. Also, the attitudes toward the Catholic Church are today very diverse. Alongside the parishioners who represent Church-centered and well-grounded religiosity, and who are fully engaged in parish affairs, there is room for those who only partially identify themselves with Catholicism and the parish and who remain at a distance, as well as for those who are nominal or borderline members. One cannot expect that all parish members will become active and engaged parishioners. Deepened and active parish religiosity will coexist with other types of religiosity, and all these forms will in some way – at least indirectly – act upon one another. The plurality of forms and contents of parish life provides a realm of choices within the faith as well as within the Church and the parish.

In its current shape and socio-religious forms, the Catholic parish is one of the important reasons ensuring continuity – despite some changes – of Polish Catholicism. Both in its theological and in its social dimensions, the parish is a social group whose members remain in varying distances from its sociological center. It is a constantly changing group, in which social ties intensify or weaken, and the numerical ratio of different types of parishioners determines the religious-ecclesial character of the parish. If even in the modern world, institutionally specialized religion (church religiosity) is only one of many social forms of religiosity, and if socio-cultural pluralism and structural individualization cause religiosity to become increasingly an individual matter and a person's "property," religiosity in Poland, viewed in terms of system

and institution, is still strong and manifests itself in the framework of the parish institutions. Negative changes are taking place in Catholic parishes slowly; there is no evidence of formation of any kind of post-parochial order, even though parish communities in their internal forms and structures become more “fluid.”

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Opinion polls and sociological studies show a picture of the parish reality consisting of active and passive members of the parish. This picture, however, must not necessarily coincide fully with the actual religious and social condition of Catholic parishes in Poland. The Catholic parish community is a social group, which is identified with by 70% of the surveyed Poles and about 75% of the surveyed Catholics. Polls indicate a slight decrease in the parish bonds in the years 1989-2012, which may indicate a weakening of the role of the parish in the religious life of Poles (by about 10%). In large cities, ties with the territorial parish are clearly weakening. Contributing factors include not only the patriarchal and authoritarian style of parish leadership and management, but also encroaching processes of secularization. A subjective sense of connectedness with the parish still ranks high in all demographic and social categories. Also, some of those who do not participate in religious practices nevertheless have some sense of a social bond with the parish.

Participation in activities for the benefit of the parish is significant in the area of material support in the form of collections at the Mass and financing of church building renovation and construction; it is less significant in terms of a more active personal commitment. This, however, does not provide the basis for the claim that the ties of the faithful with parishes have primarily a financial dimension and – because of participation in religious practices – a cult dimension. In the years 1989-2012, social activ-

ity in parishes increased somewhat; in any event, it became more differentiated and directed toward various categories of people in need. Only in the period 2008-2011 – according to the composite index – did the supply of social and cultural services of parishes increase by 3.2%, and the number of those taking advantage of those services rise by 1.2% (according to CBOS polls). Available empirical materials do not fully show the new forms of collaboration with the parish, which – albeit visible only in some parishes – appear to be increasing. Neither do they reveal in a tangible way the daily contacts of the faithful with the parish communities in which they live.

Parish participation, manifesting itself by taking part in religious movements, communities, and Catholic associations, is markedly low. One can speak of a definite deficit of community and association activities in the Catholic Church in Poland. Only 7% of the Catholics surveyed declare participation – often passive – in the work of various religious and Church groups in parishes. To make Polish Catholics socially involved is not an easy task, but there is a great deal of room in Polish society for development of religious movements, communities, and Catholic associations as well as for voluntary faith-inspired civic associations.

The Polish parishes are in need of a *sui generis* revolution concerning cooperation and common decision-making in parish affairs. An inadequate level of participation in decisions and actions for the benefit of the parish is a mirror reflection of a general deficit in the area of pro-social activities. About two-thirds of the Catholics neither have a sense of their influence on what is happening in the parish nor declare a desire to influence the decisions regarding the parish. The participation of the laity in the life of parish communities and their agency are recognized theoretically, but still are not being fully implemented. Polish parishes do not open themselves sufficiently to new movements and church communities and to the inclusion of lay Catholics in the processes of making decisions about the parish. As a result,

they do not contribute sufficiently to augmentation of a Church consciousness and introduction of a new form of evangelization.

Translated by Stanisław A. Wargacki SVD

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