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An Encyclopedia

Volume II
K-Z

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Roman Catholic Church

Largest religious body in Poland. Poland was Christianized in 966. The Roman Catholic Church has been closely connected with both the statehood and the culture of Poland for over one thousand years. Some 93 to 94 percent of Poles declare their affiliation to the Catholic Church.

During the Second World War Poland lost one-fifth of its population. Compared to other social groups the clergy were, after the Jews, the second-most affected community, with 1,932 priests, 6 bishops, 850 monks, and 289 nuns killed. These figures do not cover those persecuted and those who survived the German death camps but died after the war.

In September 1939—after the German invasion—under the agreement between the Polish government and the papal nuncio, Primate of Poland August Hlond left the country and the church worked on with overall authority. In spite of the new social and political system established in postwar Poland and the policy of the Communist authorities that aimed at the creation of an atheistic society, the church began to reconstruct religious life and church administration. The episcopate of Poland consisted of twenty bishops, compared with one hundred of 1990, after the fall of the communist regime.

At the beginning of the establishment of the Communist regime the state authorities showed remarkable restraint in its attitude toward the church. Both the Polish Committee for National Liberation on July 22, 1944, and the Sejm (parliament) on February 22, 1944, recognized freedom of religious beliefs. Part of the church's property was legally recognized and the first university in the Polish People's Republic, the Catholic University of Lublin, was established.

On July 20, 1944, Primate Hlond returned to Poland, empowered to reorganize the church system in the country. After taking over the church jurisdiction from the German church in the territories annexed from Germany in the west and north east, he set up a Polish church administration there. On September 12, 1944, the concordat between Poland and the Vatican was invalidated because of the Vatican's war policy under which some jurisdictions of the Polish church were handed over to the administration of the Roman Catholic Church in Ger-

many. The Polish government found this decision to be a formal breach of the concordat.

On November 12, 1948, after the death of Hlond, Pope Pius XII named bishop Stefan Wyszyński primate of Poland. The new primate inherited all special powers from his predecessor. Showing conciliatory gestures toward the Communist authorities, he was unyielding as far as theological priorities were concerned. Under his administration the church founded numerous institutions, theological seminaries, church courts, bishop's curias, charities, religious buildings, and convents that provided both theological and educational or medical and charity services. Catholic activists presented their opinions and attitudes in diocesan press and other Catholic periodicals—*Znak (Sign)*, *Tygodnik Powszechny (Universal Weekly)*, and *Tygodnik Warszawski (Warsaw Weekly)*.

With no major obstacles, the church carried out its religious works. There was relative freedom of worship, and catechism lessons were taught at state schools. The state provided some financial support to reconstruct churches destroyed in the war. The Catholic press was published and representatives of the hierarchy participated in public life while politicians took part in some religious services. The church itself functioned as a relatively independent social institution not affected by the political system. The Roman Catholic Church enjoyed the status of *primus inter pares* (first among equals) among other religions. Its broad autonomy allowed a strong influence on social life. Until 1948 relations between church and state were relatively smooth.

However, the fall of Władysław Gomułka, the first secretary of the Polish Workers Party (Communist Party) and a National Communist, the new leadership of the Polish Workers' Party, and, after December 1949 when the Socialists were forced to merge with the Communists, subservient to Moscow the Polish United Workers' Party as it was called, launched a severe Stalinization process in many fields of social life and declared an open war against the church and religion itself. The hierarchy was accused of a hostile policy toward the state stimulated by the Vatican and Western political centers.

On March 1, 1949, Pope Pius XII sent a letter to the German Episcopate announcing that the transfer of German territory in the East to Poland was still an open issue. This again worsened the relations between state and church. The decree of the Holy Office of July 13, 1949, that anathematized Roman Catholics who collaborated with the Communist authorities did not help the situation. The state authorities began to slander the clergy and expelled some bishops from their dioceses. The work of church schools and associations was restricted, and the

Catholic press and publications were censored. *Tygodnik Warszawski* and *Znak* were closed, and *Tygodnik Powszechny* put under strict control. Monastic hospitals were nationalized, pro-church political groups were dissolved, and the church's ability to administer its institutions was impaired.

At the end of 1949 the Communist government brought into being the Committee of Priests, which organized so-called priests-patriots. The movement, supported by a regime-sponsored lay association called PAX, enrolled about two thousand clergymen.

At the same time opposition to the dictatorship of the party grew. Avoiding open, antisocialist declarations and promoting political neutrality, the church turned into an important, well-organized oppositional center. To settle the conflict, Wyszyński initiated the meeting of the so-called Combined Committee representing both the church and the regime. The government was represented by Franciszek Mazur, a member of the Communist Party's Political Bureau responsible for church affairs; the church's spokesman was Bishop Zygmunt Choromański, a secretary of the episcopate. Although the negotiations were not very successful, on April 14, 1950, a limited agreement was signed, the signatories of which were the members of the Combined Committee: Bishops Choromański, Michal Klepacz, and Zakrzewski, and, apart from Minister Wolski, Edward Ochab and Mazur on the government's side. The Polish government promised to respect freedom of religious beliefs and the episcopate promised its consideration for so-called Polish state interests. In spite of these declarations, catechism lessons were often suspended, the work of Catholic associations was restricted, and priests were often forbidden to say mass in prisons, hospitals, and other venues.

In January 1951 the apostolic administrators in the Regained Territories were replaced by chapter curates. To avoid a direct conflict and schism, Wyszyński empowered them with necessary church jurisdiction and appointed them his personal curates. The state authorities dismissed some bishops, and many officials of the church were arrested.

On July 16 some minor theological seminaries and monastic novitiates were closed. Wyszyński took precautions to prevent other persecutions. Not only did he take part in the parliamentary elections of October 1952, but he allowed the ringing of church bells on the day of Soviet dictator Stalin's funeral as well.

On February 9, 1953, the authorities issued a decree taking over crucial church posts, including that of bishops. The decree was often in conflict with the church administration's regulations. In September 1953 Primate

Wyszyński was detained and interned. His successor for the time was Bishop Michal Klepacz, who remained chairman of the episcopate until October 28, 1956, when Wyszyński was released.

October 1956 witnessed a return of Gomułka, who again became first secretary of the party, and the process of liberalization in political life. Wyszyński regained his post and the Combined Committee was replaced by the Common Committee of Government and Episcopate. In December 1956 a State-Church Agreement was signed that considerably improved relations. The decree on church posts was changed, and religious instruction was reintroduced in the schools. The church regained some works of art, Catholic journals could be published again, and licences to build religious buildings were issued. In January 1957 Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, who wished for a large turn-out to indicate Polish acceptance of the regime, sought Wyszyński's support in parliamentary elections and received it. Wyszyński went to vote and even changed the Sunday mass schedule to allow Catholics to vote to conform to the situation.

On July 15, 1961, a new educational law came into force according to which state education was to have an exclusively lay character. Thus religion lessons were again taught outside of school in parishes where about twenty thousand special centers were opened.

From 1962 to 1965 the Second Vatican Council met. The Polish church before this council was sometimes regarded by proponents of reform in the Catholic Church as a "folk church" because of its traditionalism and authoritarianism, which resulted in unquestioning obedience of parishioners and uniformity of behavior and attitudes. Polish Catholicism was dominated by folk forms of worship. The Vatican Council was followed by essential changes in the Polish Catholic Church. The laity grew in importance. The liturgy was reformed, and Latin was replaced by the Polish language. Services became a dialogue between priest and parishioner. Folk religious practices began to diminish. This religious revival produced new religious movements and associations. One of them was the Light-Life Movement, which developed fully in the 1980s.

November 18, 1965, brought another turn in church-state relations. When an effort to hold talks between Polish and German bishops did not materialize, Polish bishops sent a letter to their German colleagues in which they "forgave and sought forgiveness." Forty-two German bishops answered the letter, but Poland's Communist government found it to be an interference in political affairs and refused permission for Pope Paul VI to visit Poland.

From 1945 to 1970 over one thousand two hundred churches were built or reconstructed and the number of priests grew by some 60 percent. The 1970s and the 1980s brought many newly conceived projects and investments in theological education, as well as some important changes in church-state relations. When the government ruthlessly suppressed workers' protests, Wyszyński called for bloodshed to be prevented, and the church assumed the role of mediator in the December 1970 conflicts. That certainly helped to preserve social stability. In return for this several buildings in the territories gained from Germany at the end of World War II were transferred by the government to the church and meetings of a "working group" from Poland and the Vatican began.

Cardinal Wyszyński at age seventy-five wanted, in accordance with canon law, to retire. The government asked the Vatican to delay his resignation. In the mid-1970s the economic situation in the country considerably worsened. In July and August 1980 workers went on strike and Wyszyński mediated again. The new leaders of the Communist Party sought an agreement with the church and gave up ideological confrontation.

Wyszyński died on May 28, 1981. On July 9 bishop Józef Glemp was elected primate of Poland. When several months later the regime, in an effort to crush Solidarity, imposed martial law, the anti-Communist labor union, Solidarity, found strong support from the church and the cardinal himself. The episcopate of Poland, a main political mediator, was soon to take the side of Solidarity in the contest between the union and the regime. The assassination of the priest Jerzy Popiełuszko was followed by a break between the church and the government. The church became a center of independent criticism and at the same time because of its status and backing a deterrent against the use of arbitrary force by the regime. The church won social support and strengthened its educational function.

A new wave of strikes in April 1988 resulted in the so-called Round Table talks in February and April 1989 in which the church was represented by Bronisław Dembowski and Alojzy Orszulik. The parliamentary elections of June 4 brought an overwhelming victory to Solidarity.

In the new post-Communist state the church enjoyed the privileged status of a stimulator of social change. Initially its sociopolitical involvement was fully approved by society. However, some of its political initiatives were far from accepted. In September 1990 the Common Government-Episcopate Committee agreed to reintroduce religious instruction in the schools. The minister of education decreed this in April 1992. The decree, how-

ever, was taken to the Court of the Constitution by the state civil rights ombudsman Tadeusz Zieliński. In answer to this some members of the hierarchy demanded the spokesman's dismissal.

Then in parliamentary elections of 1991 the church declared its neutrality but soon started its own moral and political campaign in which the issue of abortion became the defining litmus test for church support or opposition as far as candidates were concerned. The Catholic Electoral Action and some electoral committees could rely on priests for advice and support. Moreover, the hierarchy pressured the government to promulgate regulations that compelled Christian values to be "respected" in mass-media, and, taking advantage of the amendment to the State-Church Agreement of May 1989, it regained most of its former property.

The Catholic Church, in both its declarations and its actions, began a campaign of political and social pressures and demands that resulted in a remarkable change in social attitudes toward this once highly respected institution. Poles in general, and part of the church hierarchy as well, have not accepted church interference in purely political affairs.

In the early 1990s the church in Poland had not yet defined its place in the new society.

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Paweł Zatecki

SEE ALSO Glemp, Józef; Popiełuszko, Jerzy; Wyszyński, Stefan

Press

The Polish press after 1947 was totally controlled by the Communist Party. Preemptive censorship and the party's direct influence on printed material did not allow a free portrayal of the information in the legal press.

Together with the strengthening of the party's hegemony after 1945, attempts to limit the development of the press were undertaken. The liquidation of the relatively independent local press began in 1947. To control the mass media, the party limited the number of publications associated with its political opponents. On April