

# Poland

**POPULATION** 38,634,000

**ROMAN CATHOLIC** 93 percent

**OTHER CATHOLIC** 0.5 percent

**ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN** 1.3 percent

**NONRELIGIOUS** 4 percent

**OTHER** 1.2 percent



## Country Overview

**INTRODUCTION** The Republic of Poland is located in Central Europe to the east of Germany; it is bordered on the north by the Baltic Sea and Russia and on the south by the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Most of the people in the country are Polish; minorities include Ukrainians, Germans, and Belarusians.

Religion has been highly significant in Polish history. The Catholic Church is the largest religious organization in Poland and has been closely connected to both the statehood and culture of the country for more than a thousand years. The Christianization of Poland began

in 966, when the Polish dukes received baptism from the Bohemian monarchy. This enabled the dukes to make connections with Christian rulers and protected the country against German hegemony. The date is widely recognized as the beginning of the Polish state.

There are four rites in the Catholic Church in Poland: Roman Catholic (by far the largest with nearly 36 million members), Byzantine-Ukrainian, Byzantine-Slavic, and Armenian. The last three are in formal union with Roman Catholic Church. There are also three Old Catholic churches (separated from the church in Rome). A majority of Polish Roman Catholics (72 percent) are so-called “passive churchgoers.”

The Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church is the second-largest registered religious group, with about half a million laypersons. Protestantism, the third-largest branch of Christianity in Poland, is divided into a dozen or so denominations, including the Augsburg-Evangelical (Lutheran) Church, the United Pentecostal Church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. There is a sizeable number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Poland and relatively small numbers of Muslims, Jews, and practitioners of Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** Poland is a secular state, neutral in matters of religion and convictions. It does not have an official religion, and the constitution grants freedom of religion. The constitution also maintains that religion may be taught in schools, provided that doing so does not infringe upon any person’s religious freedom.



One of the best known Catholic shrines in Poland is the Marian shrine of Jasna Góra in the city of Częstochowa. It is recognized as the spiritual heart of the country and is treated as the national shrine. © DAVE G. HOUSER/CORBIS.

## Major Religion

### ROMAN CATHOLICISM

**DATE OF ORIGIN** 966 c.e.

**NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS** 36 million

**HISTORY** In Poland there are seven churches based on Catholic tradition. The biggest, with almost 36 million members, is the Roman Catholic Church. The Byzantine-Ukrainian (123,000 adherents), Byzantine-Slavic (300 adherents), and Armenian (8,000 adherents) churches are in formal union with Roman Catholic Church, accepting the pope's primacy in matters of church jurisdiction. The other three are so-called Old Catholic churches.

The beginning of Christianity (and the Roman Catholic Church) in Poland is closely connected with the state's formation. In 966 Prince Mieszko accepted Christianity for his state. The clergymen who subsequently Christianized the people codified the Polish

language into a written form. In the years 999 and 1000 the first archdiocese was founded by Boleslav I, the first king of Poland, who continued the support of Christianity. In 1207 Leszek the White placed Poland under the Holy See, positioning the state into the system of the vassal kingdoms of the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1384 Jadwiga—daughter of Louis the Hungarian (ruled Poland 1370–82)—ascended the throne. The assembly of ruling magnates arranged her marriage to Jagiello, the pagan ruler of Lithuania. Lithuanians had to convert to Christianity and become part of the Polish kingdom. In 1386 Jagiello was baptized and became King Ladislaus of Poland. This arrangement (called the Union of Krewa), concluded in 1385, provided the Polish church with vast opportunities for extending the Catholic Church. It also led in 1410 to a battle between the Teutonic Knights (a religious order that sought to claim eastern Lithuania) and the Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian army. The Knights were defeated, and their order was permanently weakened.

In the sixteenth-century the Protestant Reformation did not affect Poland as greatly as it did Germany, and the majority of the Polish population remained Catholic. Two centuries later, in the eighteenth century, Poland fell under the dominance of Russia. Prussia and Austria also took advantage of Poland's internal power struggles to divide up the country's territory in three stages. The third partition (1795) wiped Poland from the map of Europe, but the Roman Catholic Church preserved Polish national identity. Because of this Catholicism has become closely connected with the social and cultural definitions of "Polish traits."

Poland lost one-fifth of its population during the Second World War. More than 2,000 members of the Catholic clergy were killed. In postwar Poland the Communist authorities promoted an atheistic society; nevertheless, the church began to reconstruct religious life and the church administration. In 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 Roman Catholic Church in Germany.

During the Communist regime in Poland (1945–89) the Roman Catholic Church was accused of having a hostile policy toward the government that was influenced by the Vatican and Western governments. In the post-Communist state (after 1989) the church has served as a significant agent of social change.

**EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS** One of the most important leaders of the Catholic Church in Poland was Cardinal August Hlond (1881–1948). He played a significant role in creating the framework of a free Polish state. Another noteworthy person in modern Polish Catholic history was Prince Adam Sapieha (1867–1951), an archbishop who was raised to the rank of cardinal in 1946. During World War II he cooperated with the Polish government in exile (which was recognized by the Allied governments), and he stood up for persecuted members of society during the Communist era.

Bishop Stefan Wyszyński (1901–81) was nominated primate of Poland in 1948. He was a skillful politician and was able to negotiate with the Communists. Under his administration the church founded seminaries, church courts, charities, sacral buildings, and convents. He was raised to the rank of cardinal in 1952. Wyszyński was imprisoned in 1953, following his con-

demnation of the Communist government. He was freed in 1956, but relations remained tense.

On 16 October 1978 the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church chose the first non-Italian pope in more than 400 years. The archbishop of Kraków, Karol Józef Wojtyła (born in 1920), became known as Pope John Paul II. As pope he continued to apply the decisions of Vatican II and placed special emphasis on Marian devotion. He opposed the imposition of martial law in Poland (1981) and supported—prior to the collapse of Communism—the Solidarity movement, a labor union that was an important element of Polish civic society. In 1981 Józef Glemp (born in 1929) was elected primate of Poland. In the same year he was a mediator between the Communist state and the Solidarity movement.

**MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS** Polish theologians are not widely known outside the country, and their impact on Catholic discourse in Poland is not substantial. One exception is Karol Józef Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), whose writings influenced the theology of the Catholic Church worldwide.

In 1997 Bishop Kazimierz Romaniuk (born in 1927) published the first Polish translation of the Bible by a single translator. He has also written many books on biblical sciences. Waclaw Hryniewicz (born in 1936), a theologian and priest, has served as director of the Ecumenical Institute at the Catholic University in Lublin. Another influential Polish theologian was Franciszek Blachnicki (1921–87), a priest and social activist who, in 1954, founded the youth movement Ruch Oazowy (the Oasis movement, from 1976 known as Ruch Światło-Zycie, or the Light-Life movement). Blachnicki is a candidate for beatification. One of the most important contemporary Polish philosophers was Józef Tischner (1931–2000). In 1980 he was appointed a chaplain to the Solidarity movement. He was a great moral authority and a well-known figure in Polish public life.

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES** As in the whole Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic house of worship in Poland is the church. Sanctuaries are also important to Polish devotees and are traditional destinations of pilgrimages; most are devoted to the Mother of God. The best-known sanctuaries are those in Lichen, Gniezno, Warsaw, Niepokalanów, Częstochowa, Góra Świętej Anny, Piekary Śląskie, Kraków-Lagiewniki, and Kalwaria Zebrzydowska.

**WHAT IS SACRED?** A distinctive characteristic of Polish Catholicism is devotees' strong attachment to holy sites. One of the best-known sites, the Marian shrine of Jasna Góra, is in the city of Czestochowa in southern Poland. It is recognized as the spiritual heart of the country and is treated as the national shrine.

Another phenomenon is not connected with things or places but with a unique way of reasoning and acting—the so-called “miraculous religiosity” that develops in areas where, according to popular belief, wonders happen. For example, there are sanctuaries with a statue of Virgin Mary that is said to weep blood. To some extent, these miracles shape people's opinions, social attitudes, religious practices, and ways of life.

**HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS** In Poland some of the Catholic Church's holidays (Easter Monday, Corpus Christi, Assumption of the Virgin Mary, All Saints' Day, and Saint Stephen's Day) are recognized as national holidays. In general, there are no differences in the way Polish Catholics celebrate religious holidays compared with Catholics in other European countries. In traditional Catholic communities (mainly in the rural and provincial areas of Poland), however, religious holidays and festivals have a more profound influence and meaning in people's lives.

The most popular practices connected with religious festivals are sharing of *oplatek* (Christmas wafer), blessing of food in church, blessing of a candle on Candlemas Day and lighting it at the bedside of a dying person, blessing of palms and herbs in church, and taking part in a Corpus Christi procession.

**MODE OF DRESS** In Poland there is no distinctive mode of dress among Catholic laypeople. Only in the most traditional parishes (in villages and small towns) are there culturally defined requirements that women not wear trousers during religious services. Wearing a holy medal (pendant with a picture of the Holy Mother) or a small cross or crucifix is common. Often devotees wear rosary rings on their fingers, a practice connected with Marian devotion.

**DIETARY PRACTICES** The majority of Polish Catholics observe, to some extent, the Roman Catholic Church's formal regulations regarding fasting and abstaining. In Poland religious fasting is understood as temporary restrictions in food consumption, specifically, the abstaining from eating meat (fish is allowed, however) and al-

cohol; it usually allows one meal a day. There are several kinds of fasts. The rigorous or strict fast is obligatory during the fast days of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (only one full meal per day and in reduced quantity). Poles also observe a strict fast on Christmas Eve, abstaining from eating during the day and then participating in an evening meal. Restrictions in meal consumption are also obligatory on Fridays, but less than a third of Polish Catholics observe this practice.

**RITUALS** Most Catholic rituals in Poland are connected with religious services. As in the entire Roman Catholic Church, there is a Holy Mass. In Poland recipients usually receive the Holy Communion while kneeling. Almost half of Poles participate in weekly masses, religious meetings, and services. About every year six to seven million Polish devotees participate in pilgrimages. Another common religious ritual is the procession. In modern Poland processions have retained their various regional characteristics.

Much Catholic practice in Poland may be characterized as folk religiosity, which is strongly rooted in Polish culture and focuses more on the devotee's sentiments than on Catholic doctrine. Such religiosity (especially in traditional areas) is based on ceremony and tradition rather than on conscious participation. Folk religiosity is often connected with irregular religious practice, negligence of sacraments, and lack of religious education.

As a result of the changes in the Polish sociocultural milieu since 1989, religious rituals have been in a transitory phase. Some folk customs connected with religious rituals continue to be supported, but others have been omitted. Particularly notable has been the disappearance of annual customs characterized by regionalism, folklore, and magic.

**rites of passage** In the Polish Roman Catholic Church rites of passage include baptism, first Communion, confirmation, wedding, and funeral. There are no noticeable dissimilarities with those of the church in general. Polish children are usually baptized as infants. There are also rituals of adult initiation (baptism), but these ceremonies are not highly visible. Since 1990, when religion lessons were reintroduced to Polish schools, the preparation for the sacraments of first Communion and confirmation has usually taken place in primary and secondary schools. The first Communion is typically introduced when a Pole is about 8 years

old, and confirmation is achieved when she or he is about 15 years old.

**MEMBERSHIP** Catholicism is the culturally dominant religion in Poland, and membership is mainly determined by birth. Catholic parents have a religious duty to bring up their children within the Catholic religion.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE** Many Roman Catholic clergy in Poland are regularly involved in working among the poor. There are numerous Catholic institutions and nonprofit organizations involved in charity, education, and human rights. The best-known Catholic charity organization is Caritas Polska, which seeks to help the poor and underprivileged through fund-raising, providing relief to the needy, and education. Other social justice activities are support for children, youths, and poor families; health-care; care for the aged and terminally ill; support for migrants; and helping the unemployed find jobs.

**SOCIAL ASPECTS** Marriage and family are highly respected institutions in Poland. As a result of the political and economical transformations since 1989, the Polish family has become less traditional. The number of divorces has increased, the number of new marriages has decreased, and the birthrate has been declining. Nevertheless, Catholics continue to perceive family as a source of support for individuals.

**POLITICAL IMPACT** After the fall of the Communist government in 1989, Poles strongly approved of the church's involvement in sociopolitical matters. In the early 1990s, however, the church began to present political and social pressures and demands. For example, in the parliamentary elections of 1991 the church declared its neutrality, but it soon started its own moral and political campaign. This resulted in a change in social attitudes toward the church.

Poles in general and part of the church hierarchy do not accept the church's interference in political affairs; many interpret it as compromising the state's non-religious character. According to this view, parliament spends too much time debating ideological issues, such as abortion, divorce, religious education, and the presence of Christian values in the media. Those who defend the church's political involvement view it as a necessary consequence of pulling the church into the realities of social life.

**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES** One issue that has been controversial for Polish Catholics is the place of religious education in the public school system. In 1990 the government—reacting to pressure from the Polish bishops—restored religious education in public schools. After this the Polish public's support for the church began to erode.

The church's involvement in politics is the major divisive issue among Polish Catholics. Alongside the political transformations of 1989, full diplomatic relations with the Vatican were restored. Many aspects of the concordat (agreement between the Vatican and Poland) were criticized, especially its definition of state-church relationships. For instance, it enabled priests to serve as public officials and enforced the sacredness of Catholic cemeteries (which entailed refusal of burial to non-Catholics).

**CULTURAL IMPACT** Catholic values and traits can be found in almost all spheres of Polish national culture, both historical and contemporary. For instance, in the late fifteenth century the great German artist Veit Stoss (in Polish, Wit Stwos) created renowned sculptures and carvings for Polish Catholic churches. A school of sixteenth-century Polish composers (including Mikolaj Gomolka) produced notable church music. Today Polish traditional religious art continues to affect both folk art and high art.

There are many contemporary examples of Catholic cultural influence in Poland. The most visible spheres are Catholic publishing activity, architecture, and Christian music. There are several influential publishing houses in Poland that put out books concerned primarily with Catholic religious, theological, philosophical, and cultural ideas.

An interesting example of transformations in Polish sacral architecture is the Catholic sanctuary in the village of Lichen. Originally a nineteenth-century shrine to Mary, since the 1960s it has been expanded into a complex containing religious buildings, paintings, sculptures, and monuments. The images at Lichen—which include patriotic as well as religious and moralizing motifs—reflect the folk religiosity that is embraced by the pilgrims who travel to the site. In 1994 construction began on an immense basilica (the largest church in Poland) at Lichen.

Since 1989 the Catholic Church in Poland has organized Christian music festivals and concerts, and there are a number of well-known Christian music groups.

## Other Religions

In 1989 the bill on the freedom of belief and worship was introduced in Poland. It initiated a mass registration of religious movements and communities. Until this law took effect, hardly 30 religious groups were active in the country. Today Poland has about 150 officially registered churches, religious denominations, and other religious groups; there are also more than 150 unregistered religious groups.

Orthodox Christianity (Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church), with about 500,000 members, is Poland's second-largest religion. Most Orthodox Christians in Poland are members of the Belarusian minority in the eastern part of the country and of the Ukrainian minority in southeastern districts. The largest Protestant denomination in Poland is Evangelical Augsburg (Lutheran) Church; it has about 87,000 adherents, many of whom have German ethnic roots. The next-largest churches are the United Pentecostal Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, there were more opportunities for public social activities in Poland, and many new religious movements emerged and developed. Although membership in these movements has increased, the actual number of members is not substantial.

Almost all new religious movements in Poland, even those of Eastern origin, arrived from western Europe or the United States. The best known of these are the Science of Identity Institute (also called Chaitanya Mission), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, The Family, the Bahai faith, and the Unification Church. There are also groups with a native Polish origin, including Evangelical Congregation-Jerusalem (which has as its main aim evangelization), Panmonistic Congregation (a nondogmatic and nonceremonial confession), and Association of the Native Faith (whose aim is to spread proto-Polish customs and ceremonies as well as to celebrate native holidays).

There is a sizable population (127,000) of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. Other religious groups operating in Poland include the Muslim Religious Union, the Union of Jewish Religious Communities, and the Karaite Religious Board (the Karaites are an ethnic minority of Turkic origin). There are a number of organizations related to Eastern religions, including Buddhist groups and practices that draw upon Hindu traditions.

The Jewish community in Poland is rather small (about 5,000 members), but the presence of Jews in Polish history is remarkable. In the past Poland was home to the largest concentration of Jews in Europe, and it was the most important center of Jewish culture. There were more than 3,500,000 Jews in Poland in 1939, the year that Germany began its attack on Poland and World War II began. About 100,000 Jewish soldiers were in the Polish Army at the beginning of the war; many received the highest combat distinctions. Of the nearly 9 million Jews who lived in Europe before the Holocaust, 6 million perished as a result of Nazi genocide. During the war 3 million Jews died in Poland. Most of them were Polish; there are no precise records of how many Polish Jews were deported or fled the country.

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*See Also* Vol. I: *Christianity*

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