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## From Love to Hate: The Catholic Church in Poland in the Public Opinion

**Od miłości do nienawiści. Kościół katolicki w Polsce w opinii społeczeństwa**

### • Abstract •

Poland is a country that is still considered Catholic. Faced with a series of image problems of the Catholic Church, this opinion is being increasingly revised. People, especially young people, are increasingly turning away from this centuries-old institution in search of their moral principles. The percentage of Catholics in Poland is decreasing. The author of the study decided to find out: (1) What do Poles think of the Catholic Church today?; (2) How do they evaluate the various areas of activity of the Catholic Church in Poland?; (3) Is there a predominant opinion in Polish society about the necessity of separation of state and church?; (4) What political consequences does this have? These questions are answered through desk research analysis of reports by the Public Opinion Research Centre and statistical analysis of the author's quantitative survey conducted after the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland. The survey results indicate that various areas of activity of the Catholic Church in Poland are evaluated in different ways. The respondents are most critical of the Church's influence on political authorities and the problem of solving the issue of paedophilia among the clergy. The results of the survey confirm that Law and Justice voters are the people who

### • Abstrakt •

Polska to kraj wciąż jeszcze uznawany za katolicki. W obliczu szeregu problemów wizerunkowych Kościoła katolickiego opinia ta ulega coraz większej rewizji. Ludzie, zwłaszcza młodzi, coraz częściej odwracają się od tej wielkiej na przestrzeni wieków instytucji w poszukiwaniu własnych zasad moralnych. Odsetek katolików w Polsce maleje. Autor badania postanowił sprawdzić: (1) Co Polacy myślą dziś o Kościele katolickim?; (2) Jak oceniają różne obszary działalności Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce?; (3) Czy w społeczeństwie polskim dominuje opinia o konieczności rozdziału państwa i Kościoła?; (4) Jak ma to polityczne konsekwencje? Odpowiedzi na te pytania udziela dzięki analizie *desk research* raportów Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej oraz analizie statystycznej autorskiego badania ilościowego przeprowadzonego po wyborach parlamentarnych w Polsce w 2023 roku. Wyniki badań wskazują, że różne obszary działalności Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce są oceniane w zróżnicowany sposób. Respondenci najbardziej krytycznie odnoszą się do wpływu Kościoła na władze polityczne oraz problemu z rozwiązaniem kwestii pedofilii wśród duchownych. Wyniki badania potwierdzają, że wyborcy Prawa i Sprawiedliwości to osoby blisko związane

have the highest opinion of the Catholic Church in Poland and are closely associated with Christian values.

z wartościami chrześcijańskimi i zarazem najlepiej oceniające Kościół katolicki w Polsce.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church; public opinion; political influence

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kościół katolicki; opinia publiczna; wpływ polityczny

## Introduction

Poland is a country that is historically, but still today, considered to be Catholic (Frasik, 2021). In the face of several image problems of the Catholic Church, which have come to light in recent years through media publications (Gutowski, 2021; Nowak & Obirek, 2021, p. 202), this opinion is being increasingly revised. People, especially young people, are turning away from this institution, which has been great over the centuries (Pew Research Center, 2018), in search of their moral principles. The percentage of Catholics in Poland, although remaining at a very high level, continues to decline uninterruptedly since 2005. This study aims to indicate Poles's evaluation of the Catholic Church. The author intends to achieve this goal by answering the following research questions: (1) What do Poles think of the Catholic Church today?; (2) How do they evaluate the various areas of activity of the Catholic Church in Poland?; (3) Is there a dominant opinion in Polish society about the necessity of separation of state and church?; (4) What political implications does this have?

The author seeks to answer the research questions through methodological dualism. The first part of the study analyses reports from the Public Opinion Research Centre [Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej], which were juxtaposed with the author's quantitative survey conducted on a representative group of adult Poles. This survey was conducted after the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland and is, therefore, very up-to-date. The juxtaposition of the two social research types will yield meaningful results.

## The current situation of the Catholic Church in Poland, taking into account the political context

When examining the situation of the Catholic Church in Poland over the years, it is impossible not to notice that, despite the very comfortable political situation after 2015, which the Church owed to its close relationship with the Law and Justice party

(Hall, 2017), the institution is plagued by several crises. The declining percentage of Catholics in Poland was mentioned at the outset, but reports from the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church show unequivocally that the percentage of believers who take part in religious practices is currently 28%, which is dramatically low compared to the situation a dozen years ago (Report of the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church, 2023). The situation for priestly and religious vocations is similar. Young people no longer want to spend their lives in strict rules, giving up their pleasure.

Undoubtedly, this institution is not helped by the fact that there have been a multitude of successive image crises caused by sexual abuse, political involvement, internal leadership crises, or differences in the statements of prominent hierarchs on similar topics. The same is true of the public activities of many media-savvy clergy. A crowning example of the image problem of the Church in Poland is the public activity of some of its representatives, with Father Tadeusz Rydzyk at the forefront, and religious ceremonies, although important, solemn and necessary, at which representatives of the highest organs of the state hold hands while dancing to songs during the liturgy (Radio Maryja, 2018). It exposes not only the state and the Church to ridicule, but it also makes a happening out of the Holy Mass. It is worth adding that such practices are also disliked by many representatives of the Church in Poland (Jarecki & Krzyżak, 2020, pp. 82–83).

As Janusz Mariański aptly observes: “In the last few years, the type of criticism of the Church and religion has changed, especially the presence of religious symbols in the public life space in our country. From certain political and ideological circles, demands are being made to remove crucifixes from public places, to move religion lessons from schools to parishes, to abolish the so-called church fund, to remove chaplains from the army and hospitals, to legalise homosexual unions, to finance in vitro treatments, abortions and others from state funds” (2018, p. 95). In recent years, there have been significant changes in society, especially among young people, who no longer count religion as a subjectively important matter. According to Irena Borowik, this is evident in four main areas: (1) a decline in participation in religious services and reception of Holy Communion, (2) a likening of the model of religiosity of young women, to the model previously characteristic of young men, (3) frequent protests against the activities of the Catholic Church, and (4) criticism of the Church as an institution, clergy and catechists (2016, pp. 10–12). An example illustrating the veracity of the cited claims will be the conflict over the cross, i.e., the symbol of Christianity, attacked while groups of people were praying under it in Krakowskie Przedmieście during the national mourning after the Smoleńsk catastrophe in 2010 (Fordoński, 2021, pp. 324–350). In the vast majority of scholarly opinions, the

prevailing view is that the changes involving the secularisation of social and public life in Poland will further accelerate (Mariański, 2018, pp. 93–107).

Nevertheless, the situation of the Catholic Church in Poland is very good, from an organisational point of view. The institution operates within the boundaries of the Concordat (JoL 1998, No. 51, item 318), under which the Catholic Church in Poland has very preferential tax opportunities. In addition, there are still religious lessons in Polish schools, which give room for the formation of Catholic and patriotic attitudes. It is also worth mentioning that a cross, which is a symbol of Christianity, hangs on the wall of the Plenary Hall of the Polish Sejm, so the Catholic Church is very visible in the public space, making use of its historical merits in the country.

In conclusion, despite a favourable political situation after 2015, the Church in Poland has found itself in a huge internal crisis. The institution's image problems are causing a decline in trust from the public and the emergence of increasingly strong demands for a revision of the contemporary role of the Catholic Church in Poland.

## Poles' opinion of the Catholic Church over the years

Poles' opinion of the Catholic Church has evolved over the years, which is best shown in studies and charts prepared by the Public Opinion Research Centre, which has been studying the institution for many years.

Chart 1 seems to be extremely valuable for analysing Poles' opinion of the Catholic Church over the years.

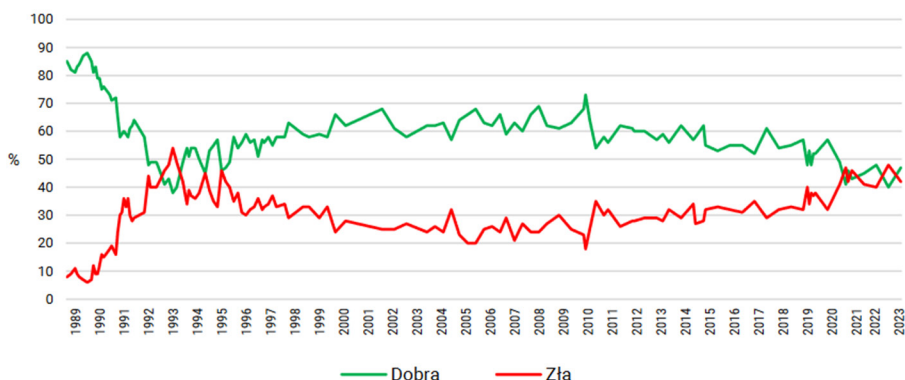


Chart 1. Opinion of the Catholic Church in Poland 1989–2023\*

\* Green – good; Red – bad.

Source: Public Opinion Research Centre, 2023, p. 22.

As can be seen from this graph, only twice after 1989 did the percentage of negative opinions outweigh positive opinions. This happened in the years 1993–1994, when it was caused by the adoption of the so-called abortion compromise (JoL 1993, No. 17, item 78) and the signing of the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland, granting a number of privileges to the institutions of the Catholic Church and the clergy (JoL 1998, No. 51, item 318), and in the years 2022–2023, for reasons already indicated in this work. Although other problems and crises of the Church have brought hesitations visible in the graph, apart from the cases indicated, the positive opinion of the Catholic Church expressed by Poles has always remained dominant.

Currently, the percentage of positive votes is only slightly higher than that of negative votes. Very significantly, the Church is positively assessed by as many as 85% of the Law and Justice voters and only 16% of the Civic Platform electorate (Public Opinion Research Centre, 2023, pp. 22–23).

While the reasons for this state of affairs existing in the past can be traced to the Church's struggle against the liberalisation of the abortion law and the gaining of the aforementioned privileges, learning more about the contemporary motivations for Poles' negative assessment of the Catholic Church may prove to be very important, given its diversity. The Public Opinion Research Centre, in August 2022, published a report that seems to answer these doubts.

Table 1. Motives and Reasons Why Poles Give Up Religious Practices\*

Motive/Reason	Percentage of indications
Lack of need (including lack of interest)	17%
Criticism of the Church as an institution (including criticism of the hierarchy)	12%
Lack of faith (do not believe)	11%
Criticism of priests, their attitudes and behaviour	10%
Interference of the Church in politics	9%
Lack of trust in the Church and priests	7%
Excessively advanced age (unable to leave home)	7%
Lack of time, feeling like a waste of time	6%
Paedophile scandals involving the clergy and their cover-up by the hierarchy	5%
COVID-19 pandemic	4%
Too much focus of the Church and clergy on money	4%
Hypocrisy and falsehood of the clergy	4%
Individual prejudice (e.g., non-admission to sacraments, expulsion from religion lessons, etc.)	4%

Motive/Reason	Percentage of indications
Coercion on the part of the family	3%
Faith without practices (individualisation of religion)	3%
Atheism	3%
The archaic and unattractive message of the Church	3%
Changing to a different religion	3%
Agnosticism	1%
Harsh criticism of religion (e.g., that it is fairy tales, nonsense, etc.)	1%
Belief in science, rationalism	1%
Another	2%

\* Percentages do not add up to 100 as more than one answer could be selected.

Source: Public Opinion Research Centre, 2022b, p. 4.

As is clear from the table above, the reasons for giving up religious practices widely vary. Although the answers “lack of need” and “lack of faith” are in the lead, there is no shortage of answers such as “criticism of the Church”, “criticism of priests” or lack of trust in them. Very significantly, the respondents are bothered more by the Church’s meddling in politics than by paedophilia among the clergy.

A slightly broader picture of this situation was given by a study by the Centre for Social Prevention, which was published in 2021. It is worth noting that this study looked at the reasons why young people abandon their faith. It clearly shows that as many as 64.8% of the respondents indicated that they were most offended by the incompatibility between what religion says and what the Church does. As many as 63% (the respondents could give more than one answer, so the results do not add up to 100%) assessed that the Church does not react properly to paedophilia in its ranks, and 43.2% of young people are struck by the Church’s involvement in politics. Very significantly, only one in two respondents intends to bring up their children in the Catholic faith (*Sondaż...*, 2021). This is a factor that should be very alarming for the people and institutions of the Catholic Church in Poland.

Yet another survey conducted in 2023 shows that the faithful do not feel that the Church is effectively holding itself accountable for its own mistakes. In the report *Church in Crisis* (Kapiszewski, Forreiter & Rogalski, 2023), 70% of the respondents answered negatively to the question: “Do you agree with the statement that the Church is doing enough to account for paedophile crimes committed by the clergy?”. The opposite view was held by 21% of the respondents. In addition, 80% of the Poles questioned believe that the Church’s finances should also be fully transparent.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the opinion about the Catholic Church in Poland has evolved significantly after 1989. It should be stated that the Church in Poland, just after the political transformation, entered the new reality with a credit of trust from society and an excellent balance of the profit and loss ratio. The Pope was John Paul II, who, together with the clergy in Poland, significantly contributed to the collapse of the socialist system and the rule of the Polish United Workers' Party. During the following 34 years, and especially after 2005 when the Pope died, the institution, thanks to image crises and many ill-considered actions, squandered all this public credit, losing its position as a universally respected guardian of morality, while losing the faithful for many different reasons, among which there is no shortage of 'sins' of the Church itself.

### **Author's quantitative study – description and methodology**

The compilation of historical and contemporary evaluations of the Catholic Church as expressed by the public should, however, be divided into smaller analytical categories. After all, for different respondents, other factors related to the Catholic Church may be of greater or lesser importance in assessing the institution indicated. To this end, the author has prepared a quantitative survey which indicates various areas of activity of the Catholic Church in Poland. These areas are evaluated by the respondents.

The quantitative research presented here was conducted using a paper survey questionnaire. The survey covered the period from December 2023 to April 2024. The survey was conducted on a nationwide, representative sample of Poles, selected in a quota and stratified manner ( $N = 1069$ ). The survey population was divided in a complete and disjointed manner into strata, which were the provinces. The quota selection procedure covered the following variables: gender, age, and place of residence (rural – urban). The percentage of each of these variables in the research sample corresponded to the percentage of each group in the total population, as expressed in the annual publications of the Central Statistical Office (Statistics Poland). In this study, the author used the most recent data available at the time, i.e., for the year 2022. The research was carried out using the method of direct questionnaire interviews on an availability sample.

The sample consisted of 561 women (52.5%) and 508 men (47.5%). Crucial to this study, however, in the context of this article, was the age structure. This was as follows: 93 (8.7%) were in the 18–24 age bracket, 173 (16.2%) were in the 25–34 age bracket, 212 (19.8%) respondents were in the 35–44 age bracket, 178 (16.7%)

respondents were in the 45–54 age bracket, 159 (14.9%) respondents were in the 55–64 age bracket, and 254 (23.8%) respondents were voters aged 65 and over.

The sample included 34.5% of Law and Justice voters, 29.1% of Civic Coalition voters, 17.6% of Third Way voters, 9.9% of New Left supporters, and 7.6% of Confederation voters.

## Presentation and analysis of the survey results

The analysis of the results of the survey should begin with an indication of the respondents' assessment of various areas of activity of the Catholic Church in Poland. Among such areas the author distinguished: helping those in need, resolving social conflicts, influencing political authorities, solving problems of paedophilia among the clergy, contact with the faithful, being a moral authority. Each of these activities of the Catholic Church in Poland was assessed on a five-point scale from 'strongly positive' to 'strongly negative'. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Poles' Assessment of the Catholic Church Activities (in percentage terms)

Percentage indications ► ▼ Action	Definitely positive	Positive	Neither positively nor negatively	Negative	Definitely negative
Helping those in need	17.2%	38.0%	29.7%	9.7%	5.4%
Resolving social conflicts	11.9%	21.7%	40.0%	16.7%	9.7%
Influence on political authorities	6.5%	13.8%	35.4%	20.0%	24.3%
Tackling paedophilia among the clergy	4.0%	10.3%	25.0%	22.5%	37.8%
Contact with the faithful	12.5%	29.3%	40.8%	9.3%	8.1%
Being a moral authority	10.8%	19.6%	34.8%	15.2%	19.4%

Source: Author's own study.

An analysis of the evaluation of the Catholic Church activities clearly shows that helping the needy and contact with the faithful are rated highest. At the opposite end of the spectrum are tackling paedophilia among the clergy, influence on political authorities, and the function of moral authority. The rating of the Catholic Church activity in the electorates of the various political parties in the 2023 parliamentary elections is shown in Chart 2.

From the chart presented, it is clear that the Law and Justice electorate rates the overall performance of the Catholic Church highest. On the other hand, there



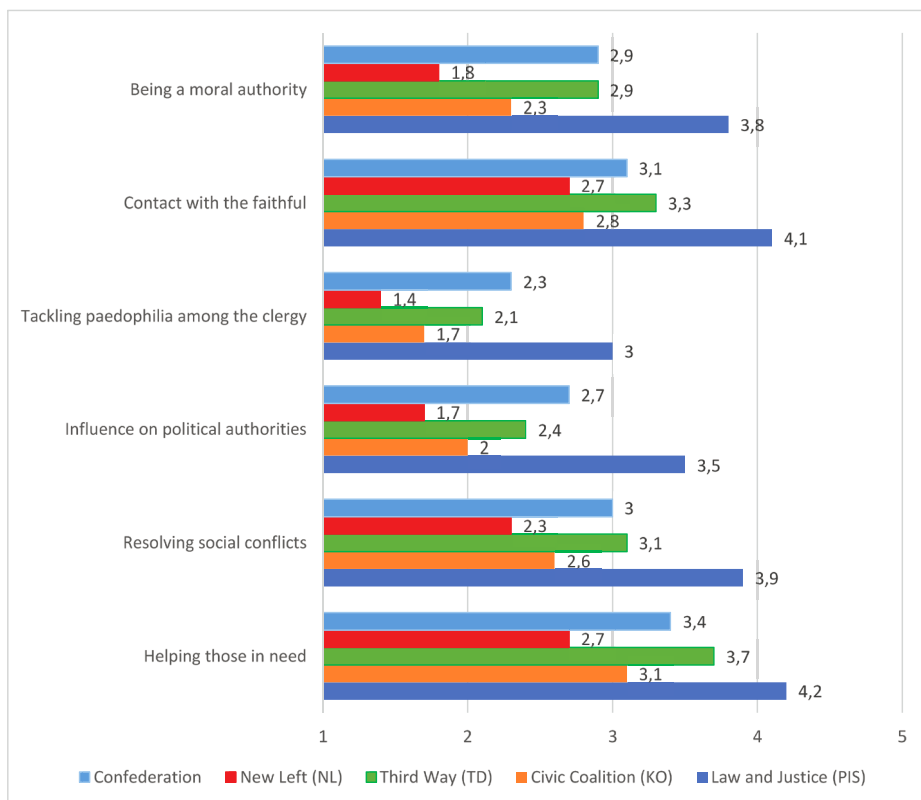


Chart 2. Assessment of the Activity of the Catholic Church in Poland in the Electorates of Political Parties in the 2023 Parliamentary Elections

Source: Author's own study.

are voters of the New Left who are most critical of the activities of this institution, rating them very low. The assessment of the Church's influence on public authorities is very interesting. Law and Justice voters rate this activity highly, in contrast to the electorates of other parties. The lowest assessment is among voters of the Civic Coalition and the New Left.

In the survey presented here, two contradictory statements were also assessed: (1) The state should be guided by the principle of separation of state and church, and (2) The state should adhere to Christian values, Catholicism should be the state religion. The respondents rated these using a five-point scale, where "1" meant "definitely (1)" and "5" meant "definitely (2)". The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Poles' Assessment of the Principle of Separation of State and Church (in percentage terms)

Statement (1)	Definitely (1)	Rather (1)	Difficult to say	Rather (2)	Definitely (2)	Statement (2)
The State should be guided by the principle of separation of state and church	40.5%	16.6%	16.4%	12.1%	14.5%	The state should adhere to Christian values, Catholicism should be the state religion

Source: Author's own study.

The above table shows that as many as 57.1% of the respondents believe that the state should be guided by the principle of separation of state and church. Only 26.6% of the respondents are of the opposite opinion. It is worth noting that as many as 40.5% of the respondents are strongly in favour of the separation of state and church.

Since previous reports by the Public Opinion Research Centre dealing with the characteristics of the electorates of the largest political parties in Poland leave no illusions – the percentage of Law and Justice voters is highest precisely among religious people, closely related to Christian values and the Catholic religion (Public Opinion Research Centre, 2022a), it is worth comparing the results of this analysis with the electoral preferences expressed in the 2023 parliamentary elections. The correlation of these two factors is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Assessment of the Principle of Separation of State and Church in Poland in the Electorate of Political Parties in the 2023 Parliamentary Elections

Percentage indications ► ▼ Action	Law and Justice (PiS)	Civic Coalition (KO)	Third Way (TD)	New Left (NL)	Confederation
Definitely (1)	11.8%	<b>64.9%</b>	<b>36.8%</b>	<b>84.8%</b>	<b>36.6%</b>
Rather (1)	15.3%	17.3%	<b>26.4%</b>	5.4%	<b>18.3%</b>
Difficult to say	15.0%	10.0%	17.8%	3.3%	15.5%
Rather (2)	<b>23.0%</b>	4.8%	9.8%	1.1%	14.1%
Definitely (2)	<b>34.9%</b>	3.0%	9.2%	5.4%	15.5%

Source: Author's own study.

The results of the analysis clearly show that the voters of Law and Justice are those who most postulate the Catholic nature of the Polish state. As many as 57.9% of the voters of Jarosław Kaczyński's party believe that the state should adhere to Christian values and that Catholicism should be the state religion. They are, however, a minority group, as the electorates of other political parties clearly indicate that they are in favour of the separation of state and church. The analysis conducted indicates that a revision of the role and place of the Catholic Church in the state and society is likely to take place in the coming years.

## Summary

The overall analysis carried out in this article yields several scientifically relevant conclusions. The role of the Catholic Church in the state and society is subject to permanent evolution. This institution, tarnished in recent years by a series of crises and image problems, has found itself in retreat with the increasing secularisation of Poles. Political parties, but also whole segments of society, are raising issues that for many years seemed impossible. There are calls to remove crucifixes in offices, or calls to remove or restrict religious lessons in schools, or even to denounce the Concordat.

Having carried out the analysis as a whole, it should be pointed out that Poles negatively assess most of the actions taken by the Catholic Church, with the most negative assessment of the solution to the problem of paedophilia among the clergy and the influence of this institution on political authorities. The overall assessment of the Catholic Church in Polish society should be regarded as negative, although a large segment of the electorate, the voters of the Law and Justice, breaks out of this assessment. In addition, the vast majority of society believes that it is necessary to actually separate the state and the church. This is the opinion of the majority of the electorates of all political parties in Poland, except for the voters of the Law and Justice. Those who vote for Jarosław Kaczyński's party mostly express the opinion that the state should respect Christian values and that Catholicism should be the state religion.

The indicated evolution of the assessment of the Catholic Church in Poland also has political consequences. The critical assessment of the Catholic Church necessitates a revision of its place and role in the state, and thus also of the values and axiological system prevailing in Poland. The coming years will probably bring an answer to the question of the new place of the Catholic Church in Poland.

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