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ARTYKUŁY

Agnieszka Kościańska
akoscianska@uw.edu.pl
Uniwersytet Warszawski/University of Oxford

Agnieszka Kosiorowska
a.kosiorowska@student.uw.edu.pl
Uniwersytet Warszawski

Natalia Pomian
n.pomian@student.uw.edu.pl
Uniwersytet Warszawski

"A WOMAN SHOULD FOLLOW HER OWN CONSCIENCE": UNDERSTANDING CATHOLIC INVOLVEMENT IN DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE ABORTION BAN IN POLAND

„Kobieta powinna decydować w swoim sumieniu" – o katolickimi zaangażowaniu w protesty przeciwko zakazowi aborcji w Polsce

Abstract: In October 2020, a ruling by Poland's Constitutional Tribunal effectively ending legal abortion incited mass protests across the country. Despite the demonstrations being directed at both the government and the Catholic Church, many devout Catholics joined the protests against the Church's opposition to family planning being enacted through state-imposed prohibition.

Drawing on ongoing archival and ethnographic research, in this paper we address a number of issues relating to Catholicism and abortion: how it is possible that so many Catholics decided to take part in pro-choice marches openly opposing official Catholic teaching on birth control? What were their motivations?

Keywords: abortion, Poland, Catholicism, protest

Streszczenie: W październiku 2020 roku wyrok Trybunału Konstytucyjnego, znacząco ograniczający możliwość wykonywania legalnej aborcji w Polsce, wywołał masowe protesty w całym kraju. Do demonstracji przyłączyło się wielu pobożnych katolików, mimo że były one skierowane nie tylko przeciwko rządowi, ale i Kościołowi katolickiemu, popierającemu zmiany w prawie. Odpowiadają one bowiem jego oficjalnemu stanowisku wobec planowania rodziny.

Bazując na badaniach archiwalnych i etnograficznych, w poniższej pracy przyglądamy się szeregowi kwestii związanych z katolicyzmem i aborcją: jak to możliwe, że tak wiele katoliczek zdecydowało się wziąć udział w protestach otwarcie sprzeciwiających się katolickiej nauce na temat kontroli urodzeń? Jakie były ich motywacje?

Słowa kluczowe: aborcja, Polska, katolicyzm, protest

In October 2020, a ruling by Poland's Constitutional Tribunal effectively ending legal abortion incited mass protests across the country. Despite the surge of new Covid-19 cases, protests were not only organized in major Polish cities, but also in small towns, even rural areas. Although the demonstrations were directed at both the government and the Catholic Church (Motak, Krotofil, Wójciak 2021), and despite the political polarisation of Polish society, many devout Catholics joined the demonstrations to protest against the Church's opposition to family planning being enacted through state-imposed prohibition. Drawing on our ethnographic research among the protesters and a theoretical framework from the anthropology of reproduction, in this article we address a set of questions about Catholicism and reproductive rights in Poland: how it is possible that so many Catholics

decided to take part in pro-choice marches openly opposing official Catholic teaching on birth control? What were their motivations? And – finally – what is the relationship between the pandemic and Catholics' approach to reproductive rights? We also reflect on ethnography under the pandemic: how can engaged ethnographic research be carried out safely? How can ethnography be conducted under Covid-19 restrictions? And how can it help us understand the issue of reproductive rights in Poland?

Researching reproductive rights during the pandemic

The research presented here was conducted during an unusual time: firstly, because of the outbreak of Covid-19, which surprised us at the beginning of our work, and secondly because of the pro-choice protests, which began a few months later. Due to the pandemic we could not meet our research participants in person, having no choice but to conduct interviews via facetime platforms. Initially, we were afraid this would deprive ethnography of its most valuable aspect – human to human contact. How could we establish a relationship of trust with a person who could only see us on the screen of their computer? How could we understand the meaning of our interlocutors' stories, if we missed their body language and could not see tears in their eyes? What is more, we were afraid some groups, such as elderly people who tend to be less familiar with online tools, would be excluded from our research.

Although there was certainly some truth to these concerns, we soon realized that there were also benefits to conducting research during the pandemic. When our interviewees were locked down in their homes, we were able to discover their feelings about this and how the experience influenced their opinions. Thanks to technology, distances shrank and we were able to reach some interlocutors we may not have done in other circumstances. Despite our initial concerns, we managed to interview people of all ages.

When the protests began, our team took an active part in discussions on social media, which contributed to our research and helped us contact interlocutors. As we all took an active part in the demonstrations, our ethnography

was influenced by our own involvement. We attended demonstrations and manifested our support through our profile pictures on Facebook or placing protest signs in our windows. We believe that abortion should be legal and accessible for every person no matter their economic situation. Yet, the backgrounds of our research team members vary from being raised in a non-religious family with strong anticlerical views to being a former active Catholic. This situation reflects the diversity and multiplicity of attitudes present in Polish society. This project has therefore been based on the principles of engaged and public anthropology (Lassiter 2005, Bennett 1996). In a landscape of political polarization, this research aims to reveal the diversity of Catholic approaches towards birth control.

Reproductive rights in Poland: understanding legal regulations and public debates in a Catholic country

In Poland, where the overwhelming majority of citizens identify as and declare themselves to be Catholic, public debate about abortion is strongly influenced by the views of the Catholic Church. The present-day Catholic approach to birth control has been formulated over the course of the 20th century. In 1930, Pope Pius XI promulgated the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, in which he underlined the sanctity of marriage and made clear statements on birth control and abortion: all forms of artificial contraception were prohibited to Catholics, and abortion was forbidden under all circumstances. This included when pregnancy constituted a threat to the health or life of the mother:

> As to the 'medical and therapeutic indication' […] however much we may pity the mother whose health and even life is gravely imperilled in the performance of the duty allotted to her by nature, nevertheless what could ever be a sufficient reason for excusing in any way the direct murder of the innocent? (*Pius XI, paragraph 64, p. 13*)

The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was cited to support the Pope's uncompromising position.

The stance of the Catholic Church on abortion was sustained by the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. The document, promulgated by Pope Paul VI stated that "all direct abortions, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children" (Paul VI, paragraph 13, p. 4).

John Paul II, whose long pontificate lasted from 1978 until 2005, firmly supported *Humanae Vitae*. His pontificate was characterised by a strong anti-abortion message. Greatly influenced by his friend Wanda Półtawska, a Polish Catholic doctor (Kościańska 2018, 2021a), John Paul II referred to abortion as the mass murder of the unborn and supported radical pro-life activism.

At the same time, it is important to stress that the Catholic approach to birth control has never been fully homogeneous. Catholics, both within the clergy and the laity, have contested official teachings. Theologians have attempted to challenge official approaches, especially during the 1960s, when strong critical voices pressed John XXIII to establish a special commission to consider how to combine Catholicism with birth control. When his successor Paul VI disregarded its recommendations and promulgated the *Humanae Vitae* encyclical, many Catholics, priests, bishops, and followers protested. In accordance with the considerations of the Second Vatican Council, many theologians and lay Catholics emphasised that Catholic couples should follow their own conscience in decisions about fertility and family planning (Dupont 2014, Harris 2018a, 2018b, Herzog 2005, Tentler 2004, 2007). These discussions also took place in Poland, where many Catholics either openly protested against the strict regulations or simply ignored them (Kościanska 2018, 2021a).

At various historical moments of the 20th and early 21st centuries, Polish reproductive policies have been influenced by the Holy See. After the country regained its independence following the First World War, a bill enacted in 1932 banned abortion except in two situations: if the pregnancy was the result of a crime or if it constituted a threat to the woman's health. This almost entire ban on abortion continued through the first years of state socialism, only being liberalised after the death of Stalin. The law

of 1956 made abortion legal for social and economic reasons, and gradually the procedure became accessible on demand. After state socialism, abortion once more became subject to debate, with some conservative Catholic circles demanding a total ban, and feminist activists attempting to keep the 1956 law in place. The debate resulted in the so-called "abortion compromise" of 1993, in which the procedure was criminalized except in three cases. First, if the woman's health or life was endangered. Second, if prenatal testing suggested a high probability of the foetus being severely and irreversibly deformed or the child would be born with an incurable, life-threatening disease. Third, if the pregnancy was the result of a crime, such as rape or incest. Abortion for social or economic reasons was no longer legal. Despite controversies surrounding the "abortion compromise", and several attempts to change the law, it remained unchanged until 2020. On the 22nd of October, 2020, a constitutional tribunal made a ruling that imposed further restrictions: pregnancy termination is no longer permitted when the foetus is suspected of being deformed. Since almost all legal procedures prior to the ruling were performed under this premise, the tribunal's decision effectively ended legal abortion in Poland.

All changes in Polish abortion law have been preceded by heated public debate, and such debates have taken place when the future shape of the state has been indeterminate. The debate that took place in the years 1930-1932 coincided with defining the Polish state after independence. The years 1955-1956, when the next heated public discussion about abortion took place, were deciding moments for the shape of state socialism after Stalinism. Interest in abortion was then renewed in the years 1989-1993, when the Polish state had to be redefined after socialism. Finally, the current time of increased interest in the abortion issue, which can be traced to a stricter abortion law being unsuccessfully proposed in 2016, is also a moment of redefining Poland under the right-wing Law and Justice government that came to power in 2015 (on abortion and reproductive policies in Poland see for example E. Zielińska 2000, Mishtal 2015, 2017, Verdery 1996: 61-82, Ignaciuk 2019, Fidelis 2010: 170-202, Holc 2004, Fuszara 1991, Chełstowska 2011).

Theoretical inspirations: religion and reproduction

Restrictions in access to abortion introduced in Poland immediately after communism attracted a lot of feminist attention, with scholars claiming the Polish situation clearly showed that reproductive rights and control over women's bodies are central to not only various forms of modern statehood and nationalism but to the processes of transition from socialism to postsocialism (Verdery 1996: 61-82, Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b, Graff 2001, Krajewska 2021, for an overview see Mishtal 2015: 11-12).

In descriptions of the public debates about abortion and other sexuality and reproduction related issues in Poland, it is often suggested that the opponents are organised around two camps divided by strong ideological boundaries: Catholic versus non-Catholic (Fassin 2011, Kościańska 2021b, Pine and Haukanes 2021). However, numerous sociological and ethnographic studies have demonstrated that the issue of Catholicism in Poland is highly complex. Although the current radical right government is highly influenced by the Church, and its most conservative bishops in particular, the Polish people do not necessarily follow their politicians in regard to Catholicism. Furthermore, Polish Catholicism is diverse and public involvement in faith has been historically variable. During the 1970s, when the Church was particularly strong and almost 90 percent of Polish people attended Sunday mass on a weekly basis, around half a million abortions were performed each year. Although over 90 percent of the Polish people are Catholics today (CBOS 2020), their faith is extremely selective, even syncretic (Borowik and Doktór 2001). Only around 15 percent use birth control methods approved by the Church (Izdebski 2012: 190, 253) and only 22 percent believe that Catholic morality is "the best and sufficient" (CBOS 2012: 23). Finally, Poland has a very low fertility rate (Mishtal 2015: 147), which testifies to a far lower observance of Catholic rules than one might expect.

In her recent work, Joanna Mishtal has argued that these discrepancies could be explained by what she terms unofficial biopolitics, and that the situation in Poland "is not merely another case of Foucauldian biopolitics as a secular rationality of a liberal democracy promoted in the name

of optimizing the state, but rather the nature of Polish biopolitics lies in its religious and moral governance promoted in the name of Catholic-nationalist state-building" (Mishtal 2015: 14). Yet, this biopolitical project is "not fully successful" as "women routinely resist the church's strictures through various unsanctioned, individualized practices" (14). In her ethnographically rich study, Mishtal shows the multiple ways in which women counteract the power of both the Church and the state in order to take control over their bodies and reproductive choices. With our ethnographic perspective we intend to detail an even more nuanced picture, by analysing the complex positions taken by Catholic women. We build on Mishtal's "unofficial biopolitics", as well as the work of scholars who theorize the concept of women's agency in religious contexts and argue that being religious and following religious rules may not necessarily preclude being an agentic subject. At times being deeply religious may increase a woman's capacity to change, including re-define what a religion means, and make moral decisions with her own conscience (Burke 2012, Klassen 2001, Kościańska 2009, Leszczyńska and K. Zielińska 2016, Mack 2003, Mahmood 2001). In what follows, we attempt to understand how to combine being Catholic with not only being pro-choice, but to actively express one's view by attending anti-Church demonstrations.

Pro-choice protests in Poland: 2016-2020

The abortion debate recommenced most recently in October 2016, when the Polish Parliament discussed a citizen's bill for an almost total abortion ban (Korolczuk 2016a). In response, the Black Protests brought over 100,000 people onto the streets of Polish cities and in a few other countries (Chmielewska, Druciak, Przybysz 2017), successfully persuading members of parliament to reject the bill. As sociologist Elżbieta Korolczuk (2016b) has shown, the success of this social mobilization resulted from several factors. The major factor was the change of political context: the conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) coming to power after the parliamentary elections in 2015 deepened already existing social and political divisions

and limited public dialogue. The reach of the protests was influenced by "the shift of the horizon of what was possible" (33). Social polarization contributed to the fact that the conflict over abortion was a *de facto* conflict with PiS. Korolczuk claims the Black Protest was a symptom of deeper social changes. This has been borne out over the following years, such as in 2018, when further protests took place in response to the Episcopal Conference declaring their full support for plans to delegalize abortion for embryopathological reasons (Rytel-Andrianik 2018). The protestors not only voiced strong opposition to the ruling party, but also to the Catholic Church (Kubisa, Rakowska 2018). Despite the protestors' success, the fight for women's reproductive rights was far from over. Representatives of PiS filed a motion to the Constitutional Tribunal arguing that abortions due to foetal defects are eugenic practices and therefore inconsistent with the constitutional principle of respecting and protecting human dignity (*Wniosek o stwierdzenie…*). The ruling, issued on 22nd October 2020, upheld this claim and made abortion due to foetal genetic defects illegal. Termination is now legal in Poland in only two situations: when the life or health of the mother is at risk and when the pregnancy results from a criminal act.

Polish women, taught by the experience of previous years, swiftly mobilized, and spontaneous demonstrations began in Polish cities on the day of the Constitutional Tribunal's announcement. From the very beginning, churches became important places of protest, with activists interrupting mass to express their opposition and covering the walls of many church buildings with slogans. Thus, many nationalists, wishing to protect churches and religion, opposed the protest. Over the following weeks, Poland became divided between supporters and opponents of tightening the abortion law. Pro-choice activists had by far the greater social support: slogans full of criticism, sharp wit and profanities were shouted by hundreds of thousands of women and supporting men across the whole country. Despite these protests originating in response to restrictions of the abortion law, criticism of PiS and the Catholic Church quickly began to prevail, somewhat drowning out the original demands.

What is particularly unique about this movement is its scale. While the fact that hundreds of thousands of people gathered for protests in Warsaw, Kraków

and Poznań is unsurprising, the mobilization witnessed in smaller towns was extraordinary (Pitoń 2020). Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2019), writing about the protests of 2016, assumed that this was an example of an emerging "feminism of the people". Nevertheless, taking into account the multiplicity of attitudes and opinions among protest participants, it is difficult to agree with this thesis. One of our interviewees – Renata – immediately described herself as an anti-feminist. Thus, feminist postulates were not important for some participants. What appeared to more unite the protestors was a set of goals in direct opposition to PiS policy and the Catholic Church (Korolczuk 2016a, 2016b).

Open and broad criticism of the Catholic Church emerged in 2019 following the distribution of a documentary film entitled *Tylko nie mów nikomu* (*Tell no one*). Independently produced by the brothers, Tomasz and Marek Sekielski, *Tell No One* documents paedophilia within the Polish Catholic Church, with victims sharing their stories about being abused by priests and their powerlessness against the ecclesiastical hierarchy when seeking justice. This discussion heightened anger and frustration among the protesters. Some of our interlocutors angrily demanded how priests could speak about abortion being wrong when the hierarchy attempted to cover up accusations of paedophilia. For many, the Church has lost its authority as a moral guide: as Mirosława stated, "the priests are incompetent people about women and families. They oppress Catholic society like the Pharisees in the Old Testament". Also, the role of the pandemic in increased criticism of both PiS policy and the Catholic Church cannot be ignored. As some of our interlocutors emphasized, social isolation and missing Sunday Mass provided opportunities for some to distance themselves from the Catholic Church and be more reflective about their faith.

Catholic women confronting the pro-choice protests

The in-depth ethnographic interviews on which this article is based were conducted between May 2020 and February 2021. Despite the limitations caused by the pandemic, we managed to conduct 55 interviews with Catholics, 21 of these after the Tribunal's ruling, an important topic in our conversations.

All the interviews we conducted touched upon topics relating to religiosity, upbringing, sex education, marriage, and reproduction. Thus, we were able to trace the biographies of people who differed from each other in social status, education and place of residence. Their stories reveal a wide variety of attitudes towards the Catholic Church, politics and, above all, the issue of reproductive rights. In the following section, we present 5 case studies of women who told us about their lives and their attitude to the pro-choice protests. Their individual narratives enable us to exhibit various faces of Catholicism in Poland, which have proved more diverse than may have been expected.

Mirosława

Mirosława is a 69-year-old Catholic woman. Despite being an engineer by education, she decided to work as a catechist, teaching Catholicism to children. She was born in one of the largest cities in Poland to the family of a first generation factory worker. As her faith had always been an important part of her life, Mirosława took Church guidance seriously. She distinguishes between the rules of faith and the rules of the Church. The former she understands as arising directly from the teachings of Jesus Christ, the second from doctrine established over the centuries. Thanks to this distinction, Mirosława, and other interlocutors, can question Church principles by pointing out that they do not always directly correspond to the teachings of Jesus. This approach allows them to negotiate and justify daily behaviours, which may at times diverge from the rules of the Church but not necessarily from the rules of faith.

As a teenager, Mirosława was interested in fertility issues. As she recalled, she was lucky with the catechists who taught her, especially in high school, when she attended religious classes at a church.[1] Her priest was also

[1] The Polish constitution of 1921 introduced compulsory religious lessons in schools. This was confirmed in the 1925 concordat. After World War II, the communist state denounced the concordat, but recognized the validity of the 1921 constitution. Therefore, religion was only definitively removed from schools in 1961. Voluntary lessons were then provided in church rooms with people attending in their free time. Religion returned to schools in 1990, where it is funded on the same terms as other subjects, with catechists receiving a regular salary.

devoted to teaching about fertility, even inviting a pro-life activist to give a guest lecture. The activist was the aforementioned friend of John Paul II, Wanda Półtawska, who gave a talk on natural family planning – which Mirosława would use as a main method of birth control from that time – and provided a number of recommendations on how to care for one's reproductive health. Although Catholic thinking was important to Mirosława, even as a teenager she was critical of Church teachings: she could not agree when her catechist claimed that nature should decide who survived when pregnancy threatened a woman's life, the baby or the mother.

Mirosława married a man who shared her values when finishing her degree, and together they raised three children in the Catholic faith. Despite experiencing the double burden of being professionally active and responsible for all the housework, Mirosława always found time to visit a church. After a retreat in her parish she overheard someone on a bus stating that catechesis classes could be conducted by secular people. This idea developed in her mind and a year later she signed up for a preparatory course. She not only became a catechist to develop her own spirituality, but also to show her children that "a good material life and such a lavish celebration of religious, national and personal holidays is not all that matters, the spirituality must be a core". Between 1980 and 1989, she conducted catechesis on Saturdays and Sundays and, after the reintroduction of religion to schools, worked, with a short break, in elementary school and high school until her retirement. The topic that most interested young people of school age was, of course, sexuality. However, she did not intend to clearly adhere to the principles laid down in the catechism: "I kept telling them that we had to look at what science was achieving in this matter and hope that the Church would also turn to science, especially since we had this "*Fides et ratio*"[2] and we have to try to complement all of this".

This common-sense approach to Church principles also manifests in other aspects of Mirosława's life. She does not like the sacrament of confession, which at times she believes is merely an empty exchange of well-worn formulas. Neither does she recognize the thoughtless, perfunctory

[2] Encyclical of John Paul II in which he deliberated about the relation between faith and reason, and concluded that they were complementary.

"patting of prayer". Although using natural fertility control methods herself, she does not condemn the use of contraceptives:

> The Catholicization of reproduction affects women and families, is contrary to the fertility cycle, and in the age of contraceptives that do not kill a fertilized egg, it is even cruel, destroying the peace of many marriages and families. We have to take advantage of the achievements of science, enjoy the relationship and family without the stress that the hierarchs impose, and our rulers pick up and try to make Poland a Catholic state and impose one cruel law on all citizens by force.

Mirosława does not agree with the policy pursued by the Law and Justice Party. Rather than prohibiting abortion, they should focus on helping children with disabilities and single mothers, and on making sure that men do not leave their families. She believes that heroism can only be expected of oneself, not of others, and that breaking the "compromise" was like opening Pandora's box: Mirosława is afraid that if (or, as she put it, when) Law and Justice loses in the next elections, it will lead to more in-depth liberalization of the law than the earlier "compromise". This would be against her own morality: she believes that reckless abortions, taken on a "whim", should not be legal. Mirosława claimed that the compromise controlled both women and men, who are mutually responsible for unwanted pregnancies.

Although she does not support abortion on demand and dislikes the profanities used during the protests – "I think that this noise and screams are unnecessary, the marches should be silent marches, with banners, but not screams" – Mirosława understands the anger of the younger generation, who want to decide about their own bodies and fertility management. She is also outraged that the ruling party and Church hierarchies are attempting to make Poland a confessional state, because she is aware that not everyone is a Catholic. While abortion is a sin for Catholics, it is probably not for non-believers. Thus, she claims that freedom of choice is a necessity.

Teresa

Although Mirosława and Teresa are sisters, the life trajectory of 66-year-old Teresa, the younger sister, is significantly different. Teresa considered herself to be a Catholic for most of her life, but always took an interest in other religions to ensure that she was Catholic by choice, not by habit. During the times of the Solidarity movement and political transformation she felt encouraged "to stay in the Church, which was very open and religious", although she always knew the Church was not keeping up with the world. Change arrived with the increasing activity of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a priest strongly involved in politics and business, whose conservative Radio *Maryja* and Television *Trwam* shape the views of many elderly people in the country (Krzemiński 2017). Thus, Teresa decided that if she remained religious she would be legitimizing something she could not agree with. As a woman of science associated with academia all her life, reason was always important to Teresa. Therefore, she identifies herself as a Christian, not a Catholic. However, the ethical and moral principles relating to faith are still an important point of reference for her, which is why she is involved in an organization relating to the idea of an open Church.

Teresa also followed her own path when it came to relationships. She met her first husband in her 30's, and they cohabited before the wedding, which was rare and to some extent scandalous at that time. When they married, the concordat between the state and Church enabling the recognition of Church marriages by the state had yet to be signed. Therefore, they decided to have a civil marriage first and a church wedding after a few months, as they did not want to rush and settle everything at once. However, Teresa very quickly realized the relationship had no future and decided to get a divorce. She met her second husband sometime later. He had already been married and had children. Initially, she felt that if they could not get married in church, then why bother. Over time, however, she began to see a number of benefits from formalizing the relationship. She felt social pressure from others, including her sister Mirosława, who said it was a scandal to cohabit without getting married, and her parents,

who refused to meet her partner. Teresa also felt it would be better for her partner's children and their mother if they were aware this was not just an affair and she wanted to become part of their father's life. Therefore, formalization of the relationship was a testimony to Teresa taking the relationship seriously. Her second husband asked if she would like his marriage annulled so that they could marry in a church. Although Teresa had always secretly desired this, she thought it unfair to the children to pretend their parents' marriage had never happened, and pretending the first marriage had not taken place to meet social demands was unacceptable: in fact, she considered this an even more serious sin than living without the Sacrament of Matrimony.

As can be seen, Teresa never adhered to social norms but to her own conscience. The same attitude is evident in her approach to the issue of abortion. Until she was 35 to 40-years-old she thought of abortion as the killing of a baby, but was always supportive of friends who underwent the procedure. She even said that perhaps if she had become pregnant at a young age she would have considered termination. This discrepancy between her moral principles and daily choices is a common theme in discussions about abortion. As a biologist, Teresa believes that the combination of two cells, the zygote, is already a human being. Therefore, she understands the Catholic recognition of life at conception. However, she points out that, as not everyone is Catholic, it is wrong to impose Catholic rules on nonbelievers. On the other hand, Teresa is also aware there are mutations in nature, some successful, others not, and, as without them there would be no evolution, their presence is constantly inscribed in human nature.

Therefore, Teresa believes the abortion issue cannot be analysed solely through either a biological or an ethical prism. Life is far more complicated. She cannot imagine a woman devoting all her energy to maintaining a pregnancy that is doomed to failure. She believes this is why people were given free will: to use it and follow their own conscience. Teresa claims that if women had a choice – abortion on demand – "they would think 10 times before doing something. And when they have no choice, they do anything in panic and they may regret it later". Unlike many of her

peers, she wholeheartedly supports the demands of the Women's Strike and its form: "I absolutely accept vulgarity, we were previously polite. Often in conversations, letters, e-mails, or jokes, I just add at the end that we were previously polite". She believes with all her heart that a change of law leading to the full legalisation of abortion is possible with mass social mobilization, as observed during the protests. She compared the Women's Strike to other significant demonstrations in Poland's recent history: the Solidarity strikes of 1980, and the demonstrations that led to the political transformations of 1989. Despite this, she did not directly participate in the protests, explaining that she is "too old and I'm a coward in this case". Teresa compared police brutality, observed during the recent demonstrations, to the communist militia crushing protests under state socialism. While this made her too afraid to place herself in such a dangerous situation, she expressed her support in everyday gestures, such as buying cakes in support of the Women's Strike. She would have placed a banner with a lightning symbol or eight stars in her window, but as she lives on the ground floor, was afraid someone might retaliate. Teresa strongly believes in the agency of the young generation, as demonstrated by how our conversation concluded: "spring will be ours!"

Julia

Julia is a 51-year-old shop assistant living in Wroclaw. She comes from a medium-sized town in Silesia, and a large working-class family she describes as a "typical Catholic family". By this she means they were believers and received all the sacraments, but "only for appearances, because everybody does that, because that's the tradition". She sees herself as different from this model. She started, but never managed to complete, a university education. She is married and a mother of two.

The way Julia chose to narrate her life in the interview revolved around a conflict between the need to obey the rules of her religion, and the idea that one should follow one's own conscience. Whenever she secretly skipped Mass as a child, spending the money given to her for the

church collection on going to the cinema, she was afraid she would go to hell. This fear stayed with her through to adulthood, when she cohabited with a partner for some years and used contraception. Even experimenting with new sexual positions made her feel so guilty she needed to drink alcohol to relax. She believed that as a Catholic, she should not cherry-pick rules she wanted to obey and ignore others. But there was the Church, and there was life: she believed the things she did could not be all that bad.

In 2016, when some of her friends attended the Black Protest, Julia did not. Despite agreeing with the cause, she felt this would have caused her to feel conflict and remorse. But, in 2020, something changed. Perhaps, Julia suggests, it was the pandemic, and the fact she was spending more time on social media. "Now it's the time, for me now it's the time when one says 'I'm watching. I'm watching to see who you are'," she says about a Church that she appears to blame for her lifelong conflict:

> When I was feeling bad about the fact that as a believer I attend all these marches and support abortion, somebody told me that the Church has abandoned us. That people like myself... that I was abandoned. [...] Because I really thought about it a million times and it really touches a raw nerve, and the Church left me alone with all this. This way or that way, and if you don't like it – get out. And maybe this is why I say to myself: 'Too bad, hell it is'.

Julia's stance on the abortion law also changed. She described the 1993 law with irony:

> It was a very good compromise, because I didn't have to think about it as a Catholic. That's just how it was, right? I didn't have to think about my stance in this matter, because that's just how it was. And this was very comfortable.

However, Julia stated she would now support unlimited access to abortion: "I think that God gave us free will [...] for us to use. It's not true that if we give free access to abortion people will treat it as contraception."

Julia gave our team little space to structure the interview, she simply told us her story. She appeared to have thought about it many times and knew how she was going to present her narrative: as a story of internal evolution, of overcoming her fear of hell, and of learning to trust her own moral judgement rather than that of the Church, culminating in her participation in the Women's Strike:

> I remember walking… I was going to meet the girls [...] and I was just walking from the place where I left my car. And I was just walking and crying. … I was walking and I was crying, because I felt something I hadn't felt since I was a teenager. I was really walking and crying because I saw these young people and I was thinking 'How wonderful they are!'. Some people say I mother young people, but I think they cannot be abandoned, they cannot! They are so incredible! It's not regret that I'm not young anymore, I just saw this glow in them and I think it's wonderful that they fight for something that is worth fighting for. [...] I just think that this is my responsibility as a mother of a young girl [...]. I keep believing that the world can just be better.

Julia believed the young protesters were fighting for a world in which people would not live with the fear of hell as she had; this was why she cried.

Karolina

Karolina is a 26-year-old PhD student from Warsaw. She comes from a middle-class family and described her economic situation as privileged. She was due to be married shortly after the interview.

Karolina explained that her family practiced Catholicism in a "traditional way", in contrast to the "profound way" characterised by "theological reflection". She associates "traditional" Catholicism with participating in the "mainstream" events she attended with her family as a child, such as processions for the Feast of Corpus Christi. "Profound" Catholicism, by contrast, is represented by the Paschal Vigil liturgy, which she attends as

an adult. She also makes a connection between "profound" Catholicism and the Dominican Order, while "traditional" Catholicism resides in local parishes.

Her early experiences with the Church were far from rewarding. As a teenager she came into conflict with the priest teaching catechism at her school. With permission from her family, who saw no sense in her continuing in such a contentious situation, she resigned from the voluntary class. Only later did she discover that this ruled her out of receiving the sacrament of confirmation at her local church:

> So I went to the parish priest and told him I quit religion classes at school because I had a conflict with the teacher. And he said I have to decide what's important to me. If it's my comfort, then it's 'sorry, no confirmation, see you, bye'.

Karolina lost interest in religion after this and declared herself an agnostic. She refers to this period as her first "rebellion" against the Church.

Despite her declared agnosticism, as a young adult Karolina once felt it would be appropriate to receive the holy communion at a relative's funeral, and therefore had to go to confession. The confessor asked if she had been confirmed, and on learning she had not, ordered her to prepare for it as penance. She was initially indignant at this interference in her "sphere of subjectivity and decision-making", but eventually decided to join a Dominican confirmation group for adults. This event marked the beginning of her interest in religion, in which she gradually became increasingly involved.

This new involvement with religion was not without conflict. Sexuality and contraception were the main axes of Karolina's disagreement with the Church. Tensions arose over the years as she built a relationship with her fiancé. Karolina came to believe that the Church's messages concerning sexuality were harmful from a sexological point of view. She realised that "it really is impossible to live [for several years of a relationship] flogging one's own sexuality and treating it as a source of sin, dirt, and then start enjoying sex overnight". At first, she and her fiancé imagined

that once they began their sex life after marriage they would use natural family planning methods. However, as the years passed and the couple gained more knowledge about how a woman's body functions, they came to understand that their initial vision was utopic and could easily lead to unwanted pregnancies. Despite declaring she would accept any child she conceived, Karolina clearly did not want to become a mother just yet. She knows that sooner or later she will start using contraception, and this has become a source of apprehension:

> I go to confession, I receive the Holy Communion, I get absolution, but soon I will get married, or maybe I won't, but we enter this phase [when we have sex] and I will be using contraception. The teaching of the Church concerning contraception is somewhat absurd.

Karolina decided to discuss her internal conflict with a confessor:

> So I went to confession at the Dominicans' and I said: I have a thought, maybe I should start confessing now, because this is a condition suspended in time, the intention is already in me. And he said that what I'm intending to do is a huge step backwards, because I want him to tell me from the majesty of the Church what I should do. And that's not the point. I'm supposed to develop my conscience, live in accord with myself, and if this teaching doesn't speak to me – that's it, thank you, no sin. He didn't bestow a pardon, because he heard no sin.

For Karolina, turning points in her relationship with her faith and the Church have been marked by encounters with priests. She describes this encounter as key to her later involvement in the Women's Strike:

> This was an important moment on my way to rebelling, once again, this time in a conscious way, against the Church as an institution. This is probably why today I don't have a problem... I mean, I do... but I'm not afraid to say that I disagree with the stance of the Church, and I'm not afraid to receive Holy Communion despite the fact I went to the protest.

Like Julia, Karolina describes her rejection of some Church teachings as rebellion. Unlike the first rebellion in her teenage years, which wasn't based on a deeper reflection, this rebellion was a conscious one. She also places her rebellion in the context of recent scandals and controversial statements by celebrity bishops and believes she has been betrayed by the Church. However, Karolina participated in the Black Protest two years ago, before her adult rebellion. She says her support for the protests was undeniable, as at the time the threat was a total abortion ban and punishment for women undergoing abortions.

Karolina believes that sexual activity comes with responsibility. However, she reproaches Catholic sexual ethics for being limited to responsibility for the life that could be conceived:

> The Church of course emphasises that in sexuality one has to take responsibility for the life which may potentially appear. We [Karolina and her fiancé] think this is not enough. In our opinion one must also take responsibility for this other life, which lies in bed next to us. For this other person, their world of emotions, world of feelings. The possibility that they could be hurt.

Nevertheless, Karolina also assumes responsibility for the life that is conceived, and thus believes abortion to be a bad thing. She believes every abortion is the result of tragedy, whether an "everyday kind of tragedy" or a "spectacular" one. An everyday tragedy could be a lack of access to contraceptives or the emotional immaturity of a man who "won't use a condom because he doesn't like it".

Karolina supports unlimited access to abortion, although she would sympathise with a model that required a psychological consultation and time for contemplation. When justifying her stance she often refers to her own privileged position: "From the perspective of my safe situation I tell myself that I wouldn't want to do it [abortion]. But it doesn't mean others shouldn't."

Karolina is also aware that if circumstances forced her to have an abortion she could always go abroad, while others may not have the means to do so. Moreover, she refers to statistics showing there are less abortions

in countries where the procedure is legal. She believes that being pro-life means providing care and economic opportunities for prospective mothers, thereby enabling them to have the child. In this context she makes the following statement: "I think that as long as we don't have accessible abortion in Poland, we cannot be truly pro-life."

Karolina feels that her views are marginalised in Polish public discourse: she feels excluded from the Church, but also cannot identify with feminist discourses and the protestors carrying placards saying "abortion is okay". Karolina participated in two protests despite feeling uncomfortable in crowds, and this was very important to her. Unprompted, she also announced she doesn't have an issue with acts of vandalism carried out on churches during the initial protests: "It is kind of schizophrenic to believe in a God who took away sin and rose again, and to think he won't be able to cope with an inscription on a door."

Beata

Beata is a Polish migrant woman living in a town on the outskirts of Paris. She is 38-years-old and mother to a 5-year-old boy. Beata occasionally gives Polish lessons, while her husband, also Polish, has a stable middle-class job. Beata emigrated after finishing her university degree to join her then fiancé. Despite many years of learning French she has been unable to find employment in France that matches her qualifications.

Beata was raised by her mother, whose faith was limited to regularly attending church services. Beata holds the religiosity of her grandmother in higher esteem: despite being a believer, she "identified mainly as herself" and appreciated churches more for their architecture than their religious community. As a university student Beata was involved in the academic chaplaincy of the Jesuit convent, as this gave her the opportunity to practice singing for free.

Beata's relationship with the Catholic Church is complicated, and she makes a clear distinction between the Polish and French Catholic Churches:

"I am a believer, but I find it increasingly hard to identify with the Church, especially the Polish Church. I feel far more at ease here in France."

Beata's criticism of the Polish Catholic Church mainly relates to her opinion that the institution is highly politicised and supports the Law and Justice government, which she does not. She relates being surprised that her mother, who lives in Poland, does not see any contradiction between attending church and watching the private liberal news TV station, *TVN24*. In the context of abortion, Beata mentions the well-known, ultra-conservative, pro-life activist Kaja Godek, and says that as a believer and a mother, she refuses to be represented by such a person.

Many Polish migrants who wish to practice religion face the choice of attending service in a local church, or one administered by the Polish Catholic Mission, which answers to the Church hierarchy in Poland. Beata grew highly critical of the Polish Catholic Mission's Church in Paris when she and her husband attended a premarital course. She was outraged by the paternalistic behaviour of both the priest who led the course and an invited expert, who acted as if addressing an audience that knew nothing about sexuality and were staying chaste until marriage, despite some of the participants arriving with their own children. She was also displeased by the expert's depiction of natural family planning methods as the only option, and refusal to listen when the audience attempted to argue that it was their choice whether or not to use contraception. Beata stated: "I have the right to say that this method doesn't speak to me, that I do not wish to put a thermometer into my vagina every morning for the next fifteen or twenty years."

Although Beata's views on contraception are liberal, her stance on abortion is more conservative than that of other interviewees. While expressing her support for the Women's Strike, she underlines that "there are things [she] doesn't agree with".

> I think that abortion is something bad in general. I think it has nothing to do with religion. I am a mother of a son who is five years old, I am also a mother of three other children who died. And each of them was my child since I saw two lines on a pregnancy test. [...]

> So to me the question is not whether it's an embryo or something else. This is simply a child. It will grow up to be a human, not a giraffe.

Beata's support for the protests is mainly due to the tribunal's judgement forcing women to continue pregnancies when foetuses are deformed and "unable to live, only able to suffer". To her, this is "not exactly a question of abortion, it's more like euthanasia", and just like euthanasia, abortion due to irreversible foetal defects is for Beata a question of human dignity, which should be valued by the Catholic Church.

When asked what kind of abortion law she would endorse, Beata replied:

> Now I would be suggesting a compromise. I would be suggesting abortion on request if someone could demonstrate perfectly functioning sexual education, which would start, I don't know, in kindergarten, and unlimited, free of charge access to contraception. Because, really, my point of departure is that abortion is something bad, a last resort, right?

Beata's understanding is that in a perfect system, with early sex education and free, universal access to contraception, abortion would be extremely rare; there would be no risk of anyone using it instead of contraception. In such a system, Beata believes women should be able to terminate a pregnancy on the condition they first talk to a psychologist: "A person comes and says 'Hello, I would like to abort my child.' In my opinion she shouldn't. But I don't want to say 'no' to her. But I say: 'Fine, but you know what, first you have to talk to this lady or this gentleman'." However, as Beata points out, this would require increasing the quality of mental health care in Poland and training sufficiently professional psychologists.

Conclusions

The 5 case studies presented in this article illustrate a number of tendencies we observed during our fieldwork among people declaring themselves both Catholic and in favour of the protests. While they do not exhibit all viewpoints, many themes and issues that emerged in these 5 interviews were repeated in others. Presenting these individual stories has enabled us to present the opinions and political positions of our interlocutors within their biographical context, and show how the voices of Catholic women in the Polish abortion debate are embedded in their everyday lives. Most importantly, these examples contribute to research demonstrating the variety of views held by Catholic individuals in Poland (Kościańska 2021a). Although the women we interviewed believe abortion is a sin, they do not support the ban and recognize that the decision to have an abortion is embedded in complex personal and social circumstances. They embody various attitudes towards the Women's Strike and pro-choice protests, from active participation, through inactive support, to criticism, and believe there are circumstances in which women should be able to have an abortion.

Therefore, contrary to mainstream accounts of polarised opinions on abortion among the Polish people, which depict all Catholics as supporters of the abortion ban, our research shows that many believers do not share the conservative stance of the Church and right-wing politicians. This diversity of views is not new: it has a long history and is embedded in debates that have taken place in Poland over the last few decades (Kościańska 2018, 2021a). While underlining the variety of perspectives encountered during our fieldwork, we argue for the importance of ethnographic research and engaged anthropology, which enables us to witness the complexity of – too often overlooked – individual perspectives.

In the history of 20th and 21st century Poland, the most incendiary abortion debates have coincided with moments of redefining the nation, the state, and the place of the Church. Defining independent Poland after the partitions (1930-1932), deciding the shape of state socialism after Stalinism (1955-1956), and discussing what Poland should become after

socialism (1989-1993) have all been accompanied by renewed interest in the legal aspects of pregnancy termination. Similarly, with the Law and Justice government taking power and the need to redefine Poland after liberal democracy, abortion has occupied a central space in public debate since 2016, a phenomenon reinforced with the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. This is perfectly illustrated by a heartfelt statement one of our interlocutors made concerning the Church: "now it's the time, for me now it's the time when one says 'I'm watching. I'm watching to see who you are'".

Although women's rights and reproductive rights are issues of great importance for many of our interlocutors, they perceive the protests and accompanying debates as having a broader political meaning in relation to the state. They not only protest against the tribunal ruling, but also to voice their opinions about how decisions are made in present-day Poland. For some, this is an opportunity to criticise the Church and the place it occupies in the state. Many of our interlocutors who are actively defending the rights of Polish women do not identify as feminists, or do not agree with the feminist stance on reproductive rights and morally neutral attitude to abortion. As feminists are often the ones organising the protests and speaking during the marches, some of our interlocutors, such as Karolina, feel their views are not being represented. Nevertheless, they feel able to participate in the movement: as with the protests of 2016, the Women's Strike is based on a community of goals and emotions rather than a community of identity (see Korolczuk 2016b).

Some of our interviewees, such as Karolina, attended the protests in 2016, while others, like Julia and Teresa, were not ready or too scared to publicly support the right to abortion. Many interlocutors claim their views have evolved over recent years. Teresa, Julia, and Karolina describe this evolution as part of their individual biographies: they have developed over the years and are now finally ready for their "mature rebellion" against the Church. These personal evolutions have coincided with the deepening crisis of liberal democracy in Poland. Eventually, and simultaneously, many have felt the moment has come to stand up to the conservative government and the Church. Some, like Mirosława, do not support liberalization of the abortion law and the form of the protests, but oppose the

relationship between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the ruling party. However, many of our interlocutors believe it is possible to reform the Catholic Church, on both an individual and institutional level. Some practice what has come to be known as *churching*: visiting parishes other than their own to discuss sermons with priests and challenge them intellectually. Others are involved in various formal initiatives that promote dialogue within the Church and greater laity involvement in decision-making.

Attitudes to abortion liberalization among our other interviewees varied from full support to rejection. However, even those who described themselves as conservative and opposed the legalization of abortion admitted there are certain situations in which pregnancy termination would be justified, particularly when we shifted discussions from general concerns to descriptions of specific people and their suffering.

Joanna Mishtal (2015) has shown that in Poland, alongside the biopolitics of the state that limits access to abortion, there exists an unofficial biopolitics consisting of "resistances, contestations, and unofficial practices that Poles routinely engage in to control their fertility" (2015: 185). Our research reveals that the effect of this unofficial biopolitics, and the women's agency it incites, is a religious reconfiguration. For some women, becoming involved in the practices of unofficial biopolitics must be accompanied by religious reflection, a redefinition of their relationship with the Church and subsequent political commitment. As they see themselves as religious, these women feel they not only have the right to decide about fertility management in their own conscience, but also to voice their opinion and criticize the institutionalized Catholic Church, which has failed to provide space for women's voices and concerns.

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