

RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

It has long been known that we fear the new and the unknown the most. The COVID-19 pandemic is a huge challenge for people all over the world. These are times of fear and uncertainty not only of economic but also of philosophical and existential basis. Faced with the threat to health and life, people again began to ask themselves basic questions about being and its essence. No wonder then that we can now observe an increased interest in faith and religion, as well as an increasing influx of believers into the various Churches. As history shows, in difficult times, faith and belonging to a community of believers is a great support for people and a source of hope for the future. The aim of the paper is to analyze the recommendations of the hierarchs of the churches existing in Poland and their current situation based on the latest data.

Key words: religion, religiosity, pandemic, society, church, faith

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According to the data from the list of churches and religious associations published by The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, as of February 13, 2018, there are approximately one hundred and eighty-five churches, communities and religious associations in Poland, associating followers of Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodoxy, native faith, and even the International School of the Golden Rosicrucian. It is also remember about non-believers, who, according to statistical data, number about a million in Poland.

However, the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affected not only our everyday life, but also our way of thinking. Suddenly, what seemed normal to us became unattainable and longed for. Therefore, people again began to ask themselves fundamental, philosophical questions about the essence of life. Hence, it was possible to observe an increase in spiritual needs associated with ensuring an existential sense of security. As it is impossible to focus on each and every church existing in Poland, I will talk about the eight of them with the biggest number of believers.

The heads of the eight largest churches existing in Poland reacted to the prevailing epidemiological situation in very different ways. It should be emphasized once again that strict guidelines apply not only to Christian temples. However, the ordinances of the Catholic Church will be discussed first, as it has the largest number of believers in Poland. At the beginnig of the pandemic, in March, the Catholic Church has taken special measures against the coronavirus in almost all countries, including closing the churches and/or reducing the number of people which may be present in churches. In dioceses, bishops granted

dispensation from the obligation to participate in the Sunday Mass. It was recommended, among others, to receive Holy Communion on the hand, to give the sign of peace by nodding the head without shaking hands and to empty the holy water stoups at the entrances to churches. All episcopates and dioceses encouraged participation in services through the media, creating additional websites on which Masses, prayers, Lenten retreats and recommendations for avoiding infection were broadcasted. The bishops called on the faithful to pray for an end to the pandemic, especially for the infected and for the health service workers. They emphasized that the measures introduced are primarily intended to protect the elderly and the sick as groups most at risk of contracting the virus. It is worth emphasizing that the Primate of Poland, Archbishop Wojciech Polak, when issuing the ordinances, takes into account governmental regulations regarding the pandemic. In connection with the lifting of certain restrictions, on April 20, the metropolitan of Gniezno issued a decree increasing the number of people allowed to stay in the church, appealing, however, to keep the distance, to wear masks during the service, excluding accession to the sacrament of the Eucharist and urged parents and children receiving First Holy Communion to postpone their dates until autumn [1]. It may therefore seem that the faithful of the Catholic Church in the face of a pandemic, limited opportunities to participate in Mass and organizing sacred celebrations have been left to themselves and will turn their backs on the community. But nothing further from the truth. According to the spokesman of the Polish Episcopate, Reverend Paweł Rytel-Andrianik, Live Masses, prayers of the rosary at 20.30 in the intention of ending the pandemic and online retreats are some of the initiatives taken by the Church in connection with the ongoing epidemic threat in Poland and the reduction in the number of people in churches. All dioceses were involved in the online initiatives¹. At that time, the statistics of viewership of Holy Masses and online commenting on individual initiatives soared. The people themselves learned to follow the diocesan or parish websites, on which the list of Internet broadcasts of the Holy Masses was posted on a regular basis. Important initiatives included spiritual adoptions of medical personnel and the sick, as the national chaplain of the health service, Rev. Arkadiusz Zawistowski asked for them. Such actions started to appear very quickly in individual dioceses. It is true that the smaller

number of the people in churches resulted in a deterioration of the financial situation of the Church [2], nevertheless, the charitable activity of church organizations did not cease. Church charity initiatives during the coronavirus pandemic, from the very beginning, primarily provided support for doctors, nursing homes and health centers, as well as support for seniors, the lonely and the poor, and the homeless. Help for children was mainly to prevent digital exclusion. There are also special helplines with psychological and spiritual help [3]. The recently lifted limits on the number of people in churches did not immediately translate into 100% restoration of the pre-pandemic church attendance. As Archbishop Józef Kupny says, 'Many people fear leaving home and participating in a larger community', although he adds that compared to the time before the coronavirus threat, today much more people participate in the Holy Mass on weekdays. 'This shows that the faithful have a hunger for the Eucharist, but are afraid of coming to churches on days when they expect a larger group of people to participate' [4]. Pilgrimages to holy places are still organized, but with smaller groups of people or in a motorized form [5]. Unfortunately, cases of coronavirus infection have been confirmed after the pilgrimage [6].

The second largest church is the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church. On March 17, 2020, the Holy Council of Bishops of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church issued a communication on the coronavirus epidemic in Poland. I quote:

In connection with the state of the epidemic threat of the coronavirus in our country and the pandemic in the world, the Holy Council of Bishops of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, concerned about the situation, addresses the faithful of our Church with a call to vigilance and responsibility in everyday life and appeals for earnest prayers to the Lord of Life - Jesus Christ for the end of the epidemic and the health of all the sick, as well as those who help them - doctors and all medical personnel. Let us pray to Almighty God, Source of life and Physician of our souls and bodies, to stop this deadly epidemic. The Holy Council of Bishops recommends adding to the ektenia strenuous during the Divine Liturgy the requests with "molebna in the plague air". The clergy is obliged to provide all the sick with pastoral care and physical help. Practical forms of help for those in need should be established in parishes. All services should be

held according to the Lenten schedule. The faithful should be recommended to receive the Sacrament of Confession on weekdays when a smaller number of believers gather in the churches. Regarding St. Eucharist, The St. Council of Bishops states unequivocally that. The St Eucharist is the source of life, health of soul and body, against which no disease has power. Divine Eucharist - is God's fire that burns all evil. We recall the words of Christ addressed to the apostles: "... in My name they will cast out demons ... they will take vipers in their hands and even if they drink poison, nothing will hurt them ... they will lay hands on the sick and heal them." (Mk16,18). The content of these words of our Savior explains all doubts and confirms the eternal truth that faith works miracles. Giving The St Eucharist also applies to the sick in hospitals, places of isolation, etc .; it is recommended to follow the recommendations of medical personnel or other competent services. This also applies to people in home quarantine. The Holy Council of Bishops recommends the clergy to provide in churches and parish rooms with appropriate hygienic measures, such as: disinfectants, wipes for icons, etc. For the duration of the epidemic emergency, meetings in parish rooms should be refrained from. Only strong faith, prayer, broadly understood abstinence, penance - as it was in the history of our Church - will help us to overcome the epidemic that affects our generation. "God! Help, save, have mercy, protect us with Your grace; deliver us from sickness, that we may praise You with thanksgiving, now and always and forever and ever". (Molebien in the plague air) [7].

Orthodox church services and celebrations are held unchanged.

There is no information and no regulations about the coronavirus on the official site of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland, which held the third place considering the number of believers.

The fourth largest church in Poland is the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland. The Bishop of the Church, Jerzy Samiec, issued an appeal as the first of the Polish churches' heads on March 3, 2020, in which he asks for 'prayers for the sick in various parts of the world, for their families and for the doctors who care for them' [8], encouraging the implementation of precautionary measures during services and distribution of Holy

Communion. Interestingly, as the only one of the clergy addressing his words to the faithful, Bishop Samiec refers not only to the act, but also to consultation with an epidemiologist. The appeal emphasizes the possibility of participating in the Holy Mass via online broadcast. Attention was also paid to the need to help the elderly, the sick and the lonely, whose situation has significantly worsened during the epidemic. The final part of the appeal underlines the role of faith in this difficult situation. I quote:

I realize how much insecurity and anxiety can arise in our families by listening to the daily reports of the spread of disease and the death toll. This applies especially to those families whose members, due to their profession, come into contact with sick people or those who have to travel around the world. This threat is new to us, so it arouses many emotions. We got used to others, but it didn't make them any less dangerous. That is why faith is so important to us. It is our Savior who has promised not to leave us alone. God supports His children in every situation of life. In prayer we can find peace, but also by asking for protection, we really receive help [9].

Until the end of March, Greek Catholic bishops gave dispensation from the obligation to participate in the Sunday Liturgy to elderly people, sick people, children, schoolchildren, those who care for the elderly and those who are afraid of contracting the virus. At the same time, they encouraged the faithful to pray at home and to benefit from the liturgy broadcast in the media. A letter to the faithful of the Przemyśl-Warsaw Archdiocese and the Wrocław-Gdańsk diocese specifying the liturgical and religious standards of conduct during the coronavirus epidemic was read in Greek Catholic churches on Sunday, March 15. Guided by the

safety of the clergy and the faithful and taking into account the guidelines of the Head of the Greek Catholic Church, Światosław Szewczuk, as well as the indications of the Polish Bishops' Conference, we establish the following legal norms and regulations that will be in force until the end of March for the Przemyśl-Warsaw Archdiocese and the Wrocław-Gdańsk diocese – the bishops wrote. Due to the high risk of contracting the coronavirus, the Greek Catholic bishops ordered the clergy not to give Holy Communion to the faithful (in the Greek Catholic Church, Holy Communion is given

with a spoon in two forms). Instead, they encouraged the spiritual reception of the Eucharist, awakening in themselves 'an act of faith, love for God and a sincere and earnest reception of the Body of Christ into one's heart.' The bishops canceled the Lenten retreat by the end of March, as well as all religious and liturgical congregations in parishes all over Poland. They also asked the faithful not to kiss religious objects in the temples. The clergy should remove the vessels with holy water and put a protective film in the confessionals. The letter also encourages to behave responsibly and to follow the announcements of the sanitary services. Considering the dangers faced by mankind in today's world, the bishops instructed priests to pray for the sick, for the end of epidemics, and for life-saving doctors at all Holy Liturgies [10]. After some of the restrictions were lifted, the rules of safety in the Greek Catholic Church are similar to those in the Catholic Church.

The Bishop of the Pentecostal Church in Poland, Marek Kamiński, on March, 15, issued a video appeal in which he recommended compliance with state recommendations. Besides, he ordered a week of fasting and prayers for Poland on March 16-21. On each designated day, one of the six existing districts was tasked with fasting and praying for the country, for the end of the epidemic, and for the government and doctors. Moreover, Bishop Kaminski encouraged the faithful to participate in online broadcasts of services. The official website of the Church regularly features sermons and meditations, designed to strengthen in faith and help the faithful in times of plague.

The seventh largest church in Poland is the Old Catholic Mariavite Church. His superior is the Chief Bishop Marek M. Karol Babi. Like his aforementioned predecessor from the Pentecostal Church, he made a video aimed at the faithful in which he not only recommends sanitation, but also highlights the importance of the time at which the pandemic broke, namely Lent. In it, Bishop Babi encourages people to reflect on themselves and their faith, as well as to care for their loved ones and those in need. On the official website of the Mariavite Church there is also a message regarding a pilgrimage to the temple in Płock. Pilgrims are obliged not only to silence and pray in order to strengthen their spiritual strength, but also to observe sanitary rigor, register for participation and sign the

regulations. Due to the prevailing epidemiological situation, the amount of traditional snacks prepared for this occasion was limited.

The last of the churches I describe is the Polish Catholic Church of Republic of Poland. The head of the Church, Bishop Superior Wiktor Wysoczański issued an Appeal addressed to the clergy and faithful, a request for a common prayer 'Our Father' on March 25, chosen by Pope Francis, as well as liturgical recommendations and suggestions for clergy and faithful for Easter 2020 and a message to priests of the Church about the obligation to observe the rules of hygiene when celebrating the liturgy. The rules and recommendations described by Bishop Wysoczański are clear and quite strict at the same time. I quote:

We recommend, ask and oblige that priests do not organize Holy Mass. and services in which more than 50 people participate. From participation in Sunday Masses. are released: elder people, people who experience symptoms such as runny nose, cough, increased body temperature, children and adolescents and those who look after them, people who are afraid of infection during liturgical services. Those staying at home on Sunday can establish spiritual contact with those who pray in our temples according to the order of the parish services. They can also listen to Mass on radio, television or on the Internet. Holy Masses ordered, they will be cleared only in the presence of persons declaring their intentions. Only the closest relatives of the deceased may participate in funerals. First Communion will only be accepted as hand-bread. There will be no holy water in the stoups. Priests and the faithful are required to follow and adhere to government orders on social media. If possible, do not use public transport to churches and chapels, and stay indoors, washing your hands frequently with disinfectants, and stay within a meter and a half of each other. The above-mentioned instructions are binding on the followers of the Polish Catholic Church until further notice" [11].

As for the Easter service, the number of the faithful was limited to 5 people. The Bitter Lamentations, the Way of the Cross and the Lenten Retreat were canceled, as well as the Palm Sunday procession and the Resurrection procession on Resurrection Sunday. Priests were recommended to pray for all the sick, suffering, hospitalized, and those who died due

to the coronavirus, as well as those who were lost due to the epidemic on Good Friday. The traditional blessing of food by priests on Holy Saturday was canceled. Each family member had the opportunity to sacrifice food by making the sign of the cross over them. The possibility of the faithful to participate in services through the media was also emphasized. The latest message is directed only to clergymen and reminds about the obligation to disinfect hands before celebrating the liturgy and before administering the Eucharist, and supports the prior decision of the hierarchy to give the message only on hand. In all the appeals, one can see the Bishop's concern to unite the faithful in prayer to stop the epidemic, consolidate religious life and support in a difficult time for both lay people and clergy.

After listening to all the observations, one can ask himself whether the Church as an institution dealt with the responsibility that was and is imposed on it in times of a pandemic, namely whether it really supported and helped people in an existential and spiritual sense. According to the chairman of the Pastoral Commission of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Wiktor Skworc, the pandemic turned out to be a completely new reality for the whole Church. Nevertheless, the Church turned out to be an efficient, solidary structure, capable of taking action depending on the contexts that arose and the epidemic situation in individual dioceses. The Church also found itself in a new situation by presenting pastoral offers through the media, ranging from broadcasting the Mass, devotions, to catechesis online. The parish websites have become an important information board about the life of the local and national Church. The emergency triggered many prayer and charity initiatives, revealed pro-social attitudes, including the virtue of solidarity with the most needy. The spirit of volunteering and selfless help was released. 'At the moment it is difficult

to assess how the epidemic influenced the experience of faith from the point of view of spirituality' - says Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki in response to the KAI survey. He adds that

experiencing the liturgy at home has become an opportunity to discover more deeply the family community and the reality of the domestic church. The shared experience of the broadcast liturgy, prayer of the rosary, heard homilies or pastoral conferences gave a greater opportunity to talk about faith and taught to experience these mysteries more intensely in everyday life. It takes patience in assessing the effects of this new situation.

The president of the Episcopate also warns against the dangers of 'comforting and lulling faith lived in reality'. Referring to the widespread use of the Internet in pastoral work, Archbishop Gądecki hopes that 'one of the important fruits of these meetings will be the ability to use this type of communication tools'. However, he points out that one must be careful not to destroy interpersonal relationships. He emphasizes that

a machine cannot replace a human being. Telecommunications is just a tool. If we misuse it, it will prove devastating. If we learn to use it, it can be useful for people-to-people contacts. Telecommunications cannot, however, replace the potential of a real meeting, sharing one's own experiences thanks to direct contact. What will the Church be or should be after the pandemic? Instead of reflecting on it and giving answers that will be only assumptions anyway, it is better to focus on our personal relationship with God and take a closer look at our presence in the Church so far. What is the community of the Church for me? What do I expect from it? What can I and want to bring to it? In short, one must try to live this present time as fruitfully as possible. The epidemic is still ongoing, we are entering the next stages and we should remain careful and consistent in our responsibility - believes the Polish Primate, Archbishop Wojciech Polak [12].

Endnotes

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2. See also: <https://www.niedziela.pl/artukul/50761/W-czasach-pandemii-powinnismy-Kosciol>, access date: 10.09.2020.

3. See also: <https://ekai.pl/charytatywna-dzialalnosc-kosciola-w-czasie-pandemii-koronawirusa/>, access date: 10.09.2020.
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9. Ibidem, access date: 10.09.2020.
10. See also: <https://niezalezna.pl/316557-dyspensa-dla-grekokatolikow>, access date: 10.09.2020.
11. Author's own translation from:
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