

Where Reproductive Rights Are A Joke: Poland, Politics and the Catholic Church

by Anka Grzywacz

May and June is the time of first communion celebrations in Poland. Since Polish people are predominantly Roman Catholic, little girls and boys who are dressed up like smaller versions of brides and grooms are to be seen everywhere – on the streets, shopping malls, returning from different church occasions. A couple of days ago, I came upon an article¹ on how this tradition is turning into a more and more commercial event.

What frightened me more than the stories of children driven to church in pink limos was the mention of pledges taken by these 8-year-olds in some parishes. Besides swearing not to consume any alcohol and drugs, girls and boys are made to take an oath to “remain chaste” until the age of 18. I could not help but wonder – how do these kids know what their pledge really means?

Most Polish parents lack the skills and courage to talk to their children about sex. But I also assume that nobody explains the details of “chastity” to those young ones.

The Roman Catholic church in my country is not just an institution. It is a force that has been trying to control people’s thoughts and lives by repressing their sexual freedom. What makes things worse is that priests and

Picture Perfect.

The Roman Catholic church has been a formidable political and personal force in Polish life. Chastity is quite ingrained beginning childhood especially among girls.

St. Florian church in Krakow by Kakub Halun in Wikimedia Commons.



bishops have the obedient, God-fearing politicians of the right-wing parties ready to turn the most conservative Catholic teachings into binding laws. This combination of circumstances has never brought any good to women and discriminated groups.

Why exactly is the church in Poland so powerful that almost every draft law is sent to the episcopate with request for opinion? Not so long ago, in the 1920s and 1930s, my country was a place where different cultures, religions—Catholicism, Russian Orthodox Church and Judaism—and points of view coexisted. But World War II changed everything.

Today, the Polish population is extremely homogenous – everyone is white and Catholic - you hardly ever see a person of different race, ethnicity or faith. Decades of communism have hindered the development of civil society and have made people passive. There was no second wave feminism, no fight for gay rights. The only social movement that thrived during those times was the anti-communist opposition which was supported by the church. Heroes of the “Solidarity” movement are almost exclusively

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males – priests, bishops and devoted Catholics, like the first democratically elected president Lech Walesa who never appears in public without a brooch with the picture of Virgin Mary pinned to his jacket.

Perhaps the church and state relations would be different if it was not for pope John Paul II who had encouraged the repressed Poles to rebel against the atheist regime and contributed to the end of communism in Poland.

The Catholic Church represented everything that the communist party disregarded. Practicing one's faith in that period was not only about religion. It was a subversive act against the authorities who claimed there was no God. Sharing the conservative position of the church on such issues as division of gender roles or abortion was desired because it was a sign of disobedience.

When the communists imposed their vision of social equality, promoting it with posters of smiling women on tractors and opening free childcare facilities so that mothers could



Shaping Solidarity. Labour and human rights activist Lech Walesa freely allowed the intervention of the Roman Catholic church in the state's affairs during his presidency. Such interventions were most intense on matters such as abortion and contraception. His party, Solidarity has been fully supported by the church especially during the former's struggle against communism.

Photo by Slawek from Wikimedia Commons.

join the socialist work force, the wives of opposition activists stayed home, raising their children and supporting them in silent prayers. When the communists allowed women to terminate pregnancy on demand, protesting against it and quoting the pope's teachings on the sanctity of life from the moment of conception was in order.

When democratic transformations in Poland began, the bishops held on to their political role. The influence of Catholic ethics is clearly seen in the Polish Constitution of 1997 where marriage is defined as a "union of a man and a woman."²

In 1993, on the initiative of Catholic members of Parliament, the new anti-

abortion law was passed, making the procedure illegal except for cases of maternal health threat, serious fetal abnormalities or rape. The law was liberalised for a brief period only to return to its restrictive form in 1997.

When the left-wing party was in power, a new law was drafted in cooperation with pro-choice NGOs and experts but the bill was never voted upon. Many say that this was a result of secret dealings between politicians and church hierarchy who allegedly promised to convince Polish people to vote "yes" in the referendum on Poland's EU accession in exchange for leaving the abortion issue alone. Nobody knows for sure how it really was but the so-called abortion compromise is still in force.



The Polish Pope



John Paul II with the Reagans.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Perhaps the most popular pope of the 20th century, John Paul II was the first non-Italian cardinal to assume the highest position in the Catholic church. He likewise came from a country that was under the influence of the Soviet Union. Although John Paul II instituted significant changes in the Catholic church, including the latter's acknowledgement of its past crimes such as the death of Galileo, its role in the Inquisition and slavery and the murder of Muslims during the Crusades, he was quite conservative on women, abortion, contraception and sexuality.

He never approved of the ordination of women in priesthood, which was the only way for women to assume higher positions in the Vatican. Although the church's teachings on the viability of life have changed over time, John Paul II had an uncompromising stance on abortion and contraception especially in the South where Catholicism has a huge following. Some also consider his apology for people who have been sexually abused by priests lame. While he did not consider homosexuality as a sin, he nevertheless found immoral partnership between persons of the same sex.

Some people may say that John Paul II was a feminist pope with his position against violence against women and his appointment of a few women in critical positions such as the Vatican Theological Commission. However his term consistently followed the church's harsh bias against women especially on issues relating to women's bodies.

As Angela Bonavoglia, author of *Good Catholic Girls: How Women Are Leading the Fight to Change the Church* commented, "[The Catholic church] is against war except under very specific circumstances. But it has never said anybody who supports those things cannot come to communion, must be turned away at the altar, but it has taken that position with abortion. And on a purely political level, I think we have to ask why. You can say that to women, and you're not going to get as much opposition as if the Church hierarchy had said to anybody who supports pre-emptive war or capital punishment you cannot come and receive communion."

Source: Goodman, Amy (5 April 2005). "The Legacy of Pope John Paul II." URL: <http://www.alternet.org/story/21670/>



Speaking of Sex. Ponton, a local group has been organising sessions where young people can learn and exchange information on otherwise taboo issues such as sex.

Photo from Ponton.

The abortion status quo has had a huge impact on women's lives and contributed to social inequality. Officially, there are about 200 legal abortions performed in Poland every year. Unofficial estimates are as high as 200,000. Only a very naïve person would believe that in a country of almost 40 million people, with poor sex education, difficult access to contraception and falling birth rates, only a handful of women would seek to end their pregnancies.

But the reality looks different – women with means go abroad to have the procedure or pay big sums for underground but usually safe abortions performed by doctor in Poland. Those who are in a difficult financial situation, for example frightened teenagers who would not want their parents to learn about their pregnancy, resort to ordering

abortion pills online. Yet using these pills incorrectly can lead to serious complications.

The anti-abortion pressure has been so high in Poland that even the women who had a legal right to terminate their pregnancy have difficulty exercising their rights. The best known example is the story of Alicja Tysiac, a woman who had been denied the right to abortion and almost lost her eyesight due to her third pregnancy. Recently Tysiac has brought a civil lawsuit against the editor-in-chief of a Catholic magazine *Gosc Niedzielny* which published a series of articles condemning the woman's attempts to undergo an abortion as "wanting to murder her child".

Another shocking case is that of a 14-year-old girl's pregnancy that is thought to have been the result of rape. The girl demanded legal abortion but one hospital refused to perform the procedure on the basis of the conscience clause. Worse, it breached the patient's right to confidentiality as the hospital notified a priest and anti-choice activists who visited the girl, obtained her telephone number and tried to convince her not to terminate. The girl traveled with her mother to Warsaw where she was followed and harassed by opponents of abortion. When they complained to the police and were taken to the precinct for interrogation, officers allowed the priest to participate in it, despite the fact that he was one of the possible suspects in the case.

When the girl finally had an abortion, one of the Polish bishops, Stanis Baw Stefanek commented³ that "the ideology of death was victorious" in this case. This cruel statement shows clearly the disregard of church representatives for women's – and in this case, the girl's well-being.

There are probably many more cases like Agata's in Poland. Every year, about 300 girls aged under 15 years give birth. In 2008 alone, almost 20,000 Polish teenagers aged between 15 and 19 became mothers.⁴ This is not going to change without proper sexuality education

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that is based on scientific knowledge instead of ideology. Unfortunately, the present situation is far from perfect.

The existing law provides for about 14 hours a year for the subject “Preparation for Family Life” but it is not obligatory. Some schools do not bother to provide any education in this field.

For over seven years, I have been a volunteer in the Group of Sex Educators, “Ponton.” Recently we have conducted a study among young people on what their sex education in

This is a clear contradiction of modern sex education standards, which demand that the subject be science-based. Instead of reliable knowledge, young girls learn that they should remain virgins until marriage, otherwise they would be “like an apple that has already been bitten and nobody would want them.”

Myths and stereotypes like this cause enormous confusion with which we have to deal every day in our work as sex educators, answering letters from desperate teenagers who are worried that they will become infertile if they masturbate or believe that condoms have holes big enough to let HIV virus through. In our work, we have also received complaints from people who had been shown in class the manipulated and drastic anti-abortion films like the “Silent Scream” when they were very young.

The Polish church interprets the pro-life teachings in an extremely conservative and narrow way. Sometimes it can lead to paradoxes, like the one happening now around the debate on the new law on in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments for infertile couples. Despite the ageing population and low birth rates, the bishops have decided to go into war against IVF procedures, condemning infertile couples who have undergone this type of treatment in the hope of having a child.

When the government announced it was considering refunding IVF treatments for infertile married couples, the bishops’ conference decided to interfere. Before Christmas of 2007, they issued a letter appealing to parliamentarians not to support the solution. In a harsh language, they said that IVF was inadmissible and wicked. It described the method as a “sophisticated abortion,”⁵ due to the fact that the procedure usually leads to the destruction of several embryos. Big discussions broke out and many Catholic couples felt hurt by this statement,

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school was like. We were shocked to see that what should have been a neutral education had been mixed up with religion. According to the law, Polish students are obliged to attend two lessons of religious education or ethics a week. In practice, the choice of the subject is very limited as most schools do not provide a teacher of ethics. But the schools assign a religious education teacher, most often a priest or nun.

This version of religious education does not mean learning about different faiths and traditions for these classes focus strictly on the teachings of the Roman Catholic church and leave little room for discussion. During those lessons teachers often take up the subject of Catholic sexual morality, condemning abortion as murder or homosexuality as a deviation. What is even more worrying and curious is that in some schools, it is a priest or a nun who is assigned the classes of “Preparation for Family Life.”





not to mention gays and lesbians whose reproductive choices of couples have not altogether been taken into account.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people still have a hard life in Poland, especially in smaller towns and villages. Here, the attitude of the Catholic church also plays an enormous role. In 2005, when the current Polish president Lech Kaczynski was still Mayor of Warsaw, he denied LGBT activists the right to hold an Equality Parade, saying that this would upset the religious feelings of many. The sad truth is that his position was a reflection of general opinion in the society. According to a recent poll⁶ 66 per cent of Poles are against gay pride marches, 90 per cent reject the possibility of gay men and lesbians to have the right to adopt children and a mere eight per cent regard homosexual orientation as something normal.

No surprises there if you consider that schools teach children that being gay or lesbian is a deviation and can be cured. Authors of many course books used in teaching the “Preparation for Family Life” subject were clearly guided by Catholicism on the issue, saying for example that a gay man or lesbian woman ought to remain sexually abstinent.

Respected public figures further reinforce prejudices by using hate speech in reference to the LGBT community. When a moral authority like bishop Tadeusz Pieronek tells the public that gays are not fit to work as school teachers or when the Solidarity movement hero, former Polish president Lech Walesa adds that homosexuality should be treated, people start believing something is wrong in the lives of LGBT.

It is not easy to be different in this country. When I was reading the article about first communions I was equally surprised with the idea of virginity pledges for 8-year-olds as with the hypocrisy and conformity of their parents. A typical Polish Catholic does not study Bible before going to sleep. She/he attends mass irregularly except during holidays, weddings and funerals. She/he does not practice what the Vatican preaches in terms of using condoms, the sanctity of marriage or abortion. The only problem is that few people are willing and ready to talk openly about the fact that they disagree with some of the strict teachings in the morality sphere.

Personally the road was quite different. Being raised Catholic I grew up to become a pro-choice feminist. I figured the two could never come together, not here, so I stopped practising my faith. It was only when I met people from the United States (US)-based organisation, Catholics for Choice (CFC) and became one of their European advisors did I realise that it is possible to reconcile one's non-traditional views with one's religion.

Still, when I openly talk about my opinions in Poland, I hear comments like “you can't be Catholic and support liberal abortion laws, it's not possible”. Nonetheless, these encourage me even more to continue the faith in my advocacy, my vocation, my choice. ■

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Endnotes:

¹ Paweł B. Moskalewicz, Judyta Sierakowska (10 June 2009). “Rodzice u komunii Przekrój,” URL: http://www.przekroj.pl/nydarzenia_kraj_artykul,4856.html

² The Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997). Chapter I, Article 18, URL: <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/kon1.htm>

³ Tomasz Niepiało B (19 June 2008). “14-latka usun ‘Ba ci’”; „Rzeczpospolita” URL: <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/150644.html>

⁴ Central Statistical Office in Warsaw (2008). “Demographic Yearbook of Poland 2008”

⁵ Nasz Dziennik (19 January 2007). URL: <http://www.naszdziennik.pl/index.php?typ=wiec&dat=20071219&id=wi11.txt>

⁶ Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) (June 2008). Opinion poll “Gay and Lesbian Rights” URL: http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2008/K_088_08.PDF