



# THE POLISH NATIONAL CATHOLICISM IN THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK. USE AND MISUSE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ROSA MARIA MARTINEZ DE CODES<sup>1</sup>

JAIME CONTRERAS CONTRERAS<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This text describes the history of a unique paradox and invites us to analyze the deep crisis into which Polish national Catholicism has plunged, understood both as a political structure and as a cultural bloc forming a precise conception of Polish identity. The Polish Catholic Church and the Law and Justice (PiS) government are the two major social forces of so-called national Catholicism. The paradox walks the path that stretches between a notorious alliance of the two entities in their early days and the increasing distancing of both since 2016. The text proposes two explanations of such remarkable swift. One is the nationalist stance of the Church in its alliance with PiS due to its anti-liberal refugee policy and attack on the judiciary, and the other is the transnational influence of Catholicism in Europe and especially the explicit intervention of Pope Francis, who supports the rights of refugees and calls on the most reluctant sectors of the bishops' conference to join Catholic orthodoxy. The result of such a paradox is the rift that has opened up between the liberal and nationalist factions within the Polish Church.

**KEYWORDS:** Polish Catholic Church, Religious Freedom, Nationalism, Europe

## INTRODUCTION

Recent research on political Catholicism in Europe has sought to define the ways in which Catholic politics, including Catholic political parties and political ideals have survived in and navigated in a post secular political environment. Many of these studies have articulated the complex ways in which Catholicism has adjusted and transformed in late modernity, as both an institution and a living tradition, as the Polish case points out, in ways

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa Maria Martínez de Codes, PhD, is Professor of American History at Complutense University, Madrid, a Vice President of the International Religious Liberty Association, and former Vice Director of Religious Affairs in Spain's Ministry of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> Jaime Contreras Contreras, PhD, is Professor Emeritus in Modern European History in Alcalá University, Spain. He was former director of the International Center for Sefardies and Adalusies Studies and Vice Chancellor of Postgraduate Students at Alcalá University.



which have opened unexpected avenues for its continuing influence on political practices and ideas, rather than disappearing from the political landscape altogether, as much previous research on religion and political experts had expected<sup>3</sup>.

It is commonplace to say that the Polish Catholic Church is not simply considered as a part of the Polish nation; it is the Polish nation. This is reflected in the current constitutional relationship of the Church and the State in the form of a Concordat and there is no doubt that this Concordat is part of a historical tradition that determined a form of reconstruction of the rule of law in 1993. Yet, despite a formally constitutionally warranted separation, the Church retains heavy weight in the legal and political debates to the purpose that currently, during a time of resurgence of populism across the world, variety of right-wing parties adopt positions supported those of the Church, establishing a dysfunctional nexus between religion and nationalism.

So it happens that the identity of the nation and sovereignty are determined by a culture, the Catholic, that characterizes them. Such agreement was especially pointed out by the highest authority of the Catholic Church when Pope John Paul II, on Poland's entry into the European Union in 2004, indicated that such adherence was justified in order to "restore Europe for Christianity," the main idea that was based on the premise that "majorities also have rights." Such shift implied new forms of religious nationalism for Poland that significantly affected the exercise of religious freedom by creating notorious dichotomies between "us" and "others."

During the communist period (1945-1989) the Polish governments never felt powerful enough to prohibit Catholic worship or to break down ecclesiastical structures or close religious orders, hence the end of communism in Poland, as also happened in Eastern Europe, produced an ideological vacuum and the severe economic conditions that accompanied the "return to Europe" demanded a new set of "beliefs". The connection of nationality with historically dominant religions soon acquired the character of reconstruction of the nation, which meant that the religious actors' protagonists of this process strengthened their social and political capacities.

At the outset of the post-communist period, notorious concerns were expressed, especially regarding the role that the Catholic Church could play in this transition process. An important sector of Polish intellectuals expressed their opposition to the growing hegemony of the church, which changed its strategy of "open Catholicism"<sup>4</sup> understood as encouraging

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<sup>3</sup> Danchin (2002, 23).

<sup>4</sup> Stala (2012, p. 180 et seq).



open channels into more democracy, emancipation, and freedom, to at least one of monopolistic authoritarianism. In such circumstances, religious revivalism was conceived as a crucial factor that hindered the development of pluralism in a society that was trying to move towards more secular forms. Now the role of the Catholic Church was complicated because it had to reconcile their transnational dimension with their national role and presence, the question today is how these actors currently position themselves vis-a-vis ethnicity and nationalism and therefore the implications of their choices on religious freedom.

The aim of this contribution is therefore to explore the method and implications of the growing alliance between conservative Catholicism and Polish nationalism taking into account the normative content given to religious freedom. It is noticeable despite the fragmented nature of religious beliefs at the individual level of believers, religious freedom has got the features of a relevant field of intervention in Poland, with clear consequences on morality and therefore the exercise of politics, also as religious rights, and freedoms of citizens. The Polish case makes it possible to advance discussion on issues with pan-European resonance, such as the rights of majorities, religion as a nation-building strategy, populism, and trends toward religious inequality and the broader instrumentalization of faith.

Our interest in the first place is to introduce the evolving features of religiosity and belief in Poland, in the last 30 years, to highlight how the Polish Catholic Church through its historical presence has been contributing towards the legitimation of one specific sort of faith to the potential exclusion of others. Secondly, our presentation aims to illustrate the tension between Polish nationalism and conservative Catholicism, through the legal framework that covers religious diversity in education. Finally, we wish to suggest that the maximalist positions of radical nationalism, of the party in power, Law and Justice, are causing a deep split in the Polish ecclesial institutions, polarizing the tensions within the Episcopal Conference and deepening rifts between liberal and nationalist factions of Polish Catholicism.

## 1. EVOLVING TRENDS IN RELIGIOSITY IN POLAND

Against the highly fragmented and ambiguous features of religiosity in Europe, Poland stands apart due to the specific dynamics of state, church, and nation that weakens the process of emergence of a secularized society. The historical process of the communist experience was decisive, for more than forty years, a time in which the church was attributed privileges and exceptional social influences that led to the firm anchoring of religion in the



public space. The terms of this evolution were developed on the following main axes: 1) the relation between the State and religious organizations, 2) the interaction between religion and politics, 3) the institutional influence of the "national" churches, and 4) the interreligious dialogue and relations<sup>5</sup>. If one takes a closer look at the characteristics of religiosity in a country like Poland, one finds that the development of religious belief patterns of religious beliefs is multi-layered and complex: instead of the 'faith without belonging' prevalent elsewhere in Europe, recent Polish data points to 'belonging with less and less faith<sup>1</sup>, where one still finds an impressively high level of denominational belonging, but with a declining level of faith and/or participation.

Thus, the Catholic Christian shares of the Polish population have been relatively stable. According to the Pew Research Center (2018) findings<sup>6</sup> on the significance of religion in Central and Eastern Europe, 96% of Poles were raised as Christian and 92% still identify as such. However, 70% of Poles consider that religion should be kept separate from government politics, with 25% supporting the view that government should be involved in supporting religious values and beliefs. On the other hand, 64% of Poles find Catholicism to be a key component of their national identity although only 28% of respondents within the same survey have stated that the government should provide financial support to the country's preferred Catholic Church.

At the same time, Polish society seems to be in flux in terms of its religiosity. Fractured Catholicism currently dictates a certain disagreement with the rules of the Church, for example, in relation to sexual behavior, with 41 % in a Pew survey between 2015-2017 refusing to follow the Church's rules on abortion<sup>7</sup>. Yet 29% of Poles still consider religion very important in their lives, 61 % attend religious services at least monthly and 27% pray daily<sup>8</sup>. What means that the proportion of Catholics who do not worship is on the rise?

As a matter of fact, it is worth questioning whether Polish society still identifies with the values conveyed by the Catholic Church. The erosion of high religiosity, or in other words, the fragmentation of being Catholic in Poland today, is still taking place under quasi-monopolistic conditions in the religious market. Regardless of that, the Polish Catholic Church still

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<sup>5</sup> Merdjanova (2001, p. 265).

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center. 2018. Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities and Key Social Issues.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Heinen and Portet (2009).



maintains and assumes its mediating role for social and political issues as manifested in the position it assumed in the 2015 elections. At that time, the Catholic Church did not institutionally involve itself in the 2015 electoral campaign, however by supporting one candidate over others, the projection of the Catholic media, perceived as the "expression" of the Polish Episcopal Conference, was viewed as politically involved with the Law and Justice (PiS) candidate Andrzej Duda<sup>9</sup>. Earlier on, Catholic political parties have also echoed the Church's voice to the point that in 2003 the Church agreed to support Poland's accession to the EU provided that abortion laws would not be affected<sup>10</sup>.

In parallel, religious pluralism has grown in the country during post-communist period. From religious communities from India and the Far East to Protestants and evangelicals from Europe or the USA, Poland is once again becoming a "religious market". This process has led to new forms of religious nationalism, with majority religion being transformed into a politicized "resistance" strategy. This process has triggered renewed forms of religious nationalism, with the majority religion being transformed into a politicized "resistance" strategy<sup>11</sup>. This sociocultural context has been partly determined by the social and economic effects derived from the fall of the communist system, which was aggravated by the worsening of an economic crisis that has generated a serious social division between broad impoverished social layers and a small, enriched minority. In this climate it is not surprising that Polish Catholicism is affected by the context of crisis. Thus, for example, there were many priests who had difficulties developing their pastoral mission and ended up adopting more conservative positions.

The role and position of the Polish Catholic Church can be analyzed in the context of (and in contrast to) the Roman Catholic Church, with which it maintained close relations during the period when John Paul II was Pope. After 1989, the Pope developed an explicit discourse on the role his homeland should play in a united Europe: the right and responsibility to become a member of Europe, but based on its own values, without uncritically adopting Western customs: "Not everything the West offers in terms of theoretical visions and practical lifestyles corresponds to the values of the Gospel<sup>12</sup>." Perceived Western values such as secularism, consumerism, materialism, and even atheism, were enemies of a Christian Europe.

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<sup>9</sup> Lesniczak (2016, pp. 272-73, 277).

<sup>10</sup> Heinen and Portet (2009, p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> Topidi (2019).

<sup>12</sup> Byrnes (2002, p. 459).



## 2. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND EDUCATION IN POLAND

In contrast to communist policies that restricted religion to the private sphere, Article 35 of the Constitution adopted by the National Assembly on 2 April 1997, recognizes the right of national or ethnic minorities to preserve and develop their culture, including the right to establish and maintain institutions to protect their religious identity (paragraph 2)<sup>13</sup>. Given that religious diversity is currently limited in Poland, as numerically few religious minorities have established presence on Polish territory, the impact of the presence and influence of the dominant Catholic Church affected an extended array of issues, covering also some previously belonging to the private sphere, such as abortion. It is also difficult to see the power struggle between majority and minority religious actors under the conditions of a religious "quasi-monopoly."

The inherent danger at present seems to be that the dominant church pushes for social paradigms that bypass religious diversity. Can there really be a pluralized religious market in Poland? In an era where "majorities" have been advancing the argument that they have rights too; we question if the content of Article 53 of the Polish Constitution<sup>14</sup> providing for freedom of religion to everyone is functional and operative.

In legal terms, the European Court of Human Rights has developed religious freedom compliance oversight and it has stated that Poland similarly to other European countries has enjoyed relative autonomy on religious matters. Actually, although the model of separation of state and Church applies constitutionally speaking (Article 25(3) of the 1997 Constitution), it remains informative to observe how the state unfolds its preference for the traditional Church<sup>15</sup>. The introduction of religious education, endorsing the majority religion, suggests the reticence to de facto separate the state from the Polish Roman Catholic Church.

Speaking in terms of religious diversity in Poland, it happens that the situation of marginality of minority confessions is hardly perceived by public opinion; and when these confessions are referenced in the media, immediately most of the media fall on their anti-Polish nature. As a matter

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<sup>13</sup> Article 35(1) and (2) of the 1997 Polish Constitution, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angienski/konl.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Article 53 of the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland stipulates that the freedom "shall include the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest such religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing rites or teaching. Freedom of religion shall also include possession of sanctuaries and other places of worship for the satisfaction of the needs of believers as well as the right of individuals, wherever they may be, to benefit from religious services."

<sup>15</sup> Merdjanova (2001, p. 277}.





of fact, attempts of the Muslim League to establish a Muslim Community Centre in Warsaw in the early 2010s triggered anti-Muslim rhetoric, which approached the project as an unwelcomed expression of radical Islam linked to terrorism<sup>16</sup>. An irrational expression of fear that was justified by the imminent "danger<sup>11</sup> of the inevitable Islamization of the nation and of Europe as a whole.

In Poland there are two types of schools (Education System Act, 1991): public (state) schools and non-public schools. The latter, insofar as they are denominational, are autonomous in the sense that they can have their own curriculum, which must be approved by the Minister of Education. Since the law does not require religious neutrality to become a public school, these schools may be granted public school status at a later stage. In this case, the school is eligible for public funding. Public schools that do not have public school status may receive financial support from local governments. One of the most symbolic, but also significant, changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Poland concerned the introduction of religious education in schools. Before the end of communism, religious education was excluded from the curriculum; religious schools were closed or under strict state control.

One of the most symbolic, but also significant changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Poland concerned the introduction of religious courses in schools. Before the end of communism, religious education was excluded from the curriculum; religious schools were closed or under strict state control. The post-1989 reinforcement of the power of the Church made a lasting impact on the public education system insofar as it institutionalized its presence in all levels of education. Accordingly, Article 12 of the Concordat between the Holy See and Poland<sup>17</sup> is explicit:

1. Recognizing parental rights regarding the religious education of their children, as well as the principles of tolerance, the State shall guarantee that public primary and secondary schools and kindergartens administered by civil administrative organizations or independent bodies shall provide religious education within an appropriate school or pre-school curriculum in accordance with the wishes of the persons concerned.

2. The curriculum for teaching the Catholic religion, as well as the textbooks used, shall be determined by ecclesiastical authority, and shall be made known to the relevant civil authorities.

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<sup>16</sup> *Mosque building brings Islam fears to Poland* by Gabriela Bachynski. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-mosque-idUSTRE6302VN20100401>.

<sup>17</sup> Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland, signed on 28 July 1993 and ratified on 23 February 1998.



3. Teachers of religion must have the approval of their diocesan bishop. Withdrawal of this permission means loss of the right to teach religion.

It is obvious that these Concordat provisions are protected by the constitutional norms of 1997, which include the important role of religion in public education, with the guarantee of the ideological impartiality of the state and the prohibition of discrimination. Such principles apply in the same way to other religious organizations, recognizing them the same rights. This is what the Constitution says (article 25): (2) Public authorities in the Republic of Poland shall be impartial in matters of personal conviction, whether religious or philosophical, or concerning views of life, and shall ensure their free expression in public life; (3) relations between the State and the Churches and other religious organizations shall be based on the principle of respect for their autonomy and mutual independence in their respective spheres, and on the principle of cooperation for the benefit of individuals and the general public. Internal autonomy under Article 25(3) here means the right to make their internal laws, while the state authorities cannot interfere or determine the direction of their internal functioning. It also means that the state and religion should be financially independent of each other. Nevertheless, religious minorities with little public presence are considered discriminated against because they are unable to carry out their programs, especially if they have difficulties in obtaining official subsidies.

In general terms, there is a consensus on the introduction of religious education into the Polish curriculum. Based on the assumption that the Church should exercise relevant power, there has been little debate and limited preparation in terms of the resources needed to support the decision, both in terms of material and human infrastructure (e.g., curriculum content, teacher training, etc.). In a social context where findings on the religiosity of Polish Catholics show a selective acceptance of religious dogma, especially among the younger generation, it is worth asking whether young people are increasingly questioning the privileged position of the Church in the social and political system. One obvious consequence of this process is the decoupling of religiosity and morality.

### 3. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AT THE CROSSROADS: AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS WITH THE GOVERNMENT

Poland is the most obvious case in Europe of an alliance between the government and a politically powerful church, where both the liberal and nationalist camps have strong traditions. Moreover, the PiS coalition





government's disregard for basic human rights (refugees) and the institutions of liberal democracy has challenged the Polish Church to react. The Polish case is thus broadly relevant to understand the response of the Catholic Church to the nationalists' borrowing of Christian values and symbols<sup>18</sup>.

This reflection requires some prior considerations. The teaching of the Vatican Council II (1962-1965) on human rights and liberal democracy is a central aspect of the Church's political theology and has been further developed and applied in the decades following the Council. As far as democracy is concerned, the doctrine of the fundamental compatibility between Church teaching and liberal democracy was formulated in the Declaration on Religious Liberty (1965), *Dignitatis Humanae*, and in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965).

Since the Council, however, there have been increasing tensions between the positions of the Church on moral issues and many seculars and even some Catholic liberals who claim that these are key human rights issues. As liberal democracies face pressure to adopt new values and forms in more and more areas of cultural and social life, the more conservative populations of Central and Eastern Europe face further tensions between their moral views and the perceived cultural colonization by the liberal West. In Poland, these tensions are particularly acute. Conflicts over moral policy are central political and social arenas in the struggle for political power, and the debates over migration.

In the reconciliation between the Church's resistance to moral liberalization and *aggiornamento* with liberal democracy. In Poland, the pontificate of John Paul II was a decisive factor in the national Church's rapprochement with liberal democracy and the deepening of moral conservatism in the country<sup>19</sup>. In line with his universalist convictions, the Pope was also a constraining force for the national Catholic faction of the Church, with great influence not only on the appointment of bishops but also on political issues, such as the country's accession to European integration or support for national Catholic parties<sup>20</sup>.

From 2010, the Law and Justice party (PiS) and the national Catholic clergy formed a tacit alliance, which helped the PiS to reach victory in the 2015 parliamentary and presidential elections. In mid-2016, however, the episcopate began to distance itself from the government and criticized PiS's refugee policy. Why did the liberal and mainstream bishops shift to a

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<sup>18</sup> Modrzejewski (2017, p. 23).

<sup>19</sup> Weigel (2010).

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II (1999).



distanced and even critical stance towards the government from mid-2016? We assume that there are two explanatory approaches.

The first way of explaining the distancing is the internal dynamics of the Polish Church, namely the polarization of the Church and the erosion of the benefits of its alliance with the government<sup>21</sup>. The second path argues that the Vatican intervention, often to reinstate doctrinal orthodoxy, had a strong impact on the national Episcopate's decisions. The pro-democracy theology of the Church is both pushed by the Vatican and implemented by the highest authorities of the national episcopate. The analysts of the Polish case shows that the relationship between the pontiff and the national hierarchies is a two-way affair in which the pope's authority is often diminished or challenged by tensions between the two levels<sup>22</sup>.

### *3.1. The First PiS Government*

The Law and Justice Party (PiS), founded and chaired by the Kaczynski brothers, is the most obvious political expression of Polish national Catholicism, emerging from the breeding ground provided by the Solidarnosc trade union from the late 1970s. It was in the early 1980s, while the famous union was still clandestine, that the two brothers joined its ranks, immediately taking up positions of responsibility close to President Lech Walesa. Following his strategy, the Kaczynski twins supported the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-communist government in the country supported by Solidarnosc, although it was severely weakened by the various internal factions that made it up. Jaroslaw Kaczynsky contributed to this fragmentation by creating a Christian Democratic formation fed by the most anti-communist sectors of the Union, whose aim was blatantly the political elimination of the communist factions. The fall of the Mazowiecki government, concocted by President Walesa and also supported by him, was the occasion for the break of the two brothers with their mentor, who, already much weakened by the multiple tendencies undermining the Union, resigned from the presidency in 1993<sup>23</sup>.

The political alternative that replaced the old Solidarnosc was an electoral platform of more than thirty-five political formations and groupings that rallied around a common point: Polish identity, crystallized based on Catholic values, historically considered and in the structure of

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<sup>21</sup> Grzymala-Busse (2015).

<sup>22</sup> Meyer Resende M, Hennig A. Polish Catholic Bishops, Nationalism and Liberal Democracy. *Religions*. 2021; 12(2):94. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020094>

<sup>23</sup> Orella Martinez Jose Luis, *The National Catholic Son of Solidarity, Space, Time and Form*, Series V *Contemporary History* 29, (2017, pp 204-224).



which the most important human values are contained: Life, Liberty, and Property. But this platform could not withstand the internal fractures and after the fleeting electoral triumph of 1997 it began to disintegrate irreversibly. This gave rise to two political formations which were the two most expressive political structures of the Polish right: Civic Platform, which represents a liberal conservatism, opts for a market economy, and seeks to join the European Union, and the Law and Justice Platform (PiS), which focuses on the defense of traditional Catholic morality, is critical of gender movements, is explicitly homophobic and has an interventionist economic program. PiS claims to be more comfortable in rural areas of Poland than in urban areas and repeatedly expresses its desire to represent the interests of unemployed youth.

In the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections, the Kaczynski won the presidency of parliament and the presidency of the republic. The coincidence of the death of Pope John Paul II with the first electoral victory of the PiS led to an increased influence of the national Catholic faction. His legacy was claimed by both liberals and national Catholics. Nevertheless, and despite his conservatism in moral policy, Pope John Paul was critical of nationalism and rejected anti-Semitism.

The victory of the PiS in the above mentioned general and presidential elections facilitated the Church's access to political power beyond the already established structures for church-state cooperation. The PiS government opened up the possibility for the most radical voices within the Church to express their stance and granted them access to the political arena. In turn, the PiS used Catholic identity as a legitimization for its illiberal and anti-democratic policies<sup>24</sup>. The government portrayed the refugees as an "invasion" threatening Poland and feeding terrorist networks operating in Europe, and made extensive use of the crisis as a narrative strategy. The nationalist wing of the Catholic Church joined the government's anti-refugee stance.

### *3.2. The Second PiS Government*

In 2015 and 2016, the church hierarchy allowed the celebration of official Independence Day masses - and these were held in Warsaw's most prominent churches<sup>25</sup>. In 2017, the combination of a nationalist agenda with a Christian identity was evident in the rally slogan: "We want God!" National Catholicism again marched through the main streets of Warsaw,

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<sup>24</sup> Narkowicz (2018, p. 365).

<sup>25</sup> Catholic World Report 2015.



completing the process of merging Catholic symbols in support of a radical form of nationalism sanctioned by the government.

During the second PiS government, the national Catholic faction of the Church radicalized its position and gained influence through increased support for the government. The PiS ideological orientation towards national Catholicism was used to legitimize the government's positions during the refugee and democracy crisis. Established conservatives saw the deepening schism and diminishing reputation of the Church and distanced themselves from the government as it moved too far away from Catholic political theology. Although we have focused here on the church level, the polarization of these ideological divisions ran through all levels of the church, from the ecclesiastical elite to Catholic organizations and priests in local communities.

The distancing between the Polish Church and the government of the nation is explained by the internal polarization of the Church itself. Since the transition to democracy, however, the Church has responded in different ways to the secularization of society, leading to a deepening of ideological antagonism between the three main factions of the Church. In the three decades after 1989, the internal cohesion of the Church diminished and a process of ideological differentiation began both among the clergy and the faithful, moving along an axis of nationalist-conservative versus more liberal/secular Catholicism<sup>26</sup>.

The first group of clergies in the Polish Church consists of a minority of liberal priests and bishops who follow the pro-democratic orthodoxy of the Vatican Council II and advocate that the Church focus on its religious role (emphasis on faith) and distance itself from the political arena. This liberal faction is in the tradition of the liberal intellectual Catholics who rejected communism. This led to a strong commitment to liberal democracy and criticism of the blurring of the lines between church and state. Liberal Catholics are rooted in respect for human rights, especially religious freedom and liberal democracy. Their political role - promoted by Pope John Paul II - during the Solidarity Crisis (1980-1981) and later during the transition to democracy (1988-1990) gave these prelates a strong public profile in the 1980s. They were also instrumental in negotiating the 1997 Polish Constitution, counterbalancing the demands of the national Catholic bishops for the Catholic Church to be enshrined in the new constitution<sup>27</sup>.

The second faction comprises the majority of centrist conservative and national conservative bishops in the Polish Bishops' Conference.

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<sup>26</sup> Narkowicz (2018, p. 375).

<sup>27</sup> Meyer Resende (2018).



These bishops advocate moral conservatism but maintain their defense of democratic principles and human rights. The mainstream bishops did not immediately condemn the PiS alliance with the Church.

The third group, which includes the national Catholic bishops and priests, responded to secularization after 1989 by elevating Catholicism to the status of state religion and attempting to institutionalize the creed of the fusion of Catholicism and the Polish nation. The national Catholics are heirs to the cultural currents of XIX, when Catholicism was an integral part of 19th century nationalism as the basis of Polish identity. During communist rule (1947-1989), the Church, which suffered alongside the nation, regained the status of a national institution, resisting foreign and totalitarian rule from Moscow<sup>28</sup>. After Stalinism (1947-1956), Cardinal Wyszyński, who headed the country's only legal civil society organization, organized the mobilization of resistance to communism, with national Catholicism as the underlying rhetoric of legitimacy. The tradition of national Catholicism has a long history in Poland, but it has never been more in line with a post-war government II than during the second PiS government. According to studies on the ideological attitudes of the clergy, the new generation of priests is also more nationalistic than the previous one. More than 80% of the younger priests profess national Catholic ideas.

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<sup>28</sup> Meyer Resende (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Pedziwiatr (2018, p. 471).



This polarization of the Polish Church has worried the Vatican and prompted Pope Francis to launch a campaign to discipline Catholic anti-immigration positions. Poland's Catholic Church - in league with a government that refused to grant Muslim migrants the status of asylum seekers<sup>30</sup> - was a glaring case in point. The Vatican approached the Polish bishops and requested a report on the Church's policy towards refugees. Later, the Pope visited Poland (July 2016) at a moment of great public and political polarization over the arrival of some two million migrants, mainly from the Middle East.

Pope Francis' direct intervention during the asylum crisis explains the timing of the episcopate's turnaround<sup>31</sup>. After the Pope's visit to Poland in July 2016, the episcopate expressed its displeasure with the government's refugee policy for the first time. Prior to this, the growing tensions between the Catholic view of liberal democracy and an increasingly accepted trend in Western democracies to recognize issues such as abortion and gay rights as human rights were factors that facilitated the complicity between the episcopate and the PiS in the run-up to the 2015 elections.

As a broader contribution, the article shows how challenging the connection with nationalism is for the Church's ecclesiastical and ideological structures, especially in the current crisis of liberal democracy. In the European context, the Polish case is the clearest expression of the damaging relationship between nationalism and Catholicism, a manifestation of the anti-democratic populism that is sweeping Europe.

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<sup>30</sup> Kucharczyk and Meseznikov (2019).

<sup>31</sup> Pedziwiatr (2018, p. 471).





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