

AGATA TASAK
Krakow
ORCID: 0000-0001-7200-2193

The evolution of the perceived social authority of the Catholic Church in Poland in the first decades of the 21st century

Introduction

The Catholic Church has held and still holds a special position in public life in Poland. However, in the period analysed, clear symptoms of weakening religiosity in Europe and a resulting reduction in participation in religious practices are already noticeable. The social processes related to the secularisation of public life, the privatisation and individualisation of faith, the deinstitutionalisation of religion, secularisation of people's mentality and selectivity in observing the instructions of the Catholic Church have been and continue to be the subject of numerous analyses.¹ It should be noted, however, that due to the special relationship between religion and politics, rooted in the history of Poland, many researchers have expressed opinions on the apparent difference in the rate of these processes in Polish society. Their slower rate was pointed out and linked to the significant authority of the Catholic Church. In addition, considerations often raised the issue of the influence of the person and teachings of John Paul II on Catholicism in Poland and, consequently, a significant impact on the level of religiosity and the high level of social authority of the Catholic Church. It should, however, be noted that the perception of this authority has been changing in recent years. In Polish society, there are also visible symptoms of an acceleration of all the processes previously diagnosed in other European societies, but they are taking place in different areas of social life and at a different pace.

¹ See, for example, Mariański (2013), Marczevska-Rytko (2010), Firlit, Hainz, *et al.* (eds.), (2012), Grabowska (2022a).

In the 21st century, expectations regarding the proper role of religion in Polish public life and the permissible limits of the Catholic Church's involvement in socio-political affairs have changed dynamically. Therefore, questions systematically arise about how religiosity in Poland and trust in the Catholic Church are evolving, and to what extent secularisation and the processes related to privatisation and selectivity in respecting the principles of faith are specific to Poland. Consequently, an interesting issue is the evolution of the perception of the authority of the Catholic Church in Poland. The primary goal of this study is to describe and explain the evolution in the perceived authority of the Catholic Church in Poland during the time period indicated in institutional, doctrinal, and personal dimensions. Indicating these changes, it is necessary to seek answers to further important questions, such as how the level of trust in the institutional Church has changed, how the religiosity of Polish society has evolved in terms of declarations of faith and in religious practices and declarations of adherence to Catholic morality. The answers to these questions will be the basis for formulating conclusions about the elements of continuity and change in the perceived authority of the Catholic Church in Polish society.² The basic research method that made it possible to obtain answers to such questions was the analysis of existing (generated) data.

A description and explanation of changes in the perceived authority of the Catholic Church in Poland must be related to the characteristics of the observed redefinition of authority figures in the modern world. The current perception of the rank of authority figures is influenced by a number of contemporary complex social changes. Undoubtedly, it is possible to identify symptoms of the crisis of authority in Poland and around the world: questioning the need for recognition of those in authority, and sometimes pointing out their harmfulness as well as frequently questioning their substantive and ethical competence. Numerous analyses emphasise the narrowing of the scope of influence of authority figures. Research shows that they are often eliminated only in private life and distanced from their influence in other spheres of life. Therefore, a necessary starting point is to recall the most important concepts of authority that are useful in further analysis. The way authority is perceived determines, to a certain extent, the strength of its influence and the level of influence.

² Considerations of length imposed limits on citations of available research results and so the approach to some issues was narrowed down to the most critical areas with an awareness that some relevant issues important in the indicated research area remain outside the analysis.

Authority in public life

It is first necessary to point out the complexity and multidimensionality of definitional approaches to the concept of authority. The ambiguity of this concept is the subject of numerous interdisciplinary studies and as a result, there are many perspectives, but no clear interpretation of this concept. Invariably, however, in every analysis the meaning resulting from the etymology of the Latin word *autorictas* is strongly emphasised, that is recognition of influence, importance, a person or institution enjoying a special position. Related words include *auctor* – the perpetrator, creator, or master, *auctorizare* – authorised, *auctoramentum* – obligation, *autorictas patrum* – more than advice, less than an order or advice that cannot be ignored (Marciniczyk 1991: 13). The first use of this term in Polish is associated with the German term *Autorität* – understood as authority, seriousness, and an indication of a higher social position thanks to which one can influence other people (Ziółkowski 2012: 21). In the context of the research issues, it is useful to recall the Christian tradition, in which it is assumed that authority means the ability to “testify to the content of rational reality, the ability to guide all people towards a goal” (Szlachta 2004: 28). It is indicated that authority in this understanding works for maintaining social order as well as supporting religion and tradition. In this understanding, authority fulfils the educational functions of a good guide. In the context of further considerations, it is important to stress the actual influence of authority as the ability to change the behaviour of another entity, that is authority, can effectively influence the behaviour and way of thinking of other people. This understanding of authority can also be found in the *Dictionary of the Polish Language*:

“a person who inspires trust, is an expert in a field or an oracle in moral matters, is respected and has an influence on the behaviour and thinking of other people. An institution, magazine, etc. that influences social opinion, is popular and respected because it represents values or content accepted and recognised by a group.” (*Słownik współczesnego języka...* 1996: 31).

Undoubtedly, the power to influence the opinions and behaviour of other people, combined with trust and respect from other people and general respect, are most often indicated in the definitions of this concept. It can therefore be assumed, following Jacek Ziółkowski, that authority is:

“a dynamic communicative relationship where the subject of authority (role bearer) exerts an effective influence on its recipients, who accept its legitimacy under the influence of values and models preferred in a given system, whether cultural, political, economic etc.

The subject of authority, in its influence, uses methods that exclude direct and conscious coercion. The relationship of authority has its own domain, which specifies the scope of subordination of recipients” (Ziółkowski 2012: 37).

This emphasises that authority is perceived through the prism of its features, which are recognised and respected by public opinion. In the context of indicating the determinants determining the power and durability of social authority, it is extremely important to underline that it is a process related to the positive acceptance of certain features and values, but the most important basis for recognition is trust. Authority then is primarily based on trust (ibid: 24).

It should be stressed that the power of a given authority is assessed by its effectiveness in influencing three dimensions. The first of these is the amount of recognition and respect its judgments receive. The second is the size of the social space in which its instructions are valid. The third is durability, that is the time span over which its judgments are accepted as valid. Across many analyses, numerous typologies of authority figures can be found (see, for example, Witkowski 2009, Ziółkowski 2012, Marcińczyk 1991, Sieradzan (ed.) 2009, and Wagner 2005). In the area of research outlined here, the definition of moral authority is particularly important. Along with emphasis placed on the importance of the axiological sphere, adjudication in the sphere of morality and the communication of ethical and religious content, it is noted that authority is “ascribed to persons or institutions whose behaviour is consistent with generally valued ethical and moral values” (Ziółkowski 2012: 42).

In the context of the issues analysed here, it is worth mentioning one more important concept. Yves R. Simon presented his definition of authority based on the concept of the common good. He argued that in the process of discovering, describing and convincing others of the importance of specific goals that constitute the common good, those who are authority figures should play an important role (Simon 1993: 30).

As underlined above, approaching authority in terms of a dynamic relationship, mutual influence, and reactions, always involves emphasizing trust as an inherent attribute of authority. This trust is the source of authority’s legitimacy and the condition for influence. It is often noted that obedience and submission to authority are justified by many factors, such as wisdom, honesty, experience, and compliance with moral principles, but in each case the fundamental, decisive issue is trust. Trust is the first factor in recognising the influence of authority, but it is often added that the subject of authority should also be a model of reasonable behaviour and social attitudes:

“so, as if it were a guardian of values that remain highly prized, and which at least some people would still like to defend, such authority is given to someone who tries to remind us of these values, who has not yet doubted their meaning. It is bestowed on institutions that actively protect values.” (Skarga 2004: 1).

Prior to further considerations, it should be mentioned that in analyses of the decline in the status of authority figures in modern societies and in searches for explanations of these processes, the main cause is often a decline in the level of social trust. It should be assumed that the dynamic socio-political processes of the modern world favour such changes, and some analyses point to their irreversibility.

An important issue for further considerations is to recall concepts that state that in the modern world opinions on the crisis of authority should not be formulated. Instead, only redefinitions of their role and the way they are perceived should be described. It is stated that the demand for authority figures in the 21st century is no smaller than before, but due to the fulfilment of a different role, primarily of a “wise guide” in a new, complicated world (Wagner 2005: 22). It is stressed that the current trend is to move from “the authority of leaders” to “the authority of examples”. The former clearly indicated the necessary choices while the latter instruct and model ways of coping in a world full of possibilities, “show how to move in a world full of choices” (*ibid.*). The authority described in this way is often called “rational authority” because it is not recognised thoughtlessly.

Tadeusz Sławek, describing the status of contemporary authority figures, stressed that in the modern world the strength of their influence is determined by a lack of involvement in current political disputes: “we know that they exist, but they can only fulfil their mission when they do not participate in the whirlwind and confusion of everyday life, but are summoned to this everyday life” (Sławek 2010: 1). Another distinguishing feature of authority in this concept is that it influences through the power of its decent behaviour, which becomes a model and example for others (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is strongly emphasised that at present moral authorities are chosen as role models due to their attitudes or moral views.

Bearing in mind the diversity of perspectives in defining the concept of authority, in the analysis of selected research issues, trust is assumed to be the basis for recognising authority and that it is a dynamic relationship in which the subject of authority exerts influence on recipients who accept its legitimacy in connection with the recognition and adoption of a catalogue of specific values and patterns of behaviour. However, the strength and importance of the authority will be evidenced by the effectiveness of influence in three areas, name-

ly recognition and respect of the authority's judgments, the size of the social space in which the authority's recommendations are recognised and durability or the time range in which the authority's judgments are considered binding.

The evolution of trust in the Catholic Church in Poland

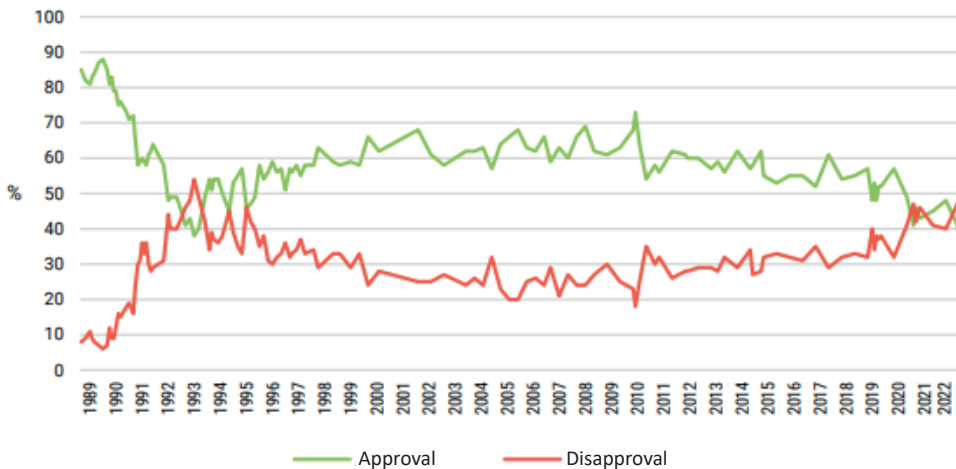
Assuming that the level of trust is the most important indicator of the recognition of authority, it is necessary to begin with an analysis of the evolution of the level of trust of Polish society towards the institutional Church and its representatives. It should be remembered that before 1989, the Catholic Church played a special role in Poland and enjoyed a very high level of trust and a specific social position. For wide circles of society, it was an unquestionable moral authority (Mazurkiewicz 2001: 284). In the political system of that time, a significant part of Polish society perceived representatives of the institutional Church as the only representatives of social interests in public life. A strong belief in the important and special role of the Catholic Church in maintaining national identity and maintaining a relatively high level of independence from political authorities resulted in very broad and lasting social support. Many publications point out that in those years the level of trust in the Catholic Church reached approximately 90%. (Nosowski 2008: 1).

This situation changed after 1989, when, along with systemic transformations, critical assessments of the Catholic Church's engagement in political life appeared. The results of the analyses indicate that in the new reality, a large part of society negatively assessed the involvement of the church hierarchy in the political sphere and its influence on the decisions of the government. Considering the results of many studies, both trust in the institutional Church and approval for the actions of its representatives decreased significantly during that period. In the years 1989-1994, the percentage of people declaring trust in the Catholic Church declined from 87.4% to 40.5% with a simultaneous significant increase in distrust (Baniak 2022: 229). It should be noted that the results of research by the Public Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, hereinafter CBOS) in 1993 showed one of the lowest levels of positive assessments and trust in the activities of the Catholic Church (Marjański 2017: 81). In mid-1993, approval for the Church reached a record low level of 38%, while the level of disapproval was equally unprecedented at 54% (Roguska 2022: 84). After 1993, there was a change in this trend and attempts were made to explain this process. Apart from the assumption that the decline in trust was natural after a specific earlier period, it indicates that the basis for

the critical assessment was the negative attitude of part of the Polish society towards cases of direct influence of representatives of the Catholic Church in the political sphere (Nosowski 2008: 3). In the second half of the 1990s, an increase in the level of trust in the area analysed could already be noticed. Before further considerations, it can be concluded that the assumption that the Church's authority was and is supported by distance from current politics is correct. One can agree with the statement that "the more the Church distanced itself from the authorities, the more it moved from the position of a political player to the position of a moral authority, the more trustworthy it became." (ibid: 7).

In the first decade of the 21st century, the level of approval and trust in Church activities was relatively rarely below 60%, often close to 70%, and even higher (Roguska 2022: 86).

Fig. 1
Changes in assessments of Church activities (1989-2022)



Source: Roguska 2022: 87.

From available detailed studies, the results of surveys regarding the level of trust can be referenced. They were as follows, 34.3% expressed strong trust in the Catholic Church, 41.2% declared that it deserves trust, 14.2% that it "neither deserves nor does not deserve trust", while 6% answered it probably does not deserve trust and 2.5% answered that it definitely does not deserve trust (Baniak 2022: 236). In 2010 research by CBOS, 68% of respondents assessed the Church's activities positively, and 23% negatively (Mariański 2017: 82). In 2012, CBOS research results compared the level of trust in various in-

stitutions operating in Poland; 61% declared trust in the Catholic Church and 28% claimed no trust. Very similar results were obtained in the 2014 survey (*ibid.*). In research published in 2016, the public opinion research centre TNS OBOP presented the following results: 60% declared trust and 33% declared no trust. Anticipating further considerations, it should be noted that in almost every study, young people (18-19 years old) declared much lower trust in the Catholic Church. (Baniak 2022: 240).

Significant changes occurred in 2020, when the positive ratings quickly decreased from 73% to 54% and negative ratings increased from 18% to 35%. Later, the level of positive assessments rarely exceeded 60% (Roguska 2022: 86). The downward trend intensified in subsequent years. It can be concluded that highly publicised, controversial, and reprehensible moral scandals involving priests and the rapprochement between representatives of the institutional Church and the ruling party, which was negatively assessed by some of the faithful, significantly influenced the change in the level of trust. In later studies, it must be added, after a period of numerous public discussions around a documentary by Tomasz Sekielski concerning cases of paedophilia in the Polish Church, the level of positive assessment of the Church dropped below 50% for the first time in twenty years of research, to 48% (*ibid.*), and in December 2020 for the first time since July 1993, the level of negative evaluation of the Church's activities was higher than the level of positive evaluation, at 47% and 41%, respectively (*ibid.*). This further decline in trust is also associated with the impact, noticed by society at large, of Church representatives on new legal regulations severely limiting the termination of pregnancy. The latest publication, that analyses Catholic Church activities and the assessment thereof by society, points out that the level of authority of the Church measured by positive assessments of its activities as an institution of public trust in the last decade has decreased from approximately 65% to 48% (Operacz (ed.) 2023: 26).

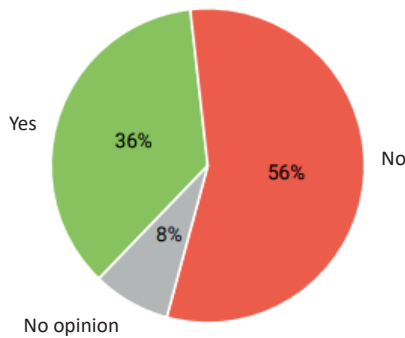
In light of available research, trust in representatives of the institutional Church is also decreasing. In research results from 2022, 36% of respondents declared that among Church representatives there is a person who is an authority in matters of faith and morals (CBOS 2022: 6).

Also, in the case of these results, it should be noted that positive declarations by young people are significantly less frequent. Recognition of Church authority and trust in its representatives was indicated by 21% of people aged 18-24 and 25% of people aged 25-34. The highest results, 49%, were found in people aged 55-64 (*ibid.*: 7). Therefore, when recalling the results of surveys relating to the level of trust in the Catholic Church and its representatives, special attention should be paid to the analysis of young people's answers. The results

of nationwide research on the level of trust among college students in 2012 include the information that 22% of young people expressed trust in priests and bishops and 33% of respondents said that the Catholic Church in Poland helps in formulating answers to important questions related to moral choices while 44% of respondents were of the opposite opinion (Guzik, Marzęcki, Stach 2015: 68). Slightly higher rates of trust in the Church were obtained in surveys conducted in 2007 and 2011 among secondary school students in Kalisz (over 59%) and college students in Poznań (over 55%). In light of these studies, a conclusion can be formulated that diagnoses “a slow crisis of trust in the Church as a social and, partly, moral institution.” (Marianiński 2017: 84).

Fig. 2

Is there anyone among representatives of the Church who you regard as an authority in matters of faith and morals? Such persons may be clergy or lay people, living or dead, widely, or only locally known.



Source: CBOS 2022: 6.

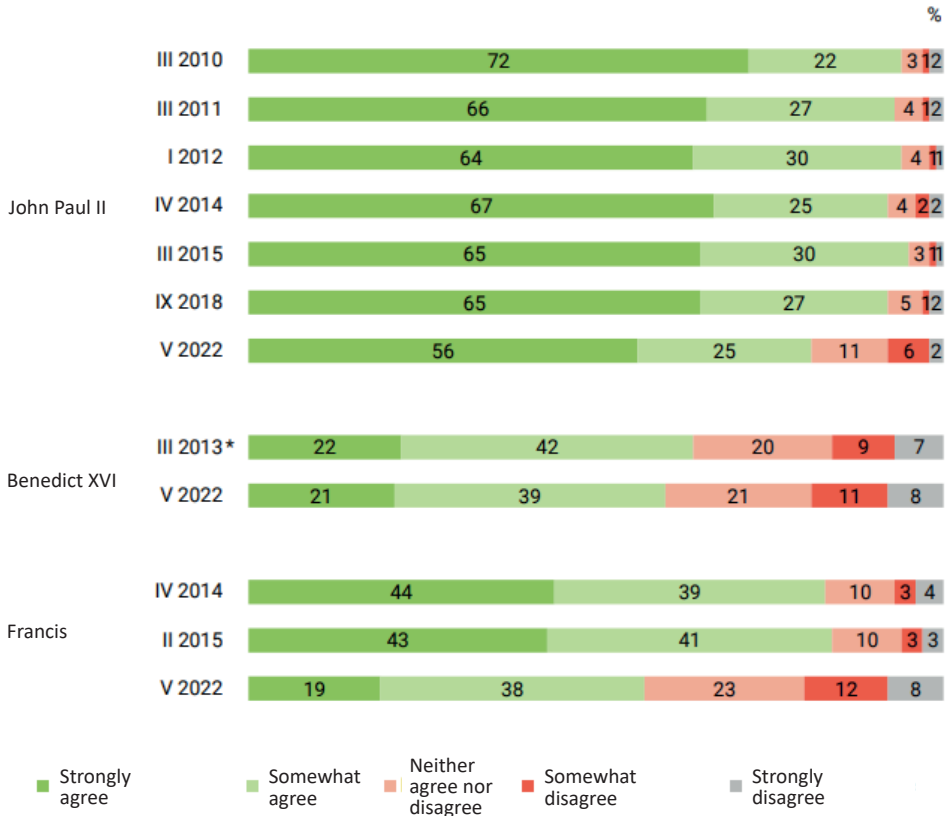
It is also important to remember that at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, young people formulated very strong and unambiguous negative assessments of involvement by institutional Church representatives in political activities. In 2012, 89% of students said that priests should not tell the faithful how to vote, and 78% believed that the Church should not influence the decisions of those in power (Guzik, Marzęcki, Stach 2015: 88). The latest research highlights the disappointment of young people. The Catholic Information Agency’s report ‘The Church in Poland 2021’ found that 50.7% of students declared that the Catholic Church is not an institutional authority for them (*Kościół katolicki w Polsce...* 2021: 3). In the report “The Church in Poland 2023” (Operacz (ed.) 2023), 21.4% of young people indicated “personal beliefs and thoughts” as the reason for disbelief or indifference, and 18.8% expressed “dissatisfaction with the Church as an institution”; and 9.3% indicated “knowledge of negative moral

attitudes of priests” (Operacz (ed.) 2023: 35). It is also important to point out that when asked what young people need and expect in relations with the Church, 35.6% declared “openness of priests to talk about their searches and problems”, 28.6% emphasised “the need for places for open meetings, discussions, common rest, rooms, clubs at parishes”, and 26.5% indicated the need for a place “where you can always come during a crisis” (Operacz (ed.) 2023: 41).

When writing about trust in representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland, it is necessary to treat separately the figure of John Paul II, who undoubtedly plays a special role in the Catholic Church and in Polish society both among young and older generations. For many years, John Paul II was perceived by Poles as a role model and a figure who significantly influenced their personal choices. In the opinion of many who analysed the results of research from the beginning of the 21st century, it was justified to say that he was perceived “in terms of an icon, a great Pole deserving the title of authority in public life” (CBOS 2022: 1).

Fig. 3

Is the Pope (...) an important moral authority for you?



Source: CBOS 2022: 2.

However, evolution is also visible in studies analysing the role played by John Paul II in the lives of Poles and the impact of his teachings on Polish society. In 2006, the year following his death, the memory of John Paul II and his teachings was very strong. The vast majority of Poles expressed attachment to his instructions and claimed to follow them in their lives. This was reported by 78% of the respondents, and 72% expressed knowledge of his papal teachings and 76% of the respondents assessed that the teachings of John Paul II changed the lives of Polish people (CBOS 2006: 5).

In 2010, five years after the death of John Paul II, just 65%, or 19 percentage points less than just after his death, claimed that they accepted his instructions. The number of people claiming that they do not pay attention to the Pope's instructions on a daily basis has also increased significantly. In 2005, they amounted to 11% of those surveyed while in 2010, 29% with 39% of respondents expressing ignorance of the papal teachings. It should be noted, however, that for 94% of respondents John Paul II remained an important moral authority (CBOS 2010: 15-18). However, at the same time, the impact of John Paul II's teaching on the lives of Poles was becoming less and less significant. The conclusions of the analyses stated that "respondents notice fewer and fewer people in their environment acting in accordance with the Pope's teachings and instructions, and they less and less often describe their behaviour as identical with the Pope's teachings" (ibid: 25). The results of subsequent research indicated that from the death of John Paul II to 2010, the number of people declaring knowledge of his teachings systematically decreased and the group of people declaring ignorance of it in research was growing, especially among the youngest respondents. It is worth mentioning, however, that in the years in which the Pope was beatified and canonised, this downward trend slowed down significantly and, to some extent, even reversed. (CBOS 2018a: 3).

Despite the trends indicated above, in 2018 a significant percentage of the Polish public still recognised John Paul II as a moral authority, and 92% considered him an important person in their lives (in 2015, there were 95% of such people). It should be noted that John Paul II was indicated as a moral authority in 99% of cases in the group of people identifying themselves as believers and observing the principles of the Catholic Church, but also in 90% in the group of "believers in their own way" and in 56% of people defining themselves as "undecided or non-believers" (CBOS 2018a: 6).

It should be remembered, however, that in the 2022 survey, questioning of Pope John Paul II's authority was already visible by approximately one third of the youngest respondents, up to 24 years of age, as well as residents of large cities and those materially best off. It should be noted that the percentage of

people questioning the moral teachings of two subsequent popes, Benedict XVI and Francis, in the indicated group of respondents reaches and sometimes even exceeds 50% (CBOS 2022: 3). Of course, declared faith or its lack and participation in religious practices are of key importance for the attitude towards popes. However, even those who do not participate in religious practices and who question the authority of John Paul II's successors, reject him much less often, as indicated in the research, as 44% in this group recognise John Paul II's authority (*ibid.*).

It should be recalled how carefully the specific events related to the illness and death of Pope John Paul II in 2005 were analysed. Some people considered them so momentous and important that they drew conclusions about the "generational nature" of these events and predicted lasting consequences in the attitudes of Polish society, especially among young people (Koseła 2008: 99). Already then, however, there were also voices that doubted the realization of this potential. In the context of further considerations, an extremely important point is that when forecasting the durability of the attitudes displayed during the "week of mourning" in 2005, it was noted that the most important factor determining the stability and continuation of this phenomenon will be the presence in the Polish institutional Church of those whom young people will be able to identify as authorities and role models. It was stressed that "the crowds revealed their hunger for authentic religion, authentic authority" (Mazurkiewicz 2008: 118). However, soon afterwards, in 2005, the opinion was formulated that "John Paul II taught young people a Church that they will not find in Poland" (Nosowski 2008: 6). It is important that already in those years, despite the relatively high trust of young people of that time in the institutional Church, they accepted its teachings regarding the broadly understood sphere of morality in private life with great distance. (Rogaczewska 2008: 150).

Religiosity of Polish society: declarations of faith, religious practices, and concordance of professed faith with the social teachings of the Catholic Church

An important area of research must be the influence and effectiveness of the authority of the Catholic Church as manifested by recognition of and respect for its judgments, the size of the social space in which these judgments apply and their durability. Therefore, the degree of religiosity of Polish society should be analysed. While emphasizing the complexity and multidimensional-

ity of the concept of religiosity, it should be noted that this concept was chosen to be understood as a declaration of faith and religious practices, as well as the issue of compliance of the professed faith with the social teachings of the Catholic Church.

The evolution of religiosity in Polish society after 1989 shows that initially the level remained relatively stable, which is worth emphasizing, in the group of young people surveyed as well (Mariański 2017: 24). However, in the years 2006-2015, visible changes took place, making it possible to conclude that a few years after the death of John Paul II, tendencies toward secularization occurred. These changes were recorded in both younger and older generations (ibid.). Nowadays, there are different definitions of the pace of these changes in particular periods, such as creeping or galloping secularisation, or milder statements about the processes that bear the hallmarks of secularisation. In the context of further considerations, it is worth recalling Janusz Mariański's accurate finding:

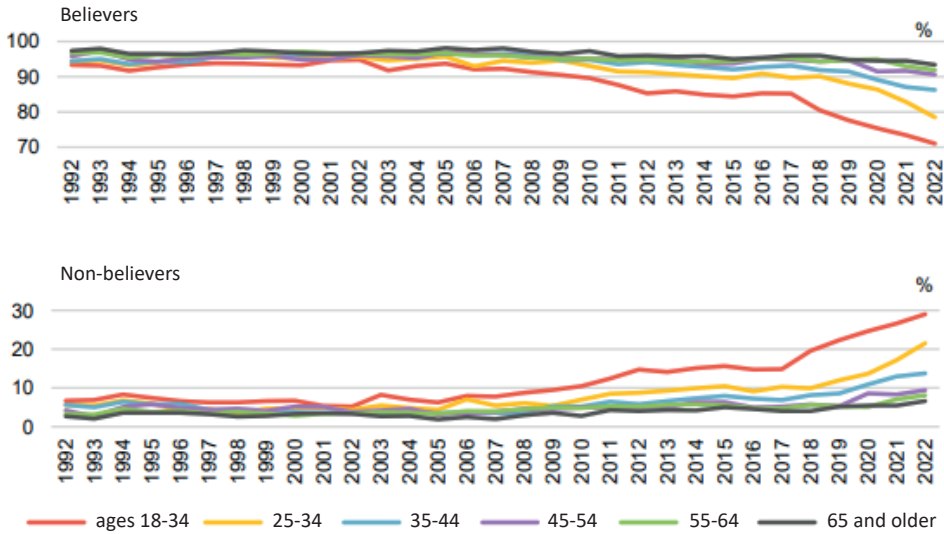
“in Poland, a positive attitude towards the Church is important as an indicator of personal religiosity. Anyone who does not trust the Church and whose assessment of it as an institution is negative shows a significant tendency to limit their participation in religious practices and even to weaken their faith. Religiosity and church-going behaviours are very closely linked in Poland” (ibid: 79).

Changes in religiosity indicate that an initial period of relative stability in 2006-2015 was followed by deeper changes, slower in declarations of faith and much more rapid in terms of level of practice. It should be assumed that in this matter the influence of the activity and subsequent departure of John Paul II was also significant, and in the following years the public opinion noted controversial issues and reprehensible events that, in the opinion of the faithful, discredited representatives of the Catholic Church.

By the end of the 1990s, between 91-96% of people described themselves as believers (CBOS 2020: 1). In 2005, the level of declaration of faith remained at 96%. Later, it began to decrease slowly but systematically: by 2020 down to 91% and by 2022 it had decreased to 87% (Grabowska 2022a: 6-9). Among the youngest respondents (18-24 years old), there was an increase in non-believers from 7% to 29%, and a decrease in believers from 93% to 71% (ibid: 9). In other age groups, the rate of decline in those declaring their faith was smaller; in the 25-34 age group by 15 percentage points, and among the oldest Polish women and men over 65 by 4 points (ibid.). The percentage of non-believers grew from 5% in 1992 (rather non-believers and complete non-believers) to 13% in 2022 (ibid.).

Fig. 4

Declarations of religious faith by age during the period 1992-2022



Source: Grabowska 2022a: 8.

It is important to point the differences between urban and rural communities. In large cities, changes in declarations of faith are more profound, from 91% declaring themselves to be believers in 1992 to 67% and 33% declaring themselves to be non-believers. In smaller towns there was a decrease of 7 percentage points. The report pointed out the need to assume that in large cities (Warsaw, Krakow, Łódź, Wrocław and Poznań) every third resident indicated that they do not believe (ibid: 10). Once again, it is necessary to point out significant research results in relation to the declarations of young people. Research in 2021 indicated that over 25 years of research, the decrease in expressions of faith among young people was approximately 20%, and before further consideration, it should be mentioned that the decrease in religious practices in this group of respondents reached approximately 50%. (*Kościół katolicki w Polsce...* 2021: 3).

Despite the reduction in declarations of faith, data from the “Church in Poland 2023” report confirm that religious faith is still important in Polish society. In 2023, declarations of faith among older generations reached 88%, but it is extremely important to highlight visible generational differences. Declarations of faith in God are highest in older generations, declining in middle generations, and significantly lower in younger generations. Some commentators, analysing these differences, formulated the conclusion that, regarding religiosity, “there are two worlds in Poland, those under 40 years of age and those

over 50 years of age, with an intermediate group made up of those in their 40s.” (Przeciszewski 2023: 2).

Therefore, particular attention should be paid to an analysis of the evolution of religiosity among young people. In the conclusions of research conducted in 2005 and in late 2005 and early 2006 it was stated that the religiosity of young people is characterised by selectivity and the privatisation of faith (Zaręba 2008: 231). In studies of school and university youth, the vast majority of respondents declared attachment to faith and religious practices, but very diverse attitudes to observance the principles of the Ten Commandments were revealed (ibid.). The conclusions of some studies at that time stated that the importance of morality for young people was relatively high. However, young people, perceiving the world as promoting attitudes of individual competition, presented a “double personality”. In the first, private layer, the importance of morality was very important to them, while in the second, public layer, they adopted permissive attitudes, which they perceived as being promoted in public life (Świda-Ziemba 2008: 160). Also, in a consideration of other studies of youth in selected Polish cities (including in 2009 and 2016), it was found that youth environments accept the Church’s competences in moral and social matters to a lesser extent than do adult Poles in general (Mariański 2017: 97).

It is worth mentioning further important analyses conducted in 2012, which confirmed the selectivity regarding Catholic Church teachings and the individualization of faith among young people. A large group of students surveyed expressed distance and critical opinions towards the institutional Church. A total of 44% stated that the institutional Church does not meet “expectations regarding moral problems and needs of the individual” (Guzik, Marzęcki, Stach 2015: 197). In the light of the results of CBOS research in 2022, 69% of young people considered themselves believers while 12.3% considered themselves to be non-believers (Przeciszewski 2023: 2). In 2023, only about half of young people declared faith in God (*Religijność młodzieży...* 2023). It is also important to note that the research shows how moral scandals revealed among representatives of the Catholic Church have significantly affected the reduction of the level of religiosity among young people. A total of 21.7% of young people declared that awareness of the disclosed events “definitely affects” the level of religiosity, and 13.7% that “rather influences” it (*Kościół katolicki w Polsce...* 2021: 3).

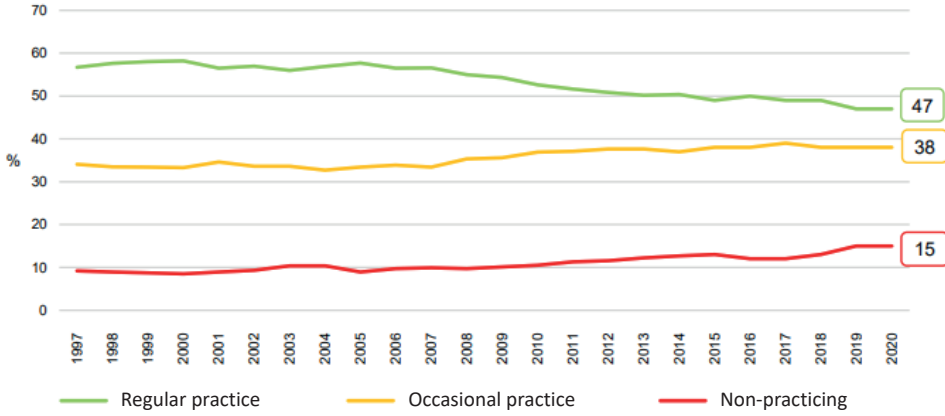
The religiosity of Polish society regarding their professed faith is also measured by compliance with the teachings of the Catholic Church and the propensity to participate in religious practices. Comparing the research results, two cycles of stabilization and two cycles of decline in religious involvement

are highlighted. It is indicated that until 2005, the share of respondents who both believed and practiced was 57-58%, and the share of non-believers and non-practitioners was 3% (CBOS 2020: 3). In the years 2005-2013, research results indicated a reduction in the first group to 50%, and an increase to 6% in the second group, and a small increase in the group of those who believe and practice irregularly from 32% to 35% (ibid.). The research results from 2013-2018 indicate the stabilisation of the analysed declarations at an almost unchanged level, but the declarations from 2019 and 2020 show a renewed decline in religious involvement (ibid.). It should also be noted that in the earlier period of very large declines in trust in the Catholic Church, in 1993, there were no significant declines in the level of religious practices (Nosowski 2008: 5). It is possible to agree with the conclusion that at that time, despite weaknesses of the Church and the mistakes of its representatives which had been revealed, there was a strong sense of connection with the Church. As a result, the frequency of declarations of faith and religious practices did not decline dramatically. It can also be assumed that the person and authority of John Paul II played a decisive role in this. Social opinion researchers emphasise that after 2005, that is after the death of John Paul II, there was a gradual increase in the number of people stating that “they believe in their own way” (CBOS 2018b: 4). In the years 2005-2010, the percentage of such people increased by 14 percentage points. At the same time, the number of people declaring themselves to be “believers and followers of the Church’s instructions” decreased from 66% in 2005 to 46% in 2010 (ibid.). Regular practice in the years 1997-2007 was at a level of 57-58%. Then it began to decline, and in 2013-2018 it stabilised at a level of 49-50%. In 2019 and 2020, the level of regular practice was 47%. (CBOS 2020: 2).

The results of research from 2017, in which only 21% of respondents stated that one should “have clear moral principles and never deviate from them”, should be considered both as important and symptomatic (CBOS 2017: 2). The same research also showed a significant increase from 57% (in 2013) to 69% of people stating that “decisions about good and evil should be primarily an internal matter for every person” (ibid.). Based on the research results, it can be concluded that since 2019, the process of withdrawing from regular religious practices has accelerated, and data from 2020 indicated that, based on the combination of declarations of faith and religious practices, 47% of the Polish public identified themselves as believers and regular practitioners, over 37% as believers while practicing irregularly, 7% as believers and non-practitioners, and 7% indicated a lack of faith and participation in religious practices (CBOS 2020: 4).

Fig. 5

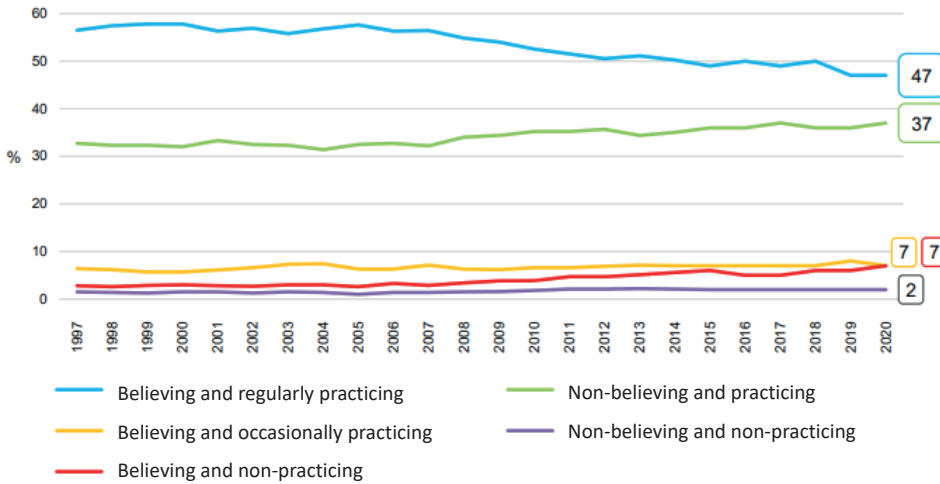
Declarations of religious practice



Source: CBOS 2020: 3.

Fig. 6

Declarations of faith and religious practice



Source: CBOS 2020: 4.

For many years, a higher percentage of regular practice has been declared by older people. Differences in declarations of practice between residents of large cities and smaller towns should also be noted. In large cities, only 25% practice regularly, while 44% declared no practice (Grabowska 2022a: 15). In

a summary of the latest data in the “Church in Poland 2023” report, it was stated that the number of people declaring regular religious practice has decreased by one third in the last twenty years (Przeciszewski 2023: 2).

Conclusions

In a dynamically changing world, the perception of the role and importance of authority figures and the expectations formulated towards them are changing. The process of evolution of perceived authority of the Catholic Church in Poland is conditioned by many factors, some global in nature and some specific to Poland. Important factors include the deepening processes of secularisation of public life, the privatisation of faith, the deinstitutionalisation of religion, and, consequently, the secularisation of people’s mentality and selectivity in observing the instructions of the Catholic Church. All these processes, which have been observed in the world for many years, are also visible in Polish society. Many analyses attempt to determine their importance and speed, mostly without coming to clear conclusions. Regardless of whether the latest research results will be a symptom of “creeping” or “galloping” secularisation, this process certainly also affects the scale, strength, and scope of the Catholic Church’s authority in Poland.

Undoubtedly, the basis for the strength and effectiveness of the Catholic Church’s authority, both in the institutional and personal dimensions, is the level of trust. Trust is also associated with the expectation of transparency in the actions of Church representatives and the possibility of identifying them as role models. However, a significant number of Catholics in Poland concluded that the Catholic Church does not meet these expectations and is also unable to provide satisfactory answers to contemporary problems. Consequently, Poland, like other European countries, is becoming a country with diverse religiosity. It is worth emphasising that the relatively slow decline in declarations of faith and the much faster decline in the level of practice occurred most rapidly among the youngest respondents and among residents of large cities.

A lower level of trust implies a lower level of authority, and it must be recalled that changes in Polish Catholicism were and are also conditioned by controversial and reprehensible events that, in the opinion of the faithful, significantly discredited Church representatives. In the light of the survey results, it can be at least partially confirmed that the Church as an institution and priests are failing and disappointing, especially young people. It is also necessary to recall the high level of disapproval of Catholic Church activities in the

political sphere. An interesting explanation is that it illustrates and accurately diagnoses the difficulty and problematic nature of the situation, pointing out a two-way relationship: “because the Church is judged more negatively, it is less accepted, but also because the actual presence of the Church in public life (where it is present) is less and less accepted, so it is judged worse and worse” (Grabowska 2022b: 111).

The thesis that in the modern world there is a shift away from the “authority of leaders” in favour of the “authority of examples” seems to be justified. As indicated in the text, this second type of authority works by virtue of decent behaviour, becoming a model and example for others based on trust. It is therefore worth mentioning the results of the research in which respondents formulated their comments on what, in their opinion, are necessary actions that can strengthen the authority of the Catholic Church in Poland. The most important recommendations were to avoid the involvement of Church representatives in politics, to consistently explain cases of paedophilia and other moral scandals, and to “strive less for money and material goods.” (CBOS 2022: 9).

However, it should be recalled that despite the above-mentioned issues, the Catholic Church remains an important authority for a relatively large part of Polish society, and a significant number of respondents point to John Paul II as a personal moral authority. However, in many respects this did not translate into their attitudes and choices, proving the strength of the processes of privatisation of faith and selectivity in the assimilation of religious principles. The conclusion of the “Church in Poland 2023” report that although the Church is no longer a universally recognised authority, it remains important in some respects for a large part of the believers in society appears to be accurate. The Church’s authority, measured by positive assessments of its activities as an institution of public trust, is weakening, but the level of declarations of faith and openness to individual, deeper religious experiences is still relatively high, so perhaps there will also be room to strengthen other areas of influence. The complexity of the issue and sometimes a certain ambiguity of the research results do not allow for the formulation of fully conclusive conclusions, especially regarding the future of the authority of the Catholic Church in Poland. When emphasising the processual nature of authority, it is necessary to emphasise the changing dynamics of building, consolidating, and weakening the power and influence of authority that are typical of this relationship. When making predictions about the strength and effectiveness of the influence of the authority of the Catholic Church in Poland, this issue should be linked to determining to what extent the Catholic Church is able to take action that will strengthen or regain the trust it once had, especially among younger people.

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Agata Tasak, Assistant Professor, University of the National Education Commission, Kraków

Keywords: Catholic Church, authority, Polish society, Catholics, religion

ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church has held and still holds a special position in Polish public life and the importance of its social authority is often emphasised. In the period analysed, however, there are clear symptoms of weakening religiosity in Europe and a related reduction of participation in religious practices. The social processes related to the secularisation of public life, the privatization and individualization of faith, the secularisation of attitudes and selectivity in observing the instructions of the Catholic Church have been and are the subject of numerous analyses. It should be noted, however, that due to the specificity of mutual relations and dependencies between religion and politics, rooted in the history of Poland, many researchers have expressed opinions about the apparent dissimilarity of these processes in Polish society and have pointed to their slower course and the still important and significant authority of the

Catholic Church. However, there is a prevailing agreement that the perception of this authority is changing, and this is related to the weakening of trust in the institutional Church, a lack of trust in many of its representatives and the negative assessment of clerical involvement in politics. Therefore, an answer was sought as to how quickly and how deeply the perceived authority of the Catholic Church in Poland is changing in institutional, doctrinal, and personal dimensions. As a result of the research, it can be concluded that trust in the institutional Church is decreasing, a slow decline in declarations of faith can be observed, and the process of abandoning religious practice is more rapid. In each case, the biggest changes are related to the attitudes of young people. In the light of prevailing opinions, if the Church wants to regain a high level of social authority, it should avoid political involvement, honestly deal with moral scandals, and, above all, follow the same principles that it professes.