

P. Kopiec

Prof. P. Kopiec, Department of Protestant Theology, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.

E-mail: petrko@kul.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0581-0737>

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Between the pandemic, the war, and the value conflict: Polish Ecumenism at the crossroads¹

ABSTRACT

Poland is still an exception on the European map of Christianity, although this exceptional position is increasingly fading away. Churches in Poland are facing the challenges known elsewhere in Europe. This matters when asking about Polish ecumenism. However, it is merely part of the picture. Global trends influence ecumenical and interconfessional relationships; nevertheless, some have a specific feature in Poland. This article attempts to map Polish ecumenism, with an emphasis on the most significant achievements and severe threats to interconfessional relationships. It also aims to bring to light what churches in Poland have in common and how they differ in their answers to the current problems.

1. INTRODUCTION

Poland is still an exception on the European map of Christianity, although this exceptional position is increasingly fading away. Churches in Poland are facing the challenges known elsewhere in Europe and more broadly in the West: fast-moving secularisation among young people in this country; an increasing number of non-denominational Christian communities; lack of or insufficient answers from the churches to the issues caused by technological and scientific progress; growing



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separation of Christian and secular teaching on moral and ethical issues; allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests, among others. Concomitantly, there are also more specific problems to the current Polish social, political, and cultural circumstances, ranging from an affinity of both the Catholic Church and a large part of the political circles with the demythologisation of Pope John Paul II.

This brief description also matters when examining Polish ecumenism. However, it is only one part of the picture. Global trends influence ecumenical and interconfessional relationships; nevertheless, some are specific to Poland. In addition, even though ecumenism is certainly not a first association when considering Polish Christianity, the view on the churches in Poland and their relationships illustrates the religious and spiritual tendencies taking place on the boundary between Western and Eastern Europe and the modern and post-modern eras.

This article attempts to provide a report on Polish ecumenism, with an emphasis on the most significant achievements and the severe threats to interconfessional relationships. It also aims to bring to light what churches in Poland have in common and how they differ in their answers to the current problems. Showing the state of Polish ecumenism also provides an opportunity to grasp the processes behind it, such as secularisation or axiological polarisation. This is all the more important because, in the face of war and polarisation, the aims and methods developed in ecumenism seem to be particularly essential.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN POLAND

Of course, it would be unrealistic to present the confessional situation in Poland within the sociocultural context in this short article. However, a brief reflection on this issue seems to be a good introduction to the problems of Polish ecumenism.

Poland is at a unique moment in its history. The country is experiencing rapid development unknown previously in terms of the economy, social politics, and social well-being. Polish society lives in relative peace and social security. Nevertheless, the observers of Polish social life drew up a list of unwelcome tendencies such as, among others, growing consumerism, understood in the most elementary sense as a "science of compelling man to use more and more things" (Samuel Strauss); a profound and still deepening division of society in terms of values and ethical orientation; a multifaceted demographic crisis, and a crisis of the prevailing model of family; the results of the massive economic migration to Western European countries such as

the so-called Euro-orphanhood. In their daily life, people complain about political conflicts, the increasing cost of living, an uncertain future, and what is currently discussed in the mass media. This clash of successes and failures creates a society that is demanding (in a deontological sense), impatient, and quick to judge.

Nevertheless, apart from the sociocultural processes, two other historical facts have a heavy impact on Polish society – the consequences of the pandemics, observed mainly in the healthcare and educational sectors, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is boosting Ukrainian migration to Poland and awakening the past fears of generations remembering World War II. Obviously, it is merely a glimpse, uncompleted and selective, which can, however, give a general image of contemporary Poland. Changes in, and around Christianity are significant factors in this image.

The confessional map of Poland is well-known, and its study can strengthen stereotypes of the country as a Catholic area. On the other hand, Poland is no longer a Catholic monolith, due to its secularisation and the emergence of spiritual and religious alternatives from within and outside Christianity. Since the situation is quickly evolving, one demands at least a cursory scheme of factors, in order to reflect on ecumenical and interconfessional relationships in Poland.

First, one can allude to the methodological aspect. This is, for instance, about the differing numbers of believers, based on the declarations of the churches themselves and the official state statistics. In cases such as the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the discrepancies between the Church's information and the statistics of the central statistical office are really serious. For instance, the first declares more than half a million believers, whereas according to the official statistics, it is slightly above 150,000 faithful. The causes of such divergences are too many to explain in this short article. However, factors such as the massive migration from North-Eastern Poland, the region inhabited by many Orthodox Christians and many so-called Orthodox atheists, are among the most important (Siwicki 2013).

In addition, churches in Poland have clearly different views in terms of their history. Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran or Old-Catholic Churches are regarded, on the whole, as more "important" for interconfessional relationships because of their embedment in the Polish tradition, their level of institutionalisation, and their participation in the ecumenical movement. This means that churches (mainly Pentecostal or Charismatic groups) can develop more dynamically and, therefore, are temporarily more numerous, but still less institutionalised and thus more ephemeral. Such communities are also reluctant to enter the ecumenical movement, at least officially.

Both observations are of a more specific nature but still allude to the two factors of interconfessional relationships that can tentatively be named quantitative and qualitative. The former pays attention to the significance of the given church's size; the latter considers the role the given church plays in Polish ecumenism and, more broadly, in Polish society and culture.

The second aspect is about various processes taking place in Polish Christianity. The secularisation and politicisation of churches have already been mentioned; nevertheless, these must be discussed more systematically, even though the list will still be incomplete.

3. SECULARISATION AND ITS DERIVATIVES

Secularisation in Poland is a hot topic and a buzzword in mass media and political discussions. The prevailing conviction is that religious faith in the future society will diminish and privatise and, obviously, the Catholic Church will definitively lose its dominant position as a source of values. Some facts seem to justify these beliefs: a clear decline in Sunday attendance, especially among young people; the dramatically decreasing number of priestly vocations; a reduction in numbers attending religious classes, and as confirmed by recent numbers, a decline in confidence in the church. Other studies highlight the growing gap between generations in Poland. For instance, the global survey "Global Religion 2023" (IPSOS 2023) shows that, among those who declare no religion (atheist, agnostic or spiritual), the skew for the Z generation is 12 per cent (against 19 per cent of all non-believers in Poland). It is one of the highest values among 26 surveyed countries, although it is not the highest one. Some studies even claim that Poland has moved from creeping to galloping secularisation.

The IPSOS survey may be regarded as the most up-to-date commentary on studies published by the Catholic Information Agency (KAI) in Poland. The official report "Church in Poland" observes that the biggest changes in religious life – usually secularisation – concern the youngest generation in Poland. Nearly one-third of all young people call themselves unbelievers and do not participate in religious practices (Sadłoń 2021:16). This process is mirrored, especially in attendance in religious classes, in big cities such as Warsaw, Gdańsk or Wrocław, where only 44 per cent (on average) of students participate in the catechesis.

The report notes a turning point in 2010, when attendance steadily dropped. The report adds that 2010 should generally be marked as a milestone, as in the intervening years society has changed its attitude towards the church (Sadłoń 2021:16). Although it is only an assumption, this change might be linked to the riots around the so-called Smolensk cross, erected in front of

the Presidential Palace and attacked by young parties from the Warsaw clubs. The situation revealed the emergence of a new generation, indifferent or hostile towards the national or religious symbols that had hitherto been regarded as unquestionable.

On the other hand, Polish “cultural” Catholicism is still a matter of fact (Sadłoń 2021:14). Poland can still be described as a religious, or even very religious, country. The above observations of decline are based on figures that should be treated with caution, at least because of two facts: recent statistics cover the pandemic years, which distort the picture of religious life,² and the general figures that do not show significant differences between either different regions in Poland or large cities and villages. Concerning the latter, some indicators of religious life such as Sunday attendance, holy communion, and the number of baptisms and marriages clearly reveal “two Polands” (Sadłoń, Organek & Kamiński 2022:24). The line of division runs roughly diagonally between the two poles: North-Western, more secular, and East-Southern, more religious. Likewise, using a simple youth category is too easy, especially when discerning the differentiation in progress of Poland’s youngest generation (Mariański 2023:16).

It is worth mentioning some issues related to secularisation in Poland. First, the demythologisation of John Paul II refers mainly to younger generations who do not remember this pontificate but who grew up during the widespread veneration of the Polish pope. Exaggeration and political abuse of this veneration resulted in a reluctance to accept the pope’s presence in the public sphere or even mocking reactions. This is reflected in the use of the derisive word, “dejohnpauling” (*odjaniepawlanie*), which is very popular among young people, particularly in the newspeak. The conflict about John Paul II escalated after several journalists made some allegations of his insufficient response to the signals of sexual abuse of minors by two priests at the time when the future pope was Archbishop of Krakow.

Secondly, intense value conflicts break out from time to time, leading to heated discussions or even riots such as the series of demonstrations in 2020 after the decision of the Constitutional Tribunal to rule out that abortion for eugenic reasons is unconstitutional. The hot themes of these ethical disputes are well-known and common to most of the European countries: abortion, euthanasia, LGBT political and civil rights, as well as gender theory. More controversial are the recent issues of green revolution, technological progress, and the regimes of social politics. A common belief of society is that, even though it is only part of the truth, the church takes a clear stand on these issues and situates itself on one side of this conflict. This refers mainly to the Catholic Church and has consequences in Poland’s interconfessional strife.

2 This will be discussed in another article.

Thirdly, the seeming politicisation of churches is mainly the aftermath of the value conflict, for two main reasons: the ethical issues that have themselves become a political agenda, and the political parties that employ, intentionally or not, and usually selectively, the teaching of the churches for the sake of their political interest.

Obviously, all the trends mentioned above are interconnected and might be explained from other perspectives than a religious one. Nevertheless, their views on secularisation with its derivatives can give insight into the social, religious, and political context in which churches in Poland operate.

4. PANDEMICS AND WAR

There is nothing unique about the assertion that the COVID-19 pandemic led to many changes. The causes and consequences of the virus are discussed in a myriad of articles worldwide, and there is no point in repeating analyses and studies on this issue. Nevertheless, the description of religious life, including the ecumenical situation in Poland, would be incomplete and inadequate without reference to how the Polish state, society, and the churches met the pandemic crisis. Concomitantly, it is correct to say that the pandemic did not start specific changes; rather, it became their catalyst (Draguła 2021), and it is mainly about secularisation forecast.

When considering statistics, figures speak for themselves. The percentage of Catholics in Poland who attend church every Sunday (*Dominicantes*) was 51 per cent in 1980, 41 per cent in 2010, 36.9 per cent in 2019, and 28.3 per cent in 2021. The percentage of attendants who received holy communion every Sunday (*Communicantes*) was 7.8 per cent in 1980, 16.4 per cent in 2010, 16.7 per cent in 2019, and 12.9 per cent in 2021 (Sadłoń, Organek & Kamiński 2022:23). Other figures are also interesting: the number of baptisms performed in the Catholic Church was slightly above 312,000 in 2020 and 315,000 in 2021. In 1996, it was 419,500 and in 2010, it was 392,500, although the drop is not so significant when compared to Poland's birth rate (331,000 in 2020 and 355,000 in 2021).

The number of individuals opting out of religious classes is increasing. Nevertheless, in general, it is still too early to pronounce the durability of secularisation as well as its pace and unambiguous causes, especially when some studies claim entering into the post-secular society. This assertion refers to the question of the pandemic's consequences, scope, and duration. Mariański (2023:19) rightly points out various forecasts for Polish secularisation in the post-pandemic world. Some authors claim that Polish society will

desecularise; some prophesy an inhibition of the secularisation processes, and others are convinced that secularisation will progress. Whatever the future of Christianity in Poland will be, it is evident that the pandemic crisis was a milestone in its modern history.

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine is the next exceptional and, so to say, unexpected event of our time, although some observers would deny this “unexpectedness”. Of course, the war’s military, political, and social results are unpredictable, yet the first consequences of invasion have already changed Poland. This change refers to the massive flight of Ukrainians in the first weeks of the war and the massive mobilisation of Polish society to help the refugees. Ordinary Poles received Ukrainians in their private houses, created aid networks, and mounted fundraising campaigns. The awareness of the necessity of aid was beyond political sympathies and conflict and led to the shared experience of civil society.

Ukrainian migration to Poland transformed the social fabric for good. In many Polish cities, Ukrainians currently account for over ten per cent of the inhabitants. Daily interactions must influence the economy, culture, and different dimensions of social life. Surprisingly, despite the phenomenon’s scale, conflicts between both national groups occur relatively rarely (although it is a subjective opinion), especially as such an immigration experience is a first in Polish society. It also brings about a rapid development of the immigration policy of the state. It forces state institutions to adapt to the new circumstances, although the immigration aid system in Poland still cannot be compared with Western European countries. In addition, the Ukrainian migration, even though the largest in number (more than 80 per cent of all foreigners), is not the only one that is rapidly increasing. The number of citizens from other countries such as Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova (therefore, the former Soviet republics) has also increased.

Secondly, it is about awakening old demons of Polish history and a profound erosion of the beliefs about the “end of history”, and faith in a lasting peace in Europe. It leads to changes in political orientation and approaches to the roles of states, such as an emphasis on security and social policy.

Finally, Ukrainian and other migrations constitute new pastoral challenges and opportunities for the churches and these become crucial ecumenical issues. Such an ecumenical issue is the Russian invasion of Ukraine – and it is a stick in the spokes of the ecumenical bike when paraphrasing the famous words by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

5. THE ECUMENICAL SPRING?

Poland prides itself on the 16th-century tradition of the state without stakes, the Golden Age of Polish tolerance, and the early interconfessional agreements such as the Sandomierz Agreement, *Consensus Sandomiriensis* (1570) between Lutherans, Calvinists, and Bohemian Brethren who declared mutual recognition of their confessions and common defence against the Catholic Church, and the Warsaw Confederation (1573), the state document that granted confessional freedom and equal rights of confessions (Bartel 1970:112).

Strictly speaking, the ecumenical relationships in Poland have a century-long history; however, it was a history without the participation of the Catholic Church in the first decades. It was also the history of martyrdom during World War II and the Stalinism period as well as many internal conflicts caused by differences in theologies (Jóźwiak 2014:193), by the governing communists who sought to use the churches to consolidate their power, even by way of some personal frictions. The ecumenical spring began in earnest in the early 1970s, when the official relationship between the Catholic Polish Bishop Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council was established. However, the first contact took place in the early 1960s.

A few words about the Polish Ecumenical Council. This is the leading institution of non-Catholic Churches in Poland, established in 1946 (the founding document was signed on 15 January). In the very beginning, the Council included the following churches: Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Methodist, Evangelical Christians (two groups), Evangelical Faith Christians, Seventh Day Adventists, Old Catholic Mariavites, Old Catholic, Polish National Catholic Church, Polish Church of Christian Baptists, Union of Churches of Christ, and the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (Hanc 2016:14). Due to the churches' internal changes, the Council's composition also changed. Currently, it consists of seven member churches of different Orthodox, Protestant, and Old Catholic traditions: The Church of Christian Baptists in the Republic of Poland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Poland, the Evangelical Methodist Church in the Republic of Poland, the Evangelical Reformed Church in the Republic of Poland, the Polish Catholic Church in the Republic of Poland, the Old Catholic Mariavite Church in the Republic of Poland, and the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (PRE 2001:3).

The official cooperation between the Polish Bishop Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council constitutes a mainstream of the ecumenical movement in Poland. However, this is only one side of Polish ecumenism. Another was the individual activities of many ecumenical leaders such as priests, nuns, journalists, lay theologians, ecumenical circles, and groups.

Individuals such as Bishop Alfons Nossol, Bishop Jan Szarek, Bishop Władysław Miziołek, Karol Karski, Bishop Jeremiasz, Halina Bortnowska, Krystyna Rottenberg, Waclaw Hryniewicz, and Bishop Zdzisław Tranda are among the most outstanding ecumenists who laid the foundation for the ecumenical spring in Poland.

Such a spring was also prepared along the timeline defined by three essential facts that changed history: the Second Vatican Council, the election of Karol Wojtyła for the papacy in 1978, and the collapse of communism in Poland in 1989. Polish ecumenism entered the new millennium well-equipped in structures, theory, optimism, and the positive mindset of many Christians from nearly all the main churches. Nevertheless, on the other hand, ecumenical activity has still been a matter of narrow circles of leaders.

According to Bruncz (2016:n.p.), editor-in-chief of the web portal ekumenizm.pl,

Polish ecumenism is shallow, comfortable and sluggish. It lacks controversial issues, and even when such is considered, it takes place only in the narrow circle of priests. Nevertheless, there is no widespread interest in ecumenical matters.

It would be difficult to challenge Bruncz's opinion. It aptly illustrates what ecumenism in Poland was like in 2016, when these words were uttered. However, in 2022, his opinion was slightly different. This ecumenism is shattered:

fear against protestantization and blurring Catholic identity, indifference towards ecumenism as such ... Anxieties maintain ecumenism in Poland. ... [D]espite many ecumenical events ... ecumenism does not exist in the faithful's experience (Bruncz 2022: n.p.).

Bruncz added that diocesan synods taking place in the Catholic Church in 2021 and 2022 have shown much the same: the theme of ecumenism was either ignored or merely mentioned (Bruncz 2022).

This opinion is also correct, although it is not the whole truth. However, juxtaposing both views helps demonstrate what has happened over the past ten years. Ecumenism in Poland suddenly passed from early spring directly to autumn. At present, it does not lack controversies, disappointments, and mere helplessness.

6. FROM SPRING TO AUTUMN – A TIMELINE OF CONTEMPORARY POLISH ECUMENISM

What does ecumenical spring in Poland mean, and why can we not speak about ecumenical autumn instead? Despite the relatively modest scope of the ecumenical movement in Poland, in terms of number of people involved, the new millennium's first decade abounded in significant ecumenical achievements. At the top of the list are four official declarations adopted by the Catholic Church in Poland and by the churches belonging to the Polish Ecumenical Council: joint agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism: Sacrament of baptism – a sign of unity, signed on 23 January 2000; the report Christian Marriage of Persons of Different Confessions – an instruction about conducting marriages between spouses of different confessions, signed by both sides in 2011 (it has been sent to the Vatican and is still awaiting recognition) (Hanc & Glaeser 2016:91); the joint agreement on ecological issues entitled Appeal of Polish Churches for the Protection of Creation, ceremoniously adopted at the headquarters of the Polish Bishops' Conference in Warsaw on 16 January 2013 (Pawłowski 2014:147), and the document Appeal of Churches in Poland for the Preservation of Sunday, signed in the Lutheran Centre in Warsaw during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2015. It is worth noting that each of the acts mentioned above has become an ecumenical success with more or less ecclesial, ecumenical, and social influence. It is evident that the joint agreement on baptism laid a solid foundation for further ecumenical steps. Interestingly, such a document was signed in Poland relatively early.³ The declaration on mixed marriages has, slowly but steadily, become something of a manual for priests, especially as they, at times, do not know the canonical procedures relating to spouses of different confessions. Despite many objections and even strong online hate speech, the ecumenical appeal for the preservation of Sunday became a significant factor in the Sunday trade ban.

It is hard to believe that, on 17 August 2012, in Warsaw, the Polish Bishop Conference and the Russian Orthodox Church (The Moscow Patriarchate) signed the Common Message to the Polish and Russian Nations. The declaration mentioned the neighbourhood and a common heritage of "brother nations"; forgiveness and entering on "the way of dialogue"; reconciliation, and a shared future. Theologians emphasised that the bishops' initiative continued the tradition started by the famous letter of the Polish Episcopacy to the German Bishops: "We forgive and ask for forgiveness"; hence, a starting point and "the most important document of the Polish-German reconciliation" (Muszyński 2016:140). Currently, hardly any hope is left, as declared in the

3 It was indeed one of the first worldwide, seven years earlier than a similar one in Germany and 12 years in the case of The Netherlands.

message. Nevertheless, it manifested, once again, in the churches' pioneering and sometimes sole advocacy for the sake of reconciliation between nations and societies (and this specifically refers to German-Polish relationships) and the churches' orientation for peace. Such an orientation is also reflected in the activity of many international groups and associations, such as the programme "Reconciliation in Europe – The task of churches in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Germany", initiated in 1995 in Weitenhagen on the outskirts of Greifswald by the Commission for Relationships between the Polish Ecumenical Council and the EKD.

7. SELECTED CURRENT CHALLENGES OF POLISH ECUMENISM

7.1 Catholic ecumenical indifferentism

Ecumenism in Poland has recently had many significant successes. Why, therefore, should we speak about an ecumenical autumn rather than an ecumenical spring? One reason has already been mentioned – the growing ecumenical indifference in the Catholic Church, both at the institutional and grassroots levels. In addition, some Catholic circles speak eagerly about the protestantisation of the Catholic Church. However, they often apply this word to two different and basically opposite processes: theological liberalisation, particularly in terms of ethical and moral issues, and the increasing significance of the Charismatic movements in the church. Of course, it does not help advance ecumenical relationships in Poland.

7.2 The issue of women's ordination

Catholic ecumenical indifferentism has a long tradition that is currently stepping up. However, more "incidental" and "single" factors contribute to this Polish ecumenical autumn. First is the conflict within the Polish Ecumenical Council relating to the decision about women's ordination taken by the Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran) in Poland.

However, the conflict is odd. Already in 2016, most of the members of the Church's Synod were in favour of accepting women's ordination, less than the required quorum. The situation changed in October 2021, when a two-thirds majority of the Synod's members confirmed the consent for exercising presbyter's ministry by women (ordination for deacons had been allowed for decades). This new ecclesiastical law came into force on 1 January 2022.

Of course, as expected, the decision taken by the Lutheran Synod has led to both internal and external controversies. Some circles in the Evangelical Church expressed their disagreement (groups defining themselves as the

confessional Lutheranism). The Catholic Church in Poland did not comment officially on the Lutheran decision. Nevertheless, this decision caused an uproar in some Catholic media of a more traditional orientation and an “explanatory” stance of the Catholic mainstream. In addition, the joint working group of the Catholic Polish Bishop Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council expressed the position about “acknowledging” the Lutheran decision.

Yet the reaction of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, a partner in the Polish Ecumenical Council, was far harsher. The head of the Church, the Metropolitan Sawa, and the Metropolitan of All Poland addressed the letter to Bishop Andrzej Malicki, President of the Council, informing him that members of the Orthodox Church will not participate in the ecumenical meetings and events alongside ordained women representing the Lutheran Church. It is worth noting that the word “presbyter”, in referring to women, was used in inverted commas.

Of course, the Head of the Lutheran Church quickly responded *argumentum ad traditionem* – the Lutheran tradition has the right to its own theology. In addition, Bruncz noted that, regardless of the “right” to follow a given Church’s theological tradition, three issues should still be considered: the letter was addressed to the President of the Council, who himself comes from the Methodist Church that accepted women’s ordination much earlier than the Lutherans; the Polish Orthodox Church is a member of the World Council of Churches, and it maintains close cooperation with the Evangelical Churches in Germany.

7.3 The Ukrainian challenges

The war in Ukraine is the most painful experience so far in the new millennium. Besides the obvious consequences for Polish society, it also becomes a significant ecumenical matter for pastoral and ecclesiological reasons. Hence, the increasing migration of Ukrainians to Poland forced the churches to find solutions for new pastoral challenges such as organising religious classes, places for worship or preparation for sacraments. Two examples aptly illustrate these challenges. An Orthodox parish priest in Puławy (Eastern Poland) reports that the number of pupils attending catechesis classes increased from a few to several hundred. The Orthodox community in Bielsko-Biała, a city in Southern Poland, started to build the first Orthodox church in the region traditionally associated with the largest Protestant population in Poland. In addition, it is worth noting that, in many Polish cities, Orthodox communities have, for several years, used Catholic churches for liturgy. A growing number of interconfessional marriages is the next pastoral challenge for all Polish churches. The issue is currently being discussed in the Council of Ecumenism of the Polish Bishop Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council.

Another ecumenical matter, so to say ecclesiological, is the consequence of autocephaly of the autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Polish Orthodox Church did not accept the decision by the Patriarch of Constantinople and sided with the Moscow Patriarchate. This issue occurred prior to the Russian attack on Ukraine. However, since 24 February 2022, the controversy has become harsher. It seems, however, that it was mostly mentioned in the media. It is mainly about the Metropolitan Sawa's messages to the faithful concerning the Russian invasion. In the opinion of many commentators, they were too vague and too relativising. Nevertheless, a particularly huge storm in the media was caused by the Metropolitan's letter addressed to Patriarch Kirill for his birthday, where the Head of the Polish Church wrote that

during Your Patriarchal service, the Russian Orthodox Church, thanks to efforts of Your Eminence, shines with spiritual revival and serves as an example for others (Metropolit Sawa 2023).

Of course, the letter was released on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate. Nevertheless, the Metropolitan apologised for this letter, explaining that it was intended to be a personal text.

Less medial, but more difficult, is the issue of the mutual relationships of the Ukrainians belonging to the autonomous Kyiv Patriarchate living in Poland. In this instance, it is also a matter of moving a universal conflict into the local dimension. In many instances, the faithful of the Ukrainian Church are denied sacramental ministry in the Polish Orthodox Church or to use the buildings of the Church for worship. Instead, they are offered the buildings of the Catholic and Lutheran Churches. Nevertheless, this is only part of the truth concerning the attitude of the Polish Orthodox Church towards issues relating to the Russian invasion. Another is the considerable aid given to the Ukrainian refugees by the Orthodox institutions, either humanitarian or spiritual.

7.4 The commotion in the Old-Catholic Churches

The Old-Catholic family in Poland comprises ten churches of different histories, sizes, and theological relatedness. Being Old-Catholic means a declarative reference to the Old-Catholic tradition, obviously bearing in mind its inclusiveness. In addition, the history of Polish Old-Catholicism is complex and full of divergences and structural changes. It would demand far more space to explain this than merely a short subsection of an article. Nevertheless, Pawłowski distinguishes ten Old-Catholic Churches in Poland, concomitantly grouping them into two categories: old and new churches. The former have a much longer history (the oldest was founded in 1891, and the newest in 1951) (Pawłowski 2023:182). The latter are small communities, usually connected to various emancipation movements that have arisen over the past two decades.

Such a division of the old and new Old-Catholic Churches corresponds with distinguishing old and new ecumenical problems. The tradition of Old Catholicism in Poland is twofold. The first is linked to the Polish National Church, founded in the United States at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and planted in Poland during the interwar period. The second is linked to the so-called Mariavite Church, whose tradition began with the alleged private revelation about God's mercy to sister Maria Kozłowska in 1893. The history of Mariavitism is one of conflicts, divisions, and persecutions. Nowadays, one of the Mariavite Churches (Old-Catholic Mariavite Church) takes part in the ecumenical movement in Poland and internationally; another church is outside interconfessional relationships (Catholic Church of Mariavites).

The category of the "new" Old-Catholic Churches encompasses six small communities (less than 1,000 faithful) that emerged over the past 20 years, due to personal conflicts and based on the emancipation movements (including groups that accept the ordination of homosexuals and blessing same-sex couples). In many instances, there is a lack of information about their doctrine and structures; in addition, they often change their institutional allegiance (in terms of international federations of churches) and do not explain further divisions. Pawłowski (2023:190) notes that they are also organised around leaders who can be defined as *episcopus vagans*. All this gives the impression of an inflation of the Old-Catholic Churches in Poland, leading to disorientation in the Polish ecumenical and interconfessional relationships.

8. CONCLUSION

Ecumenism in Poland has never been a matter of spectacular achievements. The hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church and the difficult Polish history of the 20th century, including the fight for independence, two world wars, and communism, did not create a favourable environment for the ecumenical movement. However, some threads of the Polish tradition (referred to the myth of Poland as the "state without stakes"), pre-ecumenical initiatives in Polish theology, a careful ecumenism (but still ecumenism) of the Roman Catholic hierarchy (such as Card. Stefan Wyszyński), a clear ecumenical teaching, and a living example of John Paul II made an ecumenical orientation the mainstream in Polish Christianity. Ecumenism is no longer discussed so far.

This obviousness of ecumenism has been reflected in the inter-church relationships of the main churches in Poland together with the efforts of many ecumenical leaders, priests, and lay persons of Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical or Orthodox confession. However, this has still been a matter of tiny circles. For the vast majority of Christians in Poland, ecumenism is rather an intellectual and spiritual duty, met half-heartedly and without an internal passion.

Nevertheless, irrespective of this “elitism” of ecumenism in Poland, the years after the collapse of communism may be regarded as an ecumenical spring, which, despite obvious problems and tensions, led to many great ecumenical initiatives and produced significant ecumenical agreements. It concerns the documents discussed above, but it is also about important groups working for the sake of national and social reconciliation, for the culture of remembrance, for persecuted Christians worldwide, and for common diaconal actions.

Therefore, why should we speak about an ecumenical autumn and ecumenism at the crossroads? Social and political turmoil brought about by the pandemics, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the crisis of the European idea reflected in the churches and then in ecumenism, have awakened primordial fears, distorting the ecumenical *status quo* and questioning the churches’ ecumenical commitment. The politicisation of social life, which vastly influences the churches in Poland, brings profound political conflicts to the interconfessional relationships and breaks down Polish ecumenism. Finally, secularisation among younger generations decreases the number of those who would be involved in the ecumenical movement. It is perhaps too early to proclaim an ecumenical winter in Poland, as it is often said in many countries. Nonetheless, the ecumenical leaders face the difficult task of saving and advancing the achievements of previous generations.

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