

# **The Role of the Episcopate of the Catholic Church in Moderating the Political Transformations in Poland**

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## **Abstract**

Communism is the ideology which aims at exterminating all religions as, it is believed, they are harmful to social life. Therefore, after the 2nd World War, under the arrangements between the allies, communists took control in Poland and started to gradually but systematically eliminate the influence of the Church and the Catholic religion on the society. Due to the confrontational attitude of the ruling party towards the Church, the relations between the Polish Episcopate and the communist authorities were dominated by the permanent, mainly ideological, conflicts. The breakthrough happened as late as in the 80s of 20th century. At that time, not only did the relations between the former enemies improve but they both started to work together towards the normalization and humanization of the relations between the communist regime and the Episcopate. The result was the participation of the representatives of the Episcopate in the behind-closed-doors negotiations in Magdalenka which happened before the deal between the government and a part of the Solidarity opposition was signed at “the round table”.

The main aim of this publication is to present the role of the Episcopate in the process of the political changes in Poland. In the 80s, the Episcopate constituted a specific and unique social group which brought together hierarchs who had various attitudes towards the communist authorities. What caused the internal tensions and divisions within the Episcopate were the Church representatives making deals with the former oppressors as well as various attitudes of bishops towards the ruling party. On the basis of the secondary sources, the author of the publication will attempt to present the role of the Episcopate in the moderation of the agreements which became the backbone of the political changes in Poland, i.e. the transformation of communism into post-communism.

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**Keywords:** Poland, Post-communism, Polish Episcopate

## **Introduction**

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## **Towards the normalization and humanization of the relations between the government and the Episcopate**

The most radical transformations in all forms of social life in the Polish People’s Republic happened in the 80s. They were mainly caused by the economic breakdown and the moral degradation of the communist authorities. The Polish society decisively rejected the statist model of socialism and chose the path of democratic reforms (Marczuk, 1993, 5-6). What also underwent the transformation were the relations between the Episcopate and the communist regime. An important factor which influenced the change in the attitude of the Episcopate towards the ruling party was, undeniably, the death of the leader of the Conference of the Polish Episcopate, the Primate cardinal Stefan Wyszyński (28<sup>th</sup> May 1981) and the nomination of his successor, the bishop Jozef Glemp (7<sup>th</sup> July 1981). The Primate Wyszyński was the head of the Polish Episcopate in the most difficult period for the Catholic Church in

the Polish People's Republic. He was well aware of the methods of operation of the communist regime and he personally experienced the repression which aimed at eradicating the Catholic Church in Poland, especially during the Stalin's terror. Therefore, he always approached the representatives of the ruling party with reservation. When the communist regime towards the Church relaxed, he knew that this didn't result from the sudden change of the attitude of the authorities towards the Church, but from the weaker position of the communist authorities in the society. That way they were trying to gain real advantages. The cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was also very careful when it came to the relations with the representatives of the Solidarity opposition. He fully supported the ideals of the "Solidarity" union which, by defending working class and by aiming at the democratization of social life in Poland, drew inspiration from the social education of the Church. Wyszyński was also convinced that the Polish society needed the "Solidarity" union as it had an important role to perform. Therefore, he supported its valuable initiatives. However, he was also aware of the great diversity which existed within the union as its members represented different ideological groups. The Primate knew that the main activists associated with Lech Wałęsa, i.e. Bronisław Geremek, Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik i Karol Modzelewski had the same ideological origin. In the most difficult period of the Stalin's terror, Geremek was the first secretary of the Basic Party Organization of the Polish United Workers' Party in the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Jacek Kuron founded the red scouting association, making a reference to the symbolism and ideology of the Russian Komsomol. Karol Modzelewski and Adam Michnik, who had been brought up in the families of the communist activists, were ideologically close to the fraction of Trotskyism which existed inside the communist movement (Kieżun, 2012, 83; W cieniu prymasa..., 2001, 139; Raina, 2005, 91-94). The primate Wyszyński avoided contacts with the former communist activists and his reservation towards some of the activists of the Solidarity opposition mainly depended on their communist past.

It seems that the new Primate, Józef Glemp, did not adopt the firm standpoint of his predecessor towards the communist regime. He undertook various initiatives and sent clear signals which confirmed his conciliatory and open attitude towards the party elite. Also, the team of the general Wojciech Jarużelski attempted to create the positive image of the Primate. This can be confirmed e.g. by the opinion of the manager of the Denomination Office, Adam Lopatka, expressed in December 1982 at the meeting of the lectors of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party: *The Primate [...] has a positive attitude and the right political line as well as the ability to pursue it. [...] He aims at ensuring the presence of the Church in the socialist Poland and at rejecting the idea of overthrowing the Socialist regime. In this*

*respect, the Primate is very strong-minded and, clearly, he has the ability to achieve it. Therefore, I think that we should not support any opinions commonly spread by the hostile national and international organizations in order to discredit him. Of course, we cannot expect the Primate to act as if he was the member of the Political Bureau, the secretary of the Central Committee or the minister of the Polish People's Republic. We need to remember that there is a certain ecclesiastical way of disclosing his attitude and the political line. We need to have it in mind when considering the political image of the Primate* (Wystapienie kierownika Urzedu..., 1996, 372). At the same time, the Primate Glemp did not have a clear standpoint towards the proscribed "Solidarity". The historian, Jan Zaryn, is convinced that, *similarly to the majority of the Polish Episcopate, the cardinal Jozef Glemp didn't dogmatically equate the well-being of the nation with an absolute necessity to reactivate <Solidarity>* (Zaryn, 2009, 48). It seems that the Primate's readiness to cooperate with the authorities, with the simultaneous defensive attitude towards the proscribed "Solidarity", clearly indicated the shift in the policy of the Episcopate leaders.

Favourable conditions for the implementation of the policy of the cardinal Glemp influenced the attitudes of the majority of the members of the Episcopate towards communists. The analysis of the secret document prepared by the officers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Department of the Ministry of the Interior in March 1988, "The almanac of the bishops of the Catholic Church in Poland"<sup>31</sup>, shows that the majority of the members of the Episcopate (58 bishops) had a neutral (moderate) attitude towards the authorities. One in four hierarchs (25) was perceived as the opponent of the ruling party and socialism and nearly one in seven hierarchs (15) had a positive attitude towards the authorities. Bishops with a neutral or positive attitude towards the authorities constituted nearly two thirds of the Episcopate (73 out of 98). (The Ministry of the Interior, 1988, 33-212; Jedynak, 2016, 247).

The distribution of the political preferences among the Episcopate members (estimated by the Security Service) turned out to be favourable for the policy of dialogue and for the former opponents to come closer to each other. The sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis thinks that closer relations between the representatives of the Episcopate and the communist authorities, observed from the beginning of the 80s, influenced the attitude of "Solidarity" towards the Church hierarchy. In her opinion, these changes led to the reduction of the

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<sup>31</sup> The typescript with the reference number of Ug-0818/88, prepared by the 4th Department of the Ministry of the Interior in March 1988, holds a security classification. The document is 230 page long and, marked with the number 033, it includes the information about the attitude of all Polish bishops towards the communist authorities. The number 003 means that it was made available for the narrow circle of the supreme officers of the Security Service and the representatives of the communist regime.

influence of the Church on the union activists, especially on the regional level. According to Staniszkis, the transformation of the relations between the hierarchs and the ruling party generated a permanent tendency towards secularization among the “Solidarity” activists. (Staniszkis, 2010, 114-115).

In the 80s, the attitude of the Episcopate towards the government was, to a great extent, moderated by the communist authorities themselves which, in various ways, tried to influence the attitudes and the behaviour of the Church hierarchs. It is evident from the government documents that the representatives of the ruling party wanted the Episcopate to have a stake in supporting the party elite. They made compromises with the aim to *permanently detach the Church structures from the political opposition, to gain the Church support for the political line of Jaruzelski (even limited and critical) and to gain the confidence that, in the situation of crisis, the Church will be their safety valve* (Dudek, 2004, 88-89). Moreover, the communists wanted the Episcopate *to associate its interests with the present authorities and the ruling party* (Dudek, 2004, 89). The general Wojciech Jaruzelski thought that in the relations between the authorities and the Episcopate *the <carrot and stick> method should be consequently followed. The Church needs to consider what will pay off and what will not* (Dudek, 2004, 80). Evaluating the attitude of the Episcopate towards the communist authorities Antoni Dudek comes to the conclusion that, in the 80s, the Church hierarchy played a twofold game. It is evident from the documents of the Ministry of the Interior (1987): *At the moment the Church has an ambivalent attitude. On one hand, in order not to lose the social support, it openly criticizes the authorities. On the other hand, it is not interested in the further aggravation of the situation in Poland. It is aware of the fact that every next political turn will result in the loss of their strong position as the political partner to the authorities* (Dudek, 2004, 80).

### **Moderating the arrangements between the communists and the opposition**

A clear shift in the relations between the Episcopate and the ruling party occurred in 1987. The communist authorities made conciliatory gestures towards their opponent and they tried to avoid any behaviour that could be taken as the comeback to the hostile rhetoric. Also, the Episcopate undertook the conciliatory activities. The interview with the Primate Glemp for the Moscow newspaper “Literaturnaja Gazieta” was rather sensational as it was perceived as a new beginning in the relations between the Episcopate representatives and the communist regime (The interview with the Primate cardinal..., 1996, 537-542). During the preparation of the third visit of John Paul II to Poland both sides took the diplomatic efforts aimed at improving the relations between the authorities and the Church. The efforts taken by the

Episcopate were supported by the representatives of the Vatican diplomacy who were also in touch with the supreme communist authorities. It seems that the shift in the relations between the government and the Episcopate depended on the interests of both sides. The Church authorities were mainly interested in regulating the legal status of the Church and in normalizing diplomatic relations between the Polish People's Republic and Vatican City. The government, in the face of the economic crisis and possible social unrest, was expecting the Episcopate to support the negotiations with the "Solidarity" opposition.

Of course, the political line of the Primate Glemp, which was based on making compromises with the communists, was not approved of by all members of the Church as there were internal tensions within the Episcopate caused by the various attitudes towards the communist regime. Complaisance towards the ruling party, represented by the cardinal Jozef Glemp and his supporters, was defied by the bishop Ignacy Toakrczuk and the cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz and many others (Kindziuk, 2010, 201, 225).

The deteriorating economic situation in Poland as well as the radicalization of the society, which wanted to free itself from the restraints of the totalitarian system, indicated the imminent fall of communism. The attempts to overcome the crisis in Poland did not have a chance to succeed as they mainly consisted in the prices of goods going up which hit the impoverished society. In the face of the risk of the further social unrest, the Episcopate started to protest against the price increase and the unsuccessful reforms. At the same time, they started to negotiate with the government. The representatives of the discredited and bankrupt system made use of the conciliatory activities of the Episcopate engaged in a dangerous game, i.e. behind-closed-doors deals between the communist regime and a part of the "Solidarity" opposition which ended with the contract of "the round table". To meet the expectations of the communist regime, the bishops urged the nation for Christian forgiveness and reconciliation, which calmed down the society. Better relations between the victim and the former oppressor released social tensions and ended the conflict situation. Wojciech Jaruzelski held an official meeting with the leader of the Conference of the Polish Episcopate, the cardinal Glemp, which was skilfully used by the government media to create, so called, social dialogue. Jadwiga Staniszkis thinks that, by playing an artful game with the society as well as with the opposition and the Church, the communists wanted to buy time as they feared that *"if the external empire goes down too quickly (before the guarantee of safety is achieved in the negotiations with the opposition), the "burning of the committees" will happen.* (Staniszkis, 2009, 184).

The growing economic crisis, the loss of the social support for the ruling party and well as the risk of the outbreak of social unrest led the

representatives of the Episcopate to undertake the mediation activities. In 1988, they actively participated in the negotiations aimed at reaching the agreement between the government and the opposition. The mutual arrangements were related to laying down the conditions for dismantling the totalitarian system and for the society and the state to enter the path of the political transformations. To express the support for the national agreement the clergymen participated in the unofficial meetings in Magdalenka and the official meetings at “the round table” (Informacja Biura Prasowego, 1996, 585). The representatives of the Episcopate engaged in setting out the conditions of the agreement which, according to them, took into consideration the common good of the society. According to the Episcopate, the compromise reached at “the round table” should guarantee *the employment rights, especially the rights for labourers and farmers to join unions according to their own choice* (Komunikat 230 Konferencji, 2006, 337). The aim was to lay the foundation for the substantial reforms of the state structure and the national economy. Moreover, the bishops expected that the dialogue between the communist authorities and the representatives of the opposition would stimulate the process of the consolidation of the society and strengthen the position of Poland on an international level (Komunikat 230 Konferencji, 2006, 337).

The authorities were satisfied with the active participation of the representatives of the Episcopate in the process of reaching the agreement with a part of the opposition. During the session of the Joint Commission of the representatives of the government and the Episcopate (23<sup>rd</sup> January 1989), Stanislaw Ciosek, the prominent member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, pointed out to the important role of the Church in the process of the development of the reformatory initiatives by the ruling party in the 80s: *After 13<sup>th</sup> December 1981, the relations between the government and the Church built the foundation for the transformations of both - the worldview as well as the political life. We are not talking here about <the black and red ally> or <the throne and aspergillum ally>, as some people say. [...] The relations between the government and the Church depended on the attitudes prevailing in Poland. We improved them in the shadow of <Solidarity> and Walesa. [...] This is not only the ally between the state and the Church. It also develops better understanding on the most important level, i.e. worldview level. We are not luring the leaders of the Church into the trap. We discussed it in Klarysewo and then I spoke to the priest Orszulik and ed. Mazowiecki. We came to the conclusion that without the standpoint of the Church it would take us longer to formulate the standpoint of X plenum. This was our motivation. We don’t treat the Church as the guarantor but its attitude is encouraging* (Dokument nr 40, 1993, 559).

The official enunciation of the Episcopate confirmed that not only did the hierarchs approve of the arrangements between the authorities with a part of the opposition, but also that it was their warrantor. From the announcement of the Conference of the Polish Episcopate (2<sup>nd</sup> May 1989) it is evident that “the round table” was regarded by the bishops as the success and as an important and promising step towards the democratization of social life. One of the results achieved at “the round table” was the legalization of the trade union “Solidarity”. According to the bishops, the agreement marked the beginning of the transformation of social, political, economic and moral life of the entire society. Moreover, it launched the process aimed at forming a national life according to the rights of the sovereign society and it created a new chance for the country (Komunikat 234 Konferencji, 2006, 342-343).

Despite the fact that, in the official documents, the Episcopate referred to the arrangements of “the round table” in a positive way, there were internal tensions within the Episcopate and differences in the way hierarchs evaluated the event. For the cardinal Jozef Glemp “the round table” was a considerable success of the Church diplomacy. The Primate thought that it was unfounded to doubt and question the good intentions of the sides reaching the agreement. According to Glemp, the accusation that “the round table” was a deal with the communists or even the betrayal of the national interest was false: *Neither the deal with the communists nor the betrayal took place. These accusations are false. We did our best to make the change of the system happen without bloodshed. That is why, the Church sent its representatives to take part in the talks. At that point, I was already convinced that the end of communism was coming, that the system was breaking down. I considered “the round table” as an important step forward. It was difficult not to engage in those transformations. The Church has never abandoned the nation and it has always felt responsible for it* (as cited in Kindziuk, 2010, 288). The positive results of the agreement were also highlighted by the secretary of the Conference of the Polish Episcopate, the archbishop Bronislaw Dabrowski, who represented the Church in many negotiations. According to Dabrowski, the agreement between the communists and the opposition was the success of the entire society: *The Church in Poland is very satisfied with the situation. It has always cared for, aimed at and supported the conciliatory tendencies which would lead to the national reconciliation. Therefore, it was present at <the round table> as the observer – the witness* (Dabrowski, 1995, 467).

The bishop of Przemyśl, Ignacy Tokarczuk, had a different opinion on the social and political consequences of “the round table”. He thought that, in 1989, there was a chance for the substantial transformation of the country, but “the round table” ruined it because *it gave the impression that democratically everything was taken care of. Meanwhile, it had been planned beforehand* (Nie można zdradzić, 2012, 125). According to Tokarczuk, the mystification of “the

*round table” made it difficult to know “who is who” because various groups were looking for a certain way to win the situation, to hold onto power over the same people, even from behind the scenes (Nie można zdradzić, 2012, 125). Similar conviction was expressed by the bishop Kazimierz Majdanski. He thought that the contract signed at “the round table” made it impossible to take unambiguous actions and to judge the illegal activities of the communist authorities and subordinate security services: In 1989 the decision was made to forget and to absolve the past. Was it that successful so that the past was put behind? Because if it had, and the compensation had been granted, it would have been a great triumph of forgiveness. If it hadn’t happened, the forgiveness was neither human nor Christian. On the contrary, we would have found ourselves in the situation of the common falsification. [...] The faults, which nobody regretted, were forgotten and the great injustice, which nobody corrected, was forgiven. (as cited in Jackowski, 1997, 40).*

Critical opinions were also expressed about the representatives of the Episcopate who were engaged in the moderation of the agreement between the communist regime and a part of the opposition. The activities undertaken by the priest Alojzy Orszulik met with particularly strong disapproval. Some of his negotiating activities were strongly criticized by the Primate Glemp. In his opinion, Orszulik was boasting himself about being *the main constructor of the Church policy at “the round table” and launching the initiatives which were treated as the activities undertaken in the name of the Episcopate, but which very often were contradictory to its political line (Rakowski, 2005, 408)*. It might have been possible that his behaviour during negotiations was influenced by his activities behind closed doors, especially by the fact that he was registered in the category of “the Informal Collaborator candidate” and “the operational contact of the Security Service (Aparat represji wobec...2009, 99-100; Cenckiewicz, Chmielecki, Kowalski, Piekarska, 2013, 353).

The negative opinion about Orszulik being engaged in the deals between the authorities and a part of “Solidarity” was also expressed by Peter Raina. According to Raina, one of the biggest mistakes of the ecclesiastical moderators taking part in the negotiations turned out to be the approval of the list of the participants of “the round table” prepared by Lech Walesa. Among 50 people suggested by the leader of the opposition there were the “Solidarity” activists and its supporters. However, the vast majority of them were people with left-wing social and political views. The list also included a few liberals. The list did not, however, include those who were fighting for independence and the law and order in Poland, whose who were imprisoned, tortured and discriminated by the communist system (Raina, 1999, 329, 332; Rakowski, 2005, 510).

According to Raina, Alojzy Orszulik bore the responsibility for this situation. Given the mandate of trust from the Church and the nation, not only did he try to convince everyone about the necessity to establish “the round table” but he also actively participated in the preparation of the session. Therefore, Raina thinks that the moral obligation of Orszulik, as the representative of the Church and the nation, was to convince Lech Walesa to invite people engaged in the independence movement to take part in the negotiations. Raina is of the opinion that the balance of forces among the representatives of the opposition turned out to be very unfavourable for the nationalists, as there weren't many *true representatives of the nation* (Raina, 1999, 236). At the “round table”, *on one hand, we could find the representatives of the communist authorities and, on the other hand, the representatives of <Solidarity> and doctrinaires of the left-wing and liberal ideology* (Raina, 1999, 236). Also, Witold Kieżun thinks that the agreement made at “the round table” shared the power between the communist and the left-wing Solidarity opposition (Kieżun, 2012, p. 30).

The public opinion was of significant importance in the evaluation of the participation of the representatives of the Episcopate in the deals between the communist and a part of the opposition. The results of the sociological research show that the Catholic Church was clearly losing the social trust at the beginning of the 90s. The vast majority of the society was disappointed with the socio-political situation in Poland, including the role of the Episcopate in the process of the transformation of the system. Poles suffered the consequences of, so called, economic reforms (Feliksiak, 2010, 5). The social dissatisfaction with the situation in Poland influenced the evaluation of the Church hierarchy whose representatives took part in dismantling the communist system and were perceived by the citizens as the warrantor of the interests of the society. Trust towards the institutionalized Church, which in autumn 1989 reached the level of 88%, dropped down to 38% in spring 1993. This indicates a dramatic decrease of social support (a drop by 50%) for the institution which, unquestionably, contributed to the abolishment of communism. The decrease was not, however, reflected in the religious practices of Poles (Opinions on institutions and organizations..., 1993, 7; Marczuk, 1993, 116-117; Załęcki, 2001, 59-60).

It is difficult not to agree with Ryszard Gryz who thinks that the Church lost the social trust as the price for being the peace warrantor (from April 1989) during the implementation of the arrangements made at “the round table”: *Being the warrantor of the contract of the Round Table, the Church took shared responsibility for the consequences, out of which only some were positively perceived. Peace between the repentant oppressor and the generous victim was consistent with the Christian system of values. However, the question is whether the repentance of the oppressor was real and sufficient*

(Dudek, Gryz, 2006, 441). This train of thought is supported by the sociologist, the priest Wladyslaw Piwowarski: *“So called <round table> has had a negative impact on the situation of today’s Poland. Against the will of the majority of Poles, <the power> (politics) and <the money> (economy) were in hands of various oligarchic powers which took control over our country. This mainly includes the former communists who became socio-democrats and the political and economic advisors of <Solidarity>, i.e. cosmopolitans and liberals. Neither of them were devoted to creating common good of the nation (the society), which should be the aim of the state. It retrospect, it becomes clear and obvious. The only thing that they had to achieve was the legalization of power”* (as cited in Zieliński, 2003, 374).

### **Summary**

In the 80s, the dynamic transformation of the relations between the Episcopate and the communist regime took place. These changes led the representatives of the Episcopate to enter the political deals whose signatories were: the government and a part of the Solidarity opposition. In the opinion of the society, the presence of the Church representatives at “the round table “ was to guarantee the national interests and the Polish reason of state. It turned out, however, that the contract signed at “the round table” secured mainly the interests of the party and gave the guarantee to its officers that they would not be judged for their illegal activities towards the Polish society, especially towards people engaged in the oppositional activities. The participation of the Church in dismantling the communist system was perceived negatively by a part of the society as it authenticated the deals which made it possible for the transition from communism to post-communism to happen slowly. A part of the society was convinced that the representatives of the Episcopate, by playing a skilful game with the communists and the opposition in the 80s, acted in the interest of the institution they represented. For the Episcopate the priority was to secure the interests of the Church, including the regulation of its legal status of in Poland.

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