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“This pandemic showed what is important to people.” The COVID-19 pandemic and collective religious practices from the perspective of the rural Catholics in Southern Poland*

Abstract. This paper explores the shifting terrain of contemporary lived Catholicism in Poland in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dominant position of the Catholic Church in the Polish religious landscape remains a crucial point of reference, even given the decline in religious practice in the last thirty years. Radical changes in collective religious practices brought by the pandemic provided an opportunity to analyze the experiences of lay Catholics. Our analysis is based on 21 in-depth interviews with “strong” Catholics from small rural parishes in Southern Poland. We argue that in this group, the attachment to local parish and its power structure and continued engagement with it during the pandemic is entwined with the need for transformation of the established hierarchies and means of lay engagement.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Catholicism, Poland, rural parish

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Poland is considered one of the most religious countries in Europe, with the dominant position of the Catholic Church widely recognized in political, academic, and popular discourses (Borowik & Doktor, 2001). According to the 2021 census, 71.3% of the population identify as members of the Roman Catholic Church (GUS, 2023). The enduring attachment to institutional religion is evident in various indicators such as regular mass attendance, participation in sacraments, and the importance placed on Catholic rites of passage. Some researchers, however, suggest that the widespread identification with Catholicism, which peaked in the 1980s, often reflects a superficial or ritualistic attachment to the faith (Marianiński, 2008) and argue that while Catholicism remains a significant cultural reference point in Poland (Sadłoń, 2021), broad support for the Catholic Church is steadily declining, and Polish Catholicism faces a profound crisis (Dreyer, 2015; Zduniak, 2019; Motak et al., 2021). This shift has been accompanied by a substantial decrease in religious practice over the past thirty years (Grabowska, 2021). In this evolving landscape, the pandemic presented a unique lens through which we examine the changing contours of contemporary lived Catholicism in Poland.

This paper focuses on members of rural Catholic parishes in Poland and seeks to explore their experiences related to the transformation of religious practices during the pandemic. Our respondents come from Southern Poland, where the rate of churchgoers is the highest on the national scale and the attachment to local parish – measured by the rate of participants, members of local parish organizations – remains strong (Sadłoń, 2019). Narratives from respondents reveal a tension between a conservative desire to maintain ritual stability and a readiness to use the “window” for transformation opened by the pandemic’s liminal phase.

The pandemic context

The global COVID-19 pandemic reshaped religious practices worldwide, leading to a shift toward virtual and home-based worship as a primary response to strict social distancing measures (Taragin-Zeller & Kessler, 2021). As Baker et al. (2021) observe, the pandemic triggered a heightened “demand” for religious rituals, comfort, and support, while simultaneously decreasing the “available supply” of religion in its conventional forms. In Poland, the first COVID-19 case was diagnosed on 4 March 2020, quickly followed by lockdown measures, including bans on large gatherings and the closure of educational and cultural institutions, restaurants, and nonessential stores. Particularly stringent restrictions were placed on public gatherings, including

religious services between 1 and 12 April 2020, a period encompassing Holy Week and Easter for Roman Catholics. During that time the Polish government limited religious gatherings to five people plus the celebrant (Council of Ministers, 2020). One month later, restrictions eased, allowing the number of attendees to be determined by the square footage of the venue (one person per 15 square meters). With the second wave of the pandemic in October 2020, some restrictions were reintroduced, affecting religious gatherings once again (Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021).

Most Catholic hierarchs in Poland adhered to the government-imposed restrictions and recommended additional measures to mitigate virus spread. Initially, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, Head of the Polish Bishops' Conference, advised increasing the number of masses to reduce attendance at each service. "It would be unimaginable not to pray in our churches," he emphasized (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020a). However, as the pandemic intensified, the Polish Bishops' Conference officially suggested that a general dispensation be granted to those who feared contracting the virus during mass. "We encourage spiritual connection with the Church community through radio, TV, and Internet broadcasts," the bishops wrote (Polish Bishops' Conference, 2020b).

Preliminary research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion in Poland examined the position of the Catholic Church as a social control agent influencing the Polish public sphere (Maćkowiak & Zawiejska, 2022); decisions of the Catholic hierarchy regarding the implementation of lockdown measures and the motives behind them and the limitations and potential disadvantages inherent in the undertaken steps (Ciesielski, 2020; Dorożyński, 2020; Gonera, 2020). Some research focused on the Catholic clergy and their perspectives on fundamental issues, such as the importance of rituals or the significance of the sacraments (Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021). Extensive theological and ecclesiological discussions in individual bishops' sermons, Catholic media, and in academic writing on the effects of lockdown regimes on Catholic observance emphasized that the virtual community is not a "real Church" (Dorożyński, 2020, p. 71). Ciesielski (2020), for example, discusses which changes in the liturgy are permissible and the irreplaceability of some elements of religious rituals (for example, the in-person character of the sacrament of penance). This focus on the institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic comes with the scarcity of in-depth analysis of the experiences of lay Catholics actively engaging with the changes brought about by the new circumstances. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap and analyze how lay Catholics in rural parishes engaged with the unexpected changes and made sense of them.

We focus on people living in small towns and villages and declaring a high level of religious engagement. Our study examines religiosity in rural communities, which tend to secularize more slowly than urban Catholic populations yet face distinct barriers, such as limited internet access to religious content and restricted public transportation (Gitkiewicz, 2020). Catholics in Poland constitute a diverse group that defies generalization (Porter-Szűcs, 2011), especially given the progression of the individualization and privatization of religion (Luckman, 1967). The traditional categorizations partially derived from a distinction between Catholicism as an intellectual formation, an ideological project, and a set of doctrinal claims (Porter-Szűcs, 2011) fall short of capturing the contemporary Catholic landscape in Poland. Our research therefore centers on so-called “strong” rural Catholics, defined as those who embrace most Church teachings, participate regularly in Church rituals, and engage actively in parish life (Inglis, 2004).

Theoretical framework

In this research we focus on the lived Catholicism in contemporary Poland (Niedźwiedź, 2014). The turn towards “lived religion” embedded in ethnographic methodologies reflects the interest in ordinary people as religious subjects (McGuire 2009; Ammerman, 2016). Fundamental to the study of lived religion is the idea that “all cultural idioms are intersubjective, including and especially religious ones” (Orsi 2003, p. 173). Officially prescribed practices are thus of the same importance as individual reinterpretations of such practices (Ammerman 2016). Another important theoretical framework for our analysis is the theory of social practice. It allows to see human activity as simultaneously constructing individuals as social beings and reproducing social worlds in which they participate (Ortner, 2006). The assumption about the dialectical nature of the relationship between individual agency and social structure is well aligned with the lived religion approach to studying everyday lives of religious people (Kupari, 2020). In the following analysis we draw on the concepts of habitus, field and capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1990). According to the author, habitus, a set of embodied dispositions generates a common-sense view of the world, making practices seem “taken for granted” and embedding cultural values within them (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 81). Habitus aligns with a particular field – a semi-autonomous “structured space of social forces and struggle” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 243). Each field follows its unique internal logic, which establishes its resources, values, and forms of wealth, collectively referred to as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu's theocratization of religious field, which is our focus, had been criticized for excluding lay members of religious communities as participants in the power struggles. In the author's view, laity is "dispossessed of religious capital" (Bourdieu, 1971, p. 304). Critics questioned whether such understanding of religious field based on historical case of French Catholicism can be applied to contemporary societies (Kupari, 2020; Dianteill, 2003). Bourdieu emphasizes, however, that the definitions of the concepts he introduced are intentionally open and provisional, advocating for the necessity for empirical testing of his ideas in a given context (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Sample and method

Our analysis is based on 21 qualitative interviews with lay members of Catholic parishes in southern Poland. The mean age of our sample was 42, ranging from 20 to 58. We interviewed 5 men and 16 women. All respondents gave consent to participation in the study, but for the protection of their anonymity, they were given pseudonyms. We used the purpose-driven sampling method; our respondents were selected based on their level of engagement with the local religious community. We spoke to active members of parish groups, such as the Rosary Circle, Youth Apostolate Movement (e.g., Aneta), Domestic Church Movement (e.g., Maria), a catechist (e.g., Ela), a lector, a member of the parish council, a secretary of local synod consultations, choir members, leaders of a children's choir and lay ministers of the holy communion. All respondents declared that they regularly participated in holy mass services on at least a weekly basis.

Results and discussion

The early months of the pandemic saw a growing interest in religiosity (Bentzen, 2021). Specifically, increased participation in mass services was noted in the Catholic context (Alfano et al., 2020). For some the pandemic fostered religious growth through individual prayer, which was regarded as an effective coping mechanism for addressing fears about family and social relationships (Szałachowski & Tuszyńska-Bogucka, 2021). This turn to God during adversity, a phenomenon extensively documented in research (Pargament, 2001; Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006), was a recurring theme recorded across the globe. Religious individuals frequently reported an increase in the time they

devoted to prayer, the quality of spiritual engagement and their importance for coping with the challenges brought by the pandemic.

Survey data from the early months of the pandemic in Poland also indicated an increase in religious practices (Boguszewski et al., 2021). However, these findings were approached with caution, and concerns about the long-term effects of the lockdown measures continued to be voiced by religious leaders. Our respondents echoed these concerns, predicting a significant decrease in attendance at collective practices and believing that the pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating changes in Polish Catholicism. For example, Sabina observed that in larger cities, many people who stopped attending church during the pandemic never returned once the restrictions were lifted. In this regard, our respondents reflected the widespread belief that Catholicism in Poland is in decline, losing both its popularity and mass character, with only those of “real” or “strong” faith remaining attached to the Church. According to Jan:

If someone were a true believer, they would return even if the church was closed for a few months. Because they knew what they were returning for. And if someone was just attending – one bishop called them “cultural Catholics” – then they are not [here anymore] because they find a good excuse, why [not to go to church]. Besides, this is a matter of habit. If you can function for one, two, or three months without a mass, then why not longer, maybe another month?

Some respondents constructed the level of engagement with religious practices during the time of the strictest restrictions as means for distinction in religious field. According to Zuzanna:

This pandemic showed what is important to people. Is it just the basket on Holy Saturday and food blessing or something more? [...]. Because it suddenly turned out that if someone wanted to take communion, they would do everything to do that.

Our respondents positioned themselves as truly committed, “real” Catholics, distinguishing themselves from those with a more superficial or shallow commitment – once again reinforcing the idea of rural areas as a Catholic stronghold. This self-perception was discursively enacted in their comparisons between their own devout participation in televised mass services and those who, in their view, did not treat mediatized worship with the same reverence and engagement. The stratification within the lay community, as highlighted in these examples, points to the power dynamics influencing the transformation of religious practices and reveals pre-existing religious hierarchies that are seldom articulated in everyday contexts. This hierarchy is most evident

in Dorota's narrative, where she openly described how the parish priest and churchgoers ignored restrictions on the number of people allowed in church, viewing this collective defiance as a defense of the faith. She downplayed the threat posed by COVID-19 and focused instead on what she perceived as an external threat directed at the local Catholic Church:

We did not believe in this pandemic. They wanted to move us away from religion, from God. That's how we explained it because nothing happened, we were healthy every time we went, others were healthy, how could we get sick? Nothing happened, there are worse illnesses, like the flu, and people do not spread it in church. And here, suddenly, if "you go, you will catch it." [...] If everybody resigned and we continuously gave in, they would close all the churches and be happy. It was not so much our government; it came from higher up, from far away, from the West. Unfortunately.

Dorota invoked the popular myth of Poland as an *antemurale christianitatis* – a besieged fortress of the "one true faith" under constant assault from secularized Western ideologies (Porter-Szűcs, 2011). Yet, she saw her own parish as uniquely embodying this role of faith defender, believing that, unlike hers, other parishes did not engage with this task. These comments evoked also discourse about the crisis of the Church in Poland (Grabowska, 2021). The narrative about the unavoidable consequences of pandemic, changing all spheres of social life, allowed some Catholics to acknowledge a growing inability to preserve the intergenerational transmission of religiousness in Polish society.

For our participants the local parish community constituted a site where social capital was acquired and maintained. Many respondents described the local church and Sunday mass as the central spatial and temporal focus of community life, particularly for the elderly. This portrayal aligns with their religious habitus sustaining the importance placed on regular church attendance, as expressed by most respondents. However, it also reveals the secular aspects of Sunday service attendance as for people who are not social media users or technologically savvy, meeting others after the mass or even seeing them at church at the usual time in their usual place was reassuring and provided information relevant for the local community. During customary parish announcements at the end of a mass, the priest not only informs about forthcoming celebrations (various saints' days or weddings) but also passes notifications from local authorities, like the village council. The pandemic conditions of heightened uncertainty reveal that the Catholic Church in rural Poland remains one of the critical social spaces where concern and responsibility for other community members are enacted. This phenomenon

is in line with research showing that those who practice religion several times a week are more likely to participate in civic affairs and solve their community's problems than those who do not practice (Carlton, 2015; Mariański, 2008).

The social capital acquired through a sense of belonging to local community can be transformed into a symbolic capital embedded in a distinction between "us," the pious and "strong" Catholics and "others," representing parishes, especially in big cities, where the decline in religious practices is more rapid and more visible. Delineating this hierarchy seems to be an important aspect of the respondents' social identity, both individual and collective. In our study, most of the respondents accepted the decision to limit the number of people in a church and saw it as a necessary step but some were more skeptical and critical about what was dubbed "closing churches" (see also Dorożyński, 2020). For example, Zuzanna and Krzysztof spoke openly about defying the restrictions. Their parish priest disregarded the attendance limits, stating that he had not become a priest to close church doors. "Officially [the church] was closed, but unofficially it was possible to be there and participate [in the mass]," as Krzysztof explained. As the lockdown persisted, traditional in-person Church activities were increasingly supplemented by online services.

The mediatization of Church activities also highlighted the traditional structure of rural parishes, reinforcing the strong position of the parish priest as a central authority figure. The rapid digitalization and the challenges it introduced have been among the most widely discussed effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practice (Arasa et al., 2022; Baker, 2020). A global survey conducted in the Catholic Church in the early months of the pandemic suggested low rate of mass service streaming (Arasa et al., 2022). Philips (2020) argues that in the initial phase of the lockdown in many churches the lay members were consumers rather than partners in worship. While broadcasting masses was not entirely new in Poland – services from major sanctuaries such as Częstochowa had already been available on local channels – under the new circumstances, participation in televised or streamed masses became a shared experience for entire households, rather than being an option primarily reserved for elderly family members. Thus, in rural Poland, the pandemic regulation "accelerated the mediatization of religious communication and practice," as noted by Hall & Kołodziejska (2021, p. 12).

Our data provides insights into the complexities surrounding both the mediatization of Church activities and the evolving role of the local priest within the Church. All our respondents noted that their local parishes were unprepared for the shift to virtual services when the first strict lockdown rules were enforced. While some parish priests showed little enthusiasm for online services, a small number of parishioners actively engaged in organizing these

online broadcasts. This involvement often stemmed from a sense of responsibility for the local religious community and a commitment to supporting others, particularly the elderly, whose attachment to local religious aesthetics was deemed important. Campbell (2020) argues that in the "distanced church" of the COVID-19 pandemic, technologically modified social interaction and relational desires remain its vital elements. For many engaged Catholics, the pandemic created a space where they could "do their part." "The parish has always been my parish, and one needs to take care so that something comes out of it," stated Marcin. For some this shift meant stepping into a more central position in their community's religious practice. Tomasz, for example, recalled:

The pandemic opened me to active participation in the holy mass. Before the pandemic, I practically took no part, but in the second year, 2021, in this case, I became a lector in the parish. It was a *de facto* breakthrough, and the pandemic changed that in me. As there were not enough people, they did not engage because they were afraid – a space was created for me.

The success of these efforts, however, largely depended on the attitude of the parish priest. The changes required during the pandemic largely confirmed that the priest's authority in rural parishes remains deeply entrenched. This reinforces the observation made by Anna Szwed who researched women-led grass root initiatives in the Church and noted that "the shape of parish life has to a great extent been dependent on the subjective visions and decisions made by local priests" (2021, p. 329). However, we observed emerging instances where the power structure seemed to grow more relational, allowing for subtle shifts in parish power dynamics. Some of our interlocutors shared examples of initiatives led by lay parishioners that were ultimately hindered by the parish priest, revealing the limits of lay influence and the tensions between traditional clerical authority and increasing lay involvement. Aneta described how her parish priest resisted efforts to organize an online transmission of Easter mass in a timely manner.

The dominant position of the local parish priest was also evident in the limited reference to the global Catholic Church's strategies in response to the crisis. Our respondents mentioned Pope Francis's guidance only briefly, mainly in the context of collective prayers for an end to the pandemic. In contrast, the decisions made by Polish bishops and local priests were discussed far more frequently, underscoring the primacy of local perspectives within the global Church. In some cases, this local focus served to bridge the gap between lay Catholics and the clergy. Marcin, for instance, referenced popular anticlerical sentiments and remarked, "we should not spit on priests, because one is like this, another is like that, but the priests come from our own circles." Further in

the interview, however, he observed that the authoritative position of a parish priest is no longer a given, but something that must be established: "Today [...] the priest must be more with people, not just managing them. He needs to help them to find faith."

The noticeable shift towards relational rather than authoritarian power as the preferred approach among local Church leaders reflects a departure from the passive acceptance of clergy's unquestioned dominance. Some lay members of the parish used their existing cultural capital and transformed their position in the religious field during the pandemic. For instance, they utilized technological skills and knowledge to assist with online transmissions and supported priests who lacked the necessary competencies. This collaboration led to a temporary renegotiation of roles, functions, and the power structure within the parish, effectively reducing the power distance.

All respondents participated in mediatized mass services during the strictest lockdown. This seemed a natural course of action for them, as they had been regular churchgoers before the pandemic and considered a Sunday without mass "incomplete" or "empty." However, attending mass online was often seen as a temporary substitute suited to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic – a stopgap rather than a lasting solution. During the interviews, respondents frequently echoed the sentiment that "an online mass is not the same as an actual, real mass." Halina's explanation encapsulates this perspective: "The difference is huge. True participation is in the Eucharist of Christ, when I receive the body and blood of Christ. Watching mass online is incomparable to that." Her words reflect the generally conservative tendencies among respondents, underscoring their desire to preserve the pre-pandemic experiences that constitute their religious habitus in ritual practice.

Our respondents developed intuitive, individualized methods for meaningful engagement with mediatized mass services starting from the first wave of the pandemic, even before any official decrees were issued. The Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued two decrees in March 2020, outlining guidelines for participating in mediatized masses (Arasa et al., 2022, p. 6). These general guidelines informed more specific instructions from local bishops, most of which were published with some delay. For instance, the Diocese of Tarnów released a brochure with a section titled "How to Connect Spiritually with the Broadcasted Holy Mass." The authors emphasized that nothing could replace physical presence at mass within the church walls, as the holy sacrament is realized only there. However, they suggested that viewers could achieve spiritual engagement with the broadcast if approached with seriousness (Diocese of Tarnów, 2021).

Bodily involvement (sitting, standing, kneeling at the appropriate times) was encouraged, as was responding to the priest's words and singing the hymns.

The importance of embodied participation was strongly echoed in our interviews, as respondents described deliberate efforts to distinguish mediatized mass from other activities conducted at home. For example, Maria and her husband dressed formally, lit a candle, and mimicked the gestures of those present in the church. Sabina shared a similar approach, stating, "I was fully aware that this needed to be approached with dignity – not like having a mug of coffee next to the computer, watching a soap opera." Appropriate attire was a recurring theme: "Not in my pajamas, even if no one sees me," Anna remarked. Respondents often expressed a deep attachment to their local parish, church, and community – elements that significantly shaped their religious habitus. Familiarity with the parish and knowing other community members were important pull factors for many. As previously noted, Catholic holidays and rites of passage remain vital to Poles, even amid the commonly acknowledged decline in Catholic Church membership in Poland. As Mirosława Grabowska observed: "The customs associated with the Catholic calendar are very much upheld. The patterns of celebrating the most important holidays are still binding for us" (2019). The first wave of the pandemic coincided with Easter, the most important holiday in the Catholic liturgy, and the introduction of the strictest restrictions. Many experienced these socially distanced Easter celebrations as incomplete. "We celebrated at home, so it was kind of hard," recalled Iza. This sense of disruption was evident not only during significant holidays like Easter but also in the context of Sundays. Reflecting on this, Dorota remarked: "[...] for me, it was not a real Sunday because I was not at our church's mass. I was [at the mass], but I was missing this. It felt weird all week. [...] I go to my own church, and I know I am [there]. I pray differently in that church. I can focus on my prayers in that church. When I go to a different church, I look around: what the walls look like, what is there, and how the priest talks, and I get nothing out of the sermon. I only [note] how he talks, what other people are wearing."

Even when their local parish offered low-quality worship transmissions, many respondents continued to participate in masses broadcast from their own parish via the internet. Tomasz acknowledged that other parishes provided better-quality broadcasts but noted that "this sort of inner attachment to this [our] parish prevailed."

Our findings suggest that the conservative tendency observed among respondents was interwoven with actions aimed at more meaningful engagement. The destabilization of the religious field during the pandemic created a window of opportunity for such actions. For some respondents, the lockdown

triggered engagement with interactive online religious content, which enabled them to expand their religious knowledge. Maria, for instance, participated in online religious retreats. Many respondents placed particular importance on sermons, seeking guidance and consolation during the pandemic. Tomasz stated, “Homilies helped, too. Homilies reached my head – either those from Łagiewniki or my parish. There was more time for religious education, and I used to listen more to various things I don’t have time for now.” For some, inadequate or absent sermons during online masses motivated them to explore transmissions from other locations. Sabina criticized the lack of sermons in some online broadcasts: “In that time, people needed just, like, 15 sentences, because we all needed spiritual support, and there was none. [...] [It was because of] maybe laziness, maybe convenience.” Maria explored Sunday mass transmissions from different parishes, appreciating the higher-quality sermons. Over time, she developed a strong awareness of the types of preachers she resonated with and made conscious choices based on her preferences.

Conclusions

Our respondents, the “strong” Catholics from rural Southern Poland, remained within the Catholic Church’s safe milieu during the pandemic, finding ways to navigate the challenges posed by restrictions regardless of their approval of the changes introduced. Crucially, they did so without overtly undermining the institutional Church, adapting as necessary through newly acquired technological skills. Within our research sample, this conservative tendency was intertwined with a drive for more meaningful engagement and an expansion of their symbolic capital due to new opportunities created during the pandemic.

The narratives on the transformation of religious practices during COVID-19 highlight the evolving characteristics of rural Catholicism in Poland. The pandemic exposed underlying tensions related to the vertical structure of the parish. While the hierarchical configuration of the Catholic Church, characterized by an implicit “antagonistic configuration of the ‘up’ and ‘down’” (Altermatt, 1995, pp. 99–100), remains a defining feature of lay Catholic experiences, respondents did not universally accept the authority of the clergy without question. Behaviors by priests perceived as uncaring, lazy, or greedy during the lockdown elicited resistance rather than passive acquiescence. Although respondents remained attached to their local parishes and acknowledged the authority of parish priests, they increasingly took on responsibility for the organization of religious practices in their parishes.

The local parish remains a center of respondents' religious lives – a space where they build and sustain their social capital and practice their faith. Their religious habitus is continually reinforced through participation in the local parish and collective rituals, including mediatized ones. The distinction enacted through the respondents' emphasis on "proper" ways of participating in collective religious practices under the lockdown conditions, contrasting their piety with perceived laxity in other, often urban, parishes elevated the status of rural Catholicism. The increased accessibility to diverse parishes via online transmissions allowed respondents to recognize their attachment to local parish and explore different forms of engagement with religious practices. These findings reveal the complex interplay between tradition, adaptation, and transformation within their religious practices.

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