

Faith and Fatherland

Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Introduction

Without Christ it is impossible to understand the history of Poland. . . .
It is impossible, without Christ, to understand and appraise the contribution of the Polish nation to the development of man and his humanity in the past, and its contribution today.

—Pope John Paul II, *Return to Poland*, 1978

Who are you?

A little Pole.

What is your sign?

A white eagle.¹

Where do you live?

Among my own.

In what country?

On Polish land.

What is that land?

My fatherland.

How was it won?

With blood and scars.

Do you love her?

I love her sincerely.

And in what do you believe?

I believe in Poland.

What are you for her?

A grateful child.

What is your duty to her?

To sacrifice my life.

Kto ty jesteś?

Polak mały.

Jaki znak twój?

Orzeł biały.

Gdzie ty mieszkasz?

Między swemi.

W jakim kraju?

W polskiej ziemi.

Czem ta ziemia?

Mą ojczyzną.

Czem zdobyta?

Krwią i blizną.

Czy ją kochasz?

Kocham szczerze.

A w co wierzysz?

W Polskę wierzę.

Coś ty dla niej?

Wdzięczne dziecko.

Coś jej winien?

Oddać życie.

—Władysław Belza, *Katechizm polskiego dziecka*, 1900²

It is not enough to call oneself a Catholic. We must not simply call ourselves Catholics, but be Catholics. . . . We must be Catholics at home and outside of home, every day and every hour, with (so to speak) every inch of our being.

—Archbishop Józef Bilczewski, “List pasterski do wiernych archidiecezyi w dniu konsekracji i intronizacji,” January 20, 1901, in *Listy pasterskie i mowy okolicznościowe*, 30.

Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński once observed that “nowhere else is the union of Church and nation as strong as in Poland.”² This would certainly seem to be the case: 99 percent of all children in Poland are baptized, 92.8 percent of all marriages are accompanied by a church wedding, and between 90 and 98 percent of the population will answer “Roman Catholic” when asked about their religion.³ The rituals of the Church have punctuated the calendars of the Polish peasantry for centuries, the clergy have long enjoyed respect and authority, and Catholic iconography has provided an aesthetic vocabulary for art, music, and popular culture. Poles often evoke Catholicism to describe who they are (“European” or “Western”) and who they are not (Orthodox/Russian, Protestant/German, Jewish, or “Eastern”). While language may tie the Poles to other Slavs, religion gives them a mark of distinction that they are quick to cite whenever lumped together with “Eastern Europe.”

But claims about Poland’s Catholicity often take on a significance that goes far beyond demographic statistics, cultural influences, or even ethnic identity. In the passage quoted above, John Paul II was evoking an understanding of history that gives meaning to Poland’s past by making the nation dependent upon the Church (as the receptacle for true national identity) and by making the Church dependent upon the nation (as the Eastern bastion of the faith). This mutual entanglement of faith and fatherland gives specific meaning to the past and helps determine what is remembered and what is forgotten. The implications of this worldview were suggested in a proclamation by the Solidarity movement in 1981:

Because it was Christianity that brought us into our wider motherland, Europe; because for a thousand years Christianity has in a large degree been shaping the content of our culture; since in the most tragic moments of our nation it was the Church that was our main support; since our ethics are predominantly Christian; since, finally, Catholicism is the living faith of the majority of Poles, we deem it necessary that an honest and comprehensive presentation of the role of the Church in the history of Poland and of the world have an adequate place in national education.⁴

Unfortunately, some versions of that “honest and comprehensive” history silence as much as they reveal.⁵ There has been a great deal of religious diversity in Poland over the centuries, and advocates of a distinctly Catholic narrative of

Polish history must perform some delicate maneuvers to hold up their story against alternative ways of ascribing meaning to the past. The Church is deeply rooted in Poland, but the linkage between Catholicism and an articulated ethnic identity—not to mention a politicized understanding of national belonging—is more tenuous than is usually assumed. The equation of Pole with Catholic does not rest on the unobjectionable recognition that there are a lot of Catholics in Poland and that the Church has long been a powerful institution there; rather, it is supported by a deeply ingrained but highly selective telling of national history.

The Republic of Poland-Lithuania (as the country was known until it was destroyed at the end of the eighteenth century) contained a hodgepodge of Catholics, Jews, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, Armenian Catholics, and even some Muslims, making it one of the most religiously diverse countries in Europe. For a period in the mid-sixteenth century Protestants enjoyed a majority in the Polish Senate, and at the high point of the Reformation there were about a thousand Protestant parishes in the Republic, compared to about three thousand Roman Catholic parishes.⁶ Even the Catholic historian Jerzy Kłoczowski has acknowledged that “the dynamism of the Protestant movement was so great that it was assuredly close to victory.”⁷ In 1573, during the so-called Warsaw Confederation, the assembled nobles of the Republic even issued a declaration promising, “We who are divided by faith will keep peace among ourselves, and not shed blood on account of differences in faith or church.” In passages like this, “we” were the nobility of the entire Republic, with Protestants and Catholics alike considered compatriots. In other words, this is not an example of tolerance for a confessional minority, but an unusual affirmation of a religiously heterogeneous community. Poland earned a reputation at the time as a land where religious indifference and heterodoxy made Catholicism vulnerable, but also prevented Protestantism from institutionalizing its successes. Well into the seventeenth century, as Magda Teter has demonstrated, many Catholics considered their Church to be in a precarious position, under threat from Protestants, Jews, and a state either too weak or too apathetic to enforce denominational unity.⁸

Catholics today tend to believe that the Polish nation is and always has been fundamentally loyal to the Church, mostly by defining non-Catholics as tolerated foreigners living in a Polish Catholic country. For example, the historian Bohdan Cywiński recognizes the importance of the Reformation in Poland, but still insists that the national past was “almost entirely Catholic” and that the Church was “the element supporting the entire Polish edifice.” Cywiński emphasizes that Protestantism was limited to the nobility and the townsmen, while “both society and the state remained Catholic.” By implication, those who joined the Protestant movement did not belong to (or by converting had renounced) Polish “society.”⁹ This means of sustaining the Catholic narrative of Polish history has penetrated beneath the level of explicit argumentation to the realm of

reflexive linguistic practice. Even Janusz Tazbir, a secular historian who has published more than twenty books on Protestantism and religious tolerance, called a collection of his essays “Protestantism in Poland” rather than “Polish Protestantism,” while giving another volume the subtitle “Studies from the History of the Polish Counterreformation.”¹⁰ Apparently it has become difficult to apply the adjective *Polish* to the noun *Protestant*. Religious diversity can exist *in* the nation, but it cannot be *of* the nation.

During the Counterreformation Catholics tried to take control of Poland’s past as well as its present—to both minimize religious diversity within the Polish-Lithuanian Republic and to write Protestantism out of the country’s history. In 1658 we see the first expulsion of non-Catholics (the members of the Polish Brethren denomination), and a decade later it became a crime for Catholics to convert to other faiths. In 1673 the Sejm (the Polish Parliament) made it impossible for non-Catholics to be ennobled; in 1716 a decree banned the construction of non-Catholic houses of worship; and three decrees from 1718, 1736, and 1764 established religious tests for deputies to the Sejm and employees of the state administration. None of this, however, can be categorized as compulsion within the Catholic rendition of Polish history because its coherence depends on a religious identity that is “natural” rather than politically established and enforced. In the words of Kłoczowski, “The cause of the collapse of Protestantism was not force; rather, today we are inclined to see this [as a result of] the attraction of a vital and renewed Catholicism.”¹¹ More complicated and ambiguous tales—with appropriate attention to the multifaceted struggles between Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans, and the Polish Brethren—are much less likely to be heard.

Soon after the Catholic Church seemed to establish a hegemonic position in Poland, the enlightenment introduced some new complexities. While never as aggressively anticlerical as some West European contemporaries may have wished, the Polish enlightenment did strive to “modernize” both the Polish state and the Polish population, in accordance with new sociopolitical models that many conservatives considered unacceptably secular. The clerical monopoly over education was weakened, the reading public delighted in a long list of anticlerical satires, the lifestyles of the elites grew ever more secular, and the Church had to defend itself against attacks from enlightenment theorists. The historian Jerzy Skowronek has even described a “crisis of religious life and ties to the Church in Polish society” in the late eighteenth century.¹² Catholic historians have a ready response to the suggestion that the Polish enlightenment eroded the bond between Church and nation: they point to the fact that many of the leading writers and politicians of the era were ordained. Hanna Dylągowa, for example, writes, “Specific to the Polish enlightenment was the participation of the parish and monastic Catholic clergy. Many intellectuals in cassocks were

among the creators of the great intellectual revolution that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. One might almost speak of the primacy of the clergy in political, social, and scholarly life.¹³ Poland's Catholicity is thus preserved, but only at the cost of welcoming some extraordinarily unorthodox intellectuals back into the fold. It is certainly true that prominent figures like Father Hugo Kołłątaj, Father Stanisław Staszic, and Bishop Ignacy Krasicki were central to the Polish enlightenment, but all three embraced the era's anticlericalism. Pointing to such "intellectuals in cassocks" as examples of Poland's Catholicity raises questions about what the adjective *Catholic* might mean—but more on that later.

The real focal point of the Catholic narrative of Polish history is the nineteenth century, when Poland was partitioned and occupied by Russia, Prussia, and the Habsburg Empire. Vincent Chrypiński exemplifies the pervasive view that there was a "religious sanction accorded the fight for independence" and that "the traditional bond between the Church and the Polish people was further strengthened during the nineteenth-century struggles for national liberation and social justice."¹⁴ On one level, that "religious sanction" is familiar to all students of nationalism. As Carlton Hayes argued almost forty years ago, modern nationalism is grounded in a religious sensibility, and even the most secularized nationalists mimic traditional ritual practices and theological formulas.¹⁵ George Mosse also described modern nationalism as a "civic religion" with its own "fully worked-out liturgy," capable of determining "how people saw the world and their place in it."¹⁶ On a certain level of abstraction, therefore, every study of modern nationalism must take religion into account, whether in terms of the institutional support given to national movements by organized religious bodies, or in terms of the symbolic vocabulary appropriated by nationalist politicians. But the Catholic presentation of Polish history makes a stronger claim, asserting for the Church a central role in the preservation of national identity and in the struggle for independence. For example, Ewa Jabłońska-Deptuła emphasizes the use of the Polish language in Catholic services and the preservation of traditional folk culture within popular devotional practices. She believes that because many national customs were rooted in Christian worship, their endurance "would not have been possible were it not for the support they received from the Church."¹⁷ Michael Bernhard demonstrates how pervasive this account has become, even outside of Poland. During the nineteenth century, he writes, "the Church was often the only institution that had a Polish character. Thus Polish national consciousness came to be strongly tied to a Catholic religious identity."¹⁸

To be sure, the Church was a site for the enactment of ethnicity, and at key moments (such as during Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*), defending the Church and defending the nation seemed synonymous. But as I argue throughout this volume, the bond between faith and fatherland in Poland was more complicated

than it might appear at first glance. In general, religion was far less important to “national survival” in the nineteenth century than is usually assumed. Even during the worst years of denationalization, the Church was never the *only* space within which Poles could express and cultivate the myths, customs, or practices of their ethnicity. Newspapers, magazines, and books in Polish continued to appear, and many of them (particularly during the 1860s and 1870s) were liberal and anticlerical. Village public life was never successfully Russified, and as literacy spread among the peasantry so did a strong sense of being Polish. Plays and operas in the Polish language were available to both urban and rural residents, and the stage both propagated and defined national identity. Even a Polish-language commercial life remained vibrant, though in some towns Yiddish or German was more common. In other words, the Church was just one of many sites for cultivating Polishness during the period when there was no Polish state.

Moreover, the official institutions of the Church tended to oppose the patriotic cause throughout the nineteenth century, and the Catholic hierarchy became one of the few consistent bastions of loyalism in partitioned Poland. This was especially the case early in the century. In his inaugural sermon as archbishop of Warsaw in 1815, Jan Paweł Woronicz affirmed the legitimacy of Alexander I by characterizing the tsar’s authority as an emanation of divine providence.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the secular authorities in the Polish Kingdom (the grandiloquent name for the nominally autonomous territories around Warsaw and Lublin) were far more problematic from the Church’s perspective, as they attempted to mediate all communication between the Polish clergy and Rome and to require all priests to submit annual reports on their activities. Stanisław Potocki, the minister of religious denominations and public enlightenment for the Polish Kingdom from 1815 to 1820, was famous (or infamous) for his book *Podróż do Ciemnogrodu* (Journey to the City of Darkness), a biting anticlerical satire that portrayed priests as ignorant and backward.²⁰ With people like Potocki governing in Warsaw, the Catholic hierarchy often found Petersburg a more reliable source of support. For example, when the constitutional government tried to institute civil marriages, the bishops successfully appealed to the tsar to scuttle the plan. The situation was similar in the Prussian partition, where a conservative monarch provided security for Catholics who, in the 1830s and 1840s, confronted liberal Polish nationalists on one side and liberal German nationalists on the other. And in Austria, once the tumult of Joseph II’s centralizing reforms subsided, few members of the Galician clergy could see a reason to oppose the Catholic Habsburg emperor in favor of a revolutionary national movement.

Only a handful of priests supported the uprising against Russian rule in 1830, and they acted in defiance of the hierarchy’s strong condemnation of the rebellion. The attitude of the Vatican was made clear in 1832 with the publication of Pope Gregory XVI’s encyclical, *Cum Primum*, which identified the tsar as a

“legitimate prince” to whom the Poles owed obedience.²¹ In 1863, when Polish nationalists once again revolted, the Church authorities were only somewhat more supportive. Perhaps as many as 15 percent of the parish clergy acknowledged the rebels as the legitimate national government, but the bishops remained unanimous in urging the rebels to lay down their arms and consent to Russian rule.²² After the 1863 uprising this loyalism was reinforced by a reluctance to provoke the increasingly repressive occupation regime. The Russification measures of the last third of the century pushed some priests into the arms of the nationalist opposition, but far more reacted by withdrawing to a narrowly delineated understanding of their pastoral duties. A century later, when Catholics around the world were called upon by Rome to publicly confess the sins of their collective history, Primate Józef Glemp singled out the loyalism of his predecessors as one of the few things the Polish Church should atone for.²³

The strong ideological link between faith and fatherland emerged in full force only at the start of the twentieth century, and it would be many decades before it became unquestioned common sense that Poles were necessarily Catholic. The Second Republic was only about two-thirds Catholic, but the clergy and most lay activists tended to describe the remaining third as more or less tolerated “national minorities” within a Polish Catholic nation-state. Although many people challenged these increasingly rigid ethnolinguistic categories, with each passing year it became more and more difficult to speak of Jewish Poles or Protestant Poles. Any remaining uncertainty regarding the equation between Pole and Catholic was made irrelevant by the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. The postwar boundaries were drawn so as to exclude almost all Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians; the Germans and most of the remaining Ukrainians were forcibly expelled; and nearly all the Jews perished in the Holocaust. After 1945 Poland did indeed appear monolithic—for the first time in its history. It seemed only natural, therefore, when the anticommunist opposition began to draw upon religious imagery in the late 1970s and when several bishops were called upon to participate in the roundtable negotiations that brought an end to communism in 1989.

Despite this apparent homogeneity, however, Bogdan Szajkowski misses the point when he writes, “The move of the Polish borders some 500 kilometers westwards meant that for the first time in Polish history, and uniquely in Eastern Europe, the Polish nation was religiously and ethnically homogeneous.”²⁴ In the minds of many Poles today, their nation has *always* been religiously and ethnically homogeneous, even though a great number of “foreigners” (Jews, Protestant Germans, Greek Catholic and Orthodox Ukrainians, etc.) once lived within the boundaries of the Polish state. After World War II those aliens were gone and it became easier than ever to promote an exclusivist version of Poland’s past, but the story had never been primarily about survey data or explicit religious

affiliation. During and after the communist era the claim that the Church embodied the national spirit rested on a historical narrative as much as on any demographic information about religious belief or practice. Juxtaposed against the often crude attempts by communist writers to erase Catholicism from Polish history, we find increasingly insistent assertions by Catholic commentators that their religion practically defined the nation.²⁵ A good example of this came during the debate over Poland's new constitution in 1997, when Marian Krzaklewski, one of Poland's leading right-wing politicians, protested what he considered an excessively secular draft text. "A national compromise would be possible," he declared in a speech to the Sejm, "if everyone would recognize that there are facts in Polish history that are not open to interpretation. One of these facts is this: that Poland was always based both in its system of values, as well as, later, in its constitutional legislation, on Christian values which were, meanwhile, directed positively towards people of differing views, convictions, beliefs, and towards different nationalities."²⁶ Once again we see an image of Poland as tolerant of diversity but nonetheless Christian in its essence. The "people of differing views" would be legally protected in Krzaklewski's vision of a future Poland (one might say "tolerated," in the old sense of that term), but they would never be located fully inside the nation.

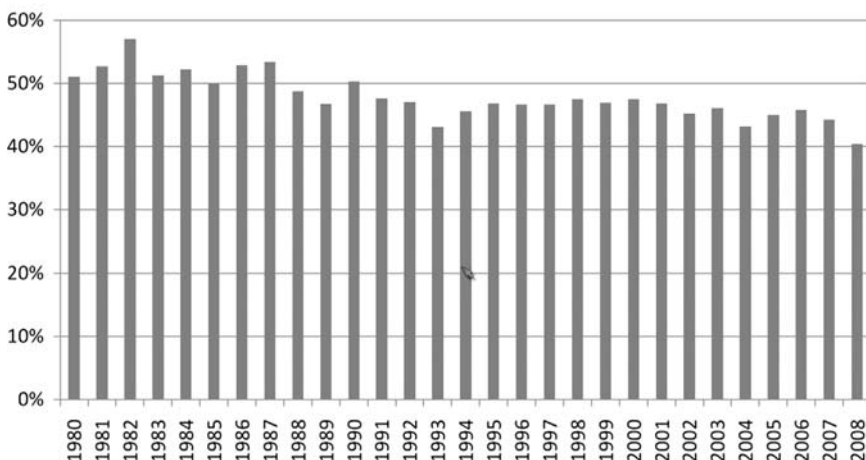
Significantly, even as Catholic activists like Krzaklewski affirm the historical bond between nation and faith, many in the Church are convinced that Catholicism's formal demographic strength is an illusion concealing pervasive religious indifference and secularism. In the words of Father Mieczyslaw Nowak, "No statistic can render precisely the question of faith. . . . For a large percentage of the Poles, faith is only a stereotypical mindset, a tradition, an extremely superficial declaration."²⁷ For many Catholics the indissoluble bond between faith and nation represents an ideal that is all too far removed from the actually existing Poland, where believers feel themselves to be under siege by modern culture, if not by a concerted anti-Christian conspiracy. Bishop Adam Lepa, for example, has lamented the growing acceptance of a "new model" of what it means to be Polish, a "secular, leftist, libertarian" model spread by "manipulation (brainwashing), pornography, and advertising." This is not, for Bishop Lepa, merely an alternative approach to national identity; it constitutes a rejection of the nation as such. The international media and the cosmopolitan intelligentsia, he charges, propagate "apathy toward the question of national identity, ignorance of Polish history, [and] a dulled sense of national honor."²⁸ For those like Bishop Lepa, the link between religion and nation depends neither on the actual state of subjective identity nor on the beliefs and behavior of the majority. The "Catholic nation" must reside in both an idealized past and a dreamed-of future, but not in today's secular, liberal, decadent world.

It is not hard to see why someone like Bishop Lepa would be concerned. Nearly two-thirds of Poles support the death penalty, despite the Church's

oft-stated opposition to this form of punishment.²⁹ On the touchstone issue of abortion, overwhelming majorities (from 75 to 82 percent) are willing to approve of the practice if the mother's health is in danger, if the child would be born severely handicapped, or if the pregnancy was the result of rape. About a third are even willing to accept material hardship as an adequate justification for ending a pregnancy.³⁰ In general, Polish attitudes toward sexuality hardly fit the image of a devout Catholic population. In a survey from 2007, 63 percent agreed that "it is entirely normal that people in love have sexual relations; marriage is not necessary for this," and 33 percent went so far as to endorse the stance that "sex does not require either love or marriage; even a passing union can provide pleasant, beautiful experiences."³¹ Forty-two percent even support civil unions for homosexuals (though only 21 percent would be willing to legalize gay and lesbian marriages).³² On matters of doctrine, simple ignorance is a huge factor: 23 percent of practicing Catholics in Poland are unable to name even one of the authors of the Gospels, and 43 percent of those who describe themselves as "devout" think it is possible to receive absolution for original sin.³³ Although religious practice is notoriously hard to measure (insofar as Poles, like Americans, routinely overstate the frequency with which they go to church), it seems clear that well under half of the population attends mass regularly. The Church's own statistical office carries out an annual survey on an ordinary Sunday in October or November, when priests are required to literally count everyone who comes to church. Those numbers are then compared to the parish registers, with adjustments made for those who are too infirm to leave home. Because priests make a particular effort to encourage people to attend that day, the figures are probably higher than they would be on a randomly chosen Sunday. The slow but steady downward trend is clear in the chart on page 12.³⁴ Even 40 percent church attendance would be extraordinary in any other European country, but it is far from the stereotype of universal piety.

The Catholic writer Zbigniew Nosowski recently observed, "Whenever foreign guests come to Poland, they certainly have no doubts that they have come to a Catholic country—here the churches are filled to overflowing, and there are very few people professing other religions. . . . But when considering this problem ourselves, many of us have doubts. . . . The greatest danger for the future of Polish Catholicism is the superficiality of the faith of many nominal Catholics."³⁵ This brings us back to the passage by Archbishop Józef Bilczewski quoted at the start of this chapter: "It is not enough to call oneself a Catholic. We must not simply call ourselves Catholics, but be Catholics." Catholic priests and commentators in Poland today do not pretend that their countrymen are "being Catholic" in the sense that would have satisfied Bilczewski, but this does not weaken their conviction that Poland remains a Catholic nation. Just as Polish society could remain Catholic during the Reformation despite religious diversity, just as

Estimated Percentage of Catholics in Poland Who Attend Mass Regularly



nation and faith could remain bound together in the nineteenth century despite loyalist bishops and heterodox patriots, so can Poland today remain Catholic despite widespread and flagrant deviation from the Church's teachings. As an ideological or theological construct the Catholic nation is both an ideal, serving to remind people of how faithful patriots should behave, and a transhistorical essence that persists regardless of contingent historical events.

The idea of Poland as a homogeneous Catholic nation, then, is simultaneously a claim about Poland's past and a demand that a particular model of national Catholicism be maintained in the present. A popular slogan maintains, "To defend the cross is to defend Poland," a rallying cry (as Geneviève Zubrzycki has observed) that is directed mainly against those who consider themselves to be Polish Catholics but who are deemed insufficiently loyal to faith and fatherland by their opponents.³⁶ My goal in this book is to understand that accusation, as well as the counterclaims from those who would continue to insist that they are both good Catholics and good Poles. Such debates are hardly new. As a Polish priest put it more than a century ago, "You will hear, 'but who doesn't believe in Christ? After all, we are all Christians, and Poland is above all Christian, even ultra-Christian!' Right. But nonetheless something is lacking. . . . Not every Christ is real."³⁷ In strikingly similar terms, a Polish catechism from 1999 lamented, "About 90% of the people in our country, if asked whether they believe in God, will say yes. Beneath these words, however, hide various meanings."³⁸ Both of these texts implied that distinguishing real Catholicism from pseudo-Catholicism should be relatively easy. Unfortunately, for us historians the task is not so simple, precisely because people use the adjective *Catholic* in so many divergent ways.

For some, *Catholic* functions as a mere ethnocultural label, with little substantive content in the realm of belief or even religious practice. Many social scientists

and historians think of religion in general in this way, treating it as a Durkheimian means of solidifying a sense of community but relegating the details of particular belief systems to theologians and philosophers.³⁹ There is something to be said for this approach. For those whom we might call “ethno-Catholics,” religion is no more (and no less) than a marker of identity. Thus “Catholics” and “Protestants” fought for decades in Northern Ireland over issues that had little to do with the legitimacy of transubstantiation or the relative importance of faith and works on the road to salvation. People in many contexts employ religious identifiers even if they see the inside of a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple only at key moments in their life passage; indeed, many people in the early twenty-first century have abandoned even these symbolic occasions. In this sense a label like *Catholic* can sometimes be empty of theological meaning; it can become a category of social practice or identity rather than one of doctrine or faith. For some purposes this sort of definition is sufficient; for many self-defined Catholics the theological and ideological teachings of the Church are distant memories from childhood Sunday School, and the sermons at mass are things to be endured, ignored, or simply avoided. These are the people who can, without any sense of self-contradiction, call themselves Catholics while using birth control, denying papal infallibility, even questioning the existence of God.

Yet alongside all these ethno-Catholics, *Catholicism* still exists as an intellectual formation, an ideological project, and a set of doctrinal claims. It is useful to distinguish between Catholics (who will always defy our generalizations) and Catholicism (which retains boundaries despite the persistence of disobedience and diversity). Not every self-labeled Catholic takes Catholicism seriously, but a great many do. Such people will argue about what exactly constitutes the core of their faith, but these very debates are what constitute the bounded field of assumptions, ideals, and principles that make up Catholicism. Understanding that shifting terrain within modern Poland is the goal of this book. This is not the story of a religious or national community per se, and the claims made here will apply only imperfectly to any particular individual or group. Nor is this an institutional history of the Polish Catholic Church, despite the attention I give to the clergy.⁴⁰ Rather, this is the story of an ideological and theological frame of reference as it was articulated by the clergy, sustained and defended by the institutions of the Church, discussed in the Catholic press, taught to the faithful through devotional texts and catechism classes, and preached in sermons.⁴¹ This is the story, in other words, of an always unfinished normative project that played (and continues to play) an enormous role in delimiting what Poles can say and do whenever they want to speak or act *as Catholics*. Those same people might, at other moments, express other identities that exist alongside or even contradict their faith, but whenever they are “being Catholic” the gravitational force of *Catholicism* exerts its influence.

Approaching Catholicism in this way entails identifying both the doctrinal and ideological core (that which is taken as given and rarely talked about) and the outer limits of what can be said and done while remaining within a Catholic framework. The former would include anything that could be inserted into the formula “They accepted Catholicism, and *therefore* they did X or believed Y.” Being baptized, accepting the divinity of Jesus, trusting the efficacy of prayer, looking to the Vatican for religious authority—these would be part of any list of core consequences of Catholicism. More interesting historically, however, is the much larger category of actions and beliefs that were contingently linked to Catholicism but not necessary products of it. Delineating such ideas and behaviors shows us what has been possible and acceptable (and by extension what has been impossible and unacceptable) within the boundaries of Catholicism at any particular moment, and thus illuminates the boundary lines beyond which one could not go without eliciting charges of heterodoxy or heresy. Interpreting the history of Catholicism in Poland by concentrating on these two polarities—the doctrinal core and the outer frontiers of orthodoxy—gives us a picture of a faith that is not just a set of dogmatic assertions, but a fluid and contested formation that is constantly being created and re-created by those who participate in it. Catholicism in this sense sets some parameters on thought and action but only *determines* thought and action in limited, imperfect, and contextually bounded ways.

Throughout this book I explore the positions, attitudes, and behaviors that were necessary consequences of an active identification with Catholicism in Poland, those that were contingently likely (but not necessary), and those that occupied the controversial zone at the edge of doctrinal and ideological conformity. The result is not a history of Polish Catholicism in all its multifaceted aspects, much less of the structures of the Polish Catholic Church or the entire population of Polish ethno-Catholics. Rather, this book offers a broad overview of what different people believed to be mandated, encouraged, tolerated, and precluded within the normative ideal of Catholicism as expressed in Poland over the past century and a half. To guide us through this rhetorical landscape, I explore a small cluster of fundamental terms and concepts, with each chapter focusing on the evolving meaning (or meanings) of a key word or phrase in the Catholic vocabulary.⁴² At times I tighten my focus to explore a specific historical moment; at other times I range widely over broad time periods. At times I adhere faithfully to a linear chronology; at other times I draw examples from discontinuous sites in order to emphasize the continuity or pervasiveness of an idea. Context, after all, can be scaled in a wide variety of ways, depending on what one is trying to see.

The ultimate goal of the book is to grasp how Catholicism was reconfigured in order to retain significance in a modern world that appeared to most Catholics

to be unrelentingly hostile. The path along which Catholicism became modern traversed the ideologically and theologically rocky ground of the nation. As the exponents of Catholicism in Poland tried to come to terms with the tumultuous transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they found themselves in a disadvantaged position. In the words of the historian Dror Wharman, “One element in the changing faces of the nascent modern has until recently remained, overall, rather constant: the modern, we were told, was *secular*. In any case, it was more so than the pre-modern.”⁴³ Secular Poles (be they liberals, socialists, or nationalists) had recourse to a well-developed story of progress and modernization that they could deploy to understand what was happening around them, and that story predicted that religion was fated to disappear.⁴⁴ Faced with these claims, some Catholics advocated a truly conservative response: a thorough repudiation of the nineteenth century’s social, political, and cultural transformations. But contrary to what many historians have presumed, this was not the only, or even the most common Catholic reaction to these challenges. Catholicism had its own modernity, its own appropriation of the rhetoric of progress, and its own distinctive responses to the social and political transformations of the past century and a half. Like many other scholars in recent years, I urge an abandonment of what has come to be called “the secularization narrative.”⁴⁵ Not only does that prophecy break down (or at least get seriously delayed) in the case of Poland, but it is grounded in a dichotomy between piety and progress that is itself ideologically loaded and theoretically problematic. Moreover, and more important for our purposes, the secularization narrative obscures the way Catholicism itself has changed in modern Poland and tends to relegate the Poles to the status of European oddities, the backward cousins of the more advanced West Europeans. Just as it was once common to speak of a distinctive (and pathological) “Eastern” form of nationalism, so today many commentators perceive a unique, atavistic, not quite European form of public religiosity in Poland.⁴⁶ I would argue that instead of imagining a depersonalized modernity pushing religion to the side, we should focus on the ways adherents reformulated their religious views as they struggled to make sense of a changing world. Doing so not only makes Poland seem more “normal,” but it help us understand other sites around the world where public religion has remained a potent force. In this volume we will see how some seemingly premodern concepts like *Church*, *sin*, and *the Virgin Mary* fit alongside more familiar twentieth-century terms like *progress* and *the nation*. The uneven, sometimes painful process of making Catholicism modern thus constitutes the central story line of this volume.

The Church

In the nineteenth century's most widely used Polish catechism, Father Józef Krukowski summarized what he took to be the essence of Catholicism: "How should we briefly proclaim our faith? With these words: I believe and proclaim everything that the Holy Roman Catholic Church believes and proclaims."¹ The journal *Pielgrzym* (The Pilgrim) was a bit more specific in 1845, when it itemized four key principles from which all Catholic teaching was derived: the immortality of the soul, mankind's collective fall from grace, salvation through Christ, and

*the orthodox, apostolic Christian Church, visible on earth in the form of an organic spiritual hierarchy and an authoritative leader. From the hands of that Church the Christian world takes orthodox teachings, the norms of Christian life, and the rules for religious rituals. From these hands it receives the grace and the blessings necessary for eternal happiness and even for worldly success. That Church, which bears God's promise of eternal assistance from the Holy Spirit until the end of time, is the only true deputy of Christ, Who here on earth has established a new covenant between God and the human race, redeemed and reborn through Him. As St. Cyprian put it, whoever does not recognize that Church as his *mother*, with a feeling of willing obedience, cannot have God as his *Father*.*²

A great deal has changed over the century and a half since these remarks were made, but the concept of *the Church* has remained among the small handful of unassailable keywords at the very core of Catholicism. The faithful argue about the relationship between the papacy, the episcopate, and the laity; some call for reforms in the administrative procedures of the Vatican; some advocate the decentralization of power away from the Roman Curia. But framing every disagreement is an ecclesiology that defines the Church as something more than a mere institution headquartered in Rome, more than a group of bishops and

priests, more even than the entire community of the Catholic faithful. Of course, in casual speech the term *Church* can be (and often is) understood sociologically, anthropologically, politically, institutionally, or demographically, but we fail to fully comprehend Catholicism if we consider only the colloquial uses of this word. Even when unstated or thinly understood, a distinctive ecclesiology gives form and meaning to Catholic ideas and ideals, and all the themes explored in the coming chapters ultimately circle back to this doctrinal foundation.

The very term *ecclesiology* reaches out in two directions, toward the mundane and the divine, toward both sociology and theology. The Greek *ἐκκλησία* was originally a general term describing any group of people assembled for a particular reason, but it gained greater weight when it was adopted by the early Christians to refer to their communities. Eventually the word came to support a complex theology that ascribed special significance to the institutions of the Church and the people within them. A 1958 pastoral letter from Stefan Wyszyński, then the primate of Poland, captured the most fundamental feature of Catholic ecclesiology:

The entire Church—although it is made up of sinners and saints, of the cold, the lukewarm, and the hot, of the chaff and the wheat—is essentially supernatural. And although it is a visible and earthly society, it nonetheless is not of this world; rather it comes from the Heart of God that was opened on the cross, it is the fruit of the redeeming suffering of Christ, His Most Holy Blood that comes from the abundance of His Redemption. The Church is an exceptional society, the only one of its kind on earth. Because its bonds are not merely a legal system, but above all a system of supernatural love. . . . We must fully understand that the Church is not just a human, secular, natural organization; it is not some sort of exclusively earthly force; it is not a political or economic organization. Of course, the Church possesses social aspects, corresponding to the demands of earthly life, and although it has a redeeming influence on earthly affairs, nonetheless our life in the Church depends on drawing supernatural power from Christ and on contributing to the growth of the supernatural, Mystical Body of the Church.³

A priest in Warsaw tried to convey this message to his parish in a sermon in the fall of 1966, as he cautioned against basing one's view of the Church on "that which is human, visible, subject to evaluation, and that which can serve as material for historical, sociological, or legal scholarship." Such a depiction, he said, would always be "like a frame without a picture, a book cover without its contents. The Church is not just a human institution, but above all a divine institution.

From this come the difficulties in observing it, in this lies the source of that which we call the mystery of the Church.”⁴ This ecclesiological “mystery” is akin to the ineffable union between the body and the soul, as Bishop Ignacy Tokarczuk of Przemyśl explained in a sermon to a parish in the mountain village of Hoczew in 1974:

The Church is something more than just a human organization; it is something more than just some sort of resilient social group. . . . The Church is like a person, consisting of two elements. A person consists of a corporeal and a spiritual element, and the entire person is precisely the play between these two elements, the consequence of their union, the consequence precisely of everything that results from the union between the body and the soul, between matter and spirit. The Church, dear ones, consists of two elements, two components: human and divine.⁵

Catholics often refer to this point of union between the transcendent and the terrestrial by as “the Kingdom of God on earth,” but the word *βασιλεία*, as interpreted by the 1992 Catholic catechism, is more ambiguous than the English *Kingdom*, implying not only the territorial locus or physical manifestation of authority, but also the authority itself. So the *βασιλεία* mentioned in the Bible could also be translated as “the rule of God” or “the reign of God,” giving the phrase a different connotation. As the catechism puts it, “‘To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth.’ Now the Father’s will is ‘to raise up men to share in his own divine life.’ He does this by gathering men around his Son Jesus Christ. This gathering is the Church, ‘on earth the seed and beginning of that Kingdom.’”⁶ The phrase *Kingdom of God* in this presentation does not imply a realm characterized by perfect justice, peace, and order; rather, the term refers to both the reign of God and all those who have submitted to it. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, the catechism teaches, He already “accomplished the coming of his Kingdom.” It exists now, as something Christ himself created by coming to earth, and it exists in the hereafter, much as the Father and the Son are one even though Jesus resided temporarily on earth. As a contributor to *Pielgrzym* put it back in 1843 (in a passage that could be reprinted without revision today):

The Church is the representation of Christ; it is the embodiment of the living Christ in humanity, the purpose of which is to carry out and fulfill the redemption of the human race. In all parts of the whole, and likewise in the destiny of the whole, the Church is therefore on the one hand a creation of Christ, the fruit of his death on the cross, and on the

other hand it *is* Christ living in humanity for the expansion of His Kingdom over all men. . . . Since the word became flesh and lived among us, so also must the Church, which is that word dwelling within humanity, be embodied and visible.⁷

The Church, in other words, is the enduring embodiment of Christ in the social realm, the means of perpetuating both His revelation and His salvific power throughout human history. This is why the word *Church* is capitalized in Catholic writing: it is quite literally a sacred body.

It follows that the Church is by definition the bearer of unerring truth. When Pius IX proclaimed the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870 he was building on a centuries-old insistence that the dogmatic definitions of the Church were not subject to error; his only innovation (though it was a big one) was to elevate the solitary role of the pope over the bishops collectively in articulating such teachings. Many arguments remained about how infallible dogma should be discerned from amid the confusion of human institutions and individual opinions, but fundamental to Catholicism over the entire period covered in this book (and probably much longer) is the claim that the Church is the bearer of truth and the means of salvation. As another contributor to *Pielgrzym* stated succinctly in 1845 (a quarter century before papal infallibility was proclaimed), “The Church cannot stray from true teachings—it cannot err.”⁸ More than fifty years later an identical sentiment could be found in a Catholic magazine aimed at the peasants: “We have to obey the Church always and in everything, because everything that the Church commands and recommends is a command from Christ Himself. Therefore, in the words of Christ, whoever does not carry out the commandments of the Church, scorns the Church; whoever scorns the Church, scorns Christ.”⁹ This teaching is not an artifact of ultramontane thinking. Though stated a bit less forcefully nowadays, the current catechism affirms that “the task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him.”¹⁰

As this last passage suggests, there is a strong tendency to slide between obedience to the Church (in its mystical sense) and obedience to the men who make up the Church’s hierarchy. The potential for this ecclesiology to support clerical authority has been demonstrated on repeated occasions over the Church’s long history. As a nineteenth-century homiletic guide explained, “It is not enough to believe in Jesus Christ, to be a simple Christian like the heretics [Protestants]; in addition it is necessary to be faithful, that is, to believe strongly and proclaim everything that the Church teaches; to be united with the bond of the Holy Sacraments and remain, through one’s pastor and bishop, unified with and obedient to the highest leader [*najwyższa głowa*], the Pope.”¹¹ Jan Puzyna,

bishop of Kraków, appealed to the clergy of his diocese in a pastoral letter from 1895 to strive to speak with “unanimity and uniformity,” something he considered possible “only insofar as there is, within each one of you, obedience for the Holy See and for this diocesan see. Just as . . . you are saddened and angered by defiance or, worse, criticism of your decrees, so too must you, brothers, feel obedience to the Highest Pastor, the Holy Father, as well as to me, your bishop.”¹²

Already in Puzyrna’s day, however, there were many Catholics unwilling to make the leap from an unqualified but abstract belief in the Church to a specific faith in the clergy. In 1903 Bishop Leon Wałęga of Tarnów expressed his bewilderment at the lack of discipline among his flock. He recalled that when he was first elevated to his post (two years earlier) he had expected “that everyone without exception would be prepared to obey me and follow me, not only when I give an order, but even a wish.” Unfortunately, he continued, the people of his diocese

did not meet my expectations and hopes . . . There have been cases when my warnings and advice have not been taken, when my words have been misrepresented, and when some even openly refused obedience to me. Behind my back, moreover, they have not refrained from slandering me. Several times I had to hear from the mouth of a Polish peasant, a member of my diocese, words such as “What are you talking about, Bishop? [Co mi tam Ksiądz Biskup mówi?] I have my own powers of reason, I know what is harmful for me and what is good for me.” Imagine, my dear ones, what unpleasantness those words caused me. To such an insult I knew no answer other than shame, tears, and prayer. And the issue was not so much my authority, as it was the soul of the blind ones who carelessly trusted their reason—or rather the reason of their insubordinate leaders—more than the words of their bishop.

Wałęga concluded by proclaiming, “It is not up to the good will of the flock whether they want to listen to the bishop or not; they should and must listen, if they want to remain faithful Catholics.”¹³ Throughout his long tenure as bishop (1901–33) Wałęga maintained this attitude. “We often forget,” he said in a speech to a Marian Congress in Przemyśl in 1911, “that the Church has authority, full authority, which we must obey. The disobedient not only *may* be punished, but *must* be punished, and the persistently disobedient must be excommunicated.”¹⁴

The Catholic hierarchy have been and remain highly resistant to criticism, particularly in Poland, in part because they have recourse to a potent theology of authority. Unfortunately (from their perspective), the emergence of mass political engagement in Europe around the turn of the twentieth century made it

harder for any authority figure to enforce unquestioned obedience. Meanwhile, the advancement of literacy made it possible to spread tales of clerical scandals more widely than ever before, and many in the laity began to wonder why they should obey priests whose moral rectitude had been cast into doubt. In this environment it was even more urgent to delineate the limits of acceptable critique, to tolerate some criticism while establishing a line that no good Catholic could cross. Contrary to what bishops like Wałęga wished, plenty of Catholics at the time did challenge their leaders, and such criticism was tolerated (albeit reluctantly) as long as complaints were couched in a way that sustained the institutional and spiritual infallibility of the Church itself. In other words, it was (and remains) possible for faithful Catholics to question the activities and pronouncements of particular members of the clergy, but to imply that the Church more broadly is merely a human creation, merely a terrestrial network of power, is to step outside the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy. As a Polish homiletic guidebook from 1891 put it, “Be understanding and forgiving toward priests. We are not angels, but people. We carry a great treasure in fragile vessels; as people we have our mistakes and weaknesses. The fact that this or that priest transgresses taints the individual, but it does not negate his dignity or his Holy Order. It is not permitted to judge or denigrate the entire [clerical] estate because of the mistakes of one or another [priest].”¹⁵

We can see how this teaching was applied by looking at some of the controversies that pushed the limits of obedience in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, when modern mass politics was emerging in the Polish territories and when old institutions were being placed under a new level of scrutiny. One of the most famous cases was that of a Galician priest named Stanisław Stojałowski (1845–1911).¹⁶ He is an ambiguous figure: on the one hand, he played a key role in propagating ultramontane Catholicism among the peasants in Galicia, and he was among the founders of the Christian Democratic movement in Poland; on the other hand, he challenged the authority of his clerical superiors and suffered excommunication as a result. Stojałowski became a Jesuit priest at the age of twenty-five, but after only five years he left the order to become a parish priest in Lwów. He said at the time that he wanted to be closer to his family in order to help them through some financial difficulties, but later he admitted that he had felt constrained by the tight discipline of life in a religious order. In 1875 Stojałowski acquired a small magazine that had fallen into bankruptcy, *Wieniec i Pszczółka* (The Wreath and the Bee), which he used to spread a combination of ultramontane Catholicism, Polish patriotism, and a Catholic critique of social injustice. Within two years these publications had a combined subscriber base of 4,500—not bad given the conditions of widespread illiteracy among the Galician poor. In September 1877 Stojałowski staged his first public demonstration (in Lwów), and in the following years he repeatedly

showed his skills as an organizer. He arranged a symbolically important peasant pilgrimage to Rome in 1877, a larger pilgrimage (with approximately a thousand people) to the tomb of St. Stanislaw in Kraków in 1879, a huge gathering of peasants in Kraków in 1883 to commemorate the bicentennial of a Polish military victory against the Ottomans, and an even more massive show of peasant patriotism during the reinternment of the poet Adam Mickiewicz in Kraków in 1890. He was also responsible for more quotidian organizational work. In 1878 he launched the Society for Popular Education and Work, which encouraged peasants to set up their own shops and agricultural cooperatives in order to counter what he considered a harmful Jewish domination of rural economic life. Within fifteen years this group was responsible for the establishment of 522 new stores and 898 co-ops.

Up to this point in Father Stojałowski's career he was well within the bounds of mainstream Catholicism. In fact, his first publication was a small booklet from 1872 released by the conservative newspaper *Czas* (Time) as part of a series entitled "Ultramontane Doctrines." Here Stojałowski declared that a basic principle for Catholics ought to be "that the dogma of the Church may not be violated, and that it constitutes a boundary which our untrustworthy wisdom and human knowledge may not reach." From this position Stojałowski extrapolated a set of social and political principles that placed the commandments of God above all human legislation, and he called on secular authorities to accept the vital role of the Church in maintaining "education and social morality."¹⁷ A few years later he published a small book with his own funds in which he attacked the liberals (many of whom he identified as Jewish) for demanding that religious faith be separated from political activities. He considered it appropriate to insist that any candidate for office in Galicia either be a Catholic or "respect Catholic sensibilities, since these are the traditional sensibilities of the nation and the actual sensibilities of the overwhelming majority of the country."¹⁸

Stojałowski's activism started to worry his superiors after his election to the town council of Lwów in 1880, a position that he used to advocate the expansion of the electoral franchise and the establishment of government-financed programs to alleviate the poverty of the Galician countryside. He became steadily more outspoken, and in 1888 the state authorities tried to silence him with trumped-up charges of corruption. The ensuing imprisonment would be the first of many for Father Stojałowski; by the end of his life he had been arrested twenty-seven times for a total of nine years of confinement. During that first incarceration he served only six months, but the timing seemed well-planned because it prevented him from running in the Galician parliamentary elections of 1889. Nonetheless, four of Stojałowski's supporters were elected that year, and once in office they formed the Catholic-Populist Club (Klub Katolicko-Ludowy) under the slogan "Faithfulness to the Church, Love of the Fatherland,

and Work for the People.” This was the kernel that later (in 1893) became the Peasant Party Union (Związek Stronnictwa Chłopskiego). The tensions between Stojałowski and the established elites of Galicia are easy enough to understand: he was calling for (and getting thousands of peasants to demand) enfranchisement and economic justice. Because the Galician episcopate at that time consisted mostly of traditional conservatives from noble families, these slogans were bound to generate controversy within the Church. At the Catholic Convention (Wiec Katolicki) held in Kraków in July 1893 Stojałowski tried several times to speak, but he had not been invited as a participant and was able to enter the hall only after obtaining a press pass. During a question-and-answer session after one panel he argued, “One can be a democrat and still be a good Catholic.” He was silenced by the chair of that session, and when he tried later to address another panel he was not even recognized.¹⁹ In December of that same year the hierarchy of the Church got officially involved in Stojałowski’s case, when three bishops (Seweryn Morawski of Lwów, Łukasz Solecki of Przemyśl, and Ignacy Łobos of Tarnów) issued a joint pastoral letter instructing the faithful not to read anything Stojałowski had written. In 1895 this ban was reissued, this time with signatures from all of Galicia’s bishops. Meanwhile, under pressure from the bishops, the ZSC expelled Stojałowski, who responded by creating a rival organization called the Christian-Populist Party (Stronnictwo Chrześcijańsko-Ludowe).

Confronted by continued opposition from the bishops, Stojałowski began to question their authority in a more systematic way. He first did so anonymously in 1894 with a small booklet entitled *The Word of a Peasant in Response to the Word of the Bishops*. Here he attacked the bishops for thinking of themselves as “princes of the Church.” The clergy and the laity, he believed, ought to be organized as a brotherhood rather than a feudal hierarchy. The bishops, Stojałowski wrote, “sat on high in their diocesan sees, never getting close to the people, not seeing what hurts them, or what they think and feel. . . . [The bishops] think that among their flock they still have *only foolish and ignorant cattle* who will fall in line the moment someone says ‘*the bishop says so, the bishop commands it.*’ But, thank God, things are not like that any longer.” Stojałowski tried to remain within Catholic orthodoxy by acknowledging episcopal authority in principle, but he crossed the line when he wrote:

We know that the Lord God said to the Apostles and to their heirs, the bishops, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” But is that supposed to happen according to *capriciousness and personal tastes*? Or rather, according to an adequate and *just* assessment of the matter, so that *even if the Pope himself excommunicates someone, but without foundation—and unjustly—then even such a papal condemnation means nothing.*²⁰

A year later (1895) Stojałowski stepped out from behind the mask of anonymity and made the same arguments in an article published under his own name.²¹ He got to test his theory about the validity of excommunication when, shortly after the second article appeared, that was precisely the punishment he received. His response came in the form of a brochure entitled *We Won't Go to Canossa*, in which he claimed not to care about the excommunication because the bishops responsible for it did not represent the true Church. As he put it, "A Catholic does not listen blindly [*sic*] to anyone. . . . A blind faith is a bad faith."²² His defiance was short-lived, though, and within a year he had appealed his excommunication to the Vatican. He was offered a reprieve on the condition that he pledge obedience to his diocesan superiors and to Rome; once he did so (in September 1897) the excommunication was lifted. After this Stojałowski remained politically active (getting elected to the Austrian Parliament in 1898 and to the Galician Assembly in 1900), and he continued to advocate peasant rights until his death from stomach cancer in 1911. During the last decade of his life, however, he frequently affirmed the sanctity of the Church, shifting the main target of his attacks from the bishops to the Jews.²³

Taken alone, Stojałowski's advocacy of social reform was not enough to get him into so much trouble. As we will see in chapter 4, there were plenty of prominent Catholics at the time—including, most famously, Archbishop (now Saint) Józef Bilczewski of Lwów—whose desire for social and political reform was every bit as radical as Stojałowski's. Such people were also controversial in Catholic circles, but they were able to safely publish their writings and even pursue successful clerical careers. At the Catholic Convention of 1893, where Stojałowski was silenced, many speakers called for far-reaching social change and political democratization. Stojałowski's message angered some conservatives, but it was not a sufficient cause for excommunication. He crossed the line when he turned his critique of authority onto the Church, and specifically when he implied that individual members of the laity could judge whether a pope was just or unjust. This was a profound transgression, but Stojałowski had not burned all his bridges. He was eventually able to reconcile with Rome because even as he attacked the hierarchy without distinction, he never really challenged the fundamental perfection and infallibility of the Church itself, in its transcendent aspect. Stojałowski was always primarily interested in social reform, not ecclesiological critique, so backtracking on this matter was not terribly difficult.

Father Izydor Wysłouch (1869–1937), in contrast, took that fatal extra step.²⁴ His transgressions were similar to those of Stojałowski, but unlike his Galician counterpart he embraced his own excommunication and left the Church. After graduating from Warsaw University with a degree in history, Wysłouch joined the Capuchin order and devoted himself to ministering to that city's urban poor. He became famous locally as a dynamic preacher, social activist, and author

(using the pseudonym “Antoni Szech,” under which he became famous). He provoked controversy when he spoke at some socialist rallies during the 1905 Revolution, after which his superiors sent him to a Jesuit academy in Innsbruck in 1906 so that he might meditate on his errors. He returned to Warsaw after a year, only to resume his activism with the same vigor and with increasingly intemperate language. In 1908 he was expelled from the Capuchin order, and shortly thereafter he was excommunicated.²⁵ If we compare Szech’s writing with that of other Catholic social reformers at the time, we can see that the problem was not his critique of the rich and powerful, nor was it his dedication to evangelical and charitable work among the poor. As in Stojałowski’s case, this earned him some political enemies but did not justify excommunication, because plenty of other priests of his day were doing the same. Szech’s inexcusable sin was to situate his calls for social change within a story of historical progress that eventually encompassed the Church itself. That pushed him beyond social reform to ecclesiological heresy.

Szech believed that Catholics had a mandate to change the world. “The task of the Church,” he wrote in 1906, “is not only to preserve and proclaim the principles of Christ’s Gospels, but also to strive so that those principles penetrate ever more deeply into human souls and sink in ever more deeply into institutions—into the law, into the governing of states and nations.”²⁶ Any Catholic at the time would have agreed that the state should encourage Christian behavior and facilitate evangelical efforts, but Szech linked this demand to a teleological scheme that pushed him toward heresy. He believed that as humanity progressed and social forms more closely adhered to God’s law, the Church itself would have to change to meet new needs. In fact, he contended, the reactionary politics, corruption, and doctrinal obscurity of the hierarchy had left the Church’s future in doubt.

God will win in the end, that’s certain. But will He indeed win with us [Catholics], and does he indeed sympathize with our ignorance and our conceit and our contempt for others, and our Phariseeism? That’s the big question. . . . God will be victorious, but necessarily through us? Might he not utilize others, maybe indeed those whom we hold in contempt, those who don’t even acknowledge [the Church], but who nonetheless, insofar as they love humanity and seek the truth, and are of good will, belong to Him and in spirit might be closer [to Him] than we are?²⁷

While in Innsbruck he answered these questions by writing a book called *The Religion of Humanity*, which he did not publish until more than a year after he was expelled from the priesthood. As the title suggests, Szech took an anthropological

approach to the Church, demoting it from the transcendent place it enjoyed within Catholic ecclesiology to a position of human transience. “That religious system will be best,” he wrote, “which under the given circumstances best corresponds to the level of development of man—which aids him most in perfecting himself, in the development of the spirit. . . . Toleration will cease to be an empty phrase only when people recognize the aforementioned truth. Namely: that everyone ought to take the path to spiritual development that best suits him.”²⁸

Szech attacked one of the handful of principles on which Church officials could not compromise, lest they abandon one of their most important ramparts: the idea that the Church was the Kingdom of God on earth, the embodiment of God’s will and revelation. Szech, in contrast, perceived that kingdom in socio-economic terms, as a terrestrial reign of divine justice that we would attain at some point in the future. The Church, in his scheme, mattered only insofar as it contributed to this project. As his opponents emphasized, this was an ecclesiological step too far. He quickly learned just how far: in 1908 he described the “piles” of letters he received, addressed to “Servant of the devil,” “Master of the Masons,” “Traitor of the Fatherland,” “Consolation of the Jews,” “Traitor of your order,” and so on.²⁹ The charges against him were summarized in a book by Father Jan Gnatowski, who argued that the Church’s hierarchal institutions were immutable:

That is how Christ founded it; that is how it is, and it cannot be otherwise. The difference between [Catholicism] and Protestantism is that in Protestantism the relationship of man to God and to his own conscience is measured individually and subjectively, whereas in Catholicism it is collective and subordinate to the authorities solely designated to decide such matters. Therefore the internal structure of Catholicism must be strictly monarchic, and even autocratic.³⁰

For Gnatowski the Church was much more than a moral watchdog, much more than a guarantor of social order, more even than a distributor of sacraments (though all these were important). The Catholic Church was the living representation of God’s will on earth, so from Gnatowski’s perspective, Szech was not merely criticizing the clergy, he was denying ecclesiology as such by seeing in the Church only a sociological, political, and devotional community, only an institutional hierarchy made by humans to serve humanity.

An even more dramatic challenge to Catholic ecclesiology in early twentieth-century Poland came from the Mariavite movement, a group of Catholics who used an eclectic mix of devotional traditions to promote an intensely emotional religious revival.³¹ The movement was founded by a nun named Feliksa Kozłowska after she received a revelation in 1893 instructing her to combat, as

she put it, “the universal corruption of the world, . . . the laxity of morals among the clergy, and the sins committed by the priests.”³² She stressed a personal relationship with the divine facilitated by devotional medallions (she believed these could focus the energy of prayer) and by frequent participation in Holy Communion and other rites associated with the Eucharist. She also preached rigorous personal rectitude and expected priests to serve as models of righteousness. Her criticism of the clergy was particularly severe, as she charged both rank-and-file priests and the hierarchy with moral turpitude and inadequate spiritual leadership. According to Kozłowska, Jesus told her in a personal revelation, “I shall stir the people against the priests and they will throw them out as I once threw out the tradesmen from the Temple of Jerusalem, because they serve Me for money and honors.”³³ This, she believed, justified the formation of a new religious order for both laity and priests dedicated to the spiritual renewal of the Church. She called her order the Mariavites (Mariawici), from the Latin phrase *Mariae vitam imitans* (in imitation of the life of Mary). Accompanied by seventeen priests from her movement, Kozłowska personally met with the newly elevated Pope Pius X on August 13, 1903, to plead for official recognition of her order. In going directly to Rome she deliberately bypassed the Polish hierarchy, convinced that their moral degradation was at the root of the problem she was trying to solve.

The response was not what she had hoped for: Pius issued a formal repudiation of the Mariavites, and in 1904 he banned all contact with Sister Kozłowska. Most Mariavite priests were transferred to isolated rural areas, and in 1906 those who remained recalcitrant were suspended from the clergy. The pope then issued the encyclical *Tribus Circiter* on April 5, 1906, condemning the Mariavites and promising excommunication to all those who refused to recant their errors. This didn't seem to help much, because the Mariavite movement grew rapidly among both the laity and the lower clergy in the Russian partition of Poland, with almost 59,000 members in 1907, 83,000 in 1909, and 156,400 in 1910. Some outbreaks of violence ensued when Mariavites and Roman Catholics struggled over control of individual churches; one such battle in the town of Leszno left six dead and twenty-seven wounded, and in Łódź another five were killed. Father Czesław Bogdalski, a Franciscan from Kraków, led a group of charismatic missionary preachers north during those years, traveling around the countryside giving sermons, hearing confessions, recruiting people into devotional organizations, and encouraging them to publicly renounce any affiliation with the Mariavites. As a sign of their orthodoxy, Bogdalski's missionaries urged their audiences to turn over any Marian medals given to them by Kozłowska's followers. The Franciscans collected 41,000 such medals during a three-month tour in 1906, and another 10,907 the following year. Over a three-year period they delivered 2,612 sermons and heard 511,154 confessions, by their own scrupulous count.³⁴ All this slowed the growth of the Mariavite movement, but even

in the 1920s they still had sixty-seven parishes and 42,000 members. To this day an estimated 28,000 Mariavites continue to propagate Kozłowska's message.³⁵

On the surface the Mariavites were simply repeating orthodox Catholic teachings; the devotional practices they promoted were well-established and uncontroversial, and their moral strictures accorded generally with the standards of the day (though they were certainly more rigorous than most). In other circumstances the Church was even willing to endorse personal revelations akin to Kozłowska's, and in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth many new religious orders similar to the Mariavites were authorized. In *Tribus Circiter* Pius X recognized that much of what the Mariavites were doing was unimpeachable on the surface, but he believed that their virtue was undermined by their improper attacks on the hierarchy of the Church.

Relying on an alleged mandate from God, they set themselves to promote without discrimination and of their own initiative among the people frequent exercises of piety (highly commendable when rightly carried out), especially the adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament and the practice of frequent communion; but at the same time they made the gravest charges against all priests and bishops who ventured to express any doubt about the sanctity and divine election of [Kozłowska], or show any hostility to the society of the Mariavites.³⁶

The various dioceses of Poland issued their own statements of condemnation, echoing *Tribus Circiter* and confirming the primary sin of the Mariavites. A special synod of the Przemyśl diocese, for example, stated, “[The Mariavites’] main error is to negate hierarchical authority and the primacy of the Holy Father.”³⁷ A Catholic periodical written for the peasantry made the same point in a more vulgar manner, arguing that the Mariavites preferred to follow “that old hag, Kozłowska” rather than the pope, “who is recognized throughout the world as an authority.”³⁸

There is an easy cynical interpretation of this episode: the Mariavites were being reprimanded for challenging their superiors. It seemed to be a simple case of authority versus resistance, the powerful versus the subaltern. It was that, to be sure, but in a Catholic context this revolt had an additional layer of meaning. The problem was not just that Kozłowska had criticized high-ranking members of the clergy; this would have generated controversy under any circumstances but would not on its own lead to the deployment of a heavy weapon like collective excommunication. Much worse was Kozłowska's radical ecclesiology, according to which God's revelation flowed not through the Church, but directly to individuals. The key phrase in *Tribus Circiter* was “without discrimination and of their own initiative.” The Mariavites did not merely bypass the hierarchical

institutions of the Church; they denied that doctrinal and devotional issues *ought* to be channeled through them. They saw priests as moral guides, justified by their personal holiness rather than their office, whereas Pius X was reaffirming the well-established Catholic teaching that priestly offices retained their sacred power even if the individuals holding them were flawed. Once again the issue at stake was the transcendent power of the Church as such—a power that should be honored regardless of the virtue (or lack thereof) of particular members of the clergy.

This was the question at the center of a much broader controversy that was simmering in Western Europe at exactly the same time. Only a year after *Tribus Circiter*, Pius X responded to the so-called Catholic modernists by issuing the encyclicals *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* and *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* and by excommunicating a cluster of intellectuals whom he charged with undermining the sacred authority of the Church. In 1910 the Vatican even instituted the “Oath against Modernism” that every priest for more than half a century to follow would have to recite upon ordination. In about a thousand words the Oath summarized all the things that a faithful Roman Catholic was required to believe, starting with the pledge “I, [name], firmly embrace and accept each and every definition that has been set forth and declared by the unerring teaching authority of the Church, especially those principal truths which are directly opposed to the errors of this day.” One of the most important of these truths was an unquestioning faith in both “the supernatural origin of Catholic tradition” and the ongoing transmission of revelation through that tradition. Catholicism, unlike some variants of Protestantism, does not hold that God’s revelation is entirely contained within the Holy Scripture. Rather, the Church is both a divine depository and (even more) a living embodiment of the reign of God on earth. Thus, all those who took the Oath promised to “hold to [their] dying breath the belief of the Fathers in the charism of truth, which certainly is, was, and always will be in the succession of the episcopacy from the apostles.”³⁹ This is not to say that each and every bishop was infallible or that every utterance of the pope was beyond question. The Oath did affirm, however, that the form of the Church—the collective “succession of the episcopacy”—was established by God to convey His ongoing revelation to mankind. It followed that these structures had to be honored even if the individuals within them were flawed, and God would ensure that the truth would remain intact through all such human imperfections.⁴⁰

Back in Poland, a monk named Honorat Koźmiński exemplified how one could advocate moral rigor, devotional innovation, and even institutional reform while remaining within the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy. Koźmiński was in an awkward position, because he was closely connected to Kozłowska and, as a Capuchin, even had indirect links to Szech. For several decades he had been spearheading the creation of new female religious communities. He first became

interested in sponsoring women's orders in 1855, when he assisted Zofia Truskowska in the formation of a new contemplative and charitable order called the Felician Sisters. When a Polish uprising broke out in the Russian Empire in 1863, the Felicians gave medical care to the rebels and as a result were swept up in a massive wave of monastic closures in 1864. Truskowska responded by moving to Kraków (in the Austrian partition) to continue her work. Koźmiński, however, decided to remain in Warsaw with a plan to cultivate a network of secret religious communities based on the model of the "tertiary orders." These groups, named after the Third Order of St. Francis, consisted of lay people who remained in the secular world but agreed to follow particularly rigorous devotional and moral rules. Members would pray and attend mass together, commit themselves to works of charity and devotion, and strive to exemplify a higher standard of moral purity. Because they remained in their lay occupations and lived outside traditional religious houses, they could not easily be detected by the Russian authorities.⁴¹

The Mariavites, however, were a major black spot on Koźmiński's résumé, because he was the personal confessor for the young Feliksa Kozłowska and the two of them had jointly founded a chapter of the Poor Sisters of St. Clare in 1887. Initially Koźmiński had approved of Kozłowska's moral rigor and her efforts to popularize the adoration of the Eucharist. He even shared her dismay over the moral failings of the clergy. In other words, although he was never directly involved with the Mariavite movement as such, he was generally identified with the sort of devotional enthusiasm that Kozłowska exemplified. The papal condemnation of 1906 thus left him vulnerable, and he scrambled to distance himself from his former colleague and to immunize the other tertiary communities he had helped to create. He succeeded: not only did his orders retain official sanction, but Koźmiński himself was eventually beatified (by Pope John Paul II in 1988). In a small book called *The Truth about the Mariavites*, Koźmiński described how some minor doctrinal errors in Kozłowska's thinking grew over time into "Satanic delusions." At the core of the Mariavite movement, he argued, was an ecclesiological error: "The rebellious priests taught in a heretical manner that those bishops and priests who did not live in accordance with what [the Mariavites] considered to be appropriate rules for a chaplain lost the power to govern [their subordinates]. Only people with small minds [*ludzie krótkiego rozumu*] could think up something like that, or believe it, because what would happen if spiritual power were tied to virtue? There would be no certainty for the faithful."⁴²

This is a crucial point. For centuries the Church has resisted any resurgence of the so-called Donatist heresy, named after Donatus Magnus, the founder of a Christian sect that flourished briefly in northern Africa in the fourth century. Donatus had maintained that a sacrament performed by a sinner would be

rendered invalid, and that as a consequence priests were required to lead absolutely spotless lives. He was renounced by the Synod of Arles of 314 because his teachings implied that nearly every sacramental act was void (no one, after all, was completely blameless). This argument reemerged from time to time throughout the history of Christianity, most famously among the Hussites of Bohemia in the fifteenth century. The Catechism of the Council of Trent issued a clear statement on this matter in 1566: "Representing as he does, in the discharge of his sacred functions, not his own, but the person of Christ, the minister of the Sacraments, be he good or bad, validly consecrates and confers the Sacraments."⁴³ It is the Church as a whole that guarantees the spiritual power of communion, absolution, and baptism; if the individual priest who is performing the ritual does so with a tarnished soul, the Church that stands behind him still ensures that the sacrament is valid. This is not theological hairsplitting; it is a doctrinal cornerstone without which the whole edifice of Catholic teaching begins to totter. The role of the priest within Catholicism differs significantly from the function of a minister in most Protestant denominations. He is more than the administrator of a parish community, more than a facilitator during religious meetings or services, and certainly more than a teacher and spiritual counselor. He is all those things, but above everything else the priest is empowered to perform sacramental acts that channel God's grace. According to Catholic doctrine, the clerical estate is not a social creation, not a mere administrative office within a man-made institution; it is part of the sacred order created by Christ. As Bishop Leon Wałęga put it succinctly in a 1911 sermon, "Without the clergy there is no Catholicism."⁴⁴ Without a priest the most profound rituals of the mass become empty words and the encounter with God captured in the mystery of transubstantiation is lost. As Wałęga put it on another occasion, "People can be wiser, more learned, and even more devout than a priest, but the priest carries in his soul something supernatural, something that distinguishes him from all laypeople—that is, the character of the sacrament of Holy Orders, which one cannot obtain from learning nor from any natural authority."⁴⁵

This vital doctrinal point clarifies why the Mariavites, Antoni Szech, and the modernists more generally were dealt with so harshly. Kozłowska and her followers were accused of demanding that priests be morally pure, and they refused to recognize the authority of anyone in the hierarchy who fell short of their rigorous moral standards. They were, in effect, repudiating the ecclesiological validity of the clergy by implicitly denying that the Church's sacramental power alone was adequate to legitimate a priest. To be sure, Church authorities are also motivated by less lofty considerations; as has become all too evident at the start of the twenty-first century, there is a sort of clerical *omertà* that inhibits the public acknowledgment of any sin or crime. As is usually the case, however, such mundane defensiveness is supported by more subtle theological reasoning, and

without the latter the former would be much harder to sustain. Ecclesiology has helped demarcate the boundary line separating acceptable (albeit controversial) criticism from the attacks that provoked excommunication for Stojałowski, Szech, and the Mariavites. Bishop Walega described this boundary when he said in a sermon, “You have the right to demand of the clergy a good example and greater perfection in their lives, for we are the servants of your souls, but alongside that, we are by the will of God your spiritual guides, mediators between God and you, we are your spiritual superiors or, as they used to say, your spiritual fathers.”⁴⁶

The way to remain within the Catholic fold was to demonstrate sincere respect for the office of the clergy whenever criticizing a specific priest, because the former had to remain holy even if the latter was mired in sin. The most popular catechism of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Poland repeated Walega’s familial metaphor: “Even if [priests] do evil things (God forbid), the cloak of mercy protects the good parishioner from the faults of his spiritual father, and [the parishioner] will pray for [the priest], so that God will cause him to repent, because he knows that even a sinful father does not cease to be a father.”⁴⁷ Addressing the controversy over Antoni Szech, one priest admitted that there were many problems with the clergy and with the organization of the Church: “Yet we are not empowered to fix them, because they cannot always be fixed, since the Church, having within itself earthly elements, being composed of humans, succumbs in its human life to mistakes and imperfections while preserving without error the principles of the faith.”⁴⁸ To push beyond the condemnation of individual priests toward a systematic critique of the clergy *as such* undermined the holiness of the Church itself and (if taken to a logical extreme) challenged the validity of the sacraments. The great miracle of the Church, in the eyes of the faithful, is precisely that it preserves the sanctity of Christ’s teachings and the efficacy of His sacraments despite the imperfect humans who manage it. As Archbishop Antoni Fijałkowski put it back in 1857, “Bad clerics are only harmful to themselves; for you they are always the vicars of God.”⁴⁹

Catholic ecclesiology, then, depicts the Church as having two elements: one corporeal and one spiritual, roughly akin to the body and the soul of an individual. Any challenge to the transcendent side of this duality has consistently been treated as a fundamental challenge. But what about the earthly component of the Church? What, exactly, constitutes the body that corresponds to the Church’s spirit? For at least a half century the answer to this question has been clear. While still a young bishop in 1964, Karol Wojtyła explained, “The Church, in its deepest essence, is the Mystical Body of Christ, which means it is Christ unfolding, so to speak, in humanity, in society—through people.”⁵⁰ Bishop Zygmunt Kamiński of Lublin was also stressing the social aspect of the Church when he told parishioners in 1980, “The Church is above all a great mystery, a mystery

of God that lives and acts in its people.”⁵¹ In other words, the Church manifests itself on earth through the community of the faithful. On one level this is hardly new; for centuries Catholics have spoken about a Church Triumphant (those residing in Heaven), a Church Suffering (those destined eventually for heaven but currently in purgatory), and a Church Militant (those still alive on earth). All three of these categories (which I will explore later in more detail) imply that the Church’s earthly body is social rather than institutional, that it is made up of the communities of the faithful and not just the clergy. Even a century ago one would hear affirmations (as a sermon from 1910 put it) that “the Kingdom of Christ that is the Catholic Church covers the entire world and counts about 400 million subjects on this earth, and in heaven a countless host of heavenly souls and the Lord’s Saints.”⁵² But despite the inclusiveness implied by counting the millions of the laity alongside the clergy, at that time little ecclesiological significance was attributed to the rank-and-file parishioners. Even today one often encounters discussions among Catholics about their attitudes *toward* the Church, as if it were an institution separate from themselves, a hierarchical organization including only the clergy. This would change gradually and unevenly over the course of the twentieth century, as more and more attention was given to the function of the laity in the life of the Church. In the 1960s the phrase “the people of God” would enter into the language of Catholicism as a way of describing the Church’s earthly manifestation, indicating the formal acceptance of an ecclesiology that encompassed far more than just the bishops, the priests, and the nuns.

Although the expression “the people of God” is from the Bible (see, for example, Exodus 19:5–6 and 1 Peter 2:10), it became central to Catholic ecclesiology only in the second half of the twentieth century. Incorporating “the people of God” into Catholic writing and speech turned out to have wide-ranging ramifications. As Catholics began to deploy this expression they could not help but get drawn into the broader political vocabulary of modernity. Whatever “the people of God” (*lud Boży*) might have signified in earlier times, by the twentieth century the phrase suggested a degree of popular participation in (and ultimately even ownership of) the Church. The term *lud* (the people), like its corollaries *popolo*, *peuple*, *puebla*, *Volk*, and *народ*, carries a linguistic legacy that is inextricably tied up with modern mass politics, so bringing this highly charged word into Catholicism could not help but complicate an ecclesiological model based on authority and discipline.

Calls for more lay involvement in the life of the Church did not spring ex nihilo from the Second Vatican Council. Even in the interwar years there was a campaign to promote a deeper understanding of the sacraments. Both Pius XI and Pius XII raised this issue (particularly in the 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*), and since the early twentieth century there were regular campaigns to persuade

people to receive Holy Communion on a more regular basis.⁵³ More generally, educational projects about the theological significance of a variety of devotional practices proliferated prior to World War II, with the stated premise that the sacraments were of greater value if the faithful actively and consciously participated in them. In 1936 Archbishop Aleksander Cardinal Kakowski of Warsaw sent a pastoral letter to the clergy of his archdiocese reminding them that the flock must not be reduced to an audience. “The faithful,” he wrote, “in whose name the priest performs the Most Holy Offering, ought to also take part in the mass. Although [the priest] consecrates on his own, nonetheless the faithful also, together with him, ought to make an offering to Christ the Lord, and so they ought to join with the Lord God in Holy Communion, actually or at least spiritually.”⁵⁴ During the first half of the twentieth century more and more Catholics began talking about the need to “experience” the mass and “participate in” the sacrifice of the Eucharist, words that in themselves signified a subtle but important shift away from “witnessing” the rituals and “receiving” communion.

There was even some limited consideration before World War II of involving the laity in the administration of the Church. The Polish Primate from 1926 to 1948, August Cardinal Hlond, wrote in a pastoral letter in 1933, “Alongside the hierarchical element represented by the priest, there ought to appear in the life of the parish another factor: the lay parishioners. The parish will not have a full life until the cooperation of the laity supplements the work of the priest.”⁵⁵ The laity did indeed get involved in Catholic life more than ever before, albeit under tightly controlled conditions. As I will discuss more fully in chapters 4 and 5, the interwar years witnessed a proliferation of Catholic periodicals, the emergence of several Catholic political parties with lay leadership, the organization of workers in specifically Catholic unions, and the creation of the Catholic Action movement to mobilize the laity for a variety of purposes. This last phenomenon was defined by Pope Pius XI as “the participation and the collaboration of the laity with the Apostolic Hierarchy.”⁵⁶ This carefully worded phrase, which Pius quoted repeatedly in exactly the same formulation, implied an egalitarianism of purpose but not of function; lay Catholics were described as full members of the Church, sharing with the priests and the bishops a common mission while remaining subordinated within tight networks of authority and obedience. Cardinal Kakowski captured this ambiguity when he wrote a pastoral letter to the parish clergy in 1936. On the one hand, he characterized Catholic Action as “an organized army of lay apostles, with whose help the bishop carries out apostolic work alongside his leading associates, the priests.” After this affirmation of his own leadership, however, Kakowski warned the priests that the laity would henceforth assume a greater role: “Catholic Action turns the lay Catholic into a knight for Christ, and gives him a certain voice in the Church, subordinate to the

bishops but not to ordinary priests. You must accept this fact, my dear shepherds of souls.”⁵⁷

Even as the bishops called for the laity to take on a larger role, however, Primate Hlond stressed that “the hierarchy leads and directs, because that is its calling and duty,” while ordinary parishioners were limited to “cooperation and assistance.” He objected in particular to any suggestion that the Church might be organized as a democratic society, with power and authority deriving from the people. “The guardian of power in the Church is not the community,” he wrote, “nor anyone nominated by the community, for in the Christian Church power derives from Christ and from Him, through the pope and the bishop, [power] flows onto those who are supposed to tend God’s flock [*trzoda boża*] in the parish.”⁵⁸ A 1922 article in the mass-circulation Catholic weekly *Przewodnik Katolicki* developed this theme more fully, labeling the Church the “monarchy of Christ.” The anonymous author addressed directly those who were trying to introduce the concept of “the people” into Catholic rhetoric:

Today they are placing the will of the people on a pedestal, like an idol. . . . They want to turn the will of the people into the source of all laws and even place it above the will of God. Every day, every hour, people would like to elect everyone and everything. . . . Today it is necessary to remind people that such a democracy in the Christian Church is impermissible. . . . Let us thus firmly remind everyone that as long as the Church is the true Christian Church, it will never permit and can never allow the people to rule it, never allow the faithful to appropriate for themselves the authority to rule in the Church. . . . Just like St. Peter and the Apostles after the death of the Savior, so today the pope and the bishops—and only they—have the right to rule the Church.⁵⁹

Throughout the interwar years a priest was required to sit on the governing board of every Catholic Action chapter and every Church-affiliated political or labor organization. In the 1930s the Episcopate tried to achieve even more control by closing down groups formed outside the centralized network of Catholic Action. Kakowski’s injunction that priests should be merely “associates, helpers, and assistants” was routinely ignored, and the clergy often interfered in these groups with a very heavy hand.⁶⁰ A prominent leader of the Catholic Action movement in Poland, Father Antoni Szymański, referred to the members of this group as “soldiers” called to the ranks by their “Supreme Leader [*Zwierzchnik Naczelny*].” When lay activists took responsibility for Catholic organizations, Szymański argued,

They are not entirely independent from the educational and governing authority of the Church. . . . [This is necessary] not only because a central leadership can best manage the division of labor and most effectively utilize the strength that the Church or the diocese has available, but above all because Catholic Action is a religious action, a manifestation of the activity of an organism at the head of which stands the Church hierarchy. The Holy Father is the helmsman of the ship of Peter both in doctrinal and educational matters, both in the sphere of private and social relations. He is the source of life.⁶¹

The Second World War threw these older models of lay-clerical relations into turmoil. The arrest and murder of so many priests during the Nazi and Soviet occupations imbued the clergy with the moral authority of martyrdom, but the sheer scale of the casualties meant that a great many parishes were deprived of any clerical leadership whatsoever. Different sources provide different figures for the number of priests who died during the war, ranging from 1,932 to 3,600, or from 20 to 30 percent of the prewar parish clergy.⁶² Although the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed some limited autonomy under the Nazis, that did not apply to Polish priests or bishops. Virtually every Polish parish in the western lands annexed by Germany was either closed (which happened to 97 percent of the churches in Poznan) or Germanized (a more common fate for churches in Pomerania, where even confessions had to be given in German). The Polish clergy was arrested en masse: out of 1,900 priests in Poznan in 1939, only seventy-three remained at liberty in 1941. About one-third of all the Polish priests from the diocese of Poznań-Gniezno were killed during the war, far more than in any other diocese. Out of 659 Catholic priests in Pomerania in 1939, only 210 were still alive in October 1942.⁶³ The situation was not as bad in the Nazi-administered occupation zone called the General Government (a reservation for Poles and Jews that the Germans set up around Warsaw and Kraków). The Polish clergy and hierarchy there were mostly left in place, and there was no concerted Germanization campaign. Nonetheless, the sheer terror of Nazi rule in this region led to the deaths of at least 500 priests. From the other direction (geographically as well as ideologically), priests and nuns living in the land occupied by the Soviet Union were subjected to arrests, deportations, and severe constraints on their activities. The casualty rates were somewhat lower than in the Nazi zone, but the situation was nonetheless dire.

The suffering of the clergy during the war, however, did not necessarily earn them special respect afterward. First of all, their losses did not set them apart: 37.5 percent of Poles with a university degree and 30 percent of those with a secondary education had died, and on a per capita basis the clergy suffered less than many other professions.⁶⁴ Moreover, the Church was not immune from the

pervasive postwar skepticism, even hostility, toward prewar figures of authority. The communist takeovers in Eastern Europe in the late 1940s were so obviously stage-managed by the Soviet Union that we can easily lose sight of the genuine radical mood that marked the late 1940s.⁶⁵ Exacerbating this discontent in the case of the Church was the Vatican's ambiguous stance vis-à-vis occupied Poland. In the months prior to the invasions of 1939 Pius XII issued several appeals to the Polish government to agree to Nazi demands in order to preserve the peace, and once the fighting started he refused to condemn Germany. His 1939 encyclical *Summi Pontificatus* lamented the suffering in Poland in generic terms but did not label anyone as the aggressor, and he spoke in very guarded language about Poland's fate throughout the war.⁶⁶ Even Pius himself acknowledged, in a letter to the bishops of Poland immediately after the war ended, "[We] had almost no opportunity to convey to you the consolation that We so wanted to send to you in your horrible situation. We hope, nonetheless, that you knew that We did not spare any effort in trying to alleviate at least a little bit your misfortune."⁶⁷ Unfortunately for the Vatican, those quiet efforts were not visible to most Poles at the time. Added to this, Primate August Cardinal Hlond spent the war years in exile, and many Poles were disillusioned that he had not followed the lead of Archbishop Adam Sapieha of Kraków by remaining at his post.⁶⁸ All of this quickly got caught up in the polemical battles of the postwar years, and most Catholics in Poland rallied around their bishops and their pope when faced with communist anticlericalism. Nonetheless, a residue of mistrust remained and would frequently bubble to the surface in the years to come.

The hierarchy sensed the new mood. In 1948 Stefan Wyszyński (then still bishop of Lublin but soon to be named primate of Poland) deplored "attempts at *ludowładztwo* within the Church." This phrase is etymologically equivalent to "democracy" (*lud* = people, *władztwo* = rule) but is typically used in a negative sense to indicate populist demagoguery and mob rule, in contrast to the more positive borrowed word, *demokracja*. Wyszyński perceived a spread of *ludowładztwo* at all levels: priests were defying bishops, laypeople were defying priests, and the unity of the Church was fracturing. He offered a suggestive analogy: "Wherever there is a bishop, there is a faithful *lud*, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." In his view the people of God might constitute the Church, but only insofar as they were properly subordinated to the established clerical authorities. "Our priesthood does not emerge from the Christian community," he wrote, "nor is it bestowed by the will of the people. . . . The hierarchy of the Church, although coming from the people, is established for the people so as to *lead* the flock of God and lead it as a shepherd leads his sheep, along the most certain path to God, without succumbing to the mood of the masses."⁶⁹ A particularly revealing example of Wyszyński's approach to the laity came in a memo that was sent to all the priests in the Warsaw archdiocese in 1951, in

which the primate wrote, “We were supposed to stand before the people so as to guide our children to the mystery of living together and working together with the Church in order to prepare the faithful to honor the Sabbath and to teach them how to actively take part in the Holy Mass.”⁷⁰ Even more striking than Wyszyński’s characterization of the laity as “children” was a subtle slip: he spoke of the laity “cooperating *with* the Church” (*z Kościołem*), whereas those calling for more participation by the laity spoke of their presence *in* the Church (*w Kościele*).

Wyszyński’s attitude was widespread among the clergy. In 1966 the theologian Tadeusz Żychiewicz (better known by the pseudonym he used in his regular advice column, “Pocztą Ojca Malachiasza” [The Mailbox of Father Malachi]) organized an informal survey by asking readers to comment on the relationship between the laity and the clergy in their parishes. He received 462 responses, totaling more than four thousand pages. The dominant theme in these letters was dissatisfaction over the poor relationship between the clergy and the laity. Readers complained that priests were “isolated from their surroundings” and that they should stop “standing on a pedestal, which provokes among a lot of people the desire to knock them off, or to pretend that they don’t see them at all.” One correspondent wrote that “priests are afraid of the laity” and as a result they “hide behind their cassocks, behind Latin, behind their serious demeanor.”⁷¹ These complaints were well-founded; in fact, they reflected Primate Wyszyński’s oft-stated desire to surround the “clerical estate” (*stan duchowny*) with an aura of mystery. Back in 1949, shortly after his appointment as primate, Wyszyński had composed a letter to the priests of Poland entitled “The Polish Clergy vis-à-vis Contemporary Needs.” Here he urged his colleagues (now subordinates) to cultivate their special status, in words that were ironically reminiscent of Sister Kozłowska’s demands a half century earlier:

We are above all *ministri Christi et dispensatores mysterium Dei*—servants and bearers of the divine grace. The people must recognize us as such (see 1 Corinthians 4:1). For this to take place in reality, it is not enough just to perform the holy sacraments as visible demonstrations of grace. Our entire lives, our intentions, actions, and goals, should emanate the supernatural. The sensuous, materialistic, earthly world must perceive in us an emanation from another world. It is indeed difficult to elevate ourselves—“from mankind drawn and for mankind established”—above earthly, human matters. But we must learn how to carry out those earthly matters in a Godly way [*po Bożemu*].⁷²

This stance would eventually come into conflict with the pastoral message of Vatican II, and after returning from the Council’s first session in 1962 the Polish

Episcopate briefly softened its tone. "From experience, we know that separatism by the priest cannot be a proper pastoral technique," the bishops wrote in a collective letter to the clergy in Poland, "because it creates between him and the faithful a vacuum, it makes him seem distant, foreign and incomprehensible." The bishops reminded their subordinates, "We are not always better than our parishioners," and cautioned against "superfluous conceit." Priests ought to think of themselves not as a "spiritual aristocracy": "[Rather we should remember that] in relations with people we remain ordinary men, because, after all, that is what we are and that is what God wants us to be."⁷³ But there were limits to the Polish bishops' willingness to change. Only nine months later they issued another pastoral letter to the clergy warning them against too much involvement with the secular world:

With distress we are observing certain phenomena in the lives of some priests, which one might generally call desacralization [*desakralizacja*], that is, the loss of holiness in their lives. . . . Most clearly, it seems to us, the process of desacralization is evident in the manner in which some priests spend their free time. They try at these times to become similar to lay people, both in terms of their attire and their entertainment. They almost always spend their free time away from home: at the cinema, at the theater, at the sports field, on outings and various kinds of social gatherings. It does not bother them that the atmosphere at these gatherings is often unchristian, and they themselves sometimes behave with a freedom that does not correspond to their priestly calling.

Such priests, the bishops continued, tried to justify their behavior by claiming that they were merely trying to establish better contact with the daily life of modern man, but in doing so they "seem to look upon the Church as a human institution," forgetting that they were to remain separate from the world.⁷⁴

Primate Wyszyński was deeply suspicious (to put it mildly) of the tendency of Catholic priests in Western Europe to blend in with the laity. An informant for the security services was present during a Christmas party attended by several members of the Episcopate in 1969, shortly after the primate had returned from a visit to Rome:

Speaking about the priests [in Italy], Wyszyński stated that it was unknown what sort of people they were, because they did not have cashmere. They imitated the mobs on the Roman streets. Such people spread moral scandals. In the modern world they are creating an unrealistic trend, a trend of negation without a program. The cause of this lies with the current moral situation of humanity, with the hippies

[*młodzież hippisowska*], who behave scandalously, amorally. The new generation is rebelling against everything and everyone. . . . In comparison to those young people, our young people are full of ambition, ideals, and they should be valued highly . . . [but] among us such a generation could also arise. That must not be allowed to happen. Humanity must not return to the era of the cavemen.⁷⁵

A few years later Bishop Antoni Baraniak of Poznań grumbled to his colleagues (among whom the security services also had an informant) that more and more priests considered it acceptable to wear ordinary street clothes outside of church. In general the bishop lamented that the priests of Poland were being corrupted by travel abroad, trips that invariably “brought harm to the Church in Poland.”⁷⁶

When Wyszyński denounced Catholic *ludowładztwo* he might have been thinking of the ideas promoted by a new periodical, *Tygodnik Powszechny* (The Universal Weekly). This publication, founded in Kraków on March 24, 1945, propagated a style of Catholicism that stressed collegiality rather than discipline, lay autonomy rather than clerical authority, and engagement with the modern world rather than cultural entrenchment. A founding editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Father Jan Piwowarczyk, exemplified the magazine’s position when he wrote in 1947, “The duties of Catholics are not limited to the passive receipt of the hierarchy’s commands. The clergy does not constitute the Church. It is constituted by the faithful, together with [the clergy]. Holy life in the Church is fulfilled not only by the virtue of obedience, but by creative work.”⁷⁷ *Tygodnik Powszechny* was never broadly representative of the Polish Church: its circulation was always small, its style was distinctly high-brow, and its views were well to the left of the Catholic mainstream in Poland. When the magazine conducted a poll of its readers in 1961, the editors felt able to conclude, “On the basis of this survey we must assert decisively that today Polish religiosity is no longer predominantly based on tradition.” The authors of this editorial did not seem to notice that 409 of the 862 respondents had university degrees—hardly a representative sample of the population.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, *Tygodnik Powszechny* is important to our story because its contributors constantly pushed at the edges of Polish Catholicism (and, for that matter, Polish communism), testing how far one could go without crossing some line that would solicit charges of heterodoxy. If Wyszyński represented the center of Polish Catholicism, *Tygodnik Powszechny* illuminated the outer boundaries.

For a time during the 1960s those outer edges of the Polish Church moved considerably closer to the center of the universal Church, as the bishops of the world met for the Second Vatican Council (1962–65).⁷⁹ I will have occasion to return to this seminal gathering repeatedly, because it transformed the way Catholics talked about nearly everything. Certainly the Council had a greater

resonance in some places and was more muted in others, but even in the conservative circles of the Polish hierarchy, the decade of the 1960s was a time of monumental change. In September 1962, as the Polish bishops were preparing to depart for the opening of the Council, they issued a joint pastoral letter assuring the faithful that the task of the Council was to protect the Church “against the dangers of error” and to preserve “the inflexible foundations of the holy faith.”⁸⁰ A mere four months later those same bishops issued another pastoral letter recognizing that the Council had a “pastoral character” and was not particularly concerned with “evaluating or condemning contemporary errors.”⁸¹ A Polish commentator at the time played off an old socialist epithet by characterizing the Council as “Christian revisionism,” made necessary because it had become “hugely dangerous” for any institution to stand in place when confronted with progress. Switching metaphors, this author acknowledged that the Council was uncovering “a huge cargo of ideological dynamite” by looking anew at the Gospels.⁸² The explosive metaphor was appropriate, because unlike at previous Councils, the debates surrounding Vatican II were not limited to the hierarchy. As one Polish observer put it as the Council was being prepared, “It might indeed have seemed that this would essentially be a matter for Roman theologians and canon lawyers . . . but such an opinion is already prehistory. Today the entire Church is ‘in a conciliar state,’ that is, in a state of general discussion about nearly all aspects of the life of the Church.”⁸³

On few matters was the impact of Vatican II greater than in the field of ecclesiology. In 2002, on the fortieth anniversary of the opening of the first session, an eighty-eight-year-old retired bishop named Ignacy Jeż (who had been in St. Peter’s Basilica when Pope John XXIII opened the Council) was asked to identify Vatican II’s most important reforms. Jeż singled out two innovations: the repudiation of anti-Semitism and the elevation of the laity. “When we talked about the Church before the Council,” he told a reporter, “we mentioned the Holy Father, the bishops, and the priests, whereas the most numerous group in the Church are the laypeople. Pushing that fact to the forefront was a colossal change in comparison to the pre-conciliar ecclesiology.”⁸⁴ Observers at the time had the same impression. At a 1961 conference held at the Catholic University of Lublin, the presenters made it clear (in the words of a priest who reported on the event) that “ecclesiology . . . [was] emerging to the forefront of Catholic theology.” Bishop Bolesław Kominek of Wrocław, who was then a member of the Vatican Commission for the Affairs of the Lay Apostolate, told the Lublin conference that the most momentous issue to be dealt with at the forthcoming Council would be “a change in the approach to the role and position of lay Catholics in the Church.”⁸⁵ Elsewhere Kominek praised the “democratizing” that was going on within his Church, and even Primate Wyszyński eventually accepted that a “divine democracy” encompassed the entire people of God.⁸⁶ In 1966 a

priest from Poznań described Vatican II to his parishioners as “the council of the laity” because of “the heretofore unprecedented emphasis not only on duties, but also on the dignity of the lay estate, which after all includes the greatest number of the members of the people of God.”⁸⁷ A priest from Wrocław went a step further and attacked the very idea that there were distinct “estates” within the Church: “The Church is not a secular society, and even less a feudal society. The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, and in that Body are ‘organs,’ and every one of them is important, everyone has something to accomplish. . . . Before our eyes, the recent Council has started to uncover from under centuries of ‘imperial dust’ the pure idea of the freedom and responsibility of all members of the Church.”⁸⁸

Not surprisingly, *Tygodnik Powszechny* and its audience were enthusiastic about this new tone. When readers of the magazine were surveyed in 1962, only 15 percent favored a complete switch in the text of the mass from Latin to Polish; in contrast, the prospect of changing the relationship between the clergy and the laity enjoyed overwhelming support.⁸⁹ One respondent (a mathematics teacher) lamented that in his town “only a small handful of the faithful take an interest in the affairs of their parish and are drawn in somehow to its affairs. More, no one demands of them any participation in parish affairs. The distance between the priest and the lay people is still too great.” Another correspondent, a physician, believed that the “most important task of contemporary pastoral work is the activation of the laity,” who needed to assume “mutual responsibility for the development of religious life in the society formed by the parish.”⁹⁰ As *Tygodnik Powszechny* publicized these views, however, it took great care not to cross any of the lines that had pushed people like Stojałowski, Szech, and Kozłowska outside the Church. The danger of following that path was very real, even in the 1960s, because the changes under discussion involved a new model of ecclesiological organization that would have profound implications. There was only a small gap between calling for more equality between the laity and the clergy, and challenging the idea that the hierarchy enjoyed divinely ordained sacramental and institutional authority. The *Tygodnik Powszechny* circle managed to safely walk along the edge of that gap because they actually *prioritized* the spiritual, transcendent, and unchanging essence of the Church. Unlike Szech or the West European modernists of the turn of the century, they never suggested that the Church itself needed to evolve in any fundamental way. Unlike Kozłowska and the Mariavites, they never directly challenged the authority or legitimacy of any bishops, priests, or nuns; they asked only for a place alongside the clergy in carrying out the (unchanging) mission of the Church.

No single individual in Poland was more important in this effort than Jerzy Turowicz, the editor in chief of *Tygodnik Powszechny*. In April 1962 he published a lengthy front-page essay with the ambitious title “To Be a Christian,” in

which he carefully distinguished between the eternal and the malleable within Catholicism:

The Church, unchanging in its essence, established once and for all, is from the start “ready” and complete. From the start its content and sense are given, from the start in a perfect and sufficient way it fulfills its function vis-à-vis man, vis-à-vis humanity: the function of teaching the truth, the function of guiding people through the world to eternal life. But this Church belongs to history. Through the centuries the Church lives, develops, grows, changes the form of its presence in the world, changes its method of operation, adapts to needs, responds to the pleas of man. It is changeless and perfect—because it is divine. But it is, at the same time, changeable and imperfect—because it is human.⁹¹

Turowicz was reaffirming that the Church could never *really* change, even as he advocated reform. More, he was arguing that the permanence of the Church’s divine mandate virtually required innovation. As he wrote later that same year, “A Church that is founded for all times and for all peoples is not tied organically to any culture or any civilization.”⁹² Precisely because of this universality and timelessness, wide swaths of ritual and structure could be customized to fit a variety of contexts.

The Church is not an immobile monolith, a guard of unchanging truth that waits for the world to come to it for that truth and to subordinate itself. The Church was established for the world; it has a mission vis-à-vis that world and in that world, and since the world changes, the Church must be sensitive to those changes; it must accommodate so that it fulfills its mission as fully, as effectively as possible, so that it may speak to people in their own language.⁹³

Such arguments rested on a reconfiguration, or rather, a clarification of the boundary between the essential and the contingent. Antoni Szech and other early twentieth-century modernists challenged the Church in the most profound way possible, by arguing that a new age of mankind demanded a new ecclesiology. For someone like Szech, relegating the Church to terrestrial historical time was a way of secularizing what had been sacred, a means of stripping away from the Church its status as the Kingdom of God and subjecting it to the vagaries of historical progress. Turowicz, on the other hand, believed that everything essential to Catholicism transcended history; only the superficial forms of the faith were immersed in secular time and subject to revision. By deflating the theological significance of their own agenda, the reformists of Vatican II

shifted the field of debate away from theology altogether. As Turowicz wrote in an essay summarizing the accomplishments of the Council's first session, "The truth proclaimed by the Church, given to it as a deposit from God, the truth of faith, cannot suffer any sort of damage, and no one can back away from it or try to efface it. We are only concerned with distinguishing the essence of that truth from its form—the form that comes from people and is thus transient." Once that "form" was identified, it could be changed so as to make the truth of the Church "more accessible to the person of today."⁹⁴ Of course, this ecclesiology of form and substance was hardly unique to *Tygodnik Powszechny*; this was the way the reformist bishops at Vatican II were framing their broader agenda. Whether this approach persuaded many who would otherwise have opposed change (either in Poland or in Rome) is less significant than the fact that it carved out a space for people like Turowicz to advocate ambitious new ideas with little danger of stepping outside the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy.

In this way the *Tygodnik Powszechny* circle could make arguments that were strikingly similar to those that would have led to excommunication a generation earlier. One could hear the echoes of Stojałowski in Turowicz's affirmation "The Church is not just the pope, the bishops, and the priests, not just the institution and the organization; it is a living organism, all of us, clerical and lay. . . . The Church does not in any way demand blind faith or blind obedience from the faithful." But whereas Stojałowski made arguments like these as a prelude to attacking his superiors, Turowicz proceeded in an entirely different (and much safer) direction: "The Church wants—it demands—that the faithful know well the contents of their faith, that they understand it, that it be their own personal faith, a result of personal experience, appropriation, absorption."⁹⁵ Turowicz felt that only when laypeople were fully engaged with the life of the Church, "experiencing" its activities and "absorbing" its teachings, could they fully appreciate the essential, eternal truth of Catholicism. With unintended irony he had implied that his conservative opponents were the ones who treated the Church like a worldly institution by concentrating on preserving external forms rather than helping people appreciate the spiritual universality of the faith.

By disaggregating the eternal from the contingent in this way, Turowicz was even able to relocate the spiritual focal point of the Church away from the clergy and onto the people:

In the new understanding, the Church is above all the People of God, a community of people serving as the object of the work of the Holy Spirit. That Church is also, still, an institution, but the accent has been placed on the community. The legalism of the post-tridentine period has been abandoned. The institution is supposed to serve the human community; that service is its essence, its task. Meanwhile, the accent

has been placed on the historicity of the Church: the Church fulfills its mission in time, in history, it reacts to the “signs of the times,” it accommodates to those times in order to fulfill its mission better, in accordance with the plan of God.⁹⁶

Thus when Turowicz wrote that the Church had become democratized, he was not just talking about institutional reform. On a much deeper level he was trying to make it impossible to say (as Wyszyński had in 1951) that the laity should cooperate *with* the Church. He was laying the groundwork for the view expressed by Bishop Ignacy Tokarczuk in 1973, when he succinctly told a village parish, “We are all the Church.”⁹⁷

That a bishop would say this in the early 1970s reflected the wide impact of Vatican II. The Polish hierarchy remained highly traditional by postconciliar standards, but the idea of “the people of God” was hard to resist after it was enshrined in *Lumen Gentium*, the new “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church” that was passed by the Council in 1964.⁹⁸ As the bishops gathered in Rome in 1962, *Tygodnik Powszechny* coyly reminded traditionalists that conciliar decisions were binding by printing a front-page prayer in which they asked God, “Strengthen our minds in truth and induce our hearts to obedience, so that we may accept the resolutions of the Council with sincere submission and willingly bring them to fulfillment.”⁹⁹ This raises yet another difference between the reformists of the 1900s and those of the 1960s: the latter could avoid questioning the sacramental validity or the ecclesiological authority of the clergy simply because they had so many of the world’s bishops on their side. The dissidents discussed earlier in this chapter had little choice but to confront their superiors; the writers at *Tygodnik Powszechny* could assert with some justification that they were merely carrying out the will of the Vatican (while simply ignoring those members of the Polish Episcopate who opposed them).

This rhetorical maneuver was facilitated by the support the *Tygodnik Powszechny* circle enjoyed from their own diocesan bishop, a dynamic young man named Karol Wojtyła who had been appointed to head the diocese of Kraków just prior to the start of Vatican II. Liberal Catholics outside of Poland have been harshly critical of Pope John Paul II, blaming him for failing to push the ideals of Vatican II forward and even for turning the Church back to a preconciliar era.¹⁰⁰ Without denying that many of the Church’s most ambitious reformers were thwarted after Wojtyła was elected pope in 1978, it is not quite correct to label him an opponent of the Council. In fact he was known in Poland as a leading advocate for change, and he first rose to international recognition as a member of the commission that composed *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council’s new “Pastoral Constitution.” For all the centralization that he eventually brought to Rome, in his early days he appeared to be an enthusiastic and articulate exponent of the

new ecclesiology.¹⁰¹ In 1962, shortly after being named bishop, Wojtyła held a retreat for a group of university students at which he captivated his audience with a striking style marked by short, often fragmentary sentences filled with rich imagery and provocative ideas. Particularly noteworthy at that gathering was the way he described the people of God:

Christ created us. Today, in Holy Communion, He wants to create us anew. To transform us. That process has yet a second direction. We also create Christ. That Christ, which we create, is called the Church. Often we hear that the Church is the mystical Christ. We, so to speak, constitute Him, we are His parts, His cells. . . . That is our creation, our work. We begin with Him, He creates us—Christ—but once he has already created us in his own image, we then create Him—the Church—as we are created.¹⁰²

A few years later Wojtyła tried to capture this same message with slightly different metaphors:

The Church is a mystery of the perpetual descent of God toward man. The Church is simultaneously a second mystery, a second reality. . . . The Church, which perceives man and elevates man toward the divine cause, so that he might see it, so that he might with his human heart embrace and love it. That is the Church! That is the People of God. That is us! That is me! . . . That is the Church: the mystery of the perpetual ascent of man toward God.¹⁰³

All mention of hierarchy, obedience, and discipline evaporated from these presentations, not so much repudiated as transcended. More than any other Polish priest of his day, he embraced the idea that the Church was “us.” In 1978 he said in a prayer, “Through You, through Your torment, death and resurrection, we are all the People of God, we are the clergy of the Kingdom, we are the Church. We come to You to proclaim that for the cause of Your body, which You gave up for us in death, and Your blood, which you shed on the cross, all of us, the people of God, Your Church, are also your body.”¹⁰⁴ The intimacy of this passage was also typical of Wojtyła’s homiletic style, which literally embodied Christ and His Church within each listener. He even used the word *clergy* to refer not to priests alone, but to all the faithful. For the young bishop, the Church was above all a mystical phenomenon, a “mystery” in the theological sense of that word. All of its visible components—the institutions in Rome, the clergy, the parishioners—were but pale reflections of a real Church that no human could fully grasp, a Church that *was* Jesus, and the laity, and the clergy.

Though one might be tempted to dismiss this as a poetic distraction from more concrete issues of clerical authority and lay autonomy, Wojtyła's mystical ecclesiology allowed him to prioritize the laity much more than most of his peers in the Polish Episcopate. Reflecting in 1967 on the innovations of the Second Vatican Council, he told an audience at the Wawel Cathedral in Kraków:

The mission of the laity, which previously had perhaps not been so well understood, became more comprehensible. . . . The laity, after all, are the Church: they are the Church as the People of God, together with their pastors, with the hierarchy. Meanwhile they—more than the clergy—“are” in the world: they therefore have, one might say, greater potential, but also greater obligations, when it comes to bringing to fulfillment the maturation of the world in Christ.¹⁰⁵

In hindsight we know that during the three decades of John Paul II's papacy power within the Church was centralized in the Vatican to a degree that even the preconiliar popes would have envied. Not only the laity, but even diocesan bishops were constrained by a newly assertive Vatican Curia. Nonetheless, back in the 1960s and 1970s Wojtyła's commitment to the “people of God” helped ensure that the *Tygodnik Powszechny* circle could elaborate their views with the full support of their bishop—and that in turn allowed them to steer away from the criticisms leveled against the Church leadership at the start of the twentieth century. For his part Wojtyła's poetic, often mystical language allowed him to finesse the tensions between the postconciliar terminology and ecclesiology and the centralism favored by Wyszyński and most of the remainder of the Polish Episcopate. A careful review of his career before 1978 (when he became pope) reveals an enthusiastic embrace of Vatican II's pastoral implications, but no concrete discussion of how a postconciliar Church should be organized in practical terms. He reached out to the laity in ways few Polish bishops had ever done and earned a reputation for unorthodox forms of ministry (retreats in the mountains, skiing trips with young people, etc.). At the same time, he would not abide any weakening of his authority as bishop, and he fully accepted Wyszyński's call for unity and obedience in the face of the communist threat. He would take to Rome this ability to combine pastoral innovation and homiletic eloquence on the one hand with institutional conservatism on the other.

Even if Wojtyła avoided actual decentralization, there could be no doubt that he was the product of a postconciliar era. In this he was in a distinct minority among the Polish bishops. Had the polemicists at *Tygodnik Powszechny* wished (or felt compelled) to mount a campaign against the Episcopate, they would have had no difficulty finding targets. At the end of the third session of the Council, in December 1964, the bishops issued a pastoral letter to all the faithful in

which they tried to correct what they saw as “rather pervasive, but mistaken views” about what had been happening: “We often hear the question, ‘what changes will the Council introduce?’ Certainly, some changes will be carried out . . . [but] the goals which the Council set for itself penetrate much more deeply. This is not about a change [zmiana] in heretofore obligatory rules or customs, but a transformation [przemiana], fully in the spirit of the Gospels, of everything in the Church.”¹⁰⁶ A move “deeper” into the meaning of the liturgy would have met with the approval of the reformers, but it seemed that the bishops were plunging to the depths in order to keep the surface as smooth as possible. They were slow to prepare the new Polish-language version of the mass, introducing the vernacular only in 1970 (in the United States most of the mass was said in English beginning in 1965). Even seemingly nonthreatening moves like the push for more frequent participation in the Eucharist met with resistance. In the United States most practicing Catholics now receive communion at almost every mass, but even in 2008 only 15.3 percent of Poles received regular communion, and even this figure is a dramatic improvement from the 7.8 percent level of 1980.¹⁰⁷

Nonetheless, the Council’s vocabulary penetrated even some of the most traditionalist bastions of the Polish Church. The best source for what priests were supposed to be telling their parishioners was (and remains) a magazine called *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* (The Homiletic Library). This little-known publication has been distributed to priests for over a century to provide models for their Sunday sermons—models that were often repeated verbatim (to the ongoing consternation of the editors).¹⁰⁸ Although the sermons were chosen from actual texts written and delivered by priests all over Poland, the periodical bore the imprimatur and can be considered a representation of what Church authorities wanted rank-and-file priests to say. Though the circulation of *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* reached a peak of about 11,300 in the 1980s, this was an impressive figure considering that Poland had only 8,000 parishes and 20,000 priests at the time.¹⁰⁹ If we survey the homilies printed by this magazine we can see how the clergy in Poland assimilated the phraseology of Vatican II without significantly altering the relationship between the laity and the clergy.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the sermons in *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska* encouraged the Catholic faithful to treat their priests as unerring authorities. As late as 1963, Father Mieczysław Pohl from the small town of Zbąszyń in western Poland contributed to the magazine a sermon entitled “Obedience: The Bond of Society.” He perceived changes in the world around him, and he did not like what he saw: “One of the most unpopular words today is ‘obedience.’ In many people this provokes disgust and a sort of psychic resistance. From all sides we hear complaints that people do not want to obey, do not want to carry out orders.” The pervasive rebellion against authority, Pohl continued, was corrosive

for all aspects of modern life, but at the most fundamental level it was a challenge to the Christian faith. “The task of man is to fulfill the will of God,” he wrote, “and without obedience that is impossible.” Above all one needed to be obedient to the clergy, from the pope on down to the lowest parish priest, because “through obedience to them we sanctify our souls and grow closer to God.”¹¹⁰ That same year Father Henryk Zimny from Inowrocław (near Toruń) told his parish that there was no place for any kind of democracy within the Church. As he put it, “The legitimacy of Church precepts does not depend upon their acceptance by the faithful. The Church receives full authority not from humans, but from Christ himself.”¹¹¹

In the very same issue as Zimny’s sermon, however, we find *Biblioteka Kaznodziejska’s* first specific reference to the Second Vatican Council: a sermon by Father Józef Anczarski of Gorzów (near Katowice) on the theme of “responsibility for the fate of the Church.” The idea that the laity might share some of this responsibility was being discussed a great deal, wrote Anczarski, so much so that he even overheard two random train passengers debating the issue. Summarizing the ongoing deliberations at the Council, he called the Church “our common spiritual organism” and told his congregation, “We are the Church. . . . The Church is not the Pope, the bishops, and the priests. Rather, the Church is the Pope, the bishops, the priests, and all of us, united with Christ as the Head of this mystical organism.” To diffuse the danger that this ecclesiology might suggest some sort of equality within the Church, Anczarski redirected the issue away from the internal workings of the Catholic community and toward the outside world. The most important job for the laity, he clarified, was to “preserve and proclaim to others” the teachings of the Church.¹¹² In the ensuing years this would become a familiar way of describing the role of the laity, who were often cast as the representative face of the Church in the wider world—precisely where priests were not to tread, according to Wyszyński. The annual homiletic program for 1981, for example, included this injunction:

Lay people, who live in the world and carry out various worldly tasks, are in their own way bearers of the Gospels. The proper fields for their evangelical activity are the spheres of political, social, and economic life, diverse cultural, academic and artistic areas, as well as international relations, the mass media, and particularly the areas that are especially open to the Gospels, like family love, the education of children and youth, professional work, and human suffering.¹¹³

Another way of preserving the line between the laity and the clergy was to shift the conversation to spiritual and devotional matters. With the Second Vatican Council proclaiming that the laity were “responsible” for the Church, Father

Tadeusz Jabłoński of Poznań emphasized, “The Church does not want the clergy to surrender its proper tasks to lay people; it wants [the clergy] to be entirely dedicated to the goals of their vocation. They are distinguished from among other members of the Church into a separate estate, a clerical estate. Alongside the duties common to all the faithful, they have duties that are particular only to the clerical estate.” As the priests exercised these duties, he continued, the laity should focus on cultivating a deeper understanding of and involvement in the mass. He believed that this would be facilitated by the new devotional reforms being planned by the Council, thanks to which “we are able to speak today of an active role for the laity in the Church.”¹¹⁴ Needless to say, this is not quite what the contributors to *Tygodnik Powszechny* had in mind when they wrote about an “active role for the laity.” The rhetoric of Catholicism was definitely changing, but in the hands of people like Father Jabłoński, the new slogans were configured so that the traditional position of the clergy in religious life could remain unaltered.

But the embrace of Vatican II’s phraseology—above all “the people of God”—would have consequences even among those most reluctant to support lay involvement in the Church’s institutional life. Primate Wyszyński demonstrated the power of the new rhetoric by trying to position himself as *more* connected to the Polish laity than the supporters of conciliar reform. In 1965 he addressed a group of Catholic intellectuals in Warsaw with a speech entitled “The True Spirit of the Council.” The tone of his presentation was unusually blunt. “The Church is not just made up of philosophers and thinkers,” he said, “but also of people who, despite having a modest intellectual level, sometimes have a very deep religious life.” Wyszyński warned against “intellectualizing the Church, as if it consisted entirely of philosophers.” He was adroitly attempting to defend traditional devotional practices by identifying them with the people (as opposed to the urban, cosmopolitan, overeducated intellectuals), thus retaining the vocabulary of Vatican II even as he challenged some of its conclusions. He even attempted to justify the retention of Latin as a populist move, arguing that revising traditional rites in the name of comprehensibility was the manifestation of an arrogant individualism that denied the centrality of community and continuity.¹¹⁵ Later the entire Episcopate attacked the “errors and licentiousness [*swawola*] of the modern human mind,” exemplified by those who claimed to represent the spirit of Vatican II. Such people were merely “elites” who failed to understand the “collective folk piety” of the genuine people of God.¹¹⁶

Other members of the Polish hierarchy were more explicit in their discomfort with the Council’s reforms, but even they felt compelled to repeat John XXIII’s call for *aggiornamento*. In 1969 Bishop Antoni Baraniak of Poznań composed a pastoral letter that he ordered all priests of his diocese to read from the pulpit during every mass on Christmas Day—that is, at a time when virtually everyone

who had even the most ephemeral ties to Catholicism would be present. Baraniak's displeasure with the reforms of Vatican II was evident:

In our times there is no lack of believers in Christ who are convinced that there has emerged a burning need to carry out revolutionary changes in the Church. They sometimes look with contempt on the traditions of centuries; the wisdom gathered over centuries is without meaning for them. In their campaigns they act on their own, without giving any attention to the Holy Father or to the hierarchy. . . . We do not want that kind of renewal, spreading confusion and disorder. That squanders the values that constitute the product of centuries, and needlessly wastes the spiritual treasury of God's Church on earth. We can only accept renewal that carries with itself greater concern for the development of the Kingdom of God on earth, that is marked by moderation, balance, and a reliable evaluation of reality.¹¹⁷

Baraniak's Interior Ministry file (where this sermon is preserved) also contains a report on how the parish priests of his diocese were responding to their bishop's conservative stance. During a diocesan synod in 1968 Baraniak supposedly provoked dissatisfaction among the rank-and-file clergy because of his unwillingness to introduce reforms "in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council." The meetings Baraniak organized, the subordinates were said to have griped, "did not differ in any way from the synods of the middle ages."¹¹⁸

But Baraniak and the other traditionalists in the Episcopate were not living in the Middle Ages, if only because they had little choice but to use the conciliar vocabulary that was now mandated by the Vatican. In fact it seems to have been easier to avoid Rome's policy initiatives than it was to avoid Rome's new language. In a pastoral letter issued on the fifth anniversary of the Council, the entire Episcopate reminded the Polish faithful, "The same Holy Spirit that inspired the work of conciliar renewal continues to watch over it, acting through the Holy Father, the bishops, and the appointed institutions to which belong the authentic interpretation of the conciliar documents and the management of renewal."¹¹⁹ Again the term *renewal* was used, but it was domesticated by making it entirely dependent upon the established hierarchy of the Church. Later the Episcopate denounced the "abundance of words" pouring forth from unauthorized theologians, and they reminded all Catholics that "responsibility for the faith of the people of God is carried by the bishops."¹²⁰ They even urged the lower clergy to cultivate "the spiritual obedience that almost allows you to guess the thoughts and the will of the bishops in matters most important to the Church."¹²¹ In all of these pastoral letters, however, one finds repeated references to the texts of the Vatican Council and constant deployment of the new keywords of the Church.

To be sure, there were those in the hierarchy who openly opposed the Council, eschewing all talk of “renewal” or “the people of God” in favor of older and more authoritarian phraseology. At his Easter mass in 1970 Bishop Franciszek Jop of Opole complained, “Everyone today considers himself to be a reformer. Amid this confusion, caused by people chattering, one senses the rising power of the ‘Kingdom of Lies.’” There are many people, the bishop claimed,

who believe that it is necessary to destroy virtually the entire structure of the Church, not preserving either the head of the Church, or the bishops dispatched by Christ, or the priests appointed by [the bishops]. They want to transform the Church from a visible society into an intangible cloud, to shatter all the cells of life starting with marriage and the family, to deprive the nation of its cultural and historical bonds and then, on the ruins, wonder what to do next. This they call “conciliar renewal,” a renewal of the world, a new humanity, progress, etc.

To protect against this coming wave of “anarchy, dissolution, and falsity,” Bishop Jop believed, it was important for Poles to guard against foreign influences: “Let us not admit to the threshold of our homes and our fatherland the spirit of social disorder, mistrust toward the Church and its might, or disruptive chatter.”¹²² Considering that the call to “conciliar renewal” had come from Pope John XXIII himself, such hostility toward “foreigners” was striking.

This, ultimately, was the greatest problem faced by people like Jop: they could no longer evoke the authority of the Oath against Modernism or other conciliar texts, nor count on the Vatican to silence reformers. Jop’s only option in the end was to follow the example of Wyszyński in using the language of Vatican II to praise *aggiornamento* while in practice defending traditional lines of authority. Because of these constraints, voices such as those at *Tygodnik Powszechny* could articulate their dissident views (dissident, that is, vis-à-vis their own Episcopate) while remaining Catholics in good standing. Moreover, as they did so they had no particular reason to publicly attack any members of the hierarchy directly, which liberated them from the risks faced by reformers of the early twentieth century. This was fortuitous, because not only could such criticism have pushed them into a conflict with Rome, but the communist authorities were constantly on the lookout for any means of driving a wedge between different factions of the Church. The result was that people as contrasting as Jop and Turowicz could remain members of the same Catholic community (even if neither would accept the validity of the other’s worldview).

There is no doubt that *Tygodnik Powszechny*’s enthusiastic advocacy of ecclesiological reform represented a minority opinion among Polish Catholics. Most of the bishops and (as far as I can tell) the bulk of the parish priests continued to

value discipline, obedience, and authority, and “the people of God” were incorporated into the life of the Polish Church in an attenuated way. In 1991 the theologian and philosopher Stefan Swieżawski, a former teacher and mentor to Karol Wojtyła, wrote a personal letter to the pope lamenting the failure of the Polish Church to embrace what he considered the key teaching of Vatican Council II. Addressing his letter to “Our Most Dear Holy Father, Beloved Karol,” Swieżawski reported, “In practice the concept of the Church as the people of God has been forgotten. Too often the dichotomy ‘clergy—people of God’ is used as if the clergy stood apart from the people of God (as a ruling and directing element). This leads directly to clericalism, paternalism, and triumphalism.”¹²³ When in 2003 the Catholic website Opoka.org.pl launched an open forum on lay involvement in parish life, the editors began with the affirmation “The vision of the Church according to which the faithful were divided between the ‘teaching Church’ and the ‘learning Church’ belongs irrecoverably to the past. . . . The role of the laypeople is not just to learn, but to actively participate in the local community of the Church.” The responses posted on the site, however, indicate that this old dichotomy is alive and well. Elżbieta K. of the town of Zabrze wrote, “In my parish it is better to be just a listener. I am waiting; maybe our parish priest will break down and recognize that we might be of some use to him. There exists a distance that is hard to overcome. To restore my soul I often visit a neighboring parish.” An anonymous posting eloquently and simply captured this lament: “In my parish I am nobody.”¹²⁴ Although few priests would openly defend a preconiliar deference to the Church hierarchy, some commentators have complained recently about “an excessively sociological understanding of the people of God,” preferring instead a more mystical “vision of the Church as a *communio*, that is, a spiritual community of people with God and among themselves.”¹²⁵ This theological turn accepted the basic claims of the Second Vatican Council, but made it possible to muffle their actual impact on parish life. Once safely relocated to the realm of the spirit, the people of God were less likely to form a meddling parish council.

It remains significant, however, that opponents of the postconciliar ecclesiology had to cast their arguments within the rhetorical context of “the people of God.” A comparison between the mid-twentieth century and the early twenty-first reveals how much has changed. Since the 1960s priests have been taught to eschew the phrase “I belong to the Church” in favor of “I am in the Church,” “I live with the Church,” even “I am the Church.”¹²⁶ After Vatican II the terrain of the debate shifted, and it became a lot easier to call for a more balanced relationship between priest and parishioner. Even when that balance was not achieved (and it usually was not), it was much easier to argue that it *ought* to be. The Polish Church today does not meet the ideal of those who advocated a turn to the people of God back in the 1960s, but the ideal itself survives. As a result, the boundaries of Catholic ecclesiology have considerably expanded.