Birth Control and the Church in Post-Communist Poland

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Authors Note

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Abstract

After the end of Communism and the introduction of liberal-democracy in Poland, the Catholic Church pursued influence on sexual and reproductive issues, while neglecting significant socio-economic issues brought about by the transition to a market economy. While many Poles today do not agree with the Church's uncompromising attitude on birth control, they nevertheless continue to identify as Catholic and respect the Church's word. In light of this background, this paper makes the case that Poland's economic and reproductive issues were linked in a way the Catholic Church did not recognize, and how recognition of this link could have accrued more influence to the Church and its political proxies in post-Communist Poland.

After the end of Communism and the introduction of pluralist democracy in Poland, the Catholic Church almost exclusively pursued influence on sexual and reproductive issues, neglecting a myriad of other social and economic causes it could have aligned itself with. This uncompromising and parochial pursuit of authority on reproductive issues has led to the Church becoming increasingly estranged from Polish public opinion, where a majority of Poles do not agree with the Church's rigid condemnation of birth control. With regards to reproductive rights, as with all other issues, Catholic actors in the Polish political scene would like to see a state that is democratic in form, but Christian in content. However, this requires a degree of political predetermination which is simply not compatible with a democratic system of government, because of the way Catholic dominance would prevent non-Catholic viewpoints from entering the political arena (Eberts 1998, 829). For this reason, the Church's perception among Poles has been declining in favour since the 1990s (Millard 1997, 92-94).

Despite this decline in favour, the Church continues to enjoy a high degree of respect and legitimacy in Poland, where a majority of the population identifies as Catholic. Therefore, for the Church to have achieved a greater degree of political and social influence within a pluralistic democratic framework, they should have positioned themselves as defenders of socioeconomic rights during Poland's transition away from Communism and towards neoliberalism during the 1990s**.** Such a decision would have helped the Church gain authority on matters of reproductive rights, given that multiple studies show religious women in Poland have largely turned to forms of birth control condemned by the Church due to a sense of economic insecurity (Misthal 2009, 171). To understand why this is the case, it is first necessary to examine both the Church's political choices in Poland following the collapse of Communism, as well as what methods of family planning the Church condemns. This will be followed by an examination of how Poland's transition to a market economy affected its female population's views of birth control. These views largely stem from the testimonies and data garnered by Joanna Misthal, which show the Church's support of the Polish state's anti-family economic policies to be one of the main factors encouraging the use of birth control among Catholic Polish women.

The Catholic Church enjoyed nearly unparalleled legitimacy in Poland during the 1990s because of its pivotal role in the overthrow of the communist regime (Misthal 2009, 163). The Church used this position to establish its authority on a narrow range of moral issues arising from the political transition to a liberal-democratic system. Notably, the Church did not involve itself in broader debates over the many new social issues brought forth by

the economic transition to a market economy (Millard 1997, 85-87). The issues which the Church concerned itself with related mainly to sexuality and reproduction. It was troubled by what it perceived as the emerging challenges to Catholic society that came with new liberal norms. The proliferation of pornography in media, the introduction of new sexual education curriculums in schools and the accessibility of contraceptives, among many other issues, alarmed Catholic officials and their political representatives in Poland. The Church felt attacked by a newly formed coterie of liberals who were pushing against its authority in the aforementioned avenues of Polish society (Millard 88). The most salient political expression of these concerns was in the Church's public opposition to the use and availability of birth control in Polish society.

With the exception of the calendar method, the Church condemns nearly every form of birth control to varying degrees. Contraceptive pills, condoms, IUDs, the withdrawal method, and abortion are all categorically listed as violations of the sanctity of life, according to the Church (Misthal 2009, 162). Abortion was effectively made illegal in Poland in 1993, in a rollback of the Communist era's open and liberal reproductive and sexual policies, which made it relatively easy to get an abortion and access contraceptives. Pope John Paul II famously articulated the Catholic Church's worries when he said "it is being demonstrated in an alarming way by the development of chemical products, intrauterine devices and vaccines which, distributed with the same ease as contraceptives, really act as abortifacients in the very early stages of the development of the life of the new human being" (Misthal 162).

However, such appeals have largely fallen on deaf ears, with a majority of Poles not sharing the Church's views on birth control. Between 1991 and 2007, contraceptive use increased from 19% to 56% in Poland. Furthermore, traditional methods of birth control, such as the calendar method, remained consistently low, and couples refraining from using birth control method dramatically decreased from 51% to 11% over the same time period (Dannefer and Misthal 2010, 233-235). Poland represents a curious trend of increasing religiosity paired with higher contraceptive use, despite the Church's unambiguous condemnation of contraceptives. Part of the story here is the sense of hypocrisy which many Poles, especially women, see in the Church's lack of support for pro-family economic policies.

Out of the post-communist states, Poland saw one of the harshest reductions in family and maternity benefits. The neoliberal economic program instituted in the early 1990s cut maternity leave, dramatically lowered subsidies for childcare, reduced family cash benefits, and closed or privatized nearly every childcare facility in the country. The state implemented this mass-privatization project in tandem with a rigorous promotion of traditional motherhood roles for women. Their arguments usually expressed the idea that women do not need to work, and as their place is in the home as mothers they do not need additional work benefits (Misthal 2015, 167). For this reason, women's healthcare also took a hit, and thus there were far fewer guarantees of post-childbirth care. Women would now have to pay for birth care services out of pocket, which were free in Poland until recently, and, in contrast, have largely remained free in the rest of Europe (Misthal 168). Of course, the Church supported the Polish state in these efforts.

One initiative that shows the Church's alignment with Poland's socioeconomic policy is the introduction in 1999 of the Profamily Program, based on the Vatican's Family Rights Charter. This project mostly consisted of calls for women to have more children and extolled the virtues of the nuclear family. Unlike in France and Scandinavia, where policymakers accepted that a majority of women would prefer to see work-family reconciliation, the Catholic Church and its political proxies failed to exercise any concrete initiatives, such as improving child care services or paid leave, that would incentivize women to stay at work and simultaneously create

a family'. The Church instead routinely deemed proposed child-service advancements as 'anti-family,' arguing instead for women to adopt full motherhood roles (Misthal 181-182). Predictably, birth rates in Poland have been falling ever lower since 1999 with little visible improvement, unlike in France, where work-family reconciliation policies have partially boosted birthrates (Misthal 163, 182). In a 2007 interview, one Polish woman expressed the widespread sense that the Polish state was deserving of its birth decline: "I think it's great that we're having a demographic crisis because the state doesn't give us any support—no support for women who are pregnant or women with kids. I had my son just before 1989 and it was no problem to have kids back then, even though I was a single mother (Misthal 169)." This woman captured the grievance many others felt during the 1990s — that in spite of the moral victory that came with the defeat of Communism, there was nevertheless a regression in family politics that came with the transition to liberal-democracy. It was this regression to which the Church contributed, both in deed and rhetoric.

Evidence from recent years shows a relationship between female employment and fertility which differs sharply from what the Church expected. More women in the workforce results in greater socioeconomic standing, and thus greater fertility (Misthal 2015, 163, 182). When one considers the widespread testimonies of women claiming they want more than one child, but are held back by economic hardships, this is unsurprising. One of the problems plaguing Polish women most acutely during the 1990s was the lack of protection for pregnant women on the job market, with many claiming to be laid off by employers once pregnant and others attesting to being forced to sign contracts pledging themselves against bearing children. Misthal's field study brings to light the popular belief among Polish women that a second child is a luxury reserved for wealthier women who do not need to lean on social benefits. One woman told surveyors in 2007: "Among my friends the dominant opinion is that a child is a luxury. If the material situation is normalized enough, then that couple, or that woman, can decide to have a child. Still, the majority of women want at least that one child (Misthal 170-172, 174, 169)." Another woman claimed:

I attend mass every Sunday, and I completed a premarital course… But the Catholic Church is irresponsible when it calls for higher fertility when there are no social provisions for women to be able to do this…. I feel responsible for the well-being of the kids I have; therefore, my decisions regarding childbearing and the kinds of contraceptive methods I use are all my decisions, because I'm responsible for what happens to my children. Since the church takes no responsibility for childcare or the upbringing of my kids, their opinions on this don't much matter to me (Misthal 180).

This sentiment that the Church has no moral authority on the question of women's reproduction because it does not bear any of the burdens of child-rearing is not at all unique.

Such testimonies might be dismissed as coming from mostly non-religious women who are ill-inclined to follow Church doctrine, but another field study undertaken by Misthal and Dennefer investigates increasing use of birth control among self-identified religious women in Gdansk, Poland. A small minority indicated that they exclusively used the calendar method out of respect for Church directives, while the other 80% explained their contraceptive use as a reinterpretation of religious doctrine, often because they have more pressing financial and familial obligations (Dannefer and Misthal 2010, 236). One woman expressed her wish that priests should start having children "so that they gain some experience with supporting a family and bringing up kids, only then would they have more say and credibility, and I would gladly listen to them then (Dannefer and Misthal 238)." "The Church keeps saying that there should be more kids but it helps no one," said one custodian, "so the Church doesn't really play any role in my decision

about kids. It's my personal opinion whether I'm capable of taking care of another child or not. The Church doesn't offer any kind of help, they only tell us to pray. What does that give me (Dannefer and Misthal)?" Apart from a general sense of the Church's empty rhetoric, many women explicitly complain about financial hardship, and others even more specifically about the state's lacklustre commitment to supporting families with financial aid. This was a perfect opportunity for the Church to have at least made a rhetorical stand against the destruction of pro-family economic benefits. There is no Catholic doctrine which unambiguously suggests pro-market policies are, in themselves right; indeed, there is a rich history of Catholics on the side of social-democratic economics in Europe and Latin America which could have served as a precedent. It is clear that the Church's absence in the economic sphere was sorely felt by many mothers and prospective mothers, in a way that discredited its diatribes against birth control, even among religious women most likely to obey Church directives.

The Church's lack of opposition to, and frequent support of the Polish state's anti-family economic policies hollowed its pro-family and anti-birth control rhetoric of meaning. If the Church positioned itself against the pulverization of maternal and child-care benefits brought by the neoliberal economic transition in Poland, it would have likely garnered more credibility and respect to itself on the question of birth control among women. Instead, the Church chose to engage with many of the new social issues arising from the *political* transition away from Communism, without addressing many of the issues relating to the *economic* transition. Partly to blame for this is the Church's aversion to work-family reconciliation methods, and its total insistence on promoting traditional motherhood roles for women. By making some compromise on the question of whether women should be allowed to work, and by extension, supporting such policies as greater child, birthcare services, and paid leave, the Church's pro-natalist policies would have seen much more success. This was a missed opportunity, especially given that the answers to many policy dilemmas, including those relating to birth control and demographic decline, were mutually complementary.

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