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Izabella MAIN

The Avant-Garde of the Catholic Church? Catholic Student Groups at the Dominican Churches in Poznań and Krakow, Poland¹

The author analyzes the organization and activities of Catholic student groups during and after the communist period in Poland as an example of the transformation of religious life in response to the challenges of modernity. She argues that the student groups organized by Dominican fathers in Poznań and Kraków were the avant-garde of the Catholic Church: they pioneered liturgical reform, social activism among the laity, the ecumenical movement, the introduction of popular culture into the churches and charismatic renewal. This contradicts the image of a closed, “traditional” and “conservative” Church behind the Iron Curtain. She also maintains that the history of the Dominican-organized student groups mirrors the history of the relations between the state and the Catholic Church in Poland: these groups were banned during the Stalinist period, restored after political liberalization in 1956, and pushed towards political activism in the late 1970s. After 1989, they were again seeking new priorities.

Key words: *avant-garde · Catholic Church · Dominican order · political opposition Poland · student groups*

L'auteure analyse l'organisation et les activités de groupes d'étudiants catholiques pendant et après la période communiste en Pologne en tant qu'exemple de la transformation de la vie religieuse répondant aux défis de la modernité. Elle soutient que les groupes d'étudiants organisés par les pères dominicains à Poznan et à Cracovie ont été l'avant-garde de l'Église catholique: ils ont lancé la réforme liturgique, l'activisme social parmi les laïcs, le mouvement œcuménique; ils ont introduit la culture populaire dans les églises, ainsi que le renouveau charismatique. Ces constats contredisent l'image d'une Église fermée, “traditionnelle” et “conservatrice” derrière le rideau de fer. L'auteure montre également que l'histoire des groupes d'étudiants dominicains organisés reflète l'histoire des relations entre l'État et l'Église catholique en Pologne: ces groupes ont été interdits pendant la période stalinienne, restaurés après la libéralisation politique en 1956 et poussés vers l'activisme politique à la fin des années 1970. Après 1989, ils furent de nouveau à la recherche de nouvelles priorités.

Mots-clés: *Église catholique · groupes d'étudiants · opposition politique · ordre des dominicains · Pologne*

The transformation of religious life in the communist and post-communist periods in Poland is the subject of this study. In particular, I analyze the organization and activities of Catholic student groups set up by the Dominican order in two Polish cities, Poznań and Kraków. I argue that an analysis of the transformation of these groups during the last half century offers a new way of looking at the position and condition of the Catholic Church in Poland. During the communist period, the Church was responding to constant challenges from the state, yet its position was also threatened by the transformation of society, by a growing attachment to material and consumer values, and by an emerging youth culture (especially in the late 1960s and 1970s). In response to social and political changes, the clergy developed new pastoral practices: they celebrated the holy mass in innovative ways and organized discussion groups, charity activities, “retreats” and holiday camps that brought students and priests together. A new tendency among the clergy was to promote personal ties with lay Catholics, especially young ones. These developments were clearly visible in the activities of the Dominican order, where several individuals played a signal role in providing a rich Catholic background for young people.

The study of small religious groups in their historical development allows us to see that these groups and their chaplains changed in response to the challenges of modernity—when education, urbanization and increasing wealth might have led to the secularization or the “unchurching” of the population—and the challenges of existing within a non-democratic state that promoted secularization. This study questions the common image and perception of the Catholic Church in Poland as “traditional” and “conservative” by showing how quickly the reforms of the Second Vatican Council were introduced in the religious practices of student groups. What is more, these groups launched some of these liturgical reforms not only ahead of the parochial clergy in Poland but also ahead of the Council itself. Finally, my analysis shows that Catholics in Eastern and Western Europe had similar religious practices: celebrating the holy mass, structuring their communities, and expanding their work into new social and cultural domains in similar ways. The Berlin Wall did not, after all, divide Europe into two completely different religious entities.

1. The Historical Context of the Catholic Youth Movement

After the First World War, the Catholic youth movement grew rapidly in Poland, just as in the other countries of Europe. During the interwar period, the Catholic Church developed more creative responses to European societies that were experiencing urbanization, increased education and diversification. Three essential and unchanging attributes of the Church, however, were the importance of the hierarchy, an uncompromising doctrinal stance and an activist associational structure (particularly in the form of youth organizations) (Conway, 1997: 3). For example, in France, youth organizations, including Catholic ones, flourished in the 1930s. New organizations such as the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (JOC) were founded as a result of spontaneous local initiatives to meet needs of young people. The goal was missionary, with a slogan of “see, judge, act” implying that young people should work towards the transformation of society (Whitney, 2001: 480–2).

In Poland, the Church developed new Catholic organizations and associations, including several addressing themselves to young people. The first student religious groups were created in the 1920s and 1930s by various religious orders as well as by the parish clergy. The largest such organization, the Catholic Association of the Young Men and Women, had around 150,000 members by 1938 (see <http://www.ksm.org.pl/o-ksm/historia>, accessed on 5 December 2008). More elitist was the Association of Catholic Academic Youth “Rebirth” (*Odrodzenie*), which brought Catholic students together for religious, social and intellectual activities. *Odrodzenie* was inspired by the revitalization of Catholicism in Western Europe, particularly by Jacques Maritain’s programme to align the Church with the oppressed. Although marginal, this group promoted the idea that the Church was a community (not just a hierarchy), and it propagated liturgical renewal and ecumenism.² With the outbreak of the Second World War, all these groups stopped their activities, but their members often kept in contact and sometimes collectively joined the anti-Nazi underground.

In the 1960s, rapid changes took place in the Catholic Church in Western Europe as the result of both the *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council and the social changes of this period (Conway, 1997: 98). In particular, there was a sharp decrease in religious practice and many religious organizations were disbanded. For example, membership in Catholic Action in Italy dropped from 3.3 million to 1.6 million between the mid 1960s and 1970 (Pollard, 1996: 93). In West Germany, as Mark Ruff has pointed out, Catholic youth leaders tried to incorporate new forms of entertainment and youth culture into their work, but they were not very successful: membership dropped rapidly, and attendance at religious gatherings for young people fell from 100,000 to 30,000 between 1954 and 1965 (Ruff, 2005: 4–6). The revolutions of 1968 also contributed to undermining the position of the Catholic Church. The student protesters in France and Italy sided with workers, supported the socialist movements, questioned educational institutions, challenged social values and called for free love—all of which represented a world view very different from the one formulated by the Catholic Church.

In comparison, the strength of the Catholic Church in Poland was undermined as early as the 1940s, albeit by different factors. While in Western Europe the challenges were tied to economic prosperity, new technologies, urbanization and consumerism, in Poland the first threat was communist rule and the state’s programme of secularization. Limitations on the activities of Catholic organizations, along with other restrictions on religious practice, were gradually introduced in the late 1940s. Catholic youth organizations were banned and participation in religious rituals in some areas dropped as the regime limited access to existing churches and prevented new ones from being built (Dudek, Gryz, 2003: 163–71). Industrialization and urbanization had some effect on the religiosity of Polish society, but state policy had a greater influence.³ Postwar relations between the communist regime and the Catholic Church reflected more or less open conflict, the state issuing pronouncements about secular socialism and the Church advocating a greater role for Catholicism in Polish society. The areas of conflict included religious education in schools, pastoral care in the army and in hospitals, church activities outside church walls (such as pilgrimages and processions), the construction of churches and chapels, religious publishing, the

clergy's support for the anticommunist opposition and the Church's involvement in international politics. Although there were Church–state conflicts in Western Europe as well, the opposition faced by Christians in the communist countries was much greater. However, the anti-Church activities of the regime—among other factors, such as the strength of religious traditions in families and connection between national identity and Catholicism—actually made religious adherence stronger in Poland (Piwowarski, 1996: 319).

In the 1960s, the Church in Poland was changed by both the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the internal programme of renewal associated with the millennium of the introduction of Christianity into Poland (celebrated in 1966). These two events inspired debates among Catholic intellectuals about the further development and modernization of Catholicism in Poland that paralleled the various responses to the program of *aggiornamento* in Western Europe. Among lay theologians and the clergy there were the protagonists of reform (so-called “progressives”) and minimalists, who interpreted the Council in more restrictive terms (“traditionalists”). The former hoped to renew the Church through openness, while the latter emphasized authority, submission, and tradition (Hocken, 2006: 32). Catholic intellectuals in Poland felt that the millennium celebrations, as well as the teachings of Primate Stefan Wyszyński, were mainly addressed to conservative Catholics, reinforcing a popular religiosity based on emotion, ritualism, tradition and national identity (Pełka, 1985: 236). Primate Wyszyński believed that only this approach could strengthen—or at least maintain—the position of the Church in Poland, while those affiliated with the journals *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Znak* and those in the Catholic Intellectual Clubs tended to support conciliar modernization. Jerzy Turowicz, the editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, called for a critical assessment of the Church's position in the past and for a religious renewal (Stomma, 1998). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he published the results of several questionnaires concerning the Council and the implementation of its programme. Respondents pointed to a more tolerant attitude towards other Christian denominations and towards non-believers, but few noticed any increase in the participation of the laity in parochial life. Furthermore, respondents claimed that the liturgy had not been significantly reformed, and that the clergy was increasingly rigorous in terms of religious practices (for example, by restricting marriage with reluctant Catholics or non-believers) (Darczewska, 1985: 290–3).

Thirty years after Vatican II, several Catholic intellectuals from Poland who participated in the Council were asked to assess its implementation. The theologian Stefan Świeżawski complained that “the Church is threatened by clericalism, intolerance, power and wealth, ... true ecumenism is missing, and nationalist groups are still present. The spirit of the Council hardly permeated the Church in Poland” (Nosowski, 1996: 26). Stanisława Grabska, a member of the Warsaw Catholic Intelligentsia Club, pointed out that the Church in Poland was only starting to implement the *aggiornamento*. Despite the existence of some student religious groups and chaplaincies for workers, doctors and others, most of the laity remained outside the life of the Church (Nosowski, 1996: 295–7). Nonetheless, rates of religious practice remained high in Poland during the decades following the 1960s, unlike in Western Europe. Religious mobilization even increased in the late 1970s when bishop Karol Wojtyła was elected to the

papal see. Contrary to the impression of observers like Świeżawski and Grabska, both the Council and the general social trends of the late 20th century did have an impact on the Church in Poland. The Dominican-run student groups in Poznań and Kraków were excellent examples of how this impact was felt at local level.

2. The Establishment of Dominican Groups

Poznań was destroyed by the fighting between the German and the Soviet armies, around half of its buildings being in ruins at the end of the Second World War. The rebuilding of the city took until the mid 1960s, but the population was enthusiastic about the reconstruction and several institutions (schools, hospitals, theatres, museums, libraries, the university and the opera house) were reopened as early as 1945. The population of the city grew rapidly, despite the fact that an estimated 100,000 Germans fled after the war. In the winter of 1945 the population was around 200,000, but it had increased to 240,000 by the summer of that year and to 320,000 by 1950. This increase resulted from both a high birth rate and immigration. Though there is scant data on the post-war population, more than half of the newcomers between 1947 and 1949 were between the ages of 18 and 29. They came to Poznań either to study or to work in factories and offices. Also among the immigrants were several university professors, who moved to Poznań from Lviv and Vilnius, which had become part of the Soviet Union.

The first plans to create Dominican-sponsored student groups in Poznań were formulated by Primate August Hlond in the late 1930s. In 1945, Fathers Stanisław Dobecki and Bernard Przybylski re-established the Dominican monastery in Poznań and set up an affiliated student group (Jaworski, 2003). Many of the young people then arriving in Poznań to study at the university and other educational institutions lacked financial support, and the Dominicans offered them material assistance, even opening the gates of the monastery to provide shelter and food. They also appealed to Poznań's inhabitants and various institutions to let rooms to students. In the winter of 1945, students in Poznań founded a national Church-run charity organization called Caritas Academica. One of the participants later suggested that those who had endured the war, the Warsaw Uprising and the long years of conspiracy were more inclined towards charity work than towards intellectual debates. In the opinion of Father Przybylski, such social activism led to a religious revival among students, because their charity work later inspired them to join the Dominicans in other activities (50 rocznica, 1987: 33–6; Przybecki, 1986: 141–2). Similar groups were also established in other cities, following the example of Poznań Caritas Academica, but after 1947 the latter faded as the state authorities stepped up their surveillance and pressed the university administration to restrict its activities (Jarkiewicz, 2004).

Already during these early post-war years, the Dominicans introduced a variation to the morning mass ritual: although the rite continued to be celebrated in Latin, the texts were distributed to the faithful and some portions were read aloud by students. Most probably this was a local initiative, since no sources of external inspiration have been identified. Another innovation concerned the altar, which in the Poznań chapel was (for technical reasons) in the middle facing the believers. This arrangement inspired Tomasz Pawłowski, then a member of the Dominican

student group and later a pastoral minister, to use the same layout in a chapel in Kraków when he organized a new group—known as *Beczka* (The Barrel) because of the shape of its meeting room—in the 1960s (Pawłowski, 1986a: 78–87). After morning mass there was a breakfast, when informal ties were strengthened. These were novel practices, aimed at increasing of the understanding of the holy mass by the faithful, and they attracted young people to the Dominican Church and encouraged them to join the group. Perhaps these changes were a creative response to the sense that morality had been undermined by years of war and occupation.

In the view of the historian Krystyna Kersten, traditional value systems were challenged by the war and the forced migrations, leading to social anomie (Kersten, 1993: 11). The war had a particularly strong impact on young people, many of whom took part in the resistance, observed or collaborated in atrocities and were forced to make tragic moral choices. The post-war Catholic Church responded to this situation by rebuilding the churches that had been destroyed, re-organizing parish life and reactivating pre-war organizations and associations. Yet the Church did not always respond to the needs of a transformed society, particularly to those of young people. One participant of the Poznań student group in the 1940s said (during an anniversary conference in 1987) that “many young people thought of religion as long and boring prayers, good for old people. In the student group many of us encountered a new model of religiosity, very different from the one we took from our homes” (50 rocznica, 1987: 52). In Poland, then, young people found Catholicism to be old-fashioned and irrelevant, and the Dominican fathers responded with a new programme designed to attract them.

This first post-war student group was small and short-lived—the state dissolved all such organizations in 1949—but it already had one of characteristic features of all Dominican student groups: a close personal relationship between the pastoral minister and students, which contrasted sharply with the hierarchical relations typical of the laity and clergy in Poland at the time. After a few years of inactivity, the group was re-established in 1956 under the leadership of Father Tomasz Pawłowski and continued some of its post-war activities as well as starting new ones. There was a move away from social welfare activities towards intellectual and cultural matters, presumably because the latter required more attention and social needs were less pressing. The main activities included prayers during the daily 7 a.m. mass, regular discussions and annual retreats. The group also organized (illegal) Church-sponsored summer camps, which moved from place to place in the mountains in order to remain secret, and these led to particularly close community ties (50 rocznica, 1987). On one such camp, in the Bieszczady mountains in 1958, the Poznań group met by coincidence Bishop Karol Wojtyła of Kraków, who accepted an invitation to come to Poznań to lead a retreat the following February. Maciej Babraj, a founder and editor of the Dominican journal *W drodze* (On the way), wrote in his memoirs that the sermons were difficult and intellectually challenging but Bishop Wojtyła was very open and direct.

3. The Role of the Youth Chaplains

One of the founders of the first post-war student group in Poznań was Father Przybylski. Before the war he had worked with a similar group in Lwów as an

assistant to Father Jacek Woroniecki, a prominent figure in the pre-war Church.⁴ Przybylski had a doctorate in theology and was an erudite and charismatic person, which drew students to him and the group (Przybecki, 1986: 141–2). His work in Poznań was continued by Father Pawłowski. In 1964, Father Pawłowski was asked to move to Kraków in order to build a similar student movement there, and he was eventually joined by Father Joachim Badeni, another Dominican who had also served in Poznań. Father Badeni came from a noble Galician family, and he grew up in a Habsburg palace in Żywiec (his mother married Karl Albert Habsburg after the death of her first husband, Ludwik Badeni). After fighting in the Second World War on the Western Front, Joachim Badeni joined the Dominicans in the United Kingdom, returning to Poland in 1947. He was a charismatic poet, known in Poznań for leading discussion groups on Thomist philosophy and the mysticism of Meister Eckhart. Badeni continued Pawłowski's initiatives (summer hikes in the mountains, retreats during the year, and weekly meetings and discussions), expanding on these by participating in university-sponsored tourist outings, by establishing contacts with “hippies” among the student body and by creating a thriving music section for the Church student group (Badeni, 2004; Przybecki, 1986: 143; 50 rocznica, 1986). Another key figure in the movement was Father Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski, who joined the Kraków student group in 1970. A philosopher and art historian, he led meetings on “The ABCs of Christianity” and “The ABCs of the Bible”. While Father Badeni stressed the spiritual aspect of the group and Father Pawłowski developed the organizational infrastructure, father Kłoczowski was the intellectual of the “trinity” of the Dominican youth chaplains in Kraków.

Moving into the next generation, Father Stanisław Kowalczyk (who went by the name of Father Honoriusz) became a youth chaplain in Poznań in 1974. One of his students later recalled that his goal was to teach students to “pay attention to the Polish tradition of love for the nation, to try to broaden the mind, the character and the intellect, and to become responsible for oneself, one's family and the life of one's society” (Borowczyk, 2004: 330–4). Under his leadership the group was characterized by political independence, and in the late 1970s and early 1980s it was quite active in the anticommunist opposition in Poznań. Father Kowalczyk died in an unexplained car accident in April 1983. The current youth chaplain in Poznań, Father Jan Góra, has been in charge since 1987. He is quite controversial: he demonstrated his organizational talents by creating religious centres in Jamna and Hermanice, and he initiated the mass Catholic youth meetings in Lednica (held annually since 1997), but his focus on these new centres has led to a decrease in the regular activities of students at the Dominican church. Góra is also an enthusiastic writer—author of 16 books, he has received numerous literary awards.

I argue that the strong personalities of the Dominican student chaplains in Poznań and Kraków were fundamental for the establishment and the activities of the youth groups. Their members—students—changed every few years while the priests offered continuity and stability. They lived in the Dominican monasteries, where they met with students on a daily basis, heard their confessions and became their personal advisers. Because they were highly educated and well known among the Catholic intelligentsia, they facilitated contacts and attracted interesting guest lecturers to student meetings. Most of all, these priests changed the character of

pastoral care, moving from older hierarchical norms towards a more personal and open style in tune with the new youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

4. Innovative Religious Activities

The changes that took place in the 1960s within Dominican student groups were part of a broader shift within the Dominican movement at the time, as its mandate was changed from “the search for absolute truth” to “compassion and an understanding of differences.” After the 1960s they were to focus on scholarship, ecumenism and the social teachings of the Church, and their commitment to the weak, the poor and the oppressed became much more pronounced (Zięba, 2002).

Many of the changes were visible in the activities of the student groups. Father Pawłowski had long been interested in ecumenical outreach, attending a camp organized by the Quakers while still a student and visiting a Protestant Church in Poznań even before the Second Vatican Council (Pawłowski, 1986a: 97). Inspired by this example, students in Poznań arranged discussions with members of other local Christian denominations (Baptists and Methodists), and in 1972 they met with a delegation from the ecumenical community in Taizé, France. In Kraków, the *Beczka* group organized an annual “Ecumenical Week” and established contacts with local Baptists, Methodists, Calvinists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Eastern Orthodox followers. In the mid 1970s Protestant choirs from the United States and Sweden visited the Dominican church in Kraków, and in 1973 *Beczka* hosted Brother Roger (the founder of the Taizé community) (Jarkiewicz, 2004; 50 rocznica, 1987; Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 38–43).

Even more than the new focus on ecumenism, however, the Dominicans introduced a new style of pastoral care. This began in Poznań but reached its fruition in Kraków with even more innovative liturgical reforms. Father Pawłowski, comparing the students in Kraków and Poznań, wrote that “people are similar everywhere” yet in Poznań he worked with mostly rural students who were the first in their families to receive higher education, while in Kraków there were many students from educated families (Pawłowski, 2006). There was also an important economic change: by the 1960s most students were in a better financial situation, and had more time for education and personal development. Kraków’s *Beczka* was created at the time of the Second Vatican Council and embodied the new trends within the Church (Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 15). Its masses were celebrated in the Polish language, the altar faced the believers, students participated in the mass by reading the Bible, and the sermons took the form of a dialogue. As former members mention in their memoirs, the masses celebrated on Sundays at 9 a.m. and every other day at 7 a.m. attracted many people due to their innovative character.

The Dominicans in Kraków even began organizing “beat masses” in May 1968, the first one featuring the jazz musician Tomasz Stańko and students of the Academy of Music.⁵ The members of *Beczka* met in the evenings for lectures, discussions and Bible readings, and during Lent retreats were organized (Pawłowski, 1986a: 78–87). In the summer the students went for hikes in the mountains and canoeing trips with their Dominican chaplains, who celebrated open-air masses (which required permission from Primate Wyszyński). These trips were illegal and dangerous both for the students and for the priests—they

could lead to arrest and imprisonment, so the destinations were kept secret from the authorities (Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 28–9). One former member of Beczka later described the impact of these experiences:

We were brought up in communist Poland, so it was natural for us to sing Soviet songs at school. At home we argued with our parents, defending the noble ideals of communism. Their religion seemed so pale and weak. So many things offended us: the naïve songs, the pilgrimages, the superficial sermons, kissing the hands of the priests, the lack of discussion. In the little towns where we grew up, the Party had not only power but also the ability to offer us a better life, one that was more comfortable and interesting. We felt honoured to go to school, where the lectures, seminars and books were very political. The Party was so strong and the Church so weak. And then Beczka and Father Pawłowski appeared. The groups completely changed my life and the lives of the other students. Meetings, trips, activities, and at the same time secrecy and even conspiracy ... The grey 1960s were not so grey for us ... and the years in Beczka gave me strength and initiative, energy and moral satisfaction, the certainty that I am on the right side.

Clearly Beczka and other similar groups touched the young people of the time in a way neither the Party nor the traditional Church could. Western music had already reached Poland in the 1950s, at first via the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe and then (in the 1960s and 1970s) on Polish radio programmes aimed at younger listeners. Young people developed semi-legal forms of interaction, organizing private parties where both official rhetoric and traditional clothing, dance styles and other values were rejected. The percentage of young people who considered themselves to be believers decreased from 71 in 1972 to 57 in 1977, and the Church hierarchy was convinced that the new generation was experiencing a “religious crisis” (Kosiński, 2006). Other studies showed that the phenomenon was even more widespread, both children and their parents in the 1970s prioritizing wealth and consumption over the values promoted by the Church (Bauman, 1965: 25–6; Pęczak, 1991: 15).

Yet despite these trends (or, rather, in response to them), those youth groups that tried to speak to the new generation on its own terms enjoyed a great deal of success. Bishop Jerzy Stroba of Poznań urged every parish in his diocese to organize an affiliated youth group in the 1970s, and while not every priest was successful, the movement grew nonetheless. By 1976 there were probably around 200 students participating regularly in the Dominican group in Poznań, and around 3,000 joined the Lent and Advent retreats (around 10 per cent of all students in the city) (Jarkiewicz, 2004: 261).

Meanwhile, Beczka in Kraków grew so much in the 1970s that it divided into several subgroups that focused on different activities. One focused on charity work among orphans, disadvantaged children, the disabled and the lonely; another organized intellectual debates; another concentrated on religious practices (Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 30–5). While the exact membership of Beczka is not known (there were no attendance lists, and members often did not know each others’ full names), it is estimated that between 250 and 500 students participated in the regular meetings and about 12,000 joined the Lent and Advent retreats (about 25 per cent of the students in the city) (Jarkiewicz, 2004: 261). On the national level, a charismatic youth group known as the Light-Life Catholic Oasis Movement had 30,000 members in the late 1970s, increasing to 70,000 by the mid 1980s (Grajewski, 2001: 114).

5. Political Activities of the Dominican Groups

While offering a religious alternative to the traditional forms of Polish Catholicism, these youth groups also positioned themselves in more or less explicit opposition to the communist regime. As early as November 1945, Father Przybylski organized a national meeting of around 80 student chaplains in Poznań. Their concluding declaration called for Catholic students to be allowed to participate fully in academic life and to be granted the freedom to join any organizations they wished. After the meeting, during the mass inaugurating the new academic year, the participants prayed, "Help us, O Lord, to introduce a just social system, O Lord, to liberate all areas of national life from foreign and hostile influences, O Lord, to summon new rulers and apostles of spiritual revival who will place a free Poland and other nations at Your feet" (Jarkiewicz, 2004: 45). Such overt statements of hostility towards the new regime soon became impossible. In August 1949, the authorities changed the regulations concerning associations, allowing the state to control their activities. The Episcopate was pressured by the government to dissolve *Caritas Academica* and several other Catholic organizations in November of that year.

Nonetheless, illegal meetings of the Dominican student group in Poznań continued. Some students took part in a Corpus Christi procession in 1952 carrying the banners of the pre-war Catholic Youth Organization, as Party officials noted (APP, KW PZPR 3191: 20). In September 1954, this informal group was dissolved and all its documents were destroyed, and there is no record of any involvement by the Dominican youth activists in the Poznań uprising of 1956 (50 rocznica, 1987: 51). After the liberalization that followed this revolt, the Dominicans were able to create space for free expression by hosting talks by people such as the independent poets Anna Kamińska and Roman Brandstaetter. Father Pawłowski recalls that his primary goal was to attract a large audience by inviting someone other than the familiar local Dominican priests. One such meeting, in 1961, featuring Father Leon Kantorski speaking about "A Catholic in the Nuclear Age", was broken up by the militia and the security services, who dissolved the meeting, searched the chapel and the monastery rooms, beat up several participants and interrogated the priests.⁶

In 1978, the Poznań group started to publish an illegal newspaper called *Przystań* (Safe Haven), 25 issues of which were eventually released. Also in the late 1970s, under the leadership of Father Stanisław Kowalczyk, the group organized lectures and seminars by many people known for their political activism. One such meeting, on 25 December 1976, is described in detail in a document compiled by the security services, indicating that either the room was bugged or there were informants among the participants (IPN Poznań, PO 08/1108: 19).

Meanwhile, the Beczka group in Kraków was also gradually getting involved in the political opposition, reprinting the work of banned authors smuggled in from the West and establishing contacts with the Committee for Workers' Defence (KOR), the most prominent political opposition group of the 1970s. Father Kłoczowski himself was a signatory of an open letter protesting against human rights violations in Poland. Beczka was not a political organization, but it did serve as a meeting point for many who were involved in the opposition. Throughout the late 1970s, the group hosted lectures by people who, for a variety

of reasons, could not openly teach in the universities or the schools, and for many young people these events were the main reason they visited the Dominican church (Jarkiewicz, 2004; interview with A.).

The turning point for the Catholic student opposition—the catalyst for its move towards open proclamation of its faith and anti-regime activities—was the murder of Stanisław Pyjas, a student of Polish philology in Jagiellonian University and a supporter of KOR, on 7 May 1977. He was not a member of *Beczka*, but he often visited the Dominican church and had many friends in the group. Father Kłoczowski celebrated a mass in his memory on Sunday 15 May that was attended by between 2,500 and 6,000 people (depending on the source).⁷ A mass was also celebrated on Pyjas' behalf by Father Kowalczyk in Poznań, and a group of students from there went to Kraków to participate in his funeral. Also on 15 May the Student Committee of Solidarity in Kraków was formed, and among its founders were many members of *Beczka* (though the two groups were not formally linked). The atmosphere became increasingly tense: sermons at youth masses began to include open critiques of the regime, and *Beczka* members were assaulted by the police, arrested when entering the church, and interrogated. A Student Committee of Solidarity was created in Poznań on 12 December 1977, its eclectic group of members including anarchists, avant-garde actors and members of the Dominican student movement. The spark in the Poznań case was a campaign to collect signatures defending Professor Stanisław Barańczak, who had just been fired from Adam Mickiewicz University after signing a letter in support of KOR (see www.pyjas.nzs.pl, accessed on 6 December 2008; IPN, Poznań, PO 08/1108).

The situation of the Church in Poland changed significantly after Karol Wojtyła, an archbishop in Kraków, was elected Pope on 16 October 1978. In Kraków, the students from *Beczka* organized vigils during the nights that followed, and some later recalled that the election of the Pope increased their expectations and allowed them to express their feelings more freely (interviews with W. and J.). In 1979, during John Paul II's first visit to Poland, a meeting with students took place in Kraków, though the organizers stressed that it was purely of a religious character (a fact which left some *Beczka* members disappointed). Often students were more radical in their open proclamation of their faith and their anti-regime activities than the clergy, whose resistance was more spiritual than political. The number of priests who strongly supported the opposition by signing letters, organizing meetings, distributing illegal publications, participating in hunger strikes, etc. was small (the security agency listed about a dozen), and the hierarchy distanced themselves from those priests who did become active (Dudek and Gryz, 2003: 386–8). Nonetheless, there was even stronger political mobilization among the Catholic youth activists during the years 1980 and 1981, when many lectures, meetings, discussions and celebrations were held in support of the political opposition (including masses in support of the student strikes of the spring and autumn of 1980, celebrated by Father Kowalczyk) (Jarkiewicz, 2004: 404–16; Borowczyk, 2004: 47).

After Solidarity was legalized, the *Beczka* group organized a meeting with its leader, Lech Wałęsa, in October 1980. The meeting attracted crowds of students and prompted endless ovations. At the same time, the political liberalization of 1980 and 1981 led many active students to shift away from the Church's youth

movement to other structures and organizations (interview with A.). As one member later recalled:

The year 1981 was rather special for Beczka. It did not attract such crowds as it had done before. What was previously available only in Beczka was now on offer everywhere. Many of its previous functions were fulfilled elsewhere. People who were attracted only by the political activities of Beczka left it, as well as many people who decided to engage more in political activities than in religious ones. (Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 84)

The situation changed again with the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981. The authorities banned any independent organizations and Beczka once again functioned as a support base and a meeting point for the opposition. From 1981 to 1983 the group openly organized legal and material aid for those who were arrested as well as their families—an effort the security services tried to discredit with anonymous letters that accused priests of corruption in the distribution of this charity. Meanwhile, an underground Solidarity office was organized with the support of Father Kłoczowski, who had been arrested on 17 December 1981 and released six days later (Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 86).

Throughout the early 1980s, therefore, there was something of an identity crisis within Beczka, as the members debated whether their activities should be strictly religious or also political, social and cultural. In Poznań, after the imposition of martial law, the Dominican church was turned into a centre for political, social, charitable, intellectual and cultural activities. A committee consisting of lawyers, doctors, psychologists and educators was formed to support those who had been arrested, and members of the student group helped the children of the internees with their schoolwork. The Dominicans promoted independent cultural activity in a variety of ways (photographic exhibitions, plays, poetry recitations, concerts, etc.), organized meetings with prominent members of the political opposition and held “masses for the fatherland” on key anniversaries and national holidays. The largest Dominican demonstration was the funeral of Father Kowalczyk in April 1983.

6. Challenges from Other Members of the Catholic Church

While the Catholic youth activists faced oppression from the communist state, they also confronted serious challenges from within the Church. They were criticized for their supposed disrespect for sacred places, their laid-back style, their beat masses and their lack of cooperation with their parish churches. When the Kraków circle was formed, it met within centuries-old monastery walls, until then immersed in silence, dignity, respect and peace, but now filled with often noisy and exuberant irreverence. Because of this their meetings were restricted to a single hall—the famous barrel-shaped room from which Beczka took its name. Even then, some Dominican priests were concerned about this new activity, fearing that it would disrupt their calm and regular monastic life. Letting young people with their spontaneity and vigour inside the walls of the monastery was considered improper. And indeed, in the eyes of the priests, improper behaviour did take place there. For example, a room that had for centuries been a burial chamber was used as a dance hall during parties in the 1960s (Krzysztofowicz, 2004: 15). The introduction of beat masses in the late 1960s brought related criticisms. Some older believers and some priests objected to the drums and the electric guitars and

keyboards, which they feared might send the faithful into a state of ecstasy. One commentator stated that beat music might be played at festivals and even in the churches, but not during the Eucharist—a view he supported with reference to Vatican documents (Rak, 1969).

For their part, the students had little interest in certain traditional forms of Polish Catholic religiosity. Devotions to the Virgin Mary (saying the rosary, celebrating the Marian festivals, etc.) do not seem to have been an important part of their activities, and attempts to encourage these practices were not particularly successful. They did go on pilgrimages to the famous Marian shrine in Częstochowa, but these may have been popular because they combined devotion with recreation and tourism.⁸

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s there was discussion among priests and lay people about the relationship between the student groups and parish churches. The Catholic University of Lublin organized a formal discussion on this relationship in 1968, at which some participants pointed out that students had no connection with their own parish churches (which were often in the countryside). Other priests defended young people, saying that even when they wanted to be active in rural parishes after graduating, local priests or parishioners were not open enough to allow it. There were some attempts to reach out to the parishes in Poznań and Kraków. In the early 1960s, for example, some members of the Poznań group organized slide shows on Catholic missions outside Europe and presented them in local churches (Przybecki, 1986: 139–41; 50 rocznica, 1987: 83–96). The Beczka group interacted with the inhabitants of Kraków through charity work, and some of those who continued to live in the city after graduation joined local parish communities (though others did continue to celebrate mass at the Dominican church).

The emergence of the Catholic charismatic movement in Poland in the 1980s produced additional challenges for the student groups. Father Badeni in Kraków was supportive of this movement, because he had had contact with supporters of the Catholic charismatic renewal in Western Europe (where the movement had been popular since the 1970s), but there seems to have been little interest in the charismatic movement in Poznań (no sources). In 1981, a charismatic subgroup called “New Life” was formed within Beczka, and eventually the majority of the students took part in its long and spontaneous prayer sessions. The members of this subgroup were indifferent to social and political issues, and took no part in the support of those who were politically repressed. Lectures and discussion groups focused on religious and spiritual matters while historical, social and political issues were hardly debated. The charismatic meetings in the first half of the 1980s were attended by as many as 2,000 people—definitely a record. This led to a division into smaller groups led by around 30 students with the most experience in the movement, and the whole charismatic group was led by a layman, Jacek Ręka. Fathers Pawłowski and Kłoczowski tried to influence the group, complaining about what they perceived as overly “Protestant” elements in its programme, but they had little success (Pawłowski, 1986b; Krzysztofowicz, 2004).

In 1986, Father Rafał Skibiński, the new Dominican minister of the Beczka group, cancelled a charismatic retreat and disbanded the subgroup. Though Father Skibiński died in a car accident the following year, the charismatic movement in Kraków was never revived. This radical end to charismatic renewal within Beczka shows the decisive role of the Dominican chaplains even in the 1980s.

To a greater degree than elsewhere in the Catholic world, in Poland it was considered impossible for lay people to hold leadership positions, because it was feared that they would question Catholic dogmas.⁹

After the withdrawal from political activities and disbanding of the charismatic group in Kraków, the student group searched for a new focus for its activities. In the late 1980s, they centred on religious matters. There were masses at 9 a.m. on Sundays and at 7a.m. on other days, annual retreats, lectures and Bible study, with a strong emphasis on personal religious and moral development (50 rocznica, 1987: 103–5). The sociologist Joanna Kowalczevska has argued, on the basis of her study of a Catholic youth group in Warsaw in the 1980s, that the students withdrew from politics because of a trust in divine providence and because they drew meaning from their relationships with other group members and with God (Kowalczevska, 1991: 90). I would argue that the lack of political engagement was related to the personal choices made by students when they joined religious groups: there were many illegal, semi-legal and official groups in the 1980s in which individuals could be active in political, social, ecological, alternative, hippie, rock, Rasta and other subcultures, so they would have entered a religious group only if the spiritual sphere was particularly important to them (Filipiak, 2001). A study of a representative sample of students from several cities in Poland in 1983 indicated that around 9 per cent were active in student religious groups, 30 per cent had isolated contacts within such groups and 57 per cent had no interest in them (Garlicki, 1988). In 1986, 89 per cent of secondary school graduates (19 years old) declared themselves to be “strongly believing” and “believing” (Pawelczyk, 1987: 68). The sociologist Hanna Świda has argued that young people who came of age in the early 1980s were turning towards moral values and religion (Świda, 1987: 191–2). These data shows that religious activity and beliefs were strong among young people in the Poland of the 1980s.

7. Conclusion

The students groups organized by Dominican fathers in Poznań and Kraków were the avant-garde of the Catholic Church: they pioneered liturgical reform, social activism among the laity, the ecumenical movement, the introduction of popular culture to churches, and charismatic renewal. All these new trends were introduced in Poland at the same time as (sometimes even before) they appeared in other countries. This contradicts the image of a closed, backward-looking and self-contained Church behind the Iron Curtain. At the same time, the history of the Dominican-organized student groups mirrors the history of the relations between the state and the Catholic Church in Poland. The student groups were banned during the Stalinist period, restored after political liberalization in 1956, and pushed towards political activism in the late 1970s. Both in Kraków and Poznań, students formed illegal organizations, prepared illegal demonstrations, published and distributed underground newspapers, invited independent intellectuals to give talks, and joined Solidarity after it was legalized. After the imposition of martial law students gradually retreated from politics—an attitude which was sustained after 1989. On social and political issues these groups followed and responded to needs rather than inspiring change.

However, this description reveals one of the most characteristic features of these groups: their flexibility and openness to innovation. They had never had a written programme, agenda or statute. They were created both by pastoral ministers and by students, the latter body changing every few years when old members graduated and new ones began their studies. Because of this “innocence” and mobility they were able to experiment with many novel religious practices. Their devotional activities were different from those that took place in the parish churches, which were often traditional and static. In my opinion, based on a limited number of interviews, the student groups were important because they initiated changes in religious practices, first in the Dominican churches, and later in the parishes to which the graduates returned. The style of these groups was different from that of the mainstream church: the emphasis was on close pastoral relations with the chaplain, regular participation in extended devotional activities, community work and personal development. Therefore, the groups were controversial—all the more so as the hierarchical structure of the Church and the power of the clergy were more entrenched in Poland than in Western Europe. The student groups created a universal, modern proposition for young people in a non-democratic political system where the state promoted atheism. Their success was partly a result of the political system, which deprived people of opportunities for social and communal practices. But, of course, these circumstances changed after 1989, and the Catholic Church in Poland is still seeking new priorities. How far the features of the student groups might be used to counter the ongoing processes of unchurching and secularization is a speculative question, dependent in part on the next generation of students and Dominican pastoral ministers.

NOTES

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² Maritain himself visited Poznań for the Thomist Congress in 1934.

³ Subsequent decades would show that the process of secularization was more limited in Poland, and the drop in participation in religious rituals was smaller than in most countries of Western Europe.

⁴ Father Woroniecki (1878–1949) was a theologian and philosopher, the founder of the Dominican Sisters order, a rector of the Catholic University of Lublin (1922–1924) and the director of the Dominican seminaries in Lwów and Warsaw. In Lwów he organized several student groups, focusing on the intellectual development of the Dominican brothers and fathers.

⁵ The first beat masses in Poland were held in Podkowa Leśna, near Warsaw, about a year earlier, and one such celebration was recorded by the band *Czerwono-Czarny* (Black-Red) in 1967 (two years before *Jesus Christ Superstar*).

⁶ Leon Kantorski was a parish priest in Podkowa Leśna, near Warsaw, from 1964 to 1991. He organized ecumenical meetings and beat masses in the 1960s, and supported the political opposition in the 1970s and 1980s.

⁷ According to the official version, Pyjas died in an accident yet the unclear circumstances of the crash and the fact that he had previously been subjected to police harassment led people to blame the security services for his death.

⁸ Pilgrimages were organized annually: in the 1960s there was a reduction in the number of student pilgrims, in the 1970s an increase (Jarkiewicz, 2004: 197–9, 341–2).

⁹ This would begin to change, however, in the 1990s. Over the past decade the young people themselves have started proposing topics for their discussion groups and organizing their own events. Some have applauded this new practice, arguing that by giving young people more freedom they can learn greater responsibility and prepare themselves for citizenship in a democratic state. Others have argued that these new groups lack authority and respect for their pastoral ministers, who themselves are younger nowadays. Interviews with J., T. and O.

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