The Catholic Church and the Ethic of Solidarity in Poland After 1989: An Update

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In spite of impressive economic growth and a burgeoning middle class in recent years, millions of Poles continue to suffer from poverty. Entrenched poverty and marginalization reveal that Polish society needs a revitalization of the ethic of solidarity, which largely disintegrated after 1989. The Roman Catholic Church should play a pivotal role in this endeavor. Promoting an ethic of solidarity is an intrinsic component of the Catholic Church’s mission of evangelization. Although the Church has advanced an ethic of solidarity in some ways, it has also hindered the fostering of greater social solidarity. In part, this stems from a failure of many Catholics, including Church leaders, to see advancing an ethic of solidarity as an integral dimension of evangelization.

The Roman Catholic Church’s positive role in the Solidarność movement in Poland during the 1980s has been widely acknowledged. However, many commentators and ordinary Poles have viewed its activities since 1989 in a much less favorable light. To be certain, the Church no longer needs to champion the rights of the oppressed in the same way as it did under Communism. With the fall of Communism, most of the so-called civil and political rights such as the freedom to vote in democratic elections, the freedom of expression and freedom of worship have been enshrined in law. Dissidents are no longer incarcerated for their opinions and religious believers are not persecuted for their beliefs. However, the Church has a pivotal role to play in ensuring that policy decisions reflect the ethic of solidarity, particularly those that affect the poor.

This article argues that the Church must play this role in order to be faithful to its mission of evangelization. Furthermore, the Church, and more specifically the Polish Bishops’ Conference, has not yet fully recognized the promotion of concrete
structures and policies that would embody an ethic of solidarity as “a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.” The Church has seldom championed the economic rights of the poor even though the Church’s mission of evangelization demands this. As will be discussed, the Church has succeeded in advancing an ethic of solidarity in some ways. However, much more needs to be done to promote the fullness of solidarity.

WHAT IS THE ETHIC OF SOLIDARITY?

A thorough exposition of the Catholic ethic of solidarity exceeds the scope of this article. The Catholic social tradition postulates three key elements of solidarity:

1. The recognition of human interdependence and corresponding obligations to others that flow from it, especially obligations to the marginalized.
2. A firm commitment to the common good, which requires creating social structures that promote the participation and rights of all.
3. A willingness to work with others across boundaries of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and nationality to foster an inclusive common good.

In short, the Catholic tradition sees solidarity as both a virtue that individuals should practice and a principle for institutions and social relations. Solidarity should shape various aspects of economic, political, and social life both within and among nations. Catholicism holds that solidarity is possible across the full spectrum of social relations. In other words, the Catholic ethic of solidarity requires creating and sustaining the common good on the local, national, and global levels. I have argued in my book *Recovering Solidarity* that the Solidarność movement embodied this ideal.

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2. One exception is in the Synod document on socioeconomic life, where the Catechism’s mention of economic rights is repeated. See Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, “Kościół wobec życia społeczno-gospodarczego,” no. 11, http://www.episkopat.pl/dokumenty/synoddokumenty .pdf.
3. There are other aspects of the Catholic ethic of solidarity, which I have explicated in greater detail elsewhere. See Gerald J. Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland’s Unfinished Revolution* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2010); and “Freedom as a Challenge to an Ethic of Solidarity in a Neoliberal Capitalist World: Lessons from Post-1989 Poland,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 133–67. See also Steinar Stjernø, *Solidarity in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62–74; 311–15. Stjernø traces the development of solidarity in Catholic thought, which reached its fullest expression in the writing of John Paul II. Pope Benedict XVI also used the concept solidarity extensively. For example, he refers to solidarity forty times in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. 
ethic to a large degree during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{4} In what follows I will present an abbreviated and updated version of that argument, that is, Polish society largely abandoned the ethic of solidarity that it embraced in those historic days. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that the Roman Catholic Church contributed to the disappearance of the ethic of solidarity through its action and inaction.

**DIFFICULT TIMES FOR THE CHURCH**

The reputation of the Church as the defender of freedom and human rights in Poland soured after 1989. After its victory in its bout with atheistic Communism, the Church encountered harsh criticism. According to Polish polling agencies, from 1989 to 1995 the approval of the Roman Catholic Church’s role in public life fell from slightly above 90 percent to approximately 50 percent.\textsuperscript{5} According to Janusz Mariański’s study of Catholicism published in 2011, the majority of Poles continue to believe the Church should have less of a role in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{6} Many believe that the Church should not even pronounce on basic human rights because this amounts to “getting embroiled in politics” (mieszanie się do polityki).\textsuperscript{7} About 75 percent (78.2 percent) believe that “politics and social life should be maximally independent of religion.”\textsuperscript{8} This is the case despite the fact that more than 90 percent of Polish citizens still declare themselves to be Catholic.\textsuperscript{9}

Catholic historian Jarosław Gowin enumerates a series of controversial decisions as contributing factors to this decline: the demand to return Roman Catholic religion classes to public schools, the hierarchy’s repeated uncompromising stance

\textsuperscript{4} See Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity*. Portions of this book are reprinted here with permission from University of Notre Dame Press.

\textsuperscript{5} Jarosław Gowin, *Kościół po komunizmie* (Kraków: Znak, 1995), 7. Piotr Mazurkiewicz points out that the Church’s authority did not decrease in the initial stages after 1989. Rather, it declined sometime later, as the Church began to see its role in society differently. More on this will follow. Piotr Mazurkiewicz, *Kościół i demokracja* (Warsaw: Pax, 2001), 13–14.


\textsuperscript{7} Andrzej Ochocki, “Kościół katolicki a sprawy publiczne w Polsce,” in *Kościół katolicki na początku tysiąclecia w opinii Polaków*, ed. Witold Zdaniewicz and Sławomir Zaręba (Warsaw: Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego SAC, 2004), 209. See also Mirosława Marody, “Polak-katolik w Europie,” *Odra* 2, no. 387 (1994): 696. Only 46 percent said that the Church should pronounce on unemployment. Marody points out that in Ireland 76 percent said the church should pronounce on unemployment. For more statistics, see Roman Andrzejewski et al., *Katolicyzm polski dziś i jutro* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 2001), 75.

\textsuperscript{8} Mariański, *Katolicyzm polski: ciągłość i zmiana*, 147; see also 141–42.

\textsuperscript{9} Even though this is the case, the number of Catholics participating in mass regularly has decreased to 40 percent. See Katarzyna Wiśniewska, “Co zniechęca ludzi do Kościoła?” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 29, 2012, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,12033038,Co_zniecheca_katolikow_do_Kosciola.html.
on abortion (including its prohibition when a mother’s life is in jeopardy), the political campaigning by clergy and bishops for certain candidates during the 1991 elections, the call for “respect of Christian values” in education and mass media, and the attempt to regain Church property expropriated by the Communists, even where this meant the closing of state-administrated schools, hospitals, and shelters.\textsuperscript{10} In addition to this, some Polish citizens feared the Church’s desire to create a theocratic state. Moreover, the post-Communists, in order to restore their reputation and thereby position themselves to regain power, criticized the “black dictatorship” of the clergy, which, in their view, replaced the pre-1989 “red dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{11} Whether or not the fears of theocracy were legitimate is debatable. Nonetheless, many members of Polish society decried the “theocratic tendencies” of the Church, with luminaries such as Noble laureate Czesław Miłosz and philosopher Leszek Kolakowski among them.\textsuperscript{12} The real or perceived attempt of the Church to “legislate morality” contributed to the rising mistrust toward the Church.

In response to these criticisms the Church largely took a defensive, sometimes hostile stance, rather than patiently explaining its decisions and searching for dialogue. Former Solidarność leader Adam Michnik, who once admired the Church for its tolerance, respect, and effort to instill hope in all people, lamented that “for a significant number of people the Church has become like a besieged fortress, whose defenders look everywhere for enemies and cast calumnies upon them.”\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Gowin, \textit{Kościół po komunizmie}, 29–30.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Mazurkiewicz, \textit{Kościół i demokracja}, 286–91.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Adam Michnik, \textit{Kościół, lewica, dialog}, Wyd. 2 (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 1998), 322. For further discussion of the Church’s “besieged fortress” syndrome in Poland, see Gowin, \textit{Kościół w czasach wolności 1989–1999}, 46–47. See also Roman Graczyk, \textit{Polski Kościół - polska demokracja} (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 1999), 23–27. For an alternate view that suggests this “syndrome” was created by anti-Catholic propaganda, and not based in reality, see Adam Lepa, “Pięć lat ‘zdrowej krtytyki’ oblężonej twierdzy,” in Śpiewak, \textit{Spór o Polskę: 1989–99}, 456–57. The bishop’s article illustrates the claim that the Church often reacted to criticism defensively, rather than seeing it as an opportunity for self-examination.
\end{itemize}
Why the Church Needs to Advocate Solidarity: The Rise and Persistence of Poverty

Trends such as the rise and persistence of poverty in Poland belie the often-heard claim that solidarity is no longer necessary in contemporary Poland because the “enemy” (i.e., the Communist regime) has been defeated. In many ways life in Poland has improved dramatically. Poland is a stable democracy and an increasingly important member of the European Union and NATO. In the past few years Poland has boasted one of Europe’s fastest growing economies. The standard of living for Poland’s burgeoning middle class has risen significantly. Yet, millions of Poles still face the plague of poverty. After the fall of Communism, poverty rose dramatically. By 2001, almost 10 percent of the population lived below the subsistence minimum, meaning they had fallen below the threshold necessary for basic survival. More than 50 percent lived below the social minimum, or the level necessary to avoid marginalization in society. Fortunately, a significant decrease in the number of people living in poverty occurred during the years 2005–8. The proportion of Poles living below the subsistence minimum decreased to 5.6 percent during the same period. According to Eurostat (which uses a more capacious definition of poverty), the number of Poles living in poverty decreased from 13,000,000 to 5,000,000.

Some of this progress can be attributed to positive trends such as a substantial increase in the minimum wage for full-time contract workers, lower unemployment, and European Union (EU) subsidies for farmers. However, some scholars and activists contend much of this change is due to the fact that the official poverty

14. See Anna Maria Mydlarska, “Polska transformacja: sukces czy katastrofa?” Wolność i Solidarność, no. 3 (2012): 248–51. The present article addresses a number of the criticisms of this review of my book.


line has not been raised to adjust for the rising cost of living since 2005. According to the Polish Główny Urząd Statystyczny, if the government’s official poverty line reflected the rising cost of living, 11.4 percent of people would be below it, not 6.5 percent. In addition, more than 2 million Poles emigrated in search of work, thus removing them from the poverty count.

Regardless of this debate, the number of people living in poverty still remains high, by any measure: 14.2 percent according to Eurostat, 6.7 percent according to the subsistence minimum, 16.7 percent according to the relative poverty standard. More than 20 percent of all children live in poverty according to the most recent statistics of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), ranking Poland among the worst European countries in this category. Poland has the highest number of temporary workers (27 percent) in the EU, and employers are not required to pay them the minimum wage. As a result, 2 million Poles belong to the category of “working poor.” It is therefore not surprising that Bishop Piotr Libera of Płock recently stated: “many of [Solidarity’s] postulates from thirty-two years ago are still waiting to be realized.”

In other words, there is still a great need for solidarity in contemporary Poland in spite of many positive changes. Sociological studies since 1989 have revealed that most “winners” during Poland’s transformation to a capitalist economy remain indifferent to the plight of the poor. Wisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, a sociologist and a leading expert on poverty, put it this way in February 2012:

In Poland we lack a strategic approach to overcoming poverty on the level of the central government and on the local government level. It is believed that the prob-

23. Kowalski, “Eurostat: 5 mln Polaków żyje w biedzie, 10 milionów zagrożonych ubóstwem.”
28. See Beyer, Recovering Solidarity, 82–84. See also Jarosław Makowski, Wariacje Tischnerowskie (Warsaw: Sfery, 2011), 199. Makowski writes that indifference is the opposite of solidarity.
lem of poverty will solve itself with economic growth, because “a rising tide raises all boats.” There is a widespread belief that poor people themselves are to blame and suffer the consequences for their fate, which they have created for themselves.29

Data also reveal that Poles lack the trust toward one another necessary for solidarity and concern for the common good. Thus, Janusz Czapiński wrote in his summary of the most recent Diagnoza Społeczna:

We still live in a culture of envy and distrust, and we have not yet embarked on the journey towards civil society. But we have been developing, and changes have been taking place at a fairly good pace even in these times of worldwide economic crisis, though over recent years the process has been much faster at the individual rather than collective level.

... Growing individual resourcefulness is not matched by an increase in the ability to cooperate. ... We are not learning to cooperate because we generally do not trust each other; we only make an exception for family members and less often for neighbours. We also do not trust institutions in general.30

Czapiński goes on to say that Poland desperately needs to introduce learning about civic responsibility in schools, starting in preschool. In his view, “Polish youths have solid knowledge about society ... but they are not able to self-organize, cooperate, they do not get involved in volunteer activities and are just as ‘molecular’ [i.e., individualistic] as their parents.”31

WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS TO ADVOCATE SOLIDARITY: THE CHURCH’S THEOLOGY OF EVANGELIZATION

As was discussed earlier, the majority of Poles do not want Church involvement in political and social issues. However, the Catholic theology of evangelization mandates that the Church brings to bear its ethic of solidarity on society’s most pressing issues, such as poverty. Vatican II’s Gaudium et Spes initiated a reconceptualization of the meaning of evangelization and its relationship to social justice.32 The 1971 World Synod of Bishops went further in Justitia in Mundo. The Bishops argued that “[a]ction on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation

31. Ibid., 264.
32. See, for example, Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, 185–89, nos. 34, 39, 40.
of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.”33 Pope Benedict unambiguously reaffirmed this teaching. In his 2011 message for World Mission Sunday, he maintained that evangelization must include solidarity with the oppressed and the promotion of “justice and liberation from every kind of oppression.”34 In other words, the Church must take a stance regarding socioeconomic issues such as poverty and this constitutes an indispensable dimension of evangelization.35 Theologians disagree about the level of specificity appropriate to the magisterium’s teaching on such matters. Nonetheless, Pope Paul VI unambiguously challenged local Churches to “discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes . . . urgently needed.”36 Popes and Bishops’ conferences such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales have not hesitated to offer specific policy proposals designed to promote solidarity and overcome oppression.37 As the latter put it, remaining on the level of broad generalities to avoid controversy would be a “failure in moral courage.”38 They

35. John Paul II made this point clearly when he spoke of new evangelization. For example, he stated in Centesimus Annus, no. 5: “The ‘new evangelization,’ which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church’s social doctrine.” See also Centesimus Annus, no. 54.
36. Pope Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, 266, no. 4.
37. See, for example, Pope John XXIII, Mater et Magistra in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, 106, no. 37; and Pope John Paul II, Laborem Exercens in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, 370, no. 14; 78, no. 19. In regard to wages, John Paul II states that proper remuneration for a worker responsible for a family can and should be achieved by one of two means: a family wage or grants to mothers who devote themselves “exclusively to their families.” Generally speaking, J. Bryan Hehir refers to the “moral and political specificity” of John Paul II’s social teaching. See J. Bryan Hehir, “The Right and Competence of the Church in the American Case,” in One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge, ed. John Aloysius Coleman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 62.
38. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, “The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching,” http://www.osjspm.org/cst/britbish.htm. See also United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), “Economic Justice for All: A Catholic Framework for Economic Life,” in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, 582, no. 20; 610, nos. 134–35. The USCCB states that while their “prudential judgments” do not have the same level of authority as their moral principles, they “feel obliged to teach by example how Christians can undertake concrete analysis and make specific judgments on economic issues.” They contend that the Church’s teaching cannot remain on the level of “appealing generalities.”
therefore recommended policies such as a statutory minimum wage, suggesting it should equal a living wage.\textsuperscript{39} In the case of Poland, Bishops must also be willing to demonstrate how solidarity can be embodied in social policies and exemplify how to build solidarity across differences.\textsuperscript{40}

**THE CHURCH IN POLAND AND THE ETHIC OF SOLIDARITY: \textit{“PLUSY I MINUSY”}**

The Catholic Church has exhibited tendencies toward both hindering and promoting an ethic of solidarity in post-1989 Poland. To put it another way, the Church in Poland has failed to reach its full potential as an agent of solidarity. At times, numerous groups have instrumentalized the Catholic tradition for the sake of goals that dubiously resemble the tenets of Catholic social teaching. One example relates to the “Catholic pro-family politics” promoted by groups such as the Polish Federation of Associations of Catholic Families (Polska Federacja Stowarzyszeń Rodzin Katolickich). While such groups do promote some goals that cohere with Catholic social teaching, such as counting a mother’s child-rearing years toward her retirement fund, other parts of the agenda do not promote solidarity with the poor.\textsuperscript{41} Social critic Ewa Nowakowska has persuasively argued that a proposed tax reduction proportionate to the number of children (thus promoting the Catholic procreation agenda) would in effect aid only families with middle- to high-bracket incomes; most low-income families with many children subsist purely on public assistance.\textsuperscript{42} The latter, the truly poor, would not therefore benefit from the proposed tax policy. Admittedly, because of the complicated nature of such policies, their validity can be debated among people of good will. Yet other examples more glaringly illustrate the Church’s failure as a witness of solidarity after 1989. For example, those who have demonized others in the name of the Catholic faith because of their points of view clearly lack the will to foster solidarity. Michnik and others have drawn attention to the vitriol used by some, including certain bishops, to

\textsuperscript{39} Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, “The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching,” no. 97. A lengthier analysis would examine the work of other bishops’ conferences as well.

\textsuperscript{40} It should be acknowledged that many disagree with this argument. J. Bryan Hehir discusses the criticisms of the “legislative-policy” function of the church in Hehir, “The Right and Competence of the Church in the American Case.”

\textsuperscript{41} For a similar proposal pertaining to domestic work, see for example John Paul II, \textit{Laborum Exercens}, no. 19.

\textsuperscript{42} Ewa Nowakowska, “Cnota w komórce,” \textit{Polityka} 25 (1998). The remainder of the agenda includes: counting mothers’ parental duties at home toward retirement pensions, helping create small “domestic” businesses, and a yearly report on the status of the family in Poland. According to Minister Kapera, the program is a “battle to save the Polish family from disintegration, as a result of the influence of Western liberalism.”
malign “crypto-Communists.” Among them, Bishop Michalik, the head of the Polish Bishops’ Conference since 2004, chastised those who opposed catechesis in public schools, referring to them “as enemies of the Cross and the Gospel” and “echoes of the voice of Satan.” In another statement, Michalik urged Catholics to vote for Catholics, Jews to vote for Jews and Muslims for Muslims, masons for masons and Communists for Communists. In his 2012 pastoral letter for Lent, he maintained that the Church is “systematically attacked by libertarian, atheistic, and Masonic circles.” In addition, many Catholics have caricatured “liberals” as licentious, sex-driven heathens. Father Józef Tischner, the former Solidarność chaplain, aptly characterized the problem after 1989 as follows: “Who is a ‘real Catholic?’ Who is a ‘real Christian?’ Who is a ‘real Pole?’ . . . These questions serve the wrong goal today: exclusion, derision, accusation.” The former archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Francis Macharski, went as far as saying “social divisions, even religious ones, are a real Polish sickness, an epidemic” in a homily during the celebration of the 750th year of St. Stanisław’s canonization. It is hard not to agree if one considers that Radio Maryja, which boasts millions of listeners, often condemns “enemies” of the Church. In short, a lack of will to promote solidarity, which “turns against no one,” clearly exists among many Roman Catholics in Poland today, including many bishops.

Some Catholic groups and organizations have admirably sought to foster solidarity. Father Tischner and editors of the Catholic periodical Znak attempted to debunk many of the negative stereotypes of “liberals.” Catholic media outlets such as Znak, Tygodnik Powszechny, and Więź have tried to address social issues that were considered “taboo” for Catholics. For example, many bishops and conservative

43. Gowin, Kościół po komunizmie, 30.
44. Gowin, Kościół w czasach wolności 1989–1999, 60. For more statements of a similar nature by bishops and theologians, see Gracyz, Polski Kościół–polska demokracja, 23–27.
47. Tischner, Nieszczęsny dar wolności, 23.
50. It should be noted that this defense of “liberals” seems to have led to an uncritical stance toward economic liberalism in some cases.
Catholics have no interest in hearing the claims of feminists. They see feminism as one of the nefarious “isms,” which, along with liberalism, will erode the morals of Polish society. While much more could be published to promote greater understanding of feminism, in its myriad forms, these media sources have made initial efforts. Więź devoted one of its monthly issues to the topic of “new feminism.” For its part, Tygodnik Powszechny published a weekly column on women of the Bible written by Elżbieta Adamiak, one of the few published feminist theologians in Poland today. While this could seem insignificant in a country where most Catholics think feminist theology is not a legitimate enterprise and where women face many discriminatory practices, these are steps in the right direction. They are attempts to foster dialogue and mutual understanding, which are important ingredients of social trust, the foundation of solidarity.

Although there are all too few, some bishops have attempted to reach out in solidarity to those who are different, and have criticized the narrow-mindedness of many bishops. For example, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek rebuffed Archbishop Michalik’s claim that the Church is being attacked by “Masons” and “liberals,” saying “epithets are not an appropriate method.” In an interview in May 2011, he lamented that individualism has become so deeply entrenched in Poland and “that bishops feel so secure on their thrones that they reject the vision of Vatican II . . . bishophood in Poland is [like] a mansion. A mansion and its servants is a false understanding of the Church.” In spite of his worst moments, even Archbishop Michalik has at times shown the desire to extend solidarity to “others,” most recently leading the effort to mend relations with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church.

In terms of realizing solidarity with the poor, Catholic organizations like Caritas Polska and Fundacja Nadzieja have made strides in the right direction. However, the Polish Bishops seldom spoke out on economic issues for most of the first decade after the fall of Communism. When they did, their remarks were general and uncritically supportive (i.e., seen as “painful, but necessary”) of the government’s reforms. While

the Bishops did mention issues such as poverty at times, they never made a serious attempt at diagnosing the causes of poverty and proposing solutions to it.⁵⁶ Differences exist among individual bishops regarding the weight they should accord social justice issues. For example, in an interview concerning the mission of the Church in Poland, several bishops were asked what they perceive to be the most important tasks of the Church today. Bishop Adam Śmigielski named “announcing the message of salvation to all people without exception” as the Church’s “basic task.” He named helping poor families and charitable activities to help victims of disasters and addictions as the fifth and sixth items on the Church’s pastoral agenda, respectively.⁵⁷ When asked the same question, Bishop Marian Gołębiewski responded quite differently: “Taking into consideration the specific conditions in which the faithful of the Koszalin–Kolobrzeg diocese live, I would say the Church must first and foremost realize the option for the poor.” He went on to say, “This means imbuing the structures of state life, institutions of social life, local government and congressional communities, and a wide range of human activity with the spirit of the Gospel and Catholic social teaching.”⁵⁸

Starting around the year 2000, the Polish Bishops made some earnest attempts to grapple with the problem of poverty.⁵⁹ Bishop Pieronek directly acknowledged that the Church mistakenly closed its eyes to the uneven sharing of the burdens of the economic transformation, which led to a “serious increase in the number of people below the social minimum.”⁶⁰ In his pastoral letter on unemployment of 2001, Archbishop Damian Zimoń of Śląsk went even further, criticizing the Church’s acceptance of neoliberal economic reforms that caused greater unemployment. Therefore, he argued, the Church should now lucidly articulate a position that does not accept the negative effects of the economic transformation.⁶¹ The most outstanding attempt to address these issues came in the document on socioeconomic life from the 2000 Synod provides a detailed analysis of the bishops’ general stance toward the socioeconomic reforms of the nineties. Bishop Pieronek has acknowledged this with remorse on several occasions. See Tadeusz Pieronek, Kościół nie boi się wolności (Kraków: Znak, 1998), 46–47, 103.

56. This explains the difference of opinions between those, such as Ochocki, who state that the Church relentlessly calls attention to the problems of poverty and unemployment, and Gowin, who admits this, but claims that these are largely “sound bites.” In other words, Gowin and others maintain it is not enough to simply “draw attention to” the problem of poverty. The present author thanks Jarosław Gowin for his willingness to discuss his view in conversation.


58. Ibid., 26–27.


60. Pieronek, Kościół nie boi się wolności, 105.

of Polish Bishops, along with some noteworthy portions of other Synodal documents. This document provides a philosophical framework that emphasizes solidarity while critiquing neoliberal economic policies and understandings of freedom that value profits over people (see nos. 8, 12, 26, 31, and 45). Furthermore, the Bishops attempt to demonstrate what an ethic of solidarity looks like in socioeconomic life. For example, they urge politicians and corporate boards to remember that "demanding and earning incommensurably high salaries is an expression of a lack of solidarity with millions of poor and it extinguishes the hope for a justly managed country" (no. 32). This is a timely exhortation given that Polish politicians, for example, earn disproportionately high salaries in the face of profound distrust toward them. In a manner reminiscent of Tischner’s *Etyka solidarności* and John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens*, the Bishops called on employers to “humanize” work by respecting the rights of workers and urged workers to do their job diligently and honestly. This will forge healthy relations between labor and capital, which will be built on a “foundation of the virtue of solidarity” (no. 42). The Bishops also exhorted all citizens to be in solidarity with the decision makers who undertake often painful, but necessary reforms. This does not preclude real dialogue and the ability to raise doubts about specific policies. However, citizens should not berate public figures; this does not contribute to genuine public debate (no. 31).

Other documents from the 2000 Synod of Bishops dealt with important aspects of solidarity with the poor, even if they remained mostly on the level of generalities. In 2003, the Bishops published a pastoral letter on socioeconomic issues to commemorate the 110th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, along with several other shorter statements. Importantly, the Bishops again stressed the relevance of an ethic of solidarity today. They underlined an understanding of development that encompasses more than economic growth. They also intensified their critique of a “radical ideology of capitalism”:

> After twelve years of systemic changes in Poland we must contend that many people responsible for the shape of public life uncritically believed that the fall of Marxism would automatically lead to a just society and believed in free-market mechanisms, which would guarantee the well-being of all in every sphere of life. In the place of collectivist ideology appeared a distorted version of liberalism, which . . . conceived the whole of reality solely in economic categories. In this manner the development so desperately needed in our country was identified only with economic growth.

Thus, it is the case that the Polish Bishops began to promote solidarity with the poor at the dawn of the new millennium. Unfortunately, however, the Bishops have

64. Ibid., no. 2
seldom seriously dealt with the issue in the past few years. In his 2011 book Wariacje Tischnerowskie, theologian Jarosław Makowski contends that the Bishops, along with most Catholic commentators, failed to discuss Pope Benedict’s encyclical on the global economic crisis Caritas in Veritate. Moreover, he accuses the Church of being “more fond of capitalism than the social gospel of Jesus Christ.” In his view the Church in Poland cannot effectively teach the norms for economic life found in Caritas in Veritate because it does not live by them itself. He points to the examples of the “abuses” in the Church’s own committee for property reappropriation and the fact that many employees in Church-related institutions are not paid a living wage.

The Bishops did issue a seventy-page document in 2012, titled “In Concern for the Human Person and the Common Good.” It is composed of six chapters. While there is much to commend in this document, there are a number of tensions and problems. It appropriately starts by defending the dignity of the human person, which is the “basis for the equality of all people and has fundamental meaning for the organization of social life.” Tellingly, the Bishops treat social economic problems in chapter 5, choosing first to emphasize the family and the defense of traditional marriage. The fourth paragraph of the document states that “abortion, euthanasia, in vitro, harvesting stem cells from embryos, and cloning” are unacceptable threats to the dignity of the human person (no. 4). One wonders why the Bishops did not add poverty and sexual and workplace abuse to this list. Lengthy treatment of IVF, abortion, and sexual education appears early on in the document, whereas poverty is only mentioned in passing a few times. A disproportionate amount of space (four pages) is also devoted to patriotism, beginning with the claim that the “love of one’s fatherland is—according to Christian teaching—a demand of conscience” (no. 18). At times, the document exhibits the language of solidarity, recalling themes similar to those taken up by Józef Tischner in his Etyka solidarności. For example, the Bishops rightly condemn treating those who disagree as “enemies” (no. 25). They also call upon leaders to be willing to make compromises and sacrifices that require the “political virtue of courage” (no. 28). However, a few paragraphs later, the Bishops admonish those who would make compromises because many times they have led to “moral and social regression” (no. 30).

The chapter on socioeconomic life does point to a number of concrete issues such as the necessary role for government in the economy (no. 33), corporate social responsibility (no. 34), mistreatment of workers, including unfair contracts (no. 36), worker participation in management and corporate decisions (no. 36), unemployment (no. 37), profit and its social dimension (no. 39), the falling incomes of farmers and solutions to it (nos. 41–42), emigration for work (no. 43), and human trafficking (no. 44). The Bishops also criticize “the free market ideology of capitalism in its radical

66. Ibid., 238.
67. Ibid., 233.
form, with all of its negative consequences for the human person” (no. 33). They also issue a welcome call for solidarity in all aspects of the economy (no. 39). Thus, in some respects the document promotes an ethic of solidarity. In an age when many Poles trumpet their own success and that of the Polish economy in general, the Bishops rightly remind their readers that while there is much to be proud of, “the costs of the transformation for many people have been very high” and that all Poles have more “obligation in the spirit of solidarity and brotherhood to help the poor, unemployed, and many families pushed to the margins of poverty” (no. 53). In spite of these positive traits of the document, it lacks the emphasis and rigor used in dealing with poverty in the Bishops’ Synodal document on socioeconomic life. The greater emphasis on what are often called “culture war” issues throughout the document leaves little room for the serious analysis of poverty, its causes and solutions.

**Reasons for the Church’s Failure to Champion Solidarity**

There are several reasons why the Church has not done more to promote solidarity. According to Catholic social ethicist Aniela Dylus, the Bishops were reluctant to think and speak concretely about socioeconomic policies in the early nineties because they feared being perceived and portrayed as biased toward a political party. She also claims the Polish Bishops wrote relatively little about the highly complex socioeconomic reforms because evaluating socioeconomic issues, such as privatization, requires expertise that the Bishops do not have. Unfortunately, distrust toward laypersons continued to hinder fruitful consultation with lay experts after 1989. In addition, many outcomes of the social and economic policy decisions were still unclear. Thus, the Bishops did not want to make rash judgments early on in the transformation process.

Since 1989, the Bishops have devoted most of their attention to other issues. As Gowin and others have argued, opposition to abortion dominated their agenda at

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69. There is only one statistic throughout the entire document: families of farmers earn 70 percent of the average earnings of families in urban cities. This leads to a lower standard of living according to the bishops, which they see as an injustice. See Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *W trosce o człowieka i dobro wspólne*, no. 41. For a similar judgment of this document, see Andrzej Paszewski, “Co z tą troską?” *Kontakt*, May 23, 2012, http://www.deon.pl/czytelnia/czasopisma/kontakt/art,4,co-z-ta-troska.html.


71. This phenomenon is fairly widely recognized and criticized in Poland. Stanisława Grab ska describes it in “Obywatele Kościoła,” in *Dzieci Soboru zadają pytanie: rozmowy o Soborze Watykańskim II*, ed. Zbigniew Nosowski (Warsaw: Biblioteka Więź, 1996), 308. The bishops themselves criticize the lack of cooperation between the laity and clergy in the parish. See also Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, “Sól ziemi. Powołanie i posłannictwo świeckich,” http://www.episkopat.pl/dokumenty/synododkumenty.pdf. However, the bishops place the onus on lay persons, who are ignorant of their responsibilities in the Church.

least until 1997. In the past few years, the Bishops have been battling against in vitro fertilization, calling it “sophisticated abortion” in a 2007 letter to the Polish Parliament. The Bishops’ Conference has expended much energy on this issue lately, which has deepened a rift in the Church and in Polish society more broadly. In an essay for a conference devoted to Church reform in 2008, Father Andrzej Czaja, a noted theologian and currently a bishop, contended that the weak reception of the teaching of Vatican II has led to the Church’s being “too caught up in itself, and, moreover, interested in strengthening its structures and institutions, rather than the human person.” The Church “urgently needs to think in accordance with the Gospel,” in his words.

Finally and most important in my view, many Bishops operate with a flawed understanding of evangelization, one divorced from concern for social justice. When asked in 2000 why the Church has not issued a separate document on poverty in Poland, the late Bishop Chrąpek of Radom responded: “Up until this point, action has been more important. I fear that we still speak too uninterestingly about the Lord Jesus, social issues cannot dominate the basic mission of the Church, namely, evangelizing.” He maintained that solidarity with the poor is a “consequence of faith.” It does not belong to the most important task of the Church, which is to “proclaim the risen Christ.”

The Bishops’ Conference did bridge the gap between evangelization and social justice in several documents from the 2000 Synod and the 2003 letter on human labor. Nonetheless, many bishops still see solidarity with the poor as a consequence or outgrowth of commitment to the Gospel, not an intrinsic element of it. They have also expressed a concern for “excessive horizontalism,” which in their view distracts believers from focusing on their relationship with God. In this way, the Church’s option for the poor becomes less of a priority.

This issue, in addition to the “besieged fortress” mentality among many in the Church, remains the biggest obstacle to the Church’s fully embracing and promoting an ethic of solidarity.

77. See ibid.
78. On this, see Beyer, Recovering Solidarity, 167–71.
79. See ibid.

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Many clergy do not recognize the importance of the Church’s social teaching and the need to study various disciplines, such as economics, sociology, and political science in order to scrutinize the “signs of the times.” For example, the Tischner European School of Higher Education in Kraków and the National Bank of Poland cosponsored seminars in economics and business management for priests. These organizations assumed that priests in Poland today should have some facility in these fields in order to grapple with important contemporary pastoral and social problems. However, the clergy has shown little interest, as many priests feel that economic issues are not relevant to their work. This attitude betrays solidarity’s call to “understand the cry of the poor.”

WAYS THE CHURCH HAS SUCCEEDED

There are also some noteworthy ways in which the Church has exemplified an ethic of solidarity. Bishop Zimon’s pastoral letter provides a very concrete analysis of unemployment in the Śląsk region of Poland, where the decline of heavy industries led to a 75 percent increase in unemployment from 1998 to 2000. Like the 2000 Synodal letter on the economy, the archbishop does not hesitate to make numerous policy recommendations, many of which apply the ethic of solidarity to pressing socioeconomic problems.

Catholic institutions such as Caritas Polska have done much to promote solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. However, Church members very seldom organize in order to serve the Church’s social mission, although this is slowly changing. The more than 200 Catholic groups composed of about 500,000 Poles (a number quite low in a country that has more than 35 million Catholics), generally prefer to succor the poor directly rather than by seeking to build just economic and political structures. Most aid to the poor in Poland resembles what has been called akcyjność, short-term aid (most often in the form of money) rather than aktywność, which refers to active participation in a sustained effort. Action such as fundraisers does not “change the social landscape in a lasting way,” as Franciszek Kampka has maintained. There are a few exceptions, such as the Association of Polish Catholic Lawyers, which lobbied the Polish government concerning the necessity of

83. See Beyer, Recovering Solidarity, 191–98.
84. Dylus, Zmienność i ciągłość, 201.
privatization, equitable labor conditions, and agricultural subsidies. Nonetheless, much work needs to be done in order for Catholics as a whole to embrace an ethic of solidarity with the poor, which may include but goes beyond charity.

To their credit, the Polish Bishops acted in solidarity by creating a foundation in 1999 that awards 1,200 scholarships annually to children of poor families from villages and small towns. These scholarships will “follow” the students throughout their educational years, thus ensuring that they will continue to receive a good education. Importantly, scholarships are awarded based on merit and a clear demonstration of financial need. Preference has been given to children from the former PGR regions (Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne), which is appropriate given the high concentrations of poverty in these former collective farming regions. Scholarship winners are also invited to two-week vacations and to summer language camps. Moreover, the foundation stresses the formation of civic leadership inspired by Christian ideals. In other words, it hopes to form tomorrow’s leaders who will govern Poland in the spirit of solidarity.

The Archdiocese of Warsaw has also created a foundation that provides loans to unemployed people who wish to start their own business. Undoubtedly, there are other Catholic groups and organizations that promote solidarity among and with the poor and marginalized. Another promising step is the Bishops’ call in 2011 to create social affairs committees (rady społeczne) in every diocese, where lay Catholics would play an important role. In spite of this, much more needs to be done, as the laudable efforts described here only begin to address the massive problems of poverty, unemployment, educational deprivations, and access to decent health care for all. In this vein, the Church would do well to emulate the recent initiative of Krytyka Polityczna, which published an excellent children’s book describing the nature of poverty, its extent in Poland, and its debilitating consequences. Endorsed by the largest teachers’ union, the book is already being used by thousands of teachers across Poland. One can hope that more Catholics and people of all beliefs will seek to inculcate the solidarity that Polish society, like our own in the U.S., so desperately needs.

90. For information about Bieda. Przewodnik dla dzieci, see http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/KsiazkiPozaseriami/BiedaPrzewodnikdladzieci/menuid-105.html. It is also available at http://issuu.com/krytykapolityczna/docs/bieda_przewodnik/.