

## Article

# The Catholic Church in Poland, Her Faithful, and the Restrictions on Freedom to Practise Religion during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Piotr Stanisław<sup>1,\*</sup>, Dariusz Wadowski<sup>2</sup>, Justyna Szulich-Kałuża<sup>2</sup>, Małgorzata Nowak<sup>3</sup>  
and Mirosław Chmielewski<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Legal Sciences, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Al. Raclawickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Journalism and Management, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Al. Raclawickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Linguistics, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Al. Raclawickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

<sup>4</sup> Institute of Theology, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Al. Raclawickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

\* Correspondence: pstan@kul.pl

**Abstract:** In response to the rapid spread of the coronavirus epidemic, the state authorities in Poland—as in other countries—decided to introduce various restrictions on rights and freedoms, including the freedom to practise religion. The purpose of this study is to analyse and evaluate the position taken by the ministers of the Catholic Church in Poland and her faithful towards these restrictions during the first wave of the pandemic. An analysis of source material, including documents published by representatives of the Conference of Polish Bishops and diocesan bishops (or curial deputy officials), leads to the conclusion that, in their official messages, the bishops virtually unanimously supported the restrictions imposed by the state, often granting them the sanction of canon law, or introducing even more restrictive solutions in their own dioceses. Moreover, an analysis of the media coverage of the first wave of the pandemic, as well as sociological opinion research focusing on Poland's Catholic faithful, concludes that both the faithful and 'rank-and-file' clergy exhibited a polarised assessment of the stance adopted by the bishops towards the restrictions. However, this analysis allows for the refutation of the claim expressed in the literature, and shared by some of the faithful, about the bishops' excessive submissiveness to the state authorities. Our research proves that this claim somewhat distorts the reality. Rather, the attitude of the hierarchs of the Church needs to be seen as an expression of their responsibility for the common good. More deserving of criticism, on the other hand, is the excessive focus of the ecclesiastical message of this period on the restrictions on the freedom to practise religion, while the right of the faithful to the spiritual goods of the Church was relegated to the background (Can. 213 CIC-1983). In adopting the research framework developed by Joseph Cardijn ('see–judge–act'), our analysis concludes with the recommendation that, should a similar crisis arise in the future, the institution of the Church should rather focus its message to the faithful on securing the said right in the context of the state-imposed restrictions, by adopting the attitude typical of that of an addressee of legal norms, in line with the conclusions drawn from its own autonomy and independence as underlying principles of the State-Church relationship in both Church teachings and Polish law.

**Keywords:** freedom of religion; COVID-19; Catholic Church; communication; faithful; canon law; liturgy; media; pandemic; pragmalinguistic



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Reasons for the Research and the Research Questions

Issues related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the regulations adopted in its wake, on the opportunities to practise religion in its various forms have been widely

studied. The authors of these texts have adopted varied research perspectives and methodological approaches (see in particular: [Madera 2021a](#); [Martínez-Torrón and Rodrigo Lara 2021](#); [Consorti 2020](#); [Kasper and Augustin 2020](#); [Przywara et al. 2021](#); [Jupowicz-Ginalska et al. 2021](#); [Parish 2020](#)). Also highlighted has been the significance of the research on the response of religious communities to the restrictions imposed by state authorities, leading to preliminary research conclusions (see [Martínez-Torrón 2021](#), pp. 9–11)<sup>1</sup>. These community responses can be analysed as one of the factors that affected the effectiveness of the regulations in force, or even as one of the factors which moulded these regulations—as forms of collective attitudes, either expected or anticipated by the legislators. Notwithstanding the above, an analysis of the motives behind the attitudes displayed by religious communities towards the restrictions imposed can shed light on the inadequacies and shortcomings not only of the legislation itself, but also of the law-making process ([Martínez-Torrón 2021](#), p. 9). Recognising the validity of these research assumptions, the authors of this study undertook a detailed examination of the stance taken towards the restrictions on the freedom to practise religion during the first wave of the pandemic (i.e., March–June 2020) as manifested in the official documents issued by representatives of the Conference of Polish Bishops and individual Catholic diocesan bishops (or bodies acting on their behalf). Since the Church is understood here as a community of believers, the analysis was confined solely to official Church documents. The sociological research in our study covers the assessments formulated by the faithful on the epidemic restrictions on the freedom to practise religion and on the position taken by the Church hierarchy on this issue. Following this line of argument, we also explored how the media portrayed the restrictions in question and the public reaction to them; in this case, the content reported in the domestic Catholic media was subjected to analysis<sup>2</sup>.

The discussion in this article aims to assess the position taken by the Catholic Church in Poland regarding the epidemic restrictions on the freedom to practise religion as imposed by the state authorities. This principal aim of the study was achieved by answering the following specific questions: What intentions underlay the official Church documents? What argumentative strategies were used in intra-church communication relating to the issues under analysis (influencing the effectiveness of the state restrictions)? How did this communication framework fit in with the institutional model of the church-state relations in Poland? How was the attitude adopted by the Church hierarchy reported and evaluated in the media, and how was it perceived by the faithful? Pursuing these objectives enabled us to juxtapose the response of the Church in Poland to the epidemic restrictions with those attitudes adopted by religious communities in other countries. In his typology, Javier Martínez-Torrón proposes the following categories of globally attested attitudes: “collaboration (more or less active), perplexity accompanied by resignation, resistance, or even plain objection,” even though one needs to take into account the fact that the attitudes in question evolved over time, and that the unequivocal support of religious communities for government action, which was characteristic of the first phase of the pandemic, was later replaced by dissatisfaction, not only with the content of the restrictions, but also with the way in which they were designed ([Martínez-Torrón 2021](#), pp. 9–11).

## 1.2. Literature Review

Opportunities for practising religion during the pandemic in Poland have already been subject to numerous studies undertaken from the perspective of various scientific disciplines (law, theology and the social sciences). The legal research focused in particular on questions concerning the constitutionality and lawfulness of the restrictions imposed by the state authorities, and abounded with critical views on the issue (see [Abramowicz 2021](#); [Brzozowski 2021](#); [Maroń 2021](#); [Olszówka and Dyda 2020](#); [Ożóg 2021](#); [Stanisz 2021](#); [Świto 2021](#)). Yet, the researchers did not focus directly on analysing or assessing the stance adopted by the institution of the Church regarding the state restrictions. At the same time, in the research literature on canon law, there are suggestions that the ecclesiastical authorities in Poland contributed to violations of the right of the faithful to the Church’s

spiritual support (Can. 213 CIC-1983), owing to their all-out compliance with the state restrictions and, in the case of some bishops, owing to their own even stricter regulations, which reduced access to the sacraments and sacramentals (see [Sitarz 2021](#)).

From the theological-pastoral perspective, COVID-19 was interpreted in the category of *signum temporis* for the Church in Poland ([Tutak and Wielebski 2021](#)). The pandemic restrictions and the consequent new challenges in fulfilling her pastoral mission faced by the Catholic Church were also studied ([Kwiatkowski 2021](#); [Łoza and Beyga 2021](#); [Zulehner 2021](#); [Mazurkiewicz 2021](#); [Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020](#); [Grześkowiak 2020](#); [Sawa 2020](#); [Jeziorski 2020](#)) Notwithstanding these findings, no research so far has been dedicated to a pragmalinguistic analysis of the issues at hand. The available research that comes closest to the topic of this article (with methodological references to rhetorical approach, argumentation theory, discourse analysis, semantics and ideological meaning-making, in particular) deals with arguments and values in the public discourse related to the COVID-19 vaccination campaign (for the Polish context, see [Ciesek-Ślizowska et al. 2022](#); [Duda and Ficek 2022](#); for the Italian context, see [Załęska 2021](#)). Alongside these publications, COVID-19-related rhetoric was also subject to an analysis focusing on the issue of ecclesiastical preaching ([Bryła and Bryła-Cruz 2021](#)).

From the very beginning, social reactions to the emerging pandemic and the consequences of the restrictions imposed in its wake have been extensively studied by sociologists, who have carried out analyses in many countries the world over in their specific social contexts. For obvious reasons, studies have most often addressed the changes that the pandemic brought about in the lives of different religious communities and believers ([Boguszewski et al. 2020](#)). These studies found that religious communities were adversely affected by the lockdown and the social isolation it enforced ([Mahiya and Murisi 2022](#)). During the pandemic, new transformative trends occurred in religious life, and those which were already active intensified. The most significant of these included the transfer of religious practices to the media and its attendant consequences ([Stachowska 2020](#); [Zaręba and Mariański 2021](#)), as well as changes in religious and experiential customs ([Lorea 2020](#)). Significant and multidimensional correlations between levels of religiosity, levels of pandemic stress, and anxiety were also reported, and the influence of the opportunities for practising religion on mental well-being has been explicitly highlighted ([Thomas and Barbato 2020](#); [Pirutinsky et al. 2020](#); [Długosz 2021](#); [Buchtova et al. 2022](#)). The role of religious institutions and communities in coronavirus transmission and disease reduction, as well as in supporting believers and state institutions, has also been investigated ([Lee et al. 2022](#)). Findings from different countries have revealed that both religious leaders and religious institutions responded in different ways to the restrictions on the freedom to practise religion ([Osei-Tutu et al. 2021](#)), as did the faithful themselves. Both an increase and a decrease in religious commitment were observed in the attitudes of believers, depending on the country of the study, the religion of the respondents, and the traditions of their environments ([Bożewicz and Boguszewski 2021](#); [Bentzen 2020](#); [Gacewicz 2020](#); [Pew Research Center 2020](#); [Lucchetti et al. 2020](#); [Meza 2020](#); [Zaręba and Mariański 2021](#)). In relation to the pandemic-induced dispositions, it has been shown that individuals exhibiting lower levels of religiosity were more likely to accept such restrictions ([Schnabel and Schieman 2021](#)), while those with higher levels were more likely to seek reliance on religion ([Perry et al. 2020](#)). The sceptical attitudes of believers towards state restrictions and the view that the restrictions constituted a violation of religious freedom was also reported in American studies ([DeFranza et al. 2021](#)). It is important to note, however, that such research into social attitudes towards government-imposed restrictions are scarce, especially those that address religion. Nationwide opinion polls conducted in Poland showed that the public attitudes towards restrictions clearly evolved as the citizens became accustomed to the pandemic status quo, the changes in infection rates, and the growing availability of vaccinations ([CBOS 2022a](#)). In contrast, a Spring 2022 Eurobarometer survey found that Poles were more likely than other EU societies to consider the government restrictions unjustified ([Eurobarometer 2022](#)).

From a media studies perspective, a study of the epidemic restrictions in Poland and their consequences for religious freedom does not represent either a principal or a self-contained research category. This issue has already been explored indirectly, in the context of media discourse studies on the perceptions of religious life and the functioning of the Catholic Church during the pandemic, including the relationship between the Church and the state authorities (Fłasiński 2020; Stachowska 2020; Rybka et al. 2021; Chmielewski et al. 2022; Hall and Kołodziejka 2021; Grotowska 2022; Mojżyn 2021; Wadowski and Szulich-Kałuża 2021; Leśniczak 2022). Investigations into the role of the media in shaping religiosity and religious communication have also been carried out, as well as into media activity and media exploitation, including religious and social networks in the context of the pandemic (Pastwa 2020; Przywara et al. 2021; Kindziuk 2021; CBOS 2022c; Boguszewski 2022).

As can be seen in this literature review, only a few studies published so far have recognised the importance of the Church's response to the epidemic restrictions, and addressed them in their research. However, so far these issues have not been subjected to a comprehensive examination. Taking into account the legal, pragmalinguistic, theological, social and media aspects of the issue, the present article attempts to fill this gap in the research.

### *1.3. The State Restrictions on the Freedom to Practise Religion—An Outline*

Between 13 March and 30 June 2020, the Polish restrictions on the freedom to practise religion were regulated by nine consecutive legal acts, each of which was amended several times. On average, every ten days there was a legislative shift that affected the conditions of the Church's mission, and which had to be taken into account both in her activities and communications. Beginning with the enforcement of the Regulation of the Minister of Health of 13 March 2020, which introduced a state of epidemic threat in the territory of the Republic of Poland, limits on participants in religious ceremonies were imposed. However, it never developed into a general prohibition on holding public religious assemblies (although there was a periodic total ban on other kinds of public gatherings), and only in the period with the most serious restrictions the limit in question was reduced to five people per ceremony. A week after Easter (which was celebrated on 12 April 2020), the applicable limits were, for the first time, made dependent on the area volume of the place of the gathering (15 sq. m. first and then 10 sq. m. per attendee; by contrast, the number of people allowed in retail establishments was legally dependent on the number of checkouts from as early as 1 April 2020). The largest loosening of restrictions on the number of participants in religious ceremonies took place before the 2020 summer holidays, when the Council of Ministers enforced its Regulation of 29 May 2020. Pursuant to this act, the only restriction retained, introduced one month after the first batch of restrictions, was the obligation to cover the mouth and nose while inside religious (but also other types of) buildings (which, however, did not apply to the ministers). It should also be added that even during the lockdown phase, there was an exception which allowed people to leave their home if they planned to participate in religious services (Stanisz 2021, pp. 146–48).

In assessing the severity of Poland's restrictions on the freedom to practise religion during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, and juxtaposing them against the background of the parallel restrictions introduced in other European countries at the same time, one has to conclude that the Polish legal solutions qualify as moderate. As Alexis A. de La Ferrière found out, more lenient legal arrangements were in place in Bulgaria, Spain and Hungary. The Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Sweden experienced a similar level of restrictions. In contrast, the vast majority of European countries experienced farther-reaching restrictions, with their level described by de La Ferrière as high or very high. These latter states tended to suspend public religious ceremonies on a regular basis, and in countries with a very high restriction level, places of worship were closed (de La Ferrière 2020; OSCE 2020; Mazurkiewicz 2021, pp. 4–6).

It should be noted that, after the initial epidemic restrictions were enforced, the admissibility of their introduction via executive acts had been legitimately questioned in Poland by renowned experts, including the Ombudsman<sup>3</sup>. Although this situation was by no means unique to Poland<sup>4</sup>, it undoubtedly contributed to the rise in attitudes of discontent, distrust and even opposition to the decisions of the state authorities in some groups in society.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that the Holy See's stance towards the epidemic restrictions on the freedom to practise religion was marked by a deep understanding of the grave circumstances. The official Vatican documents not only explicitly recommended the adaptation of liturgical rites to the situation at hand, but even suggested that "in affected countries, where there are restrictions on the gathering and movement of people, bishops and priests should celebrate the rites of Holy Week without the physical participation of the faithful."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Research Methodology

Dictated by the subject matter of our analysis, and by the need to ensure interdisciplinary dialogue, this study adopts the methodological framework delineated by Joseph Cardijn in his paradigm ("see—judge—act") (see Przygoda 2011; Sands 2018; Szymczak 2020). In the first phase ('see'), which corresponds to the 'Analysing' section of the article, each scientific discipline has provided research material to address the issue from its specific angle. In its second phase ('judge'), which corresponds to the 'Discussion' section of the article, an interdisciplinary dialogue was undertaken in the light of the teaching and pastoral practice of the Catholic Church. In this way, the topic is not approached in a field-specific manner, and the research outcomes in each discipline are not to be interpreted autonomously, as they are subject to a common evaluation from a theological-pastoral perspective. Also, the third stage of the research ('act') is not a collection of loose elements, but interdisciplinary conclusions and recommendations, referring to the salvific mission of the Church, which correspond to the 'Conclusions' section of the article.

Content analysis was the method applied to explore the ecclesiastical documents and state normative acts, taking into account the principles of the interpretation of legal and canon law texts. The collected media material was also quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. In order to achieve this, we focused on the following text components: (a) thematic categories and their indicators (thematic content analysis); (b) the presence or absence of categories (quantitative content analysis); (c) meanings and associations with categories (qualitative content analysis); and (d) the popularity of categories (frequency analysis).

The sociological research, designed to provide information on how Catholic believers in Poland perceived the Church's attitude towards the state anti-Covid restrictions, was carried out via the online survey method (CAWI) between February and April 2021 (the period of the second wave of the pandemic). The respondents were adults at least 18 years old, formally in the Roman Catholic community, and proportionally representing all of Poland's dioceses. The nationwide survey sample included people with a relatively high level of religious commitment and a potentially strong awareness of the restrictions on religious practices. A total of 1058 respondents took part, and their responses were then processed quantitatively in order to determine the social impact of specific opinions<sup>6</sup>. The conclusions from the sociological analysis were contrasted with the results of CBOS surveys (Bożewicz 2020; CBOS 2020c, 2022f).

The principal research material consisted of official Church documents whose author-sender represented the Church hierarchy, and which were texts of a legal-administrative and regulatory character (160 documents in total)<sup>7</sup>. This collection is dominated by texts related to individual dioceses (the documents of diocesan bishops and curial representatives). Of a supra-diocesan nature are the communiqués of the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops, regulations from the Permanent Council of the Conference, instructions from the Episcopal Presidium to bishops, etc. The content of these documents was juxtaposed

with the documents of the universal Church, issued in connection with the spread of the pandemic in its first wave (the decrees and notes of the Apostolic Penitentiary and documents from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments—36 in total), as well with the relevant regulations of the applicable Polish legislation adopted at the same time (primarily, the regulations of the Minister of Health and the Council of Ministers concerning restrictions, and orders and prohibitions related to the state of epidemic threat or the state of epidemic). Didactic texts (pastoral letters, sermons and homilies delivered by bishops, 27 in total) were also subject to comparative analysis.

The sociological research was conducted on material collected from questionnaires. The sociological corpus consisted of the results of a nationwide survey conducted online, covering a total of 1058 of the Catholic Church faithful in Poland. They represented all dioceses and age groups. However, since the survey was conducted on-line and was voluntary in nature, its results cannot be considered as being fully representative of the entire Catholic population in Poland. Nonetheless, the size and characteristics of the research sample allow for general conclusions about the prevailing attitudes of the Catholic faithful in Poland. In contrast, a media image of the Church's response to restrictions on religious practice was reconstructed from texts published on the websites of national Catholic portals and weeklies between 13 March and 30 September 2020<sup>8</sup>.

### **3. Analysing the Church's Response to Restrictions on the Freedom to Practise Religion**

#### *3.1. The Content of Ecclesiastical Documents: Legal and Pragmalinguistic Explorations*

Our analysis of the content of the official statements made by representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland during the period of the first wave of the pandemic leads us to the conclusion that the intention of their authors was to maximise the effectiveness of the state restrictions. The position of the bishops appears to be essentially unanimous, which must have been significantly influenced by the appeals issued by the President and the Permanent Council of the Conference of Polish Bishops. On the day of the announcement of the first batch of epidemic restrictions (13 March 2020), and acting in line with their content, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki was already urging diocesan bishops "to issue a decree that a maximum of 50 people may remain inside the church during each Mass or service" (XVI.0.3). The day before, the Permanent Council of the Conference of Polish Bishops had already appealed for the granting of dispensations from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass if the faithful fell within one of the indicated categories (the elderly, people with symptoms of infection, school children and adolescents with their immediate carers, and people who feared contracting the disease). These dispensed were explicitly encouraged to avail of their right. At the same time, it was announced that the scheduled Confirmation ceremonies had been postponed, and that school retreats and the pilgrimage of high school graduates to Jasna Góra had been suspended (XVI.0.4).

Similar appeals were made by representatives of the Conference of Polish Bishops, following the enforcement of the regulation introducing the state of epidemic (20 March) and again after the tightening of restrictions on religious practices that followed a few days later (24 March). In the document entitled *Indications of the Praesidium of the Conference of Polish Bishops for bishops regarding the liturgical celebrations in the coming weeks* [Wskazania Prezydium Konferencji Episkopatu Polski dla biskupów odnośnie do sprawowania czynności liturgicznych w najbliższych tygodniach], published on 21 March 2020, a clear reminder was given of, for example, the necessity to limit the number of participants in religious congregations in order to comply with the applicable regulations, along with the related necessity to grant further dispensations (XVI.0.5). Furthermore, the 24 March 2020 communiqué from the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops featured an appeal to take into account the new restrictions on the number of attendees in religious ceremonies (five people) "in the context of upcoming celebrations, including the liturgy of the Holy Week" (XVI.0.6).

Calls and incentives to comply with the government restrictions were also repeated in other documents endorsed by diverse bodies within the Conference of Polish Bishops,

whose overriding intention was to prevent or minimise an upsurge in infections. In its statement of 26 March 2020 (entitled *A Time of Responsibility, Solidarity, Justice*), the Social Affairs Council included an appeal “to continue [...] the patient and noble effort” to constrain activities “pursuant to what is expected by the public authorities,” adding that the restrictions “have been administered justly” (B 27). Furthermore, in its note of 31 March 2020 entitled *Jesus Lives and Wants You to Live* and devoted to the restrictions on “freedom of movement and assembly,” the Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith observed that, although the restrictions are “particularly painful for the faithful, deprived of direct access to the Eucharist and the sacraments of the Church,” they nevertheless appear “necessary to combat the epidemic” (XVI.0.7).

Explicit appeals to respect the state restrictions were also almost unequivocally voiced by diocesan bishops, accompanied by their granting of the suggested dispensations. In the early days of the period under analysis, it was pointed out more than once that respecting the restrictions in question should be seen as “an expression of love thy neighbour” (III.1.1, III.2.2), and that the source of the obligation to respect them lies in “our responsibility to each other” (II.1.3). Accordingly, an appeal was made to the faithful “to remain at home on these days, taking advantage of the dispensations granted” (VI.1.5; VI.2.1), and it was even stated that, in the present situation, refraining from attending Mass was a “moral obligation” (XII.2.2). There were also appeals to the clergy that, when fulfilling their pastoral service, they needed to strictly follow “the secular laws in force, the recommendations of the Chief Sanitary Inspector and the authorities at all levels” (VII.2.3). Some documents issued by the bishops in the early days of the period in question contained suggestions for specific measures in parishes to ensure that the limit of participants in religious ceremonies imposed by the state authorities be respected. It was recommended, for example, that information about the applicable restrictions should be posted on church doors (although this was not yet a legal obligation at the time) and that, if the circumstances in a particular parish warranted it, appropriate services should be arranged in those parishes which were in charge of guaranteeing compliance with the relevant legal limits (e.g., I.3.2; III.1.1; VI.4.4).

Thus, it can be observed that, generally, the documents under analysis displayed an almost undisputed directive nature, expressed in the form of absolute/categorical compliance with the state sanitary restrictions. The Church hierarchs made parish ministers the enforcers of the state regulations. A conditional degree of liberty to interpret the recommendations was provided, formulated in terms of prudent discretion. At the same time, this freedom could be expressed both in the relaxation of requirements—or, more precisely, the application of individual solutions within these limits—and in their tightening as well. Of particular importance here is that the decisions implemented (including those concerning the number of congregation attendees) were sometimes accompanied by a canon law sanction. It was held that “having regard to the gravity of the situation and the responsibility for the health and lives of our brothers and sisters, in accordance with Can. 273 and 274 para. 2, the enforcement of these regulations is unconditional, in the context of the awareness of the accountability under secular and ecclesiastical law” (III.1.1; VI.4.4; XII.3.3; also I.3.2; III.1.3).

The prohibitions on religious practices were expressed by the Church hierarchy as being painful and extremely difficult or, at least, not easy decisions, while the documents themselves contained numerous requests, addressed both to priests and directly to the faithful, for their cooperation and understanding. Disseminating these decisions at the parish level, and acting as secondary message senders, the clergy were obliged to explain why they were indispensable. An analysis of the source documents has led the authors to the conclusion that the category of care, defined as concern for the welfare of the faithful, was paramount among that category set which was used textually to justify the need to take (and implement) decisions of one kind or another. The documents reveal a clear correlation of the care argument with the image of the priest—a good shepherd. Accountability, solidarity and unity also played their role in justifying the decisions. While solidarity was expressed in terms of the identity of the voice of the state authorities with the ecclesiastical

hierarchy, unity referred to communities of the clergy together with the faithful. The spirit of unity was part of a commitment to obedience, part of building a community sense of security. Another category applied by the sender to influence the recipients' behaviour, and being at the same time a perfect illustration of the asymmetrical sender-receiver relationship, was the commitment in conscience. In general, a religious interpretation (and justification) of the restrictions imposed was only rarely offered to the faithful in official documents. The key concepts used here were renunciation and sacrifice, fitting in well with the Lenten period and coinciding with the first wave of the pandemic. Both concepts overlapped with arguments regarding responsibility, care and love of one's neighbour.

The stance taken by the bishops on compliance with the restrictions remained materially unchanged thereafter, including over the Easter period. The bishops almost unanimously kept calling for compliance with the restrictions, although the calls noticeably less frequently mentioned the canonical obligation to comply with them. Instead, they sometimes explicitly forbade clerics from formulating any form of "criticism, violation or incitement to disrespect the state regulations" (II.1.2), and obliged them "to strictly adhere to the rules aimed at curbing the spread of the epidemic" (X.1.2; also IX.2.3) or "commissioned" them "with the task of seeing to it that the limits indicated are not exceeded by any means during the services," explaining that "we are not dealing with a persecution of the Church when it is laudable to stand by the liturgical assemblies as a witness to the faith, but clearly, with the responsible cooperation of the ministers with the civil authorities, to save as many of the faithful as possible from the catastrophe of the epidemic" (XIV.3.1). It was also common for previously granted dispensations to be extended (if, of course, they had not previously been granted until revoked) and to finally cover all of the diocesan faithful.

Particularly telling of the attitude of some bishops to the restrictions in force were their own decisions to impose restrictions on religious life that exceeded those requirements imposed by the state authorities. In some dioceses, the opportunity to attend Mass was explicitly limited to only those ordering a Mass intention, and, in the case of a funeral, to the immediate family only (e.g., I.1.2; XIII.3.3; V.1.5; many other bishops recommended this). The most far-reaching decisions were taken by the Bishop of Gliwice, who had already ruled in a decree of 14 March 2020 that "scheduled Mass times in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Gliwice are cancelled. Ministers are to celebrate the prescribed Masses in parish churches or chapels, according to the intentions set for those days, but without the participation of the faithful (*sine populo*)" (V.2.1)<sup>9</sup>. Going further than what the Permanent Council of the Conference of Polish Bishops recommended, some bishops also decided to suspend Lenten parish retreats, the joint celebration of Lenten services and all meetings in the first stages of the epidemic (e.g., I.3.2; III.1.1; VI.4.4).

The appeals by the bishops to respect state restrictions did not completely cease even after the restrictions were relaxed in the second half of April 2020. However, there was also encouragement for the faithful to gradually return to churches (e.g., III.1.3; IX.2.2) and, for example, to attend Mass at least once a month (I.2.4). An appeal "to consistently comply with the current sanitary recommendations" (i.e., the still binding obligation to cover the mouth and the nose, or the obligation to keep an appropriate physical distance) was repeated by the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops as late as 9 June 2020, i.e., after the limits on participants for religious ceremonies had already been completely lifted for the holiday months. Encouraging the bishops to revoke the general dispensations previously granted, Archbishop Gądecki also suggested at the time that they should be maintained for certain categories of the faithful (the elderly, those with symptoms of infection, and those who were afraid of infection). Decisions taken by diocesan bishops were in line with this appeal (e.g., II.3.2; VI.1.4; VII.1.3; IX.1.4; XI.2.3; XII.1.5; XIII.3.2). On more than one occasion, bishops also called for continued compliance with the state regulations in force in order to jointly contribute to "creating a sense of security for all those wishing to attend church services" (VI.1.4; similarly: VI.4.3).

Summarising this part of our research, it can be observed that during the period in question (as well as later), Polish bishops strongly urged compliance with the state restric-

tions on the freedom to practise religion. Exceptional voices aired episcopal standpoints reliant solely on the fact that restrictions had been established by the state authorities (XI.1.2; XI.1.3). As can be inferred from the open letter of 15 April 2020 from the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops to the Prime Minister of Poland (In—5), ecclesiastical support for the restrictions continued in spite of growing dissatisfaction among bishops with the format of the then-current legislation. In the context of the anticipated return to a 50-person limit for religious attendees, and taking into account the regulations already in place at that time, which made the permitted number of people present at the one time in retail establishments dependent on the number of checkouts, the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops drew attention to “the need for more consistent, proportionate and fair criteria for limiting the number of worshippers in churches.” As is clearly inferable from this letter, this was already his second communication with the Prime Minister on the issue (the first, however, was not made public). It should also be noted that the letter included expressions of respect with which the Catholic Church in Poland welcomed “the measures taken by the Polish State aimed at protecting the health and saving lives of Poles in the pandemic circumstances”. A few days later, a flawed adequacy in the provisions in force as of 20 April 2020 was also pointed out in a joint statement by representatives of the Catholic Church, the Churches affiliated to the Polish Ecumenical Council and the Muslim Religious Union (In—4). The President of the Conference of Polish Bishops spoke in a much sharper manner almost a year and a half after the outbreak of the pandemic, undoubtedly expressing the frustration that had been building up for months and had been deliberately suppressed. In an article published in one of the most widely read Catholic weeklies, the President described the state’s treatment of the Church during the epidemic as “unprecedented.” Indeed, as argued by Gądecki, the state authorities had carried out “acts which hitherto only ecclesiastical authority had been entitled to under canon law, and only for the most serious of reasons.” Formulating allegations that the state violated the Constitution and the Concordat, he acknowledged that the state at the time had taken “actions [...] parallel to an ecclesiastical interdict covering the whole country. For the Church, there has been imposed a way of dealing with religious matters” (M-N5).

### *3.2. The Church’s Response to the Epidemic Restrictions on the Freedom to Practise Religion as Perceived by the Faithful*

The strategies and concrete steps that the official institutions of the Catholic Church in Poland took to comply with the state regulations, and which were subsequently implemented at the parish level, met with various reactions from the faithful. In fact, it was the faithful—church attendees, engaging in or being served with various pastoral activities—who directly felt the burden of the restrictions, yet who were fully familiar with their justification: to protect one’s health and prevent uncontrolled COVID-19 infections. Analysing the collective and individual attitudes of the faithful, one cannot ignore the wider socio-cultural contexts in which these attitudes arose, evolved and manifested themselves. Although the emergence of these attitudes was directly influenced by the Church’s practical, pastoral and communicative actions, their basis was anchored in the deeply rooted beliefs, cultural conventions and behavioural patterns of Polish society.

Among the socio-cultural contexts that can help understand how Poles assessed the Church’s response to anti-covid curbs in Poland, the following seem to be of the utmost relevance:

The first is the level of trust in the institutions of the state, the Church and in medicine. In Poland, as in other democratic countries, state institutions do not enjoy a high level of trust, and the epidemic contributed to its further decline (Eurofound 2020). Seen against the background of trust in the state, the Catholic Church in Poland still enjoys a relatively high level of public trust, despite an obvious downward trend (CBOS 2022b, 2020c). At the same time, a growing polarisation of attitudes among Poles towards the institutional Church has become a matter of fact. In the case of the medical services, the social attitudes observed indicate ambivalence rather than polarisation: a situation that is interesting in that attitudes

concerning the medical services had already been quite polarised before COVID-19. On the one hand, the medical and health services enjoy an idealised image among Poles, with an emphasis on their omnipotence; yet, on the other, they are associated with increasing dysfunction, problems, inefficiency and medical errors (Nowak and Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2018). Sociological studies conducted in Poland during the epidemic indicate that the healthcare system was critically assessed by the public (CBOS 2021), and that it did not inspire confidence among Poles (Eurofound 2020), who were more likely to seek advice on the coronavirus from their relatives rather than from medical experts (Smith 2020).

The second criterion to mention is the specificity of Polish religiosity. Polish religiosity is characterised by unique features, incomparable with other societies (Dyczewski 2015; Mariański 2004; Wadowski 2019). The tradition of attending Sunday Mass, periodic services and collective public church celebrations on major religious festivals is deeply rooted in Polish religious culture. Faith is expressed primarily through practice, and more so in public rather than privately (CBOS 2020b). Participation in religious rituals is particularly common among senior citizens (CBOS 2022c), and, therefore, among those who were the most exposed to the risk of COVID-19 infection. One of the important motivations for limiting the number of participants in religious gatherings was precisely this desire to protect the elderly.

The third factor is the specificity of family relationships in Poland. Poles generally maintain intense family contacts, get together during major celebrations, and care for intergenerational links (Dyczewski 1994). From the earliest days of the epidemic, the public was informed that the coronavirus posed a particular threat to the elderly and the sick. To protect the older generations, other family members were also expected to limit the extent of their social contacts, minimising the risk of viral transmission. In many cases, this meant limiting visits to elderly family members, who were additionally affected by loneliness.

The fourth criterion concerns the unprecedented spread of the epidemic. Over the past few generations, Polish society had basically no experience of an epidemic; thus the coronavirus epidemic was a major turning point (CBOS 2020a). New behavioural patterns were required, new regulations introduced in various areas of social and economic life which required compliance, people had to learn to perceive and evaluate their own and others' behaviour in a new way, and they had to think differently about their own future and that of the whole world. Restrictions on attending religious gatherings were part of this general trend of change in attitudes and behaviour that were formerly taken for granted.

The fifth factor to consider is global trends. Although it was the state institutions in Poland that directly introduced various types of restrictions on religious practices, then implemented at the parish level, supranational health organisations also issued specific recommendations on the subject (WHO 2020). Recommendations and restrictions of various kinds were thus not a means of restricting religious freedom which were only applied by the secular state authorities in Poland against the Church, but which, to a large extent, expressed and reflected in worldwide trends.

The sixth factor of relevance here is the attitude towards the current government in Poland. The role of the political context in Poland at the time cannot be ignored in explaining how public opinion responded to restrictions on religious practices. The restrictions were introduced by a government enjoying relatively stable public support at the time (CBOS 2022e, 2022d). The government represented a political orientation that, in terms of its worldview, fell relatively close to that of the Catholic Church (Guzek 2019; Leśniczak 2020), which won it a relatively high level of support among the deeply religious and senior citizens, who were accustomed to personal participation in community worship. The specific actions taken by the state authorities in response to the various aspects, stages and consequences of the epidemic met with ambiguous reactions in Polish society and provoked heated debates between rival parties on the Polish political scene, along with their supporters. Given the fixed, strong political divide in Poland, it is reasonable to assume that, in many cases, evaluations of the enforced sanitary regulations were conditioned

primarily by the general attitude towards the politicians in power during the epidemic, rather than by their relevance and severity (CBOS 2022a, 2020d).

The seventh factor influencing our analysis is the importance of the media in creating the image of the epidemic and in communicating the restrictions. During the COVID-19 epidemic, the public role and responsibility of the media grew significantly, owing to the expectations regarding reporting on the epidemic, countering its spread, but also commenting upon the actions undertaken by public institutions (Macleod 2021). News of the rapid spread of the epidemic and the increasing numbers of victims worldwide completely dominated the media coverage for some time. This information was usually complemented with content on the restrictions and limitations imposed, including on religious activities, in different countries. Media audiences in Poland, including Catholics, were therefore quite familiar with the prohibition regarding church congregations in France, were able to watch Pope Francis pray alone in St. Peter's Square, and were informed immediately about the number of infections at funerals, the growing numbers of the infected, and even the deaths of active ministers.

The above are not an exhaustive list of the factors that could potentially influence the attitude of the faithful towards how the institution of the Church in Poland responded to the state anti-epidemic regulations. Although they cannot be treated in deterministic terms, they can nevertheless be interpreted as explanatory factors, or at least as cognitive facilitators in comprehending the opinions of Polish Catholics as presented below.

In our research into the perceptions of the faithful regarding how the Catholic Church in Poland dealt with the epidemic restrictions, we asked the respondents the following initial question: "There are opinions that the Church was too submissive to the restrictions imposed by the government, but there are also opinions that the restrictions on religious attendance were too lenient. What is your opinion on this subject?"

The dominant assessment by the respondents was that the nationwide restrictions affected the Church as much as other institutions, and that the Church had little say in the matter (54.4%). This was admitted more often by females (55.8%) than males (52.1%), most often by those aged 45–54 (56.6%) and 35–44 (55.3%), most often living in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants (61%), most often describing themselves as rather unreligious (70.6%), and most often attending Mass only on major holidays and for important periodical celebrations (72.4%).

Less frequently reported was the respondents' acceptance of the less explicit opinion that the Church may have yielded too easily to the government restrictions, but that this was a security-specific situation (19.7%). This opinion was also more often shared among females (21.4%) than males (16.8%), most often by those aged 65 and over (35%), living in rural areas (23.6%) and small towns of up to 20,000 inhabitants (23.7%), describing themselves as deeply religious (21.5%) and attending Mass at least once a week (22.1%).

19.2% of the respondents strongly agreed with the stance that the Church had yielded too easily to the restrictions. There were more males (23.8%) than females (16.4%) in this group, most often aged 25–34 (22.2%), most often living in towns with a population between 100,000 and 500,000 (21.4%), describing themselves as deeply religious (27.7%) and attending Mass every few months (25%).

The remaining 6.7% of respondents said they had no opinion on whether the Church was or was not too submissive to the government restrictions. These respondents were aged up to 24 years (13.4%), living in towns with a population between 100,000 and 500,000 (9.2%), considered themselves to be total atheists (84.6%) and almost never or hardly ever attended Mass (46.8%).

To sum up, the results of our sociological explorations indicate that just over half of the respondents fully accepted the Catholic Church's complete compliance with the state restrictions. About one fifth had some doubts in this regard, and saw the restrictions as primarily serving the safety of religious congregations. Furthermore, around a fifth of the respondents expressed a strong conviction that the Church had yielded too easily to the government restrictions and therefore—as can be inferred—they found no justification

for this attitude on behalf of the hierarchy and the Church institutions. These findings correspond with the results of a nationwide online survey (covering not only those who formally belonged to the Roman Catholic Church) conducted during the first wave of the epidemic in spring 2020. It was noted there that 48% of the respondents accepted the restrictions and observed them out of concern for their own health and that of others, 27% observed most restrictions but not all, and less scrupulously, noting their negative sides, and a further 25% showed an attitude of indifference to the restrictions, observed them selectively, and without any concern for their own health or that of others. Stronger religious beliefs were also found to foster attitudes that were more critical of the government's anti-epidemic regulations (Boguszewski et al. 2021).

In the light of these results, it can be said that the attitudes towards the government restrictions displayed by the participants in our study who declared themselves to be Catholics do not significantly diverge from the results for Polish society as a whole, which naturally translates into a general assessment of how the institutional Church responded to the restrictions. More often than not, the faithful accepted this response, but almost as often they expressed more or less critical views of it.

### *3.3. The Media Image of the Epidemic Restrictions on the Freedom to Practise Religion and the Ecclesiastical Responses*

The issue of the pandemic restrictions on the function of the Church in Poland surfaced in the national media, which educated its audience loudly and clearly, warning them of the risks, and appealing for responsible behaviour and compliance with the sanitary restrictions (Flasiński 2020, p. 71; Rybka et al. 2021, pp. 103–104). In general, there was a consensus in both the Polish and foreign media that the COVID-19 outbreak posed a threat to human health and life, and thus precautions were needed to ensure the safety of participants in religious services (Leśniczak 2022, p. 185; Rončáková 2022, p. 140). The Polish Catholic media, on the one hand, conveyed the official line of communication of the Church, while, on the other hand, they commented on and interpreted the statements of the bishops, trying to ensure that the message behind the content should reach the widest possible audience. They were helpful in encouraging the faithful to pray and participate in the liturgy of the Mass in an intermediary way. Many press titles started offering liturgical guides, and answered questions from the faithful about watching Mass on TV and the Internet (Kindziuk 2021, p. 51). Research by CBOS indicates that the pandemic contributed to an increase in the use of religious services, especially broadcasts of religious ceremonies (also among seniors), but also of social media. For 41% of respondents, the use of religious websites complemented their religious activities during the pandemic, and 43% of those visiting religious websites declared that, in their case, the frequency of use increased (CBOS 2022c, pp. 6 and 9).

A qualitative-quantitative analysis of the source material allows us to conclude that the media reactions to the epidemic restrictions can be situated along an axis from strongly approving through cautiously approving to disapproving. Overwhelmingly approving reactions dominated the media space. They were represented by texts encouraging the observance of the sanitary recommendations by the clergy and the lay faithful. In the quantitative breakdown of content analysis, the following arguments were highly ranked: commitment/encouragement to observe sanitary rules at places of worship (ranked first out of a total of 14 arguments on websites) and observance of sanitary rules in places of worship (ranked fourth out of a total of 20 arguments in weekly newspapers). Reactions of approval and obedience to the state authorities are conspicuous in the quoted statements by the Polish hierarchy regarding the state sanitary restrictions and in journalistic commentaries and interpretations of the official communications of the Church. The list of the most frequent speakers includes the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki (21 times), Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski (14), Archbishop Wiktor Skworc (13), Archbishop Wojciech Polak (9), Bishop Jan Kopiec (7) and Archbishop Grzegorz Ryś (7). Archbishop Gądecki's media appearances were cited the most extensively. These mostly

concerned comments on the state regulations (M-A4, M-D2, M-D3, M-D5). The president of the Conference of Polish Bishops appealed for dispensation to attend Sunday Mass, disseminated the principles of receiving sacraments in a cautious way in line with the sanitary regime, encouraged the use of online religious broadcasts, appealed to priests to remind participants in services to cover their mouths and noses, and thanked them for following the recommendations consistently and conscientiously. In general, he asked “for prudence and consistency in applying the sanitary recommendations” (M-A4). Such approving reactions were reinforced by requests directed to the clergy: “Brother priests, let us be models of obedience in regard to the sanitary regulations” (M-A5). The Archbishop also urged the bishops to give a clear, decisive, bold and even authoritarian explanation of the current situation to their communities (M-O1), including admonishing those who went against the recommendations of the sanitary services and the Conference of Polish Bishops: “Have the courage to admonish your parish priest when he goes against the recommendations of the services and the Conference of Polish Bishops” (M-W1). In the appeal quoted above, one can also see a cautious criticism of the laxity on the part of the Church authorities.

Approving reactions should also cover these emotional appeals encouraging the faithful to adopt an altruistic attitude, in which love for one’s neighbour manifested itself in an ethic of spiritual closeness, solidarity with the sick and those suffering. The ultimate expression of these virtues would be the ethic of physical detachment, undertaken for the good of all (Perzyński 2021, p. 9). There have also been media statements criticising the clergy, altar servers and worshippers who did not observe the sanitary rules; as such, they need to be considered part of the approving line of argument. One could read, for example, that “[i]n many churches, no respect to the sanitary requirements is in place, and no one motivates anyone else to obey the rules. To claim that the pandemic issue is exaggerated, or that communion in the hand is profane, represents a blatant disobedience to the Church” (M-A5); “Nor can I understand why so many lay Catholics disassociate themselves explicitly from the findings of the bishops, who recommend that the safety rules be followed” (M-O1); “Not so long ago I attended a video Mass where the celebrant had a procession of liturgists—the Bible was held in front of the reader, two people served the vessels at the same time, the celebrant and concelebrant generally did not keep their distance, and they drank from the same chalice. Why did they cling so tightly to the traditional Mass ritual? Thousands of spectators watched these scenes, wondering if the people in sanctifying grace were not susceptible to the coronavirus” (M-TP3).

The second type of reaction attested to in the media can be described as being of a less explicitly approving nature, posing questions about the legitimacy of the restrictions on the practices of religious life. As shown above, the overall media image of how the Church responded to the epidemic restrictions shows full approval and compliance with the sanitary regulations. As the outbreak unfolded, however, the media picked up on changes in the attitudes of the representatives of the Church. The Catholic weekly “Niedziela” quoted Archbishop Gądecki’s statement about the traumatic effect of the coronavirus on the unity of the Church and the inconsistency of the faithful, who too easily abandoned religious practices in churches, even though they regularly gathered in other public places: “(. . .) fear has also affected churches, i.e., the space that is created for community life. Concern about contracting the virus in a church has, in some situations, become incomparably greater than the fear of infection in other public places, such as supermarkets, post offices, banks, trains or trams. Hence, some people say ironically that the coronavirus is extremely pious: it seems only active in church spaces, and does not present a risk in other areas. (. . .) it will take time to rebuild our interpersonal relationships and our entire social life, including the full spectrum of religious practice” (M-N4). In these words, one can see the conviction of the negative consequences of the regulations restricting the exercise of the functions of the Church. They also imply that churches were treated in a more restrictive manner than secular premises. Among the cautiously approving reactions, one can classify those questions appearing in publications, which, in turn, raised questions on the validity of the

sanitary restrictions among the clergy: “Were and are the introduced restrictions related to the number of believers necessary? For us priests, this is a very difficult experience; something unprecedented (. . .) In circumstances like these, a priest feels lonely, as if he has lost something essential of his mission” (M-F3).

The third type of response is that media content with disapproving overtones regarding the respecting of the sanitary restrictions. The publications belonging to this group quoted opinions that were averse to the restrictions imposed: “The Church has stepped into the role of sanitary inspection” (M-D1); “The authors of the appeals (regarding the ban on the celebration of Mass) do not understand what the Church is or the role of its shepherds. The Church cannot be closed; it is her mission [to stay open]. The Eucharist has a salvific, and therefore also a healing, power” (M-F2). The extraordinary pastoral situation during the first period of the pandemic was conducive to controversial statements by clerical figures, which led to highly emotionally charged media debates. Their common denominator was resistance and critique of the restrictions and limitations imposed. The “anti-pandemic” narratives contradicted, although rather covertly, the official Episcopal documents and decisions. Claims even surfaced that the pandemic was a confabulation of state government or media corporations used to disrupt society, secularise community life, and that it was a planned attack so that the faithful could not receive the sacraments, and that the pandemic should be downplayed when juxtaposed against God’s omnipotence. Two examples are quoted here to illustrate the case in point. The first is a media statement by a clergyman: “(. . .) giving Holy Communion poses no risk whatsoever of (. . .) spreading any viruses, because it is a sacred act” (M-A3, see also: M-D6). The categorically negative comments regarding this opinion highlight the fact that the language of pastoral teaching should be clear, precise and free of ambiguity, and that the content communicated should be well thought out. The second example relates to press reactions to a letter from an archbishop. The author called on Catholics to be bold in using holy water and in receiving Holy Communion by mouth, and the letter was hailed in the media as an overt display of irresponsibility. One commentator observed: “The expression: ‘Jesus does not spread germs; we are safe in church’ is a mental shortcut that can easily mislead a simple man. Jesus does not spread germs, but the hygienically irresponsible distribution of the Eucharist can lead to infection” (M-N2). Nonetheless, the reactions of the weeklies can be described as mixed. “Tygodnik Powszechny” explicitly condemned the quoted statement, reading it as an encouragement to disregard the sanitary rules. “Gość Niedzielny” used a noticeably milder critique in reference to the archbishop’s statement: “(. . .) there would be no reason for criticism should these words be uttered beyond the pandemic context” (M-GN1). By contrast, “Niedziela” did not address the controversial statement at all, ignoring the media storm in the wake of the letter.

#### 4. Discussion

Taking into account the discussion above, and referring to the classification of attitudes displayed by religious communities towards the epidemic restrictions on freedom to manifest religion—as outlined in the introduction—one can conclude that the official attitude of representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland during the first wave of the pandemic was permeated by a strong drive for close cooperation with the state authorities. The restrictions on freedom to practise religion enforced under the provisions of applicable laws were never publicly challenged by the hierarchs during the first wave of the epidemic. Moreover, their attitude towards the restrictions can even be interpreted in terms of some sort of *bracchium ecclesiasticum*—an assurance by the church authorities of the validity of the decisions taken by the state. Absolute exceptions included statements promoting attitudes contrary to the recommendations of the sanitary services, while explicitly worded appeals for faithful compliance with the restrictions imposed prevailed. Admittedly, the course of time created space for confusion, caused by the perceived unfavourable treatment of church congregations by the state, which granted a more advantageous status to secular institutions or activities. Nonetheless, during the first wave of the pandemic, this confusion

did not lead to attitudes of formally aired opposition, even though it found an outlet in less official statements by some hierarchs.

The support that the representatives of the Church in Poland expressed for the state restrictions on the freedom to practise religion, despite at least periodic reservations about their form, was undoubtedly motivated by a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of the society, which could indeed be threatened by additional factors further destabilising an already unstable situation. From the perspective of the state, the institutional Church in Poland has thus proved to be a responsible partner, guided by the right priorities.

However, looking at the issues under analysis from the perspective of the faithful, one is forced to offer somewhat different conclusions. Some scholars even claim that the Polish bishops were excessively “compliant” to the state, which emboldened the authorities to set restrictions that were too far-reaching (Maroń 2021, pp. 42 and 46; for a more radical view of the issue, see Sitarz 2021, pp. 337–44).

The results of a nationwide online questionnaire for the Catholic Church faithful held in the spring of 2021—as discussed above—indicate that the respondents mostly showed an attitude of moderate acceptance of the imposed restrictions. More than half of the respondents admitted that the anti-pandemic restrictions were nationwide and without exception, which meant that the institution of the Church had no choice but to comply. The interpretation of this position can be twofold. On the one hand, this perspective may unveil a way of comprehending the Church primarily as one of many social institutions, with its autonomy limited by social factors. In view of the universal obligation of all entities operating in the state to comply with governmental regulations, the religious functions and spiritual aspect of the Church activities lose their supremacy. The second interpretation may refer to the fact that the anti-covid regulations were almost universally accepted by the Church entities and hierarchy, were reproduced and clarified in various communications to the faithful, and enforced at the level of individual parishes. The faithful may therefore have regarded them simply as a particular implementation of the state regulations and their adaptation to specific local circumstances. Thus, they were not perceived in terms of restrictions on freedom to practice religion by the state authorities, but rather as the implementation of general regulations to a specific context by Church authorities.

This second interpretation is close to the views expressed by a fifth of respondents in our sociological research, who felt that the Church may have yielded too easily to the government restrictions, but that this step was justified by the need to ensure the safety of participants in religious services and gatherings. The primacy given to protecting life and health over the ecclesiastical spiritual mission and collective participation in religious practices is evident in this case. Opinions of this type also reveal a degree of doubt on the part of the faithful as to how legitimate the attitude adopted by the Church towards the state restrictions was. These doubts are even more pronounced and explicitly expressed in another type of opinion voiced by one fifth of the participants in our research, where the respondents claimed that the Church yielded too easily to the restrictions. It is impossible to determine precisely whether this explicit assessment of the Church’s response relates to the degree of subordination or, in general, to the act of subjugating the Church to the state, assuming the position of the supreme regulator of issues that it has not been in charge of up to now. Such opinions may be an expression of the concern of the faithful about state interference in matters hitherto regarded as the internal affairs of religious communities, and, hence, an infringement on the personal freedom of their members. It is also possible to interpret them as a manifestation of the frustration of the faithful with the attitude of the Church, as her compliance with the anti-covid restrictions proved more important than the spiritual needs of individuals and communities.

Generally speaking, during the first wave of the epidemic, the faithful of the Catholic Church in Poland most often yielded to the restrictions imposed and accepted their justification, yet quite a few of them also expressed weak or strong doubts as to the degree of submissiveness of the Church to the state legislation.

At the same time, as regards the allegations of the excessive submissiveness of the representatives of the Church in Poland to the state restrictions, it must be noted that the restrictions—while sometimes inappropriately balanced and marred by flawed enforcement practice—were not fundamentally unjustified, and were doubtlessly implemented with the common good in mind. As noted above, they were among the mildest in Europe. Assessing their adequacy during the first period of the epidemic was particularly difficult, and even today, graver criticism usually concerns the lack of a fair balance between restrictions in different spheres of life, rather than their general validity. One cannot be surprised, therefore, that compliance—understood as the opposite of resistance or rebellion—appeared to the representatives of the Church at the time to be appropriate. The content of the letter of 15 April 2020 issued by the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops also represents a voice against such criticism. After all, the letter was an appeal to change the adopted regulations, which were judged to be formally flawed. The author of the letter—representing the institution of the Church in Poland—cannot therefore be accused of a lack of a critical outlook. Furthermore, his intervention wielded a positive impact on the state regulations, which further confirms the appropriateness of the course of action adopted. In the regulation of 19 April 2020, the limit on the number of persons to attend religious ceremonies inside churches—in accordance with the demands of the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops and the requirements of proportionality—was, for the first time, correlated with the size of the area (albeit with the adoption of a conversion rate that was slightly less favourable than the one proposed in the letter).

On the other hand, the practice that was attested to during the first weeks of the epidemic, where the state regulations to restrict the freedom to practise religion were given a legal canon sanction, need to be approached with reservation. The practice of recognising the validity of secular legal norms under the canonical regime is, of course, known to the Church (see in particular Can. 197, Can. 1290 and Can. 1714 CIC-1983; see [Sobański 1999](#), pp. 10–11). However, one needs to keep in mind that practices of this kind should be implemented with respect to the principle of autonomy and independence that applies to the relations between the State and the Church. This is actually accepted both in the teaching of the Church (see Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, no. 76), as well as in the Concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Poland of 28 July 1993 (art. 1), in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 (art. 25 para. 3), and—using slightly different wording—in the Act of 17 May 1989 on the relationship of the State to the Catholic Church in the Republic of Poland (art. 2). This legal merger has its obvious consequences in the mutual relationship between canon law and state law: systems that remain independent of each other and by definition cover matters belonging respectively (exclusively) to the area of competence of each community ([Krukowski 2000](#), pp. 105–23; [Sobczyk 2005](#), pp. 149–98; [Zarzycki 2014](#), pp. 69–117; [Stanisz 2015](#), pp. 159–85; [Stanisz 2020](#), pp. 37–38 and 56–64). The way the liturgy is arranged (its order, texts, gestures used, etc.) is undoubtedly the exclusive competence of the ecclesiastical legislator. However, the enactment of universally binding laws restricting the freedom to practise religion remains within the competence of the state authorities. Recognising this latter competence in the circumstances of the necessity to protect such important values as public order or public health underpins the limitation clauses in the regulations protecting the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as provisioned, for example, in the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 9) or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18). The possibility for the state authorities to restrict religious freedom for the common good (or, in other words, public order) is also recognised in the teaching of the Catholic Church, notwithstanding her strong reservation that such restrictions must not become law arbitrarily (see the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae*, no. 7). Giving ecclesiastical sanction to restrictions introduced by state authorities within their field of competence distorts the relationship between the two legal systems. As a consequence, such practices not only unnecessarily expose the ecclesiastical authorities to the moral responsibility to the faithful

for the possible imposition of over-reaching restrictions on their religious freedom (and for the consequent unjustified deprivation of the rights bestowed on them, e.g., pursuant to Can. 213 CIC-1983), but they also imply that it is up to the ecclesiastical authorities themselves to make decisions on these issues, whereas, in this sphere of social life, the Church (and its authorities) are simply an addressee of the regulations issued by the state authorities. A corollary of the above is, of course, the right of the Church (as well as any other addressees of state legislation) to challenge decisions pertinent to its interests, for instance, through court proceedings. After all, the recognition of the competence of state authorities in matters relating to the restriction of freedom to manifest religion is not a blanket recognition (with reference to European convention standards, see e.g., Hill 2020b; Evans 2001, pp. 133–64).

Institutional freedom (autonomy) is, of course, a core value for the Church and other religious communities. Respect for it can, in fact, be considered a contemporary European standard (see Doe 2011, pp. 114–138 and 263). In the opinion of the European Court of Human Rights, “[t]he autonomous existence of religious communities is indispensable for pluralism in a democratic society, and is thus an issue at the very heart of the protection which Article 9 of the Convention affords. Were the organisational life of the community not protected by Article 9 of the Convention, all other aspects of the individual’s freedom of religion would become vulnerable” (see, e.g., Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church /Metropolitan Inokentiy/ and Others v. Bulgaria, 22 January 2009, 412/02 and 35677/04, para. 103). However, the autonomy in question relates only to the internal affairs of religious organisations, and certainly does not imply the exclusion of religious communities from the power of state law. One must, therefore, be critical of the argument put forward in the literature of the subject, and upheld by the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops when the first wave of the epidemic was over, that by restricting the freedom to manifest religion on account of the epidemic threat, the state authorities “failed to respect the autonomy (sovereignty) of the Church.”

Beyond any degree of doubt, the leading intention of the authors of the Church documents in question was not to directly restrict the freedom to practise religion. Rather, it was a matter of protecting the health of the faithful and their earthly existence, and of supporting those state activities that serve this purpose. From this perspective, these actions can legitimately be judged as having been taken for the common good. It was decided that, in view of the unpredictable consequences of contracting the virus, it was necessary, above all, to protect the health and life of more than just the faithful of the Catholic Church. An unwelcome consequence of this perspective is its defective focus on aspects of sacramental life and the transfer of religious practices to the spiritual sphere (spiritual communion, contrition for sins), supported by modern media communication technologies. The decision-makers were tacitly guided by the conviction that the pandemic was a temporary condition which, on the one hand, constituted a kind of test of faith and, on the other, was an opportunity to purify it, deepen it and strengthen the desire for sacramental life.

Considering the allegations formulated by the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops in the above-quoted letter of 15 April 2020 addressed to the Prime Minister of Poland, it must be observed that the more lenient treatment of supermarkets than that of churches did indeed deserve criticism. The procedures for imposing restrictions to halt the spread of an epidemic needed to be governed by proportionality. These restrictions should not only be proportional to the existing threat, but also to each other. It must therefore be accepted that, when enforcing restrictions, the legislators need to weigh up the objective “gravity” of a given matter for peoples’ life, and the assessment of the level of this “gravity” must not stray from the level of freedom that is at stake. Furthermore, restrictions on comparably relevant spheres of activity—as long as the differentiation is not due to factors related to the spread of the disease in diverse environments—should be comparable between these spheres<sup>10</sup>.

The allegation made by the President of the Conference of Polish Bishops that the state authorities imposed restrictions on the freedom to practise religion without proper consultation with representatives of the religious communities need to be regarded as legitimate as well. Indeed, the adaptation of this type of action faced the risk of an inadequate assessment of the relevance of particular practices to the religious life (and therefore, to the religious freedom) of individuals. The state authorities are undoubtedly not properly empowered to make this kind of assessment. One must also concede that cooperation between the state and religious communities (let alone dialogue, which is a prerequisite for cooperation) has undeniable positive effects during periods of normal state functioning, but becomes of utmost importance when specific social threats arise (Hill 2020a, p. 18).

Finally, our analysis of the content of the messages delivered by Church hierarchs on the state restrictions on the freedom to practise religion leads to the conclusion that—undoubtedly, contrary to their intentions—they sometimes added to the din of information in public communication. This is because the information communicated on the form of the state restrictions was not always sufficiently precise. For example, when writing about the 50-person limit on participants in religious ceremonies in force during the first epidemic period, the hierarchs often overlooked the fact that this also applied to those who remained outside religious premises. Moreover, referring to the Corpus Christi procession, the bishops erroneously and repeatedly claimed that the 150-person limit on participation in assemblies organised on the basis of the Act of 24 July 2014, the Law on Assemblies, also applied in this case. However, the lack of precision does not seem to be the key problem with these messages. Making reference to the specific content of state legislation at one moment in time under the circumstances of the dynamic spread of an infectious disease has an obvious disadvantage: changes or amendments in the relevant legislative acts render the document, at least partly, null and void. One needs to keep in mind that the state legislators amend laws even before they come into force, albeit after they have already been promulgated. This situation can be illustrated by a case that took place before Easter, when a regulation was published to reapply the 50-person limit for religious ceremonies from 12 April 2020 onwards. However, the reintroduction of this higher limit was then postponed for a week, and then the circumstances of the epidemic left the legislators in the position of having to completely reshape the provision before it even had a chance to come into force. Irrespective of its actual status, an overt announcement of the reintroduced 50-person limit surfaced in some documents issued by Polish bishops.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the documents analysed in this article constitute an important component of the communication process between the Church in Poland and her faithful during the first wave of the pandemic. The texts under analysis give an insight into the methods used by the hierarchy in communicating with the faithful of their own religious community, but also outside of it (bishops also officially spoke about the pandemic in public media). The Polish hierarchs adopted an attitude of openness in communicating with the media, thus emphasizing the growing importance of the media in the institutional communication of the Church. The intensification of the Church's media communication activities did not come as late as the pandemic. In theological debates, the topic has surfaced for at the least several decades (González Gaitano 2016, pp. 180–81). The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly accelerated the processes towards a wider media availability of the Gospel message, particularly through the celebration of the sacraments, the Eucharist and other pastoral initiatives. All the same, the texts represent an element of the image of the Catholic Church in Poland and its attitude towards COVID-19 (see Skowronek and Przychyna 2007).

Issued with the primary intention of protecting the health and life of the faithful, the pandemic-era documents issued by the hierarchs of the Polish Catholic Church apparently reveal their principal normative function (the leading genres in the communication between the Church and the faithful represented legislative actions: decrees, regulations,

instructional guidelines and recommendations for priests and the lay faithful, etc.). Equally relevant is the opinion-forming function, since this is linked with social control as carried out in two dimensions: sanitary behaviour and religious (spiritual) behaviour. Also correlating with the former aspect of social control is the encouragement to be grateful for, and show respect to, the health, sanitary and other uniformed services. In the latter aspect, the faithful were encouraged, among other things, to experience the time of the pandemic as a religious retreat, to renew their spiritual, personal contact with God, and to take care of the sick, the elderly and the needy. Another significant function of the texts under scrutiny is didactic: the authors (re)defined terms for the faithful and reminded them of the doctrine (e.g., dispensation, spiritual communion, online mass).

The arguments used by the Church authorities relating to the pandemic restrictions can be grouped into rational arguments, using the results of scientific research on the effectiveness of confinement and isolation (lockdown); moral arguments, making reference to goodness and moral obligations; and, finally, religious arguments, referring to the content of the Catholic faith. In the case of rational arguments, the generalised justification for “closing churches” boiled down to the following argument: ‘this will reduce the risk of death.’ Counter-arguments, generally not voiced explicitly in official documents, or else raised sporadically and in a covert way, relied on the following argument: ‘churches are closed, galleries are not; there is no evidence of the effectiveness of the lockdown.’ The second group of arguments rests on the following argument: ‘churches must be closed’, complemented by arguments that ‘one must sacrifice oneself for the sake of others—not to risk infection (stay at home for the sake of others)’. The counter-arguments in this case—present in religious discourse, but not explicitly in the documents under analysis—include: ‘all this compliance of the Church with the state officials leads to the submission of the Church and her faithful to the state (the Church becomes a servant of the state); closing churches is a form of struggle against religion (in a less explicit formulation: ‘closing churches is of advantage to the enemies of the Church’). The religious arguments (both for and against) were toned down: ‘direct participation in the sacraments is not as important as deep faith (attachment to the sacramental rites is not a supreme factor)’. The argument that ‘being attached to traditional forms of religious (including sacramental) life is a relic, or an expression of folk Catholicism’ did not surface in the analysed sources at all. Interestingly enough, there occurred religious arguments against: ‘never in the history of the Church were churches closed during a plague;’ ‘the Church always reached out / the saints always reached out to minister to those affected by an epidemic;’ (or in a less explicit and a more euphemistic formulation): ‘Mass on TV or the Internet is a substitute for (and in the most extreme case, a depreciation of) Mass;’ ‘closing churches is testimony to the decline of faith in God.’

As far as the substantive and pastoral dimension is concerned, one needs to observe that the message in the texts analysed was consistent, displaying a dominant institution, and aiming at pastoral care for the life of the faithful in all of its aspects. When approached from a theological-pastoral perspective, our research topic should be viewed primarily from the point of view of the Church in pursuit of her mission. The mission is accomplished through the fulfilment of the Church’s threefold office: prophetic (teaching), priestly (cultic) and kingly (reigning). Exploring how the bishops of the Catholic Church in Poland reacted to the state restrictions on public religious practices as manifest in the documents gathered in our corpus allows for the conclusion that the hierarchs of the Church both accepted the restrictions imposed by the state, which severely affected the Church’s mission, and—in response to the decisions of the state authorities—they introduced their own restrictions, more or less related to their state variants. As regards the prophetic function, it is important to note the low frequency of theological arguments used to explain restrictions on religious freedom or to defend the right to public religious practices (this applies to the initial period of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic). The teaching of the Church ministers is dominated by instructional, directive, administrative and legal communications (Draguła 2021). During the first stage of the first wave, Polish bishops emphasised the need to

protect health and life, taking a specific perspective and addressing particular aspects of the issue. They did so with evident caution and reticence in emphasising the importance and need for physical, actual participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This line of response to the state restrictions, which they ecclesiastically legitimised and reinforced, was sanctioned by the widespread dispensations in dioceses, exempting the faithful from the obligation to physically attend Mass on days defined as *festae de precepto*. However, from the perspective of the Church's core mission, it seems that she should place a stronger emphasis on man's salvation and eternal life in Christ.

The analysis carried out leads us to the conclusion that, in the context of the state restrictions on the freedom to practise religion, the ministers of the Catholic Church in Poland should draw more definitive conclusions on the basis of the principle of autonomy and independence that governs the mutual relationship between State and Church, recognised in both Church teaching and Polish law. Consequently, facing the restrictions on the freedom to practise religion, the Church should adopt the attitude of the addressee of the norms rather than that of the legislator. The attention of the Church ministers should be directed first and foremost towards maximising the rights of the faithful to the spiritual goods of the Church (Can. 213 CIC—1983) under conditions of the significant restriction of rights and freedoms (including religious freedom). Such an attitude would not only be more in line with the principle of autonomy and independence of Church and State—as mentioned above—as well as with the basic functions (offices) of the Church, but would also free the institutional Church from the accountability for decisions taken by the state authorities (especially when this happens without consultation). This could facilitate a critical stance towards decisions that potentially exceed the limits of lawful restrictions on the freedom to practise religion.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The conclusions presented in the cited work are based on the studies concerning various countries published in [Martínez-Torrón and Rodrigo Lara \(2021\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> The starting point for this research was the authors' collaborative study on the communication of the Catholic Church in Poland with both the internal and external environment during the first wave of the pandemic. See [Chmielewski et al. \(2022\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> See the letters from the Ombudsman Adam Bodnar to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of 27 March 2020 (VII.565.1.2020), of 3 April 2020 (VII.565.3.2020.ST/MM) and of 4 June 2020 (VII.565.461.2020.ST) (In-1-3). The criticism of the formal aspect of imposing the restrictions in question is widely represented in the judiciary, which has repeatedly held that restrictions relating to rights and freedoms can only be imposed by parliamentary acts. This condition was obviously unfulfilled by the regulations issued first by the Minister of Health and then by the Council of Ministers (see, in particular, the recent judgments of the Supreme Administrative Court of 5 April 2022, II GSK 246/22 and of 4 March 2022, II GSK 15/22). On the lack of legal grounds to punish a

parish priest for exceeding the limit of Mass attendees, see the judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court in Kraków of 6 December 2021 (III SA/Kr 677/21).

- 4 As Mark Hill writes, “in relation to unconstitutionality, there is a steady stream of cases from around the world, now developing into something of a torrent, where the constitutionality of emergency provisions has been challenged” (Hill 2020a, pp. 4–5). See also Madera (2021b, pp. 4–5).
- 5 See in particular the decrees of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments of 19 March 2020 featuring guidelines for the celebration of the Paschal Triduum in affected places (DK-2) amended as of 25 March 2020 (DK-3), and Cavana (2021, pp. 279–302).
- 6 Females dominated the research pool (62.3% female respondents against 37.7% males). The vast majority of respondents were urban residents (80% vs. 20% rural residents), most often living in cities with a population of between 100,000 and 500,000 (25.6%) and 20,000 and 100,000 (25.2%). Respondents aged 35 to 54 (51.4%) were the largest group, followed by those aged 25 to 34 (17.9%) and those aged 55 and over (17.0%). Younger Poles, aged 18 to 24, were the least represented group (14.1%). The majority of respondents described themselves as religious (66.2%) or deeply religious (29.5%). Those who declared themselves rather non-religious or atheists were rare: 3.2% and 1.2%, respectively. The vast majority of respondents (87.8%) also declared that they attended Mass at least once a week. 4.3% attended Mass every few weeks, while those who attended Mass only on major holidays or for major celebrations accounted for 2.7% of the responses. 4.4% of the respondents admitted that they are not Mass attendees at all. For details concerning the research sample and procedure, see Chmielewski et al. (2022, pp. 149–60).
- 7 The source document database can be found at <https://repozytorium.kul.pl/handle/20.500.12153/3910> (accessed on 28 November 2022). The system of abbreviations was developed according to the stylesheet for the list of sources: the Roman numeral refers to the level of the metropolis (the superior organisational structure of the Church in Poland), the first Arabic numeral to the level of the (arch)diocese, and the second Arabic numeral to a specific text presenting (arch)diocesan documents in the corpus. The acronym DK refers to other Church documents as noted in the list of sources. Abbreviation In—other documents according to comments in the list of sources.
- 8 The source document database can be found at <https://repozytorium.kul.pl/handle/20.500.12153/3910> (accessed on 28 November 2022). The adopted system of abbreviations of media sources: M—media sources, A—Alateia, D—Deon, F—Fronda, O—Opoka, W—Wiara, GN—Gość Niedzielny, N—Niedziela, TP—Tygodnik Powszechny. Arabic numerals—reference number items on the list.
- 9 In order for this report to be as complete as possible, it should be added that, at the same time, the Bishop of Gliwice ordered “the celebration of one Mass a day to the Divine Mercy for the intention of all the sick, those in danger of death, medical personnel and for the cessation of the epidemic” and, hence, granted priests the right to celebrate two, or even three, masses a day.
- 10 In this context, one can find instructive a statement in the judgment of the United States District Court of the Western District of Kentucky of 11 April 2020 in the case of *On Fire Christian Center, Inc. v. Greg Fischer, et al.*, declaring as unconstitutional and unlawful a prohibition act issued by one of mayors who did not allow Easter celebrations in groups, even if the participants remained in their own cars, irrespective of his parallel approval of the opening of restaurants and liquor shops, subject to similar regulations: “if beer is «essential», so is Easter” (No. 3:2020cv00264, W.D. Ky. 2020).

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