

Chapter 13: Between the Pillory Treatment and Reliable Clarification: On the Role of the Media in Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church in Poland

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The response to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church follows a set of general rules and is influenced by each region's specific characteristics. In Poland, the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has historically been contextualized by the existence of the Church under the Communist rule after the Second World War, by the folk characteristics of the Church; and by its strong hierarchical and clerical interpretations. The sexual abuse crisis is a permanent topic in the media and is often presented bluntly, giving the impression that the Church should be sent to the pillory for punishment and humiliation. On the other hand, the media has an important contribution to make by detecting sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Poland.

In this essay, I analyze the role of the media in response to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church in Poland. First, the problem of the kind of pillory treatment that the Church receives in the media is presented. Next, I explore the contribution of the media's reliable clarifications. Both kinds of treatment of this problem in the media identify the reactions of the Church and have impacted the position of the Church in Polish society. Both of the ways in which the media treat the problem of the sexual abuse crisis in Poland present a challenge for the Catholic Church in seeking the correct way to respond to the actual problems. There is also a challenge in identifying the role of the media and the responsibilities it holds in regards to this matter.

The Pillory Treatment of the Church by the Media

Initially, the treatment and reaction of the Catholic Church in Poland regarding the sexual abuse crisis was primarily concerned with protecting the image of the Church and its position in society. The discussion was dominated by rhetoric about sexual abuse in the churches of the western countries of Europe and silence on the cases in Poland, while in practice guilty priests were transferred to other parishes or to other places of service. The problem of the clergymen who committed sexual abuse against minors, the proceedings undertaken by bishops and superiors, their reactions to this problem, and their relations to the victims at the beginning of this crisis were a taboo subject in the Catholic Church in Poland.¹

As a consequence of the Church's treatment of and reactions to this crisis, the media began to describe cases of sexual abuse of clergymen against minors and the ways the proceedings were dealt with by bishops and superiors. One of the most famous cases was the Polish Archbishop Józef Wesołowski, who was a nuncio in the Dominican Republic, among other places. He was punished by the Vatican and had his position altered to the status of a layperson.² All the cases of pedophilia by Polish clergymen were associated with the Church's strategy of protecting the institution, a strategy which was critical towards the position taken by the liberal media.

As a counter-narrative, Church authorities claimed that such media was seeking to destroy the Church and to discredit its impact in Polish society and the heritage of Saint John Paul II. Some of the statements made by bishops and clergymen in this regard reveal this belief. For example, one states that there are other "more serious questions," while another shifts the blame, saying that "a child clings, looks for, gets lost by themselves and

¹ Adam Żak, *Wierchotek góry lodowej. Kościół i pedofilia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Apostolstwa Modlitwy, 2019), 13–24.

² Paulina Guzik, "An Unfinished Story of Conversion: Clerical Sexual Abuse in Poland. A Communications Case Study on Betrayal, Healing and Trust Recovery," *Church, Communication and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2020): 427–428; "Józef Wesołowski," *Wikipedia Wolna encyklopedia*, January 4, 2022, wikipedia.org/wiki/Józef_Wesołowski.

even involves the other man.” These scandalous statements testify to the ignorance of the representatives of the Church towards the perception of the victims.³

Journalists and society became indignant about the lack of reaction and sheer inactivity of Polish bishops and superiors towards the sexual abuse against minors by clergymen, the hiding and covering up of cases of sexual violence against minors, the ignorance of the effects on children, and the failure to protect minors. The media became the guiding spirit throughout the process of bringing to light the sexual abuse cases and critiquing decisions by ecclesial leaders in cases of pedophilia. The problem of pedophilia among clergymen became increasingly present in all types of media. This happened to such an extent that the way in which sexual abuse was reported in the Polish media gave the impression that clergymen were the only group which commits abuse against minors.⁴ Furthermore, cases relating to pedophilia as committed by clergymen were consistently present in the media. This repetitiveness, one-sidedness, and presentation ultimately created an impression that pedophilia only exists in the Catholic Church. Cases of sexual abuse among other social groups and professions were not presented in media sources in a consistent manner, including the case in which some sections of the media defended the Polish film director, Roman Polański, who was accused of sexual abuse against a minor.⁵ This context of the pillory treatment of the media contrasts with the response of the Catholic Church in Poland to the sexual abuse crisis.

Within Catholic media, the problem of sexual abuse among clergymen is increasingly discussed. However, Church media generally does not disseminate information about any local histories of child abuse and limits the news to reports on pontifical statements and general information

³ Józef Kloch and Monika M. Przybyś, “Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii w Kościele katolickim w Polsce,” *Symposium* 18, no. 2 (2014): 94–98.

⁴ Marian Machinek, *Nowy tygodnik świat. Próba diagnozy* (Pelplin: Bernardinum, 2021), 166–167.

⁵ Kloch and Przybyś, “Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii,” 102–103; Machinek, *Nowy tygodnik świat*, 168–169.

about problems in other countries. The Catholic media tends to focus on events which report on the role and activity that the Church plays in protecting children. The narration of the Catholic media is dominated by texts about clergymen, who feel unfairly attacked and struggle to understand why they are the ones suspected of evil, since many more cases of sexual abuse against minors occur in other professions than in the Church.⁶

The lack of a multidimensional picture in relation to sexual abuse and the manipulated information found in the media, which only shows cases of pedophilia among clergymen, does not serve the protection of children and, in turn, strengthens the myth that all priests are pedophiles. The cases of sexual abuse described by the media do not protect the privacy of children and regularly expose children to graphic descriptions of pedophilic acts. One example of this violation of journalistic ethics is the paper entitled *Father Jack's Cherubs*,⁷ which contains enough identifying characteristics of the minors that the children and their close relations can easily be identified. The author of this paper cited fragments from the victims' and offender's intimate testimonies and text-messages, meaning that children can read about the particular details of the case as described in media publications.⁸ Many media reports contained factual errors and unauthorized conclusions, which fostered misconceptions in public opinion regarding the scale of sexual abuse of minors by clergymen in Poland, especially as regards the contemporary scale of the phenomenon. Many media reports failed to mention that most of the accusations of sexual abuse of minors concerned incidents from, on average, thirty years ago.⁹

⁶ Ewa Kusz, "Kościołe—jaki jesteś? Kryzys Kościoła w świetle skandalu wykorzystania seksualnego," in *Kryzys w świecie. Kryzys w Kościele*, ed. M. Lis (Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2020), 102.

⁷ Helena Kowalik, "Cherubinki księdza Jacka," *Wprost* 41 (2013): 26–30.

⁸ Kłoch and Przybysz, "Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii," 103–104.

⁹ Wojciech Sadlon and Sławomir Nowotny, "How to Study Child Sexual Abuse Within the Institutional Framework? The Experience of the Catholic Church in Poland," *The Person and the Challenges* 12, no. 1 (2022): 113.

Furthermore, the one-sided presentation of the sexual abuse of minors in Polish media largely omits the Catholic Church in Poland's initiatives and activities focused on and directed against abusive acts. Most of these initiatives are similar to the suggestions made by the Polish Episcopate from 2009: the establishment of a coordinator in relation to the protection of children, training courses for clergymen and seminarians, and a change of strategy for the Catholic Church in Poland.¹⁰ These matters have received reference mainly in the Catholic media, while the public and liberal media sparingly and critically relay news on these initiatives. Moreover, the public news focuses on the actual cases and criminal trials of priests who allowed the sexual abuse of minors.¹¹ The disproportionality, the almost exclusively negative way that the Polish media presents the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergymen, and the omission of news on the activities and initiatives of the Catholic Church against these criminal acts evidence how the Polish media puts the Church in the pillory. However, this characterization does not exhaust the role of media in the Polish Church, which has also played an important role in uncovering the evil of sexual abuse by clergy.

The Media as the Truth-Teller of the Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church

Any critical examination of the Polish media and its role in the detection of sexual abuse cases of minors in the Polish Church should not omit the media's contribution to combating the criminal acts carried out by clergymen on minors and exposing the hidden proceedings of bishops and superiors. Most of the cases of sexual abuse which were taken up and presented by the media were ultimately resolved through a civil court judgment. The majority of the cases presented in the media included the

¹⁰ For more on actions which the Church in Poland has taken in order to counteract the abuse of minors by clergymen, see Marcin Przeciszewski, "Counteracting Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: The System in Poland," *The Person and the Challenges* 12, no. 1 (2022): 137–159.

¹¹ Kloch and Przybysz, "Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii," 104–107.

ecclesial procedure by the Dioceses and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Some Polish bishops were accused of concealing cases of sexual abuse by clergymen and were penalized by the Vatican with various punishments, such as retirement, prohibition of participation in public celebrations, requirement to give financial support to the Foundation of St. Joseph helping the victims of sexual abuse by clergymen, and, in one case, prohibition from being buried in a cathedral.¹²

A crucial piece in the Catholic Church in Poland's approach to this problem was made with the contribution of the media: three popular films on the topic of the sexual abuse of minors by clergymen. The 2018 film *Kler (Clergy)*, directed by Wojciech Smarzowski, focuses on clergymen who were both perpetrators and victims of sexual abuse of minors. The movie presents a fictional story with a mocking, journalistic, and moralistic character and depicts the Catholic Church in Poland as a dirty, immoral, and superficial community, which ultimately lacks any spirituality or God. Two other full-length movies, namely, the 2019 documentary *Tylko nie mów nikomu (Tell No One)* and the 2020 documentary *Zabawa w chowanego (Hide and Seek)*, both directed by Tomasz Sekielski and his brother, show the victims and perpetrators of clerical sexual abuse and accuse specific Polish bishops of errors and hidden crimes.¹³

For some Catholics in Poland, the movies were perceived as part of attacks against the Church, bishops, and clergymen. However, in an official statement by the Polish bishops, the films were cited as inspirations to change the strategy and the approach of the Church as it addressed the problem. Polish bishops admitted that the protection of children—not the protection of the institution—should guide the activities against sexual abuse by clergymen.¹⁴ In the word to believers *Sensitivity and Responsibility* from May 2019, the bishops wrote:

¹² Machinek, *Nowy tęczyowy świat*, 160.

¹³ Marek Lis, "Sexual Abuse of Minors by Clergy in Cinematography: Unrecognized Signs of the Times," *The Person and the Challenges* 12, no. 1 (2022): 299–300; Guzik, "An Unfinished Story of Conversion," 434–437, 441–442.

¹⁴ Guzik, "An Unfinished Story of Conversion," 442–445.

A lot of us have watched the movie “Tell No One.” This documentary is above all about the shocking relationships of adult persons, and how childhood is treated by clergymen. It contains examples of lack of sensibility, the sin of negligence, and distrust towards the victims which consequently protected the perpetrators. Having the film accept the perspective of the aggrieved made all aware of the enormity of their suffering. Everyone who is sensitive towards many aggrieved persons feels pain, sensitivity, and sadness towards their suffering. We thank all who had the courage to speak up about their suffering. We are aware that no words are able to compensate for the harm which they have endured. We admit that as pastors of the Church we did not do everything that we could to prevent such damage All, both clergyman and laypeople as a community, must create the proper space to restore to the aggrieved as much as possible a normal life and to rebuild trust in the priests and bishops.¹⁵

In this context, the main Polish weekly opinion magazines of 2018 and 2019 wrote about the problem of the sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church from the perspective of particular persons (i.e. the pope, bishops, victims, and perpetrators). In the left-liberal magazines, the bishops and superiors were presented mainly as non-reactive to cases of abuse committed by clergymen. These elements of the Polish press wrote more often about the negative actions of representatives of ecclesial elites than about clergy criminal activity which would have been unknown to the public. On the other hand, the right-conservative weekly *W Sieci* did not seek to evaluate the actions of bishops and superiors towards perpetrators. It undermined the sincerity of Smarzowski and Sekielski, arguing that their movies include narrative attacks against the Catholic Church. In particular, the right-conservative magazines accused the creators of the movie *Tell No One* of omitting the fact that the Security

¹⁵ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, “Wrażliwość i odpowiedzialność. Słowo biskupów do wiernych w związku z problemem skandali seksualnych z udziałem duchownych,” *Opoka*, May 22, 2019, opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/dowiernych_22052019.html.

Service of the Communist era cooperated with pedophile clergymen. In previous years, the left-liberal magazines used the cases of pedophilia under clergymen to create a narrative of the Catholic Church as an institution which hides pedophiles within its structure and conceals the scale of the abuse.¹⁶

Even if these Polish movies and documentaries do not take into consideration all the dimensions of this problem nor inspire wider reflection for the Church and its structure, we should still acknowledge the good intent of the writers who seek to highlight cases of abuse in the Church in contrast to the Polish bishops, superiors, clergy, and laypeople who were all silent against this evil. As such, it is worth opening dialogue with the writers who treat the Church so seriously and critically. The Church should recognize the media's voice as a reflection of the biblical story of Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21–34), in which the donkey rescues the man of God, who is deaf to God's warnings and blind to the dangers of punishment. The Catholic Church should hear critically, creatively, and definitely the voices which speak about the condition of faith resounding in the media, inasmuch as these convey truths about the Church. "Uncomfortable" news can become a *locus theologicus* for the Church and a sign of the time which leads to reflection on and fidelity to the Gospel. Non-Christian media can inspire the Church to examine its conscience and remember the warning which Jesus directed to those who cause the little ones to stumble (Matthew 18:6). In this way, the voices of the secular media can serve as tools in the prevention of sexual abuse against minors and provide the opportunity for aggrieved people to speak.¹⁷

¹⁶ Rafał Leśniczak, "Personalizacja wizerunku medialnego instytucjonalnego Kościoła katolickiego w kontekście nadużyć niektórych duchownych wobec nieletnich. Analiza polskich tygodników opinii (2018–2019)," *Studia medioznawcze* 21, no. 2 (2020): 564–566.

¹⁷ Marek Lis, "Sexual Abuse of Minors by Clergy in Cinematography," 305–306.

Challenges for Relevant Theological Reflection

In June 2019, after the release of the movies by Smarzowski and Sekielski, surveys collected data on the reaction of the public to news reports on cases of pedophilia by clergymen in Poland. According to this research, the majority of respondents made a critical evaluation regarding the position of the Catholic Church in this regard. Half of the respondents maintained that the reaction of the Church was incorrect and insufficient. The majority of interviewees felt that the Church underestimated rather than overestimated the scale of the pedophilia cases. The idea that the media is actively attacking the Catholic Church is, for the majority, incredible. The majority of respondents support the limitation of the activity of clergymen who commit sexual abuse against minors, including expulsion from the clergy. The majority supports the creation of a state commission to examine cases of pedophilia in all areas and not only in the Catholic Church. In contrast to the majority, respondents who have more right wing politics and practice their religion more regularly have expressed opinions more favorable to the Catholic Church.¹⁸

Public opinion expects much more than merely verbal reassurances from the Church hierarchy. This is revealed by Rafał Leśniczak's analysis of the effectiveness of the communications of Polish bishops in the crisis situation and the disclosure of cases of sexual abuse of some clergymen. Even if the Polish bishops have expressed regret and apologized to laypeople for the evil caused by clergymen, society seeks to hold ecclesial superiors responsible for hiding the perpetrators of these crimes. Although the Polish bishops have communicated about the condition of the Church organization based on real numerical data, effective communication demands pinpointing the real scale of the problem of pedophilia by clergymen and identifying ways to punish criminals and ways to aid the victims of sexual abuse. The general declarations of bishops are insufficient

¹⁸ Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, "Komunika z badań. Reakcje opinii publicznej na informacje o przypadkach pedofilii wśród księży," ed. Antoni Głowacki, July 2019, www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_088_19.PDF.

for the public to accept the actions taken. The research on public opinion shows that the statements of bishops do not contribute towards building a positive image of the Catholic Church and do not fulfill the conditions of effective communication in a crisis.¹⁹

The actual crisis in the Catholic Church in Poland—as so well described by the media and so inaccurately perceived by ecclesial leaders—is an important challenge for theology and for the Catholic Church. The first problem concerns the identity of the Church given what has been uncovered, and the other concerns what the Church might become when it ceases hiding and belittling the fact that children and young people experienced harm at the hands of people who should have protected them.

With regard to the identity of the Church, we can observe that the Church has lost its status as a protector of faith in God and has become a “political apparatus” whose initial reaction to the crisis of sexual abuse of minors was seeking to maintain the *status quo*. The problem is a lack of care for all people: for victimized people, people who are close to them, the community of believers, and the persons who committed criminal acts. The ecclesial leaders do not think about hiding the evil but about protecting the priesthood, which results in the problem being identified not so much as the evil deeds but as the knowledge about them, which will damage the image of the institution and the priesthood. In this mentality there is no concern for the aggrieved person and their dignity. Instead, the priority is the institution as a “political apparatus,” which should function correctly, keep its influence, and enjoy the recognition of public opinion.

Using this strategy, the Church stops acting as a community of sinners redeemed with the Blood of Lamb and seeks to become a well-functioning institution. This utilitarian method of confronting the crisis of sexual abuse of minors is based on the assumption that we will lose all if we admit to mistakes and errors²⁰ and so determines the attitude of the Church

¹⁹ Rafał Leśniczak, “Komunikowanie polskich biskupów w kontekście kryzysu pedofilii. W trosce o zasady skutecznej komunikacji,” *Kultura—Media—Teologia* 42 (2020): 70.

²⁰ Kusz, “Kościoły—jaki jesteś?,” 99–101; for more on the structure of the Catholic Church and the sexual abuse on minors by clergyman see: Andrej Saje, “Abusi sessuali e spirituali nella

toward the media as a hostile subject that seeks to destroy an important institution.

The role of media in the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church should be limited to informing about cases perpetrated by clergymen or acts of negligence committed by bishops and superiors. However, the response to the crisis is a matter of the Church. In this regard, it is very important to create efficient systems of aid and protection for children, but it is only one side of the coin. Such an effort may be enough for the Church if it is understood as an institution, but it is not enough for the Church as a community of faith for which “humankind is the way.”

In the Church in Poland, there are some places where the problem is downplayed and even denied. In some dioceses and religious communities and pastoral areas of the country where organized training exists, prevention strategies are implemented, and victims are provided for. Due to the history of Poland and its cultural condition, the Polish Church’s strategy of protecting the institution is strong, but the vision of the Church as a community of faith and as a people of God is languishing.²¹ Consequently, the vision of the Church which exists in Poland idealizes the clergyman as an “anointed person,” who has an undisputed position of authority. The need to overcome various forms of clericalism makes reform difficult and increases the risk of sexual abuse against minors.²²

The response to the cases of sexual abuse against minors by clergymen in the Catholic Church in Poland is at the stage of “moral panic.” The media’s focus on sexual abuse in the Church and the insufficient response of the ecclesial leaders caused responsibility to be passed on to others, leading to a search for a quick response. This strategy favors a short-lived solution and does not serve the interests of the victimized people, of the society, or of the perpetrators. Consequently, the analysis of the phenomenon and structural factors, such as the methods of management

Chiesa Cattolica. Dilemmi e questioni aperte,” *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego* 40, no. 2 (2020): 69–85.

²¹ Kusz, “Kościołe—jaki jesteś?,” 103–104.

²² Kusz, “Kościołe—jaki jesteś?,” 107–108.

and reaction towards irregularities in the Church, lose importance. Actions taken are designed to satisfy public opinion. The Catholic Church in Poland lacks a readiness to endorse psychological and sociological research about specific ecclesial risk factors and the causes of sexual abuse against minors. There is a lack of theological analysis on the consequences of this crisis for the theology of the sacrament of ordination, of celibacy, and of the problem of power in the Church. “Moral panic” results in a lack of real aid for the perpetrators of sexual abuse and the solution proposed, which is transferring clergymen to the lay state, assuming that being a lay person is worse than being a clergyman. The Church searches for a place where the perpetrators can be hidden from the media spotlight and public opinion. The fear of paying high compensations prompts the Church to treat victims as patients to be put in order and not as children of God for whom the Church is mother. In these ways, the Church acts as an institution and not as a community of faith and place of the presence of God.²³

During a press conference in March 2019, bishops and clergymen reacted to movies presented on the sexual abuse of minors. Their reactions contained mistakes and revealed three visibly different concepts of approaching the problem. Ultimately, they escalated the crisis. The published report was a disunified compilation which lacked a clear discussion of the methodology of data collection and failed to delve deeper into the problem of the study, instead consisting of rhetoric of defending the Church and showing mercy to the perpetrators. This confirms that the Church in Poland not only struggles with a response to the matter of the crisis but with communication about it too.²⁴

²³ Kusz, “Kościołe—jaki jesteś?,” 110–112; see also a proposal by the German theologian Thomas Schärfl who postulates the rethinking of ecclesiology against clericalism as a cause of the sexual abuse crisis in the Church in “Amerikanischer Albtraum. Die perfide Interpretation des Missbrauchs,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 11 (2018): 753–768.

²⁴ Monika Przybysz and Józef Kloch, “Crisis Communication in the Context of Child and Youth Protection—Diagnosis, Problems, Challenges. The Case of the Catholic Church in Poland,” *The Person and the Challenges* 12, no. 1 (2022): 162–163; for more critical analysis of the press conferences of the Polish Bishops, which held the subject of pedophilia in the

In the context of this crisis, the Catholic Church in Poland should utilize communication based on three ethical principles: truthfulness, openness, and partnership. The response of the Church in the media should not be the result of speculation but its official position. The principle of rapid response is crucial. The second principle of openness deals with the credibility of the message and the response of the community. A community which believes in the entity's information, good intentions, professionalism, and desire to resolve the problem responds with support. Every kind of lie and attempt to manipulate or to hide the problem results in a lack of trust, condemnation, judgment, and attribution of guilt. The third ethical rule concerns the recipient in the communication process and demands that the dialogue be conciliation-oriented. The method of communication cannot be based on a position of infallibility or superiority. The emotional character of the recipient's message and the recipient's feelings, even irrational, should be taken into account. Crisis communication will be effective in heading toward positive solutions, when the source of information is reliable, honest, composed, emotionally subdued, and cooperative.²⁵

Church authorities must prioritize transparency as one of the principles which needs be put into practice in responding to and to dealing with the scandal of sexual abuse by clergymen, as well as any issue in general. The Church's leadership should understand journalists not as enemies, but as people whose mission is to exercise and defend the right to truth-based information to do justice. Effective communication about sexual abuses of minors is a fundamental duty because of the way that it could prevent people from committing other abuses. The lack of trust between Polish bishops and reporters must be remedied and give rise to the mindset of

Church to account, see Dariusz Tworzydło, Sławomir Gawroński, and Marek Zajic, "Catholic Church in Poland in the Face of Paedophilia: Analysis of Image Actions," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 5, vol. 1 (2020): 168–170; and Guzik, "An Unfinished Story of Conversion," 431–433.

²⁵ Przybysz and Kloch, "Crisis Communication in the Context of Child and Youth Protection," 166–167.

understanding the need to inform society, openness to discuss concerns, proper media training, and instructions on how to communicate sexual abuse cases to victims, local communities, clergy, and media. The starting point in this regard should be the conversion of heart and mind to prioritize the needs of victims and to fulfill the duties of being good pastors.²⁶

About Media Responsibility

The crisis of pedophilia in Poland and the response to it has become not only an important challenge for the Church and theology but also for the media and its responsibility for its treatment of this problem in the public sphere. The media has played a very important role in the detection of cases of sexual abuse against minors by clergymen and has contributed to the change in strategy of the Church in Poland. The media coverage about pedophilia in the Polish Church reveals some of the aspects of the responsibility of the media in this regard.

If one of the fundamental ethical principles of the media is respect for the dignity of the human person, then such communication of news is unacceptable when it violates the interests of victims and their right to privacy and to a good name. Disseminating information about the intimate matters of individual persons in specific cases in the news must as a baseline respect their private lives and present the information in such a way that does not allow victims to be identified. Otherwise, the news becomes sensationalistic, fails to lead to conversation on the problem, and instead results in re-traumatizing the aggrieved people and their relatives. The rights of aggrieved people should be an overriding factor in their treatment by the media.²⁷

The media is in service of the common good and must protect it and contribute to its respect. One of the fundamental elements of the common good is truth, which the media should proclaim in their communication

²⁶ Guzik, "An Unfinished Story of Conversion," 448.

²⁷ Kloch and Przybysz, "Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii," 108–109.

about sexual abuse. In this regard, the media fulfilled an important function by detecting cases of sexual abuse of minors while the Church was silent or hid the crimes. Because the media's tone influences the overarching social debate, respect for the common good must extend to the language of communication by the media too, which should not be brutal.²⁸

The powerful emotions and moral condemnation caused by learning about the phenomenon of sexual abuse of minors by clergymen are one of the reasons why this problem maintains a high position in public debates and media culture. Accusations of sexual abuse directed toward different groups or institutions carry important political weight. The fact that the accusation mostly concerns the intimate sphere, which is normally hidden from the sight of the audience, adds the danger of sensationalism as it is valued by the media for its "sales power." The focus on highly emotive aspects, often deliberately provoked by the media, is not conducive to thinking about what sexual abuse is actually referring to. The media discourse can do without a precise definition of the phenomenon or even benefit from blurred meanings. However, the real problem of clergy sexual abuse of minors is much more complicated than the media depiction. In order to develop a policy to counteract this abuse and its evil and damaging effects, a multi-dimensional understanding beyond the media depiction is required.²⁹

Polish journalists imitating foreign media are interested in achieving compensation paid by the Church to the victims of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The media asserts that cases of pedophilia are problems stemming from the clergymen of the Catholic Church and assumes that this is the only group of pedophiles. However, the principles of journalistic ethics demand a focus on the protection of children, providing aid to victimized people, and the sensitization of society to the problem of

²⁸ Kloch and Przybysz, "Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii," 109.

²⁹ Sadlon and Nowotny, "How to Study Child Sexual Abuse Within the Institutional Framework?," 133.

pedophilia in all social and professional groups. It is unacceptable for media communication to omit the efforts of the ecclesial institutions in combating sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is a part of society which contributes to the common good in various ways and cannot be reduced to a criminal organization due to the actual crisis of the sexual abuse of minors by clergymen.³⁰

Conclusion

The media in Poland plays an important role in the process of detecting sexual abuse of minors by clergymen. Journalistic publications have contributed not only to recognizing the criminal acts committed by representatives of the Church but also to a change of strategy in which the Church prioritizes the protection of children and the prevention of crimes before the interests of the institution. Strategies of prevention, the protection of children, and clear procedures in cases of sexual abuse are vital in the process of responding to crimes in the Church, but it is not enough when confronting this painful problem. The Church must undertake a deeper reflection in relation to its identity and its structure, especially in the form of clericalism, which precipitated the crisis. In turn, the Church must search for ways to be a community of faith respected by each person, especially by children on their way to God. The media serves a very important role and responsibility in communication about the Church and its ecclesial problems and can promote inspiration for renewal. However, theological reflection on the actual crisis must be taken on by the Church. The strong clerical and hierarchical Catholic Church in Poland now begins this long and tedious process.



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³⁰ Kloch and Przybysz, "Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii," 110.

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