

Angelika Maria Malek

“LIGHT CAVALRY” OR “DOORMATS”?¹

Contemporary Status of Religious Sisters in the Polish Roman Catholic Church

*Introduction*²

In contemporary Poland, the status of religious sisters within the Roman Catholic Church is ambiguous. On one hand, they serve as official representatives of the Church; on the other hand, their position within its structure is relatively low compared to that of male religious and diocesan priests.

In this study, Church status is understood as the position or rank that individuals occupy within ecclesiastical structures. Higher status is defined by increased opportunities for holding positions of authority and gaining public visibility as Church representatives. Key factors influencing this status include the attainment of advanced educational qualifications and access to significant responsibilities within the hierarchy of the Church – as defined by Church law – reserved for ordained men, as well as Church administration – which is also accessible for other Catholics, such as, e.g., sisters.

Discussed factors result partly from explicitly written rules and partly from unwritten norms. What exactly is the sisters' status, and why is it so? This study aims to explore the theoretical status of religious sisters according to general Church law and the specific laws of individual orders, and to examine empirical data using statistics on levels of education and positions held. The ultimate goal is to identify the reasons for

¹ The first term, attributed to Pope Pius XI, was used as a title for an international meeting of sisters in Warsaw in 2005. In a notable 1997 interview, Sr. Celestyna Giertych stated, “God does not want us to be doormats”.

² This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under Grant no. UMO-2020/37/B/HS5/00310, “Monastic Politics: Power and Status in Religious Orders. Evidence from Polish Monastic Institutions”. I would like to thank Professor Maciej Potz for all his helpful comments.

convergences and discrepancies between the theoretical status and practical realities.

The analysis based on official lists from three major superiors' conferences³, diocesan websites, and other sources indicates the presence of 66 male and 153 female religious communities. These communities vary in canonical status but universally adhere to three criteria: communal living, taking religious vows, and Church recognition. Different sources provide varying counts of communities and their members. According to the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics data for 2023, there are 15,632 sisters in 109 active communities, and (for 2022) 1,165 contemplative nuns in communities being members of the respective conferences of the major superiors. Additionally, there are 7,337 male religious in sixty associated communities.⁴ There are also 18,553 diocesan priests in Poland.⁵

Globally and in Poland, female religious significantly outnumber male ones. For women, joining a religious community is the primary means of dedicating their lives to God within the Catholic Church, as they are not permitted to be ordained within its structures. Women also demonstrate a higher level of religiosity than men.⁶

³ In Poland, major superiors of religious communities operate three separate organizations: male and two female (active and contemplative). Regarding male communities listed by the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics: in fact, it is 59, not sixty, because Chemin Neuf is irrelevant as an order in the sense adopted for this paper.

⁴ Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego [Institute for Catholic Church Statistics], *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae in Polonia. Dane za rok 2023*, Warszawa 2024, p. 16-20.

⁵ Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego, *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae in Polonia*, p. 13.

⁶ Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego, *Religijność i aktywność kobiet w Kościele katolickim w Polsce*, Warszawa 2015, p. 5-6.

State of Research

In Poland, several studies address the roles of lay and consecrated women within the local Catholic Church. Marta Trzebiatowska examined religious sisters’ understanding of vocation, positioning them between the laity and clergy, and highlighted the paradox of high religiosity coupled with aggressive criticism of Church representatives in Poland. Her qualitative research was conducted in the face of declining numbers of sisters.⁷ She also studied the role of habits in the lives of religious sisters – her interviewees interpreted them as a deep sign of their consecrated life and being the representatives of God.⁸ In Poland, it’s particularly important, given the general custom among women of wearing habits at all times. Last but not least, Trzebiatowska also studied the sisters’ understanding of femininity – adoption of a conservative view of femininity but focusing on spiritual motherhood, a kind of transformation of the traditional role of a wife and stay-at-home mother into a consecrated woman.⁹ Similarly, Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła investigated the ways in which sisters construct femininity.¹⁰ Her findings align with this traditional perspective, not only regarding motherhood and its spiritual expression, as discussed by Trzebiatowska, but also on holding positions of authority – or rather, the limited “natural” capacity

⁷ Marta Trzebiatowska, Vocational Habit(u)s: Catholic Nuns in Contemporary Poland, in: Kristin Aune/Sonya Sharma/Giselle Vincett (eds.), *Women in Religion in the West. Challenging Secularisation*, Aldershot–Burlington 2008 (Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in Association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group), p. 83, 92.

⁸ Marta Trzebiatowska, Habit Does Not a Nun Make? Religious Dress in the Everyday Lives of Polish Catholic Nuns, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25:1 (2010), p. 51-65.

⁹ Marta Trzebiatowska, Beyond Compliance and Resistance: Polish Catholic Nuns Negotiating Femininity, in: *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 20:2 (2013), p. 204-218.

¹⁰ Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła, Człowiek – kobieta – zakonnicą?: sposoby konstruowania kobiecości przez siostry zakonne, in: *Studia Humanistyczne AGH* 12:3 (2013), p. 81-98.

to serve in such functions – which is particularly relevant for the scope of this paper. Finally, she sees femininity described by her interviewees as an example of the Cult of True Womanhood that includes piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.¹¹ Anna Szwed researched the image of women from the perspective of diocesan priests, who also held conservative views on women's roles and perceived religious sisters as fulfilling their femininity through spiritual motherhood, serving others instead of their own family. The references to them as community leaders or academic lecturers were rare.¹² Katarzyna Leszczyńska discussed lay people of both genders working in bishops' offices and how they internalise their status in the Church, along with traditional gender roles – in this case, functioning as a non-priest person in a priest-dominated environment and gender overlap creating circumstances specific to the Church structures in Poland.¹³ Agata Rejowska examined the cultural backlash – a strong backward movement – visible among highly educated lay female Catholics, members of religious groups.¹⁴ The interviewees expressed conservative opinions and perceived feminism as a threat, despite their high education level, functioning in a corporate environment, living in big cities, etc. Some of them also try to fill the “secular” forms with conservative content (such as, e.g., self-development programmes).¹⁵

Despite these valuable contributions to the field of gender studies within Polish Catholicism, there remains a significant gap in the literature: a comprehensive understanding of the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹² Anna Szwed, *Ta druga. Obraz kobiety w nauczaniu Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego i w świadomości księży*, Kraków 2015, p. 186-189.

¹³ Katarzyna Leszczyńska, *Płeć w instytucje uwikłana. Reprodukowanie wzorców kobiecości i męskości przez świeckie kobiety i świeckich mężczyzn w organizacjach administracyjno-ewangelizacyjnych Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce*, Warszawa 2016.

¹⁴ Agata Rejowska, The Besieged Fortress? Urban, Highly Educated and Highly Religious: Female Members of Catholic Groups in Contemporary Poland, in: *Culture and Religion* 23:2 (2023), p. 117-139.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 133-134.

status of religious sisters as both women and integral members of the Catholic Church structures in Poland. This includes not only consideration of general Canon law but also an examination of the internal regulations of religious communities, since these serve as direct principles guiding daily life, specifically controlling members’ public activities and directly influencing their status.

Theory

Female religious operate quite differently from male religious, even within orders of the same monastic tradition, and from diocesan priests, implying the Church functions as a gendered organization where

“advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine”.¹⁶

Joan Acker identifies groups of processes concerning gendering of organization: (1) constructing divisions along gender lines, e.g., for labour, allowed behaviors, of location, of power; (2) constructing symbols and images supporting these divisions; (3) interactions between representatives of the same and different genders, including power-related patterns; (4) internal mental processes of women and men helping to produce individual identity; and (5) gender is implicated in the fundamental processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures.¹⁷ The first group, concerning divisions along gender lines, seems to be the most relevant to this paper – gender will be discussed here as a key status factor that determines all other minor ones. On the other hand, Harriet Bradley defines gendering across micro, meso, and macro levels – individual,

¹⁶ Joan Acker, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations*, in: *Gender & Society* 4:2 (1990), p. 139-158, here: p. 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146-147.

institutional, and societal, respectively.¹⁸ This paper considers institutional and societal ones, as this study concerns internal Church and social aspects of gender, without researching individual perspectives of consecrated persons¹⁹.

Methodology and Sources

This study will analyse Canon law – specifically the general laws, including the Code of Canon Law (1983), Vatican II, and post-Vatican II official documents of the Church – and the particular laws of female religious communities concerning education, managerial roles, and other public activities.

Internal orders' documents were searched across all relevant sources. The internet query was unsuccessful, as none of the documents from female orders were publicly accessible on their official websites, unlike those of male orders. The primary method was, in this case, a search in Church and university libraries. I was aware of certain key dates, such as 1983 (the adoption of the new Code of Canon Law) and other indicators, such as media announcements about the acceptance of newer versions, etc. Unfortunately, many of the orders' documents are published without ISBNs, which means they are not required to be stored in specific public libraries in Poland. Some documents were also obtained directly from the members of the communities.

Finally, I have accessed legal documents – constitutions and directories – from 54 female communities in Poland, representing approximately one-third of all such communities in the country. After careful analysis, the documents from 17 communities turned out to include specific regulations pertinent to the article's scope, rather than merely repeating the general Canon law in these terms: access to academic

¹⁸ Harriet Bradley, *Gender*, Cambridge 2007, p. 24-25.

¹⁹ Due to the broad topic, such a study based on individual interviews will be published as a separate paper.

education and the opportunity to be publicly present, either in person or via publications.

In addition to documents from religious orders, the study will employ a comparative analysis of the Code of Canon Law, documents from the Second Vatican Council and post-conciliar sources, as well as those from the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (under their former names), to determine the general Church rules regarding the factors mentioned above. Church documents are readily accessible, as they are published in multiple languages on the official Vatican websites.

The second group of sources involves statistics on factors influencing status, such as education level and managerial positions in Church administration and academia. In search of indicators of the female religious’ status, I have chosen to focus on specific factors, including education level, holding specific positions of authority within Church administrations: members of the Commission for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, chancellors, department directors, and spokespersons of the bishops’ offices, and ‘Caritas’ (the charity organization affiliated with the Polish Bishops’ Conference) directors, as well as involvement in academic institutions as academics and governing bodies. This focus is due to the strong connection between holding positions of authority and teaching roles within the Church. These data were gathered from the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics reports, publications by major superiors’ conferences, official websites of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, ‘Caritas’, bishop’s offices, and others. Given the nature of this study, it focuses on apostolic religious sisters rather than contemplative nuns, who generally refrain from public activities.

The article is structured as follows: the first section presents the official laws regarding specific factors influencing the status of sisters in the Church, and the second one analyses the practical dimensions of these factors as seen in statistical data.

Then, the third and last section discusses potential underlying reasons for the observed results.

Legal Regulations Bearing on the Status of Female Religious

It is important to recognise that, generally, post-Vatican II reforms pertaining to consecrated life apply regardless of the religious' gender. This summary will first outline those changes before focusing on specific mentions where gender differences are emphasised.

The council decree *Perfectae caritatis* establishes equal reforms for both genders, calling for modernization in everyday life, worship, and attire, and advocating for an active dialogue in obedience. It promotes integration within communities, eliminating divisions inside them, and encourages the retention of only "healthy" traditions. Mary is presented as a model for consecrated life regardless of gender.²⁰ The exhortation *Vita consecrata* highlights the Church's commitment to overcoming all forms of gender discrimination, recognizing men and women as equally gifted by God. During the 1994 synod on "The Consecrated Life and its Role in the Church and in the World", numerous women presented crucial viewpoints, leading to the acknowledgment that many assertions regarding women's positions in both society and the Church cannot be denied. This new awareness encourages men to reevaluate their perspectives and the structure of society and the Church. The document calls for increased participation of women, especially in management areas that directly concern them, and stresses that the formation of women should meet contemporary needs. Additionally, it notes that consecrated women play a vital role in interfaith dialogue to promote women's dignity due to the equality and authentic complementarity of men and

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life "Perfectae caritatis"*, 1965, 2, 15, 25. For Church documents, all numbers refer to chapters, not pages. For the Code of Canon Law – to canons.

women.²¹ The guidelines *New Wine in New Wineskins* emphasise that we inherit a mindset which often highlights deep gender differences at the expense of equality. Despite progress in appreciation for the role of women, there remains significant work to ensure women’s inclusion at various levels of Church activity, e.g., concerning the sense of agency of young consecrated women, which is not always recognized as valuable by other sisters and clergy men.²²

Regarding differences between genders, the instruction *Renovationis causam* states that even the best formation and education methods cannot be identical in both female and male communities.²³ However, it does not provide specific details about these methods. Later, the directives *Mutuae relationes* suggest that differences in formation and education are more closely related to the priesthood than to gender. This document emphasises a “new and very important place” for women in the pastoral field, urging sisters to contribute to new apostolic forms. It highlights their societal influence and concrete needs, both social and ecclesial, adopting Mary as a model. Bishops and superiors of both genders are encouraged to promote the specific apostolic service of religious sisters, valuing them more for their consecrated status than for their service roles.²⁴ The directives *Potissimum institutioni* note that convents serve as places where many women develop their womanhood, inspired by Mary.²⁵ In the instruction

²¹ John Paul II, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World “Vita consecrata”*, 1996, 57-58, 102.

²² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins. The Consecrated Life and Its Ongoing Challenges Since Vatican II. Guidelines*, 2017, 17-18.

²³ Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Instruction on the Renewal of Religious Formation “Renovationis causam”* 1969, 1.

²⁴ Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for Bishops, *Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church “Mutuae relationes”*, 1978, 29, 49-50.

²⁵ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Directives on formation in religious institutes “Potissimum*

Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor, it is stated that nearly all female communities seek new forms of communal life reflecting the current position of women in society and the Church. However, the instruction also warns of the impact of extremist currents of feminism on religious life, without defining “extremist”. It acknowledges that changes in religious communities are influenced by various factors, including gender.²⁶ *Vita consecrata* highlights the spousal dimension of consecrated life as particularly significant for women as brides of Christ.²⁷ The instruction *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram* advises considering gender differences in management.²⁸ In *New Wine in New Wineskins*, female communities are noted to be vulnerable to issues such as neglecting systematic formation, which can hinder progress post-Vatican II. Management challenges include superiors removing agency from members by requiring permission for everyday activities, perpetuating jobs, and outdated authoritarian models that foster infantilism and contribute to departures from the community.²⁹

There are some discrepancies between male and female religious at the official level; however, these differences are too vague for in-depth analysis. Some other distinctions pertain to monastic female cloisters, which may involve dependence on the male branch of the order. Male religious are active in the public sphere as professionals and spiritual leaders. In contrast, female religious, while highly visible in everyday life due to stringent rules on wearing habits, are less visible in professional roles.

institutioni”, 1990, 41.

²⁶ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Instruction on Fraternal Life in Community* “*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*”, 1994, 4-5.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, 34.

²⁸ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Instruction on the Service of Authority and Obedience* “*Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*”, 2008, 3.

²⁹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins*, 15, 21-22, 39-40.

This study will explore a spectrum of differences within female communities based on specific factors. The factors include access to academic education, opportunities to publish books and papers, and the ability to express opinions publicly. Internal rules that merely restate general Canon law – presented at the beginning of each subsection – will be disregarded.

Access to Academic Education

As the primary status factor, access to academic education will be discussed. Generally, adequate education typically allows individuals to increase their status within a specific structure.

The Second Vatican Council emphasised that superiors should support the lifelong education of their subordinates.³⁰ The respective Congregation further stressed that the “greater maturity” of priestly and religious vocations is also linked to doctrinal formation, typically provided at academic-level centres of study.³¹ In the instruction on the formation of religious, *Attenta alle condizioni*, it is stated that the formation needs of brothers, sisters, and candidates for the priesthood differ, and that these differences should be respected.³² However, these needs and differences are not elaborated upon. It is now evident that all priests – both religious and secular – are required to obtain a Master’s degree in theology.

I will now address the internal laws of religious communities. Regarding access to academic education for teaching roles and managerial positions within the community, responsibilities vary by community. In some cases, it is the responsibility of undefined major superiors³³; in others, it falls

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae caritatis*, 18.

³¹ Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for Bishops, *Mutuae relationes*, 31.

³² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Istruzione la collaborazione inter-istituti per la formazione “Attenta alle condizioni”*, 1998, 19.

³³ *Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Sióstr Albertynek Posługujących Ubogim* [Constitutions of the Congregation of Albertine Sisters Serving the Poor],

to general superiors³⁴, or to general superiors in consultation with their councils³⁵. Sometimes, final decisions in that term are required from the general council.³⁶ Additionally, some general superiors are required to obtain a higher academic degree themselves.³⁷

Censorship of Publications

Opportunities to publish are among the factors influencing visibility and, consequently, raising an individual's status.

According to the Code of Canon Law, writings by Christian faithful that address faith or morals must be submitted for review by the ordinary bishop.³⁸ Members of religious institutes require permission from their major superior to publish works on these topics³⁹. If they wish to write for newspapers that openly attack the Catholic religion or good morals, they need approval from the local ordinary⁴⁰.

Kraków 2006, 172.

³⁴ Dyrektorium, in: *Konstytucje i Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr św. Teresy od Dzieciątka Jezus* [Directory of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus], Podkowa Leśna 1995, 182 a.

³⁵ Konstytucje i ustawy Zgromadzenia Sióstr Franciszkanek Służebnic Krzyża [Constitutions and Acts of the Franciscan Sisters Servants of the Cross], Łaski 2005, 183/3; Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Panien Ofiarowania Najświętszej Maryi Panny (PP. Prezentek) [Directory of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Sisters of Presentation)], Kraków 1986, 188; Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Sióstr Niepokalanego Serca Najświętszej Maryi Panny [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary], Kietrz 1995, 172.

³⁶ Dyrektorium, in: *Konstytucje i Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Wygrodzicielek Najświętszego Oblicza* [Directory of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Holy Face], Warszawa 1990, 185.

³⁷ Konstytucje i ustawy Zgromadzenia Sióstr Franciszkanek Służebnic Krzyża, 173.

³⁸ Code of Canon Law, 823 §1; 827 §3.

³⁹ Code of Canon Law, 832.

⁴⁰ Code of Canon Law, 831 §1.

Despite these general provisions, many female religious communities have stricter requirements, demanding the approval for all publications given by an undefined major superior⁴¹, or by a general⁴² or provincial superior⁴³. In some communities, all publications require the general superior’s approval, regardless of their provincial level⁴⁴, or this is reserved for works about the community or its founder⁴⁵. Sometimes, the major superior must seek advice from a qualified person before granting permission⁴⁶. In certain cases, the

⁴¹ Konstytucje, in: *Konstytucje i Zarządzenia Zgromadzenia Sióstr Św. Dominika* [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Dominic], Kraków 2020, 74.

⁴² Konstytucje Wspólnoty Sióstr Uczennic Krzyża [Constitutions of the Community of Sisters Disciples of the Cross], 2012, 49; Konstytucje, in: *Konstytucje i Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Dominikanek Misjonarek Jezusa i Maryi* [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Dominican Missionary Sisters of Jesus and Mary], Zielonka k. Warszawy 1988, 144; *Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Misjonarek Świętej Rodziny* [Directory of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Family], Komorów 1985, 39; Konstytucje, in: *Reguła i Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Małych Sióstr Niepokalanego Serca Maryi* [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary], Częstochowa 2018, 97.

⁴³ *Dyrektorium Prowincji Najświętszego Imienia Jezus* (Zgromadzenie Sióstr Najświętszej Rodziny z Nazaretu) [Directory of Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus (Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth)], Warszawa 2016, 4.12.10; *Konstytucje Unii Rzymskiej Zakonu Świętej Urszuli* [Constitutions of the Roman Union of the Order of Saint Ursula], 1984, 42.

⁴⁴ *Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Sióstr Urszulanek Serca Jezusa Konającego* [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus], Rzym 1985, 86.

⁴⁵ *Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Służebniczek Najświętszej Maryi Panny Niepokalanie Poczętej* (Służebniczki Śląskie) [Directory of the Congregation of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Silesian Servants)], Wrocław 2010, 31.

⁴⁶ *Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Sióstr Albertynek*, 120.

approval of the ordinary bishop is also required, regardless of the topic⁴⁷.

Public Appearances

In addition to the publishing mentioned above, public appearances are another form of public visibility.

The Code of Canon Law stipulates that conferences of bishops should establish norms for the participation of clerics and members of religious institutes in radio or television discussions concerning Catholic doctrine or morals.⁴⁸ The Decree of the Polish Bishops' Conference specifies that clergy and consecrated persons should represent Christ's teachings rather than their personal opinions. Those seeking to engage in permanent or repeat media appearances must obtain approval from their higher superior or local bishop.⁴⁹ Notably, the Bishops' Conference cites Canon 831 §2 and 832, which govern the expression of opinions on matters of faith and morality, rather than general media presence.

Religious sisters are advised to express their opinions humbly and be prepared for concession.⁵⁰ To maintain proper

⁴⁷ Konstytucje, in: *Konstytucje i Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr św. Teresy od Dzieciątka Jezus* [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus], 120; Konstytucje, in: *Konstytucje i Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Benedyktynek Misjonarek* [Constitutions of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St. Benedict], Otwock 1989, 90; Konstytucje, in: *Konstytucje i Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Wynagrodzicielek Najświętszego Oblicza*, 254.

⁴⁸ Code of Canon Law, 831 §2.

⁴⁹ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski [Polish Bishops' Conference], Dekret ogólny Konferencji Episkopatu Polski w sprawie występowania duchownych, członków instytutów życia konsekrowanego, stowarzyszeń życia apostołskiego oraz niektórych wiernych świeckich w mediach, in: *Akta Konferencji Episkopatu Polski* 35 (2023), p. 142-144, here: 4, 6.

⁵⁰ *Dyrektorium Zgromadzenia Sióstr Misjonarek Świętej Rodziny*, 128.

detachment for evaluating contemporary events, they are encouraged to avoid public expressions of their views.⁵¹

Similar to the regulations for publishing, an extension of the rule requires religious sisters to obtain permission from competent authorities for all media appearances, not just those related to faith and morals.⁵² The competent person may be the major superior⁵³, the provincial superior⁵⁴, or the general superior⁵⁵. In some cases, even if a middle (provincial) level exists, permission from the general superior is still required.⁵⁶

As noted, the internal laws of certain communities restrict aspects of general Canon law; the supervision of superiors extends beyond written or spoken statements regarding faith and morals to encompass all forms of expression. Consequently, public activity and visibility in various types of media are significantly constrained.

Factors of the Sisters' Status in the Church

Testimonies from countries such as the USA, Canada, the Philippines, as well as various Latin American and European nations, highlight the intersectional emancipation characteristic of the works undertaken by religious sisters and their communities. These include leadership in multiple universities and colleges, particularly by the Sisters of Mercy in the USA, and social activism in diverse areas, such as the anti-racism movement and pastoral care for LGBT+ individuals (e.g., Sr. Jeannine Gramick, SL in the USA). Additionally, sisters have

⁵¹ *Konstytucja Zgromadzenia Sióstr św. Jadwigi* [Constitution of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Hedwig], 1984, 38.

⁵² *Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Sióstr Albertynek*, 121.

⁵³ *Konstytucje*, in: *Konstytucje i Zarządzenia Zgromadzenia Sióstr Św. Dominika*, 74.

⁵⁴ *Dyrektorium Prowincji Najświętszego Imienia Jezus*, 4.12.10

⁵⁵ *Konstytucje*, in: *Reguła i Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Małych Sióstr Niepokalanego Serca Maryi*, 97.

⁵⁶ *Konstytucje Zgromadzenia Sióstr Urszulanek Serca Jezusa Konającego*, 86.

engaged in feminist theology (e.g., Sr. Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ in the USA; Sr. Ivone Gebara in Brazil) and the feminist movement (e.g., Sr. Lucy Freibert, SCN in the USA), as well as participation in the Women's Ordination Conference (e.g., Sr. Teresa Forcades, OSB in Spain; Sr. Celine Goessl, SCSC in the USA).

At the highest official level within the Vatican Dicastery, until recently known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2 of the 4 members of the management committee – namely the prefect and 1 under-secretary – are religious sisters.⁵⁷

This section addresses the practical dimension of the legal norms previously discussed. It does not simply reflect them, as particular law does not necessarily prescribe specific roles or functions. In search of indicators of the female religious' status, I have chosen to focus on specific factors, including education level, holding positions of authority within Church administrations, or "Caritas", as well as involvement in academic institutions. This focus is due to the strong connection between being part of the official hierarchy and teaching roles within the Church. A comparison will be made between female and male religious, secular priests, and laypeople.

⁵⁷ Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, *Structure*, <https://www.vitaconsacrata.va/en/dicastero/struttura/superiori.html>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

Education Level

Table: Education – percentage of academic degree holders						
	Active sisters (2017)	Non-ordained male religious (“brothers”) (2017)	Ordained male religious (“fathers”) (2010)	Secular priests (2010)	Women in general (2021)	Men in general (2021)
BA	9%	0.5%	-	-	6.2%	5.8%
MA	36%	7.6%	~100%	~100%	21.2%	13.6%
PhD	1%	0.2%	8.7%	8.3%	0.6%	0.8%
above PhD	no data	no data	0.9%	1.6%	no data	no data

(Sources: Józef Baniak, *Losy powołań kapłańskich i zakonnych w Kościele rzymskokatolickim w Polsce w latach 1900–2018. Studium Socjologiczne*, Kraków 2019, p. 106, 209; Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Żeńskich Zgromadzeń Zakonnych, *Statystyka wykształcenia siostr*, 2017, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/wykszta%C5%82cenie-Si%C3%B3str.pdf>, accessed on: 26.02.2025; Statistics Poland, *Size and Demographic-Social Structure in the Light of the 2021 Census Results*, 2024, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/national-census/national-population-and-housing-census-2021/final-results-of-the-national-population-and-housing-census-2021/size-and-demographic-social-structure-in-the-light-of-the-2021-census-results,6,1.html>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.)

There is no available data on religious sisters holding degrees beyond a doctoral degree⁵⁸; however, other sources indicate that such sisters are employed at state and Church universities across various departments. Data on cloistered nuns and

⁵⁸ Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Żeńskich Zgromadzeń Zakonnych [Conference of the Major Superiors of Female Religious Communities], *Statystyka wykształcenia siostr*, 2017, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/wykszta%C5%82cenie-Si%C3%B3str.pdf>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

communities not affiliated with the conference of active communities is lacking. Although the overall level of education is high, only a small minority possess a doctoral degree, which qualifies them for further academic pursuits. Generally, non-ordained male religious are the least educated group compared to both religious and diocesan priests, as well as sisters. Moreover, data on communities not affiliated with the conference of male religious is similarly absent.⁵⁹ Currently, all diocesan priests and ordained male religious have obtained at least a Master's degree in theology or completed studies without a formal title, as seminaries are affiliated with theological faculties. Unfortunately, the most recent official statistics for men date back to 2010.⁶⁰ According to the 2021 census, the average education level among religious sisters significantly surpasses that of the general Polish population.⁶¹

Holding Positions of Authority in the Church Administration & 'Caritas'

This study will consider the consultants of the Commission for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life of the Polish Bishops' Conference, as well as selected positions in the bishops' offices, and 'Caritas'. According to Canon law, all of these roles are accessible to non-ordained Catholics.

Religious sisters constitute less than one-third of consultants (3 out of 11) on the Commission for Institutes of

⁵⁹ Józef Baniak, *Losy powołań kapłańskich i zakonnych w Kościele rzymskokatolickim w Polsce w latach 1900–2018. Studium Socjologiczne*, Kraków 2019, p. 209.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁶¹ Statistics Poland, *Size and Demographic-Social Structure in the Light of the 2021 Census Results*, 2024, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/national-census/national-population-and-housing-census-2021/final-results-of-the-national-population-and-housing-census-2021/size-and-demographic-social-structure-in-the-light-of-the-2021-census-results,6,1.html>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life – the other members are religious priests and one diocesan priest.⁶²

An examination of 45 bishops’ offices reveals that chancellors, department directors, and spokespersons are predominantly diocesan priests, with small exceptions for religious priests, and secular men and women. There are no sisters holding those positions.⁶³ In ‘Caritas’, each diocese has a separate director; however, only 2 of these positions are held by non-priestly heads, both of whom are secular men.⁶⁴

Academic Institutions: Running & Teaching

Religious sisters in Poland do not operate their own academies or universities. By the end of 2021, only 35 sisters from communities represented in the Conference of the Major Superiors of Female Religious Communities served as academic teachers, while 21 held positions as scholars. The data does not clarify the potential for the same individual to occupy both roles.⁶⁵

As of the end of 2022, data published by the Conference of the Major Superiors of the Male Orders lists a considerable number of academic and research institutions operated by male religious communities.⁶⁶ However, government

⁶² Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Komisja ds. Instytutów Życia Konsekrowanego i Stowarzyszeń Życia Apostolskiego*, <https://episkopat.pl/Gremia>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

⁶³ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Diecezje*, <https://episkopat.pl/Diecezje>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

⁶⁴ Caritas, *Diecezje*, <https://caritas.pl/diecezje/>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

⁶⁵ Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Żeńskich Zgromadzeń Zakonnych, *Statystyka. Funkcje aktualnie wykonywane przez siostry zakonne*, 2021, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Zestawienie-funkcje-2021.pdf>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

⁶⁶ Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Zakonów Męskich [Conference of the Major Superiors of the Male Orders], *Praca duszpasterska zakonów męskich w Polsce*, 2022, https://www.zyciezakonne.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Zakony_w_Polsce_2023_dzialanosc_duszpasterska_w_Polsce.pdf, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

databases indicate the existence of only one Jesuit university, one Jesuit college affiliated with another Catholic academy, and one state-accredited research institute – the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics. Only for them the religious orders are direct governing bodies. Additionally, there are numerous seminaries for religious priests, primarily associated with theological faculties.

Among male religious, 190 are employed at academies and universities, 55 in diocesan seminaries, and 362 in community seminaries.⁶⁷ It is unclear whether these figures account for individuals holding multiple positions within different institutions. There is a lack of data regarding the percentage of academics among diocesan priests.

While religious sisters in Poland are generally better educated than the average Polish citizen, they do not occupy positions of authority within the aforementioned bodies and institutions. It is more likely to find lay men or women than sisters in these roles, and the majority of administrative positions are held by diocesan priests. This situation indicates not only a significant clericalization of the structure but also highlights that being situated between clerics and laypeople becomes more of an obstacle than an advantage for sisters. These dynamics may stem from the internal structures and policies of the communities, which may actively or passively hinder sisters from securing positions that are accessible to laypeople. A review of recent statistics from both conferences⁶⁸ reveals a prevailing trend among sisters and their communities to be involved primarily in caregiving and maintenance roles. Notably, there are no religious sisters leading

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Zakonów Męskich, *Praca duszpasterska zakonów męskich w Polsce*; Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Żeńskich Zgromadzeń Zakonnych, *Statystyka*; Konferencja Wyższych Przełożonych Żeńskich Zgromadzeń Zakonnych, *Zestawienie statystyczne. Dzieła własne zgromadzeń*, 2021, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Zestawienie-Dziela-wlasne-2021.pdf>, accessed on: 26.02.2025.

‘Caritas’, which is particularly interesting given the charitable activities performed by numerous female religious communities, often associated with traditional femininity.

Female Church Run by Men. Catholic Church & Gender in Poland

This section aims to elucidate the reasons behind the unequal status of religious sisters compared to their male counterparts in the Church, as previously discussed. Key factors contributing to this disparity include current Church teachings on gender roles, the depiction of Mary as a role model for women, the limited response of Polish communities to the directives of the Second Vatican Council, and the relationship to feminist theologies. These elements collectively shape the status of sisters within the Church and underscore the complexities of their representation and authority.

Official Teaching on Genders after the Second Vatican Council

The gender category plays a significant role in the Catholic Church, where many functions are formally or informally reserved for men, because only they may become priests. When it comes to lay Catholics, there are no formal distinctions between lay men and women regarding various positions. Furthermore, Vatican II and later Church Magisterium teachings advocate for gender equality within the Church and society⁶⁹, although this equality does not extend to the priesthood⁷⁰. This limitation can be described as “equality with major remarks”, which will be explored further below. The discourse surrounding gender dynamics is extensive and encompasses bishops’

⁶⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* “*Gaudium et spes*”, 1965, 29, 60 and later Church Magisterium.

⁷⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* “*Inter insigniores*”, 1976, 5.

speeches, highlighting significant disparities between countries and dioceses. Although not all opportunities for the inclusion of women and non-ordained individuals outlined in general Canon law are fully exploited, such opportunities do exist, sometimes under internal oversight, as exemplified by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's Office for the Participation of Women.

Pope John Paul II called upon consecrated women to engage in the Church's life at various levels, including theological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. He popularised the term "genius of women" to highlight the unique contributions women can make to enrich both the Church and society. He also advocated for the "new feminism", focusing on motherhood, and contrasted it with "secular" feminism.⁷¹ From a terminological standpoint, speaking of "new" feminism can lead to an erroneous conclusion that there was one specific "old" feminism that preceded it. As a rule, the demands of "new feminism" converge with the existing, traditional approach that narrows the anthropological vision of women to the role of mother. Still, it is women who become mothers, not mothers who gain the status of women. In light of these aspects, it is difficult to speak of any "novelty"; at most, it is the aforementioned adaptation of the term "feminism" to the ecclesiastical context. The pope, who is a man, puts forward demands regarding "others", that is, women, and attempts to define their essence, rights, and duties, thereby sanctioning an essentialist understanding of gender. It should be noted that "new feminism" is, in fact, not a social movement; it does not seek any real change, but rather calls for acceptance of the *status quo* in the Church or for purely symbolic changes, which in turn places it in opposition to feminist theology regardless of the specific views of a given theologian, since the introduction of actual changes in favour of women is one of the foundations of this movement's existence. It can therefore be stated in the broadest terms that although both

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, 58.

feminist theology and “new feminism” address issues concerning women in the Church and the names of both refer to the legacy of the feminist movement, they do not have much else in common.⁷²

For this discussion, it is important to note that while the Church officially affirms gender equality in the post-Vatican II era, issues related to women are addressed in a manner that is distinct from those related to men. A notable example is the special apostolic letter on the dignity of women.⁷³

Pious & Pastoral Image of Mary as a Traditional Role Model for Women

The internal position of religious sisters within the Church appears to be closely linked to the figure of Mary. It does not have to be strictly based on contemporary biblical exegesis or Church teaching; for instance, the document *Marialis cultus* emphasises that using Mary as a model should transcend the anthropological and cultural context of her historical life, affirming that she can serve as a role model for contemporary people, both women and men.⁷⁴ Despite this official reinterpretation, Mary continues to be regarded as the traditional role model for women, embodying characteristics such as passivity and submissiveness. In contrast, male religious and priests are often seen as the “real” image of Christ, with the ban on

⁷² This is shortened and translated version of argumentation included in my book: Angelika Maria Małek, “*Jak ptak swoje piskłęta*”. *Macierzyńska symbolika w chrystologiach starożytnych i średniowiecznych oraz jej współczesna funkcja emancypacyjna w teologiach feministycznych*, Kraków 2022. For study in polemics of Elizabeth A. Johnson and Elżbieta Adamiak with John Paul II, see A. Maliszewska, „Nowy feminizm” Jana Pawła II. Krytyczna ocena z perspektywy katolicko-feministycznej, in: *Studia Bobolanum* 31:1 (2020), p. 71-97.

⁷³ John Paul II, *Apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of woman “Mulieris Dignitatem”*, 1988.

⁷⁴ Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary “Marialis cultus”*, 1974, 34-37.

women's ordination justified by their perceived lack of physical similarity to the male-incarnated Christ.⁷⁵

In Poland, this portrayal of Mary faces resistance, particularly among women aged 18 to 40, who distance themselves from the image of Mary as a silent servant and homemaker. With such a portrayal, public activities are often considered subsidiary.⁷⁶ While a complex discussion regarding the representation of Mary in the Polish pastoral tradition is beyond the scope of this article, two observations are noteworthy: the visible paradox in Mary's image – as humble in her earthly life and nearly omnipotent in her intercession – and the challenges of replicating the duality of virginity and motherhood in the life of women. However, this duality can be reinterpreted on a spiritual level, as frequently articulated by religious sisters.

(No) Response of the Female Communities to the Second Vatican Council

The Polish response to the Second Vatican Council encompasses various areas, including the life of female religious communities. Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, as the primate of Poland, received special prerogatives due to the concordat broken by the communist government in 1945. Consequently, he was directly accountable to the pope, functioning as a sort of papal legate.⁷⁷

Wyszyński viewed some post-Council changes observed abroad, particularly those affecting female communities, as ominous and detrimental to authentic religious life:

⁷⁵ Angelika Maria Małek, *Imago Christi or "just" imago Mariae? Women and the problem of image and imitation*, in: *Theological Research. The Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2017), p. 41-53.

⁷⁶ Remigiusz Szauer, *Kobiety (nie)pokorne. O nowych wymiarach postaw kobiet wobec religii i Kościoła w Polsce na przykładzie badań na Pomorzu*, in: *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 1:283 (2022), p. 71-90, here: p. 80.

⁷⁷ Kazimierz Śmigiel and Piotr Lewandowski, *Uprawnienia wyjątkowe prymasa Stefana Wyszyńskiego. Wybór dokumentów 1948–1979*, Pelplin 2020, p. 7, 168-176.

“We do not agree to slouching to cinemas or restaurants by our religious sisters, just because it is allowed and won by sisters in America. They [Polish sisters] are not raring to go, do not gag to do that; they do not need that. They have something else, more important to do. I recently spoke with one of the provincial superiors, who brought the general chapter’s resolutions to me and said: ‘We cannot implement those resolutions here in Poland, because it will destroy community life.’ I told her: ‘My child, leave it here (...). We will modify that according to the Polish way’.”⁷⁸

He also addressed foreign press, which referred to his decisions as the “Polish Council’s way” sarcastically – he emphasized that each local Church should implement changes in accordance with its own culture and heritage, reflecting a slow and thoughtful adaptation process as had occurred historically.⁷⁹ One of the “survivors” of the post-Vatican changes stated:

“To Poland came news from the West about premature reactions of sisters to the Council’s decisions. Our superiors were saying that we needed to listen to the superior of the Church in Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, and that we would not stick our neck out under any circumstances”.⁸⁰

Prior to the Council, Wyszyński was a strong advocate for sisters’ access to middle and higher education, the admission of younger and better-prepared sisters to superior positions,

⁷⁸ Stefan Wyszyński, *Przemówienie do wyższych przełożonych zakonów męskich w Polsce* [Address to the superiors general of men’s religious orders in Poland], Jasna Góra, 12.05.1969. It is interesting that such statement was given during the speech to the male religious.

⁷⁹ Wyszyński, *Przemówienie do wyższych przełożonych zakonów męskich w Polsce*; Stefan Wyszyński, *Odnova życia zakonnego według potrzeb Kościoła w Polsce. Przemówienie do wyższych przełożonych zakonów męskich* [Renewal of religious life in accordance with the needs of the Church in Poland Address to the superiors general of men’s religious orders in Poland], Warszawa, 10.04.1972.

⁸⁰ Beniamina Kulazińska, *Aggiornamento zakonów żeńskich w Kościele w świetle dokumentów Soboru Watykańskiego II*, in: *Studia Płockie* 34 (2006), p. 115-120, here: p. 116.

and he opposed autocratic management styles within convents as well as the imbalance between work and personal life in female communities.⁸¹ He also established curators for female communities to oversee compliance with Canon law and published regulations governing the work of sisters in parishes.⁸² In this respect, he anticipated many of the Council's reforms. After the Council, he mandated that Polish sisters prioritise the reading of the Council's documents as their spiritual reading.⁸³ He emphasised the need for deep reflection on community life by all sisters, not just the superiors.⁸⁴

Wyszyński's leadership occupied a unique position between the secularised West, where many religious communities faced decline after the Council due to dwindling membership, and the communist East, where state authorities actively sought to undermine community life (e.g., via confiscation of properties, ban on religious education in schools,

⁸¹ Stefan Wyszyński, *Pozycja zakonów w pracy Kościoła świętego w Polsce* [Role of religious orders in the work of the Holy Church in Poland], Jasna Góra, 11.10.1957; Stefan Wyszyński, *Instrukcja dla przełożonych zakonnych w sprawie pewnych niedomagań w spełnianiu obowiązków przełożęńskich* [Guidelines for religious superiors regarding certain shortcomings in the fulfilment of supervisory duties], Warszawa, 26.08.1961.

⁸² Krystyna Dębowska, Kardynał Stefan Wyszyński, Prymas Polski a zakony żeńskie. Co zgromadzenia żeńskie zawdzięczają Prymasowi Tysiąclecia?, in: *Biuletyn KWPZZZ* 14 (2001), p. 16-27.

⁸³ Stefan Wyszyński, *Zalecenie dla wyższych przełożonych zakonów żeńskich w Polsce* [Recommendation for the major superiors of women's religious orders in Poland], Warszawa, 10.01.1968. What is interesting, at that time the state authorities allowed only for very small print runs – smaller than the number of priests in Poland. Finally, the sisters themselves reproduced council documents using typewriters. Since the mid-1980s, council documents were available in Poland without restrictions. About this and more in those terms, see: Urszula Pękala and Monika Waluś, Die Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils in Polen, in: Urszula Pękala/Dries Bosschaert (eds.) *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil in Europa*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2025, p. 353-369.

⁸⁴ Stefan Wyszyński, *Zarządzenia w sprawie odnowy życia zakonnego po myśli uchwał soborowych* [Regulations on the renewal of religious life in accordance with the council's decrees], Warszawa, 10.01.1968.

or claiming to appoint bishops). While Wyszyński opposed autocratic governance styles within religious communities, he concurrently exercised significant control over their internal management, as presented in the quoted conversation with one of the provincial superiors. Furthermore, he called religious communities in Poland to nurture the bonds between different communities in the country rather than within their international structures, linking various provinces of the same order – according to him, orders in general are rather “trans-national” than “international”, and should focus on the specific national environment and local regulations.⁸⁵ This strategy helped sustain their existence but also resulted in a growing separation from international religious networks, with repercussions that became evident many years later.

Weak Response to Feminist Theologies

The Polish response to the emergence of feminist theology has been relatively weak, comprising only a few research books, some academic papers and popular essays (mostly on feminist Mariology) – most notably by Elżbieta Adamiak.⁸⁶ There have been no Polish translations of works by prominent Catholic feminist authors, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, or Sr. Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ. This limited response is a part of the overall Polish reaction to the Second Vatican Council – the Council served as a catalyst for feminist theology within the Catholic Church. As mentioned above in the context of religious orders, the dynamic of adoption of the feminist movement in the Church was also

⁸⁵ Wyszyński, *Odnowa życia zakonnego według potrzeb Kościoła w Polsce*.

⁸⁶ Elżbieta Adamiak, *Błogosławiona między niewiastami. Maryja w feministycznej teologii Cathariny Halkes*, Lublin 1997; Anna Maliszewska, *Kobieta wyzwolona. Maryja w teologii Elizabeth A. Johnson*, Katowice 2015, and other publication of those authors. For Polish example of involvement in the Feminist Christology: Małek, “*Jak ptak swoje piskłęta*”.

different from that in Western Europe – the first Polish publications came from the 1990s.

Feminist theologians advocate various postulates, the most significant of which is women's co-responsibility in the Church. This includes participation in decision-making bodies and sharing their experiences as women on equal terms with men. The male experience should not be regarded as a general, "objective" standard compared to a "subjective" and thus less serious female perspective; rather, all experiences represent a combination of diverse subjective viewpoints.⁸⁷ From a Polish perspective, the role of Mary in Catholic feminist theology could be seen as particularly noteworthy. Through her song *Magnificat* (Gospel of Luke 1:46-55), Mary is portrayed as a revolutionary figure – humble before God yet strong among people.⁸⁸

Ordination significantly influences the status and opportunities available within the Church, even in contexts where it may not directly relate to a specific role or position. This is especially evident in Poland, where the presence of priests remains substantial. The formal subordination of diocesan priests to the Church hierarchy is much greater than that of lay individuals or religious sisters, as their relationship to the bishop allows for easier oversight; they are not only employees but also lifelong subordinates.

Given the limited presence of members from other Christian denominations, they do not serve as significant sources of inspiration for women's emancipation, unlike in less Catholic countries. There may be a correlation between the presence of secular women in Church institutions and the higher visibility of non-Catholic Christians in certain regions.⁸⁹ Conversely, Poland has made minimal progress, with the Lutheran

⁸⁷ Malek, „*Jak ptak swoje pisklęta*”, p. 90.

⁸⁸ E.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London 1994, p. 123.

⁸⁹ Leszczyńska, *Płeć w instytucje uwikłana*, p. 172-173.

Church only permitting the ordination of women as presbyters in 2022, whereas in Germany this began in 1958.⁹⁰

Connected to the priesthood is the role of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. According to the most recent document from the Polish Bishops’ Conference, both secular men and consecrated women can be appointed to this role.⁹¹ However, the exact number of religious sisters serving as extraordinary ministers is unknown. While Canon law permits both secular men and women to fulfil this role, specific regulations are determined by the bishops’ conferences of each country.⁹²

Conclusion

The 19th century witnessed the significant development of numerous new national Polish religious communities, predominantly female ones. Their influence was particularly pronounced due to the partitions of Poland, as these apostolic communities engaged in education and played a crucial role in preserving the Polish language and culture.⁹³ Historically, female religious communities possessed considerable emancipatory potential, especially in community management and related work. Ewa Jabłońska-Deptuła noted that the female religious movement was intertwined with the first Polish feminist movement, mirroring trends in other countries.⁹⁴ In

⁹⁰ Peter Neuner, *Ökumenischer Affront. Zur Geschichte der Frauenordination*, in: *Herder Korrespondenz* 10 (2021), p. 49-50, here: p. 49.

⁹¹ Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Wskazania Konferencji Episkopatu Polski odnośnie do nadzwyczajnego szafarza Komunii Świętej*, 2006.

⁹² Code of Canon Law, 230 §3.

⁹³ Maria Loyola Opiela, *Wkład polskich zgromadzeń zakonnych powstałych w XIX wieku w rozwój podstaw i praktyki rodzimej edukacji*, in: *Zeszyty Naukowe SWPR – Seria Pedagogiczna* 5-6: 12-13 (2013-2014): p. 175-202; Ewa Jabłońska-Deptuła, *Szkice z dziejów formowania się polskich kongregacji żeńskich oraz ich programu społecznego w w. XIX*, in: *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 12:2 (1964), p. 141-194.

⁹⁴ Jabłońska-Deptuła, *Szkice z dziejów formowania się polskich kongregacji żeńskich*, p. 143-144.

the post-World War II period, joining a religious community provided many women – and men – with opportunities to improve their quality of life.

The Second Vatican Council marked a significant shift for lay Catholics, women, and religious communities worldwide, particularly for sisters. It transformed the understanding of consecrated life, which is evident not only in the changes to habits but also in the formation processes and daily life practices. According to Church teachings, these should be more aligned with contemporary realities. Still, divisions along gender lines⁹⁵, particularly those related to work and positions held, are visible, especially in contexts where Vaticanum II was not adequately adopted in all areas due to historical circumstances, as it has taken place in Poland in terms of female consecrated life.⁹⁶ Those findings align with existing literature, particularly with those of Nikielska-Sekuła – namely, that sisters, despite their much more numerous presence compared to male religious members and their relatively high level of education, operate on the margins of managerial structures.⁹⁷ This is not due to restrictions imposed by the Church's official teaching but rather results from the internal regulations of the orders and the cultural background, which influence the deep internalization of the *status quo* that consecrated women see as the natural order, as discussed by Nikielska-Sekuła. Consequently, this public presence in the Church environment paradoxically positions sisters lower in rank than secular women and laypeople in general.

⁹⁵ Acker, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies*, p. 146.

⁹⁶ It does not concern all dimensions of Council's reception in Poland, as it concerns many more aspects of the Church's life than just religious orders. More about general reception of Vatican II in Europe including Poland: Mathijs Lamberigts, Reception of Vatican II in Europe, in: Catherine E. Clifford/Massimo Faggioli (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, Oxford 2023 and Urszula Pękala, One Council for Divided Europe? Eastern European Perspective on Vatican II as Exemplified by Poland [to be published].

⁹⁷ Nikielska-Sekuła, *Człowiek – kobieta – zakonnica?*

While Wyszyński recognised many challenges, his actions partly obstructed the implementation of the Council’s reforms that were more crucial for the functioning of female than male communities. Although these reforms also pertained to male religious, their status in the Church did not require similar support. The combination of circumstances has contributed to a specific crisis within the Church in Poland. Currently, the Church faces not only a decrease in female religious vocations, but also an increasing number of sisters leaving their communities for various reasons. This issue, along with the experiences of former priests and male religious, has garnered public attention and warrants further research.

Historically, female cloisters provided significant educational opportunities for girls and women. The status of religious sisters within the Church reveals that traditional roles as teachers or directors in convent schools are expected; however, there exists a “glass ceiling” that prevents even highly educated women from attaining managerial positions within official Church structures or lecturing at academic institutions. Being the majority of consecrated persons, they are not engaged at levels comparable to their male counterparts, even within expert discussions on the consecrated life at the national level, as visible in the Commission for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life of the Polish Bishops’ Conference.

Unlike other social variables, gender remains a constant factor, particularly in the context of religion, which both influences and is influenced by gender dynamics.⁹⁸ The topic of the status of religious sisters is significant also outside of the Polish context: given the Catholic Church’s substantial role as a culture-shaping force globally, it also provides a framework for comparing situations in countries with similar backgrounds. Moreover, this analysis is pertinent for examining the status

⁹⁸ Marta Trzebiatowska, *Beyond Habitus: Researching Gender and Religion Through the Ontology of Social Relations*, in: Andrew McKinnon/Marta Trzebiatowska (eds.), *Sociological Theory and the Question of Religion*, London 2014, p. 252.

of women in specific contexts, particularly in settings where men hold positions of authority despite women being quantitatively dominant. The reasons behind this effect, as well as its implications, warrant further research, particularly regarding how both men and women perceive this phenomenon.

Author:

Angelika Maria Małek, Ph.D. in Theology, Religion&Politics Researcher, University of Lodz (Poland), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4549-2080>