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# CATHOLIC TRADITIONALISM IN POLAND: SOME CURRENT TRENDS

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## Abstract

This article reviews the issues related to the contemporary Catholic traditionalist movement, with a focus on its Polish branch and noticeable trends within it. Traditionalism emerged in the second half of the 20th century in reaction to the transformative processes within Catholicism associated with the Second Vatican Council. A comprehensive reform of Catholic liturgy, conducted between 1964 and 1975, played a particularly significant role in its spread. In Poland, it became noticeable only after the regime change in 1989, both in the form defined by the Apostolic See's indulgences<sup>1</sup> of the 1980s and in a more radical form associated with the Society of St. Pius X. The broader development of Polish traditionalist movement began following the issuance of Pope Benedict XVI's document *Summorum Pontificum* (2007), which equalized the pre- and post-conciliar liturgies. The primary factors defining the current dynamics of Polish traditionalism are the style and course of Pope Francis's pontificate, including primarily his abrogation of the liturgical rights introduced by his predecessor, as well as certain aspects of the Polish Church's actions in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, within the Polish Catholic community, there is a noticeable simultaneous increase in the popularity of this model of faith experience, but also tensions with the more liberally inclined part of the hierarchy and faithful. In sum, within the traditionalist faction itself, there are visible tendencies towards radicalization of attitudes, linked to an increasing critical approach towards ecclesiastical authorities and the overall reality of the post-conciliar Church.

**Keywords:** Catholic traditionalism, Poland, Second Vatican Council, Catholic liturgical reform, Benedict XVI, Francis.

## Introduction

Internal crises and disputes are nothing unusual in the history of Christianity. From its very beginnings, various tensions related to doctrinal, ritual, organizational, and disciplinary issues have been observed. Some of these have been resolved in one way or another, while others have

<sup>1</sup> A usually temporary dispensation granted by the pope, permitting a deviation from church law.

led to significant schisms, resulting in the formation of new denominations or sects. Such phenomena are also present in contemporary Christianity.

In today's Roman Catholic Church, a fundamental and often intense debate centers around the interpretation and legacy of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), an event that significantly, and in some areas even revolutionarily, shaped the current state of Catholicism. This debate involves not only the highest ecclesiastical authorities, clergy, and theologians but also many “ordinary” Catholics. Broadly speaking, the main line of this dispute is drawn between “conservative” and “liberal” approaches. The former maintain that the Catholic truth, expressed in theological and moral doctrine, the reality of worship, and the hierarchical structure of the Church, possesses and should possess an immutable quality (though the scope of what is considered immutable is not understood identically by all its proponents). The latter, in turn, view Vatican II as a new beginning—in its radical forms, the beginning of a new era in the history of the Church<sup>2</sup> or even a new Church<sup>3</sup>—opening the way to profound transformations of Catholicism as a key to its democratization, extensive adaptation to the conditions of the modern world (most often Western), and an active, yet receptive, response to the needs of the so-called “contemporary man.”

One of the primary, though not the only, representatives of the conservative approach is the traditionalist movement, which emerged almost concurrently with the Council in reaction to the changes it introduced.<sup>4</sup> This article will focus on the current state of the Catholic traditionalist movement in Poland and the noticeable trends within it. The data on which this analysis is based come from publicly available sources, personal contacts with representatives of traditionalist circles, and observations of the dynamics of discourse in this strand of Polish Catholicism, visible in the media space (mainly social media). The conclusions proposed here should therefore be viewed solely as an attempt to formulate certain intuitions and hypotheses with a considerable degree of superficiality, whose verification and deepening require further research, both quantitative and qualitative.

### **Contemporary Catholic Traditionalism**

The concept of Catholic traditionalism is not straightforward. The term “traditionalism” itself probably emerged around the mid-19th century and initially referred to a group of anti-

<sup>2</sup> K. Rahner. “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II”. *Theological Studies*, 1979, 40, 721.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hughson. “Interpreting Vatican II: «A New Pentecost»”. *Theological Studies*, 2008, 69, 3–37.

<sup>4</sup> Ph. Roy-Lysencourt, “The Reception of the Second Vatican Council by Traditionalist Catholics”. *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*. London: Oxford University Press, 2023, 360–378.

Enlightenment Catholic activists and thinkers engaged in a dispute about the role of reason in religious knowledge. They denied the significance of reason and opposed it with Revelation preserved in the Church's tradition as the sole source of such knowledge. In a slightly later period, it gained additional meanings, so much so that Alphonse V. Roche, writing in the late 1930s, identified four possible semantic ranges for the term:

1. "Adherence to tradition" (the most general sense).
2. In a more specific sense: a philosophical and religious doctrine according to which the principle of all knowledge is the original Revelation transmitted through tradition, with the Church as its main guardian.
3. A set of social, political, philosophical, and religious theories from the early 19th century that favored a return to the institutions of the *ancien régime* (advocating the rejection of the republican system and the restoration of the monarchy, etc.).
4. A literary movement with a similar ideological profile that developed at the end of the 19th century, with its most famous representatives including Bourget, Barrès, Brunetière, Bazin, Bordeaux, Lasserre, and Maurras.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionalism, as a doctrine rejecting reason in favor of the exclusivity of Revelation preserved in tradition, was condemned by Popes Gregory XVI (1840) and Pius IX (1855).

Today, this term has a different referent, as it relates to that part of the hierarchy, clergy, and laity of the Catholic Church which, within a rather broad spectrum of possible views, is skeptical of the changes that have taken place within and as a result of the Second Vatican Council. This does not mean that there are no areas of continuity between 19th and 20th-century traditionalism. At the most general level, the common element is adherence to the tradition of the Church (although it is likely understood somewhat differently by representatives of both trends). On a more detailed level, one can speak of a certain relative community of tendencies in understanding social life, preferred political systems, etc. Doubts arose about a number of changes in the Church's approach to the modern world, religious freedom, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, etc., as well as the liturgical reform mandated by the Council. All these changes were seen by some Catholics, including some bishops, as a departure from the traditional teaching and ritual practice of the Church, ultimately causing it to lose its proper character and leading to its general and profound crisis. However, it should be noted that today's traditionalist movement is not a homogeneous environment, especially regarding political trends and sympathies. Although the dominant tendency within it is to favor the broadly

<sup>5</sup> V. Roche. "Le Mot «Traditionalisme»". *Modern Language Notes*, 1937, 52 (3), 167.

understood right wing, there is significant diversity of views and practices on specific issues (e.g., attitudes toward democracy and preferred political models). This diversity seems to arise largely from the various historical experiences and political conditions of specific nations.

A significant role in the formation of the broader traditionalist movement was played by the post-conciliar transformation of the Catholic liturgy. At the time when Pope John XXIII convened the Council (1962 to 1965), the dominant liturgical practice in the Roman Church was the rite established as mandatory (with some significant exceptions) by Pope Pius V as a result of the reform mandated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563).<sup>6</sup> This is often, though somewhat imprecisely, referred to as the “Tridentine Rite.” It derived directly from the medieval papal custom, thus enjoying the status of a very ancient tradition. Between the promulgation of the liturgical books by Pius V (1568 and 1570) and the Second Vatican Council, the core of the Catholic liturgy underwent very minimal, one might say cosmetic, changes. However, between 1964 and 1975, it was subjected to a far-reaching reform, so that the form given to it at that time differed greatly from what it had been over the previous centuries. Simultaneously, the highest ecclesiastical authorities, having accepted the reformed rites, decided to impose them on the entire Catholic community, while also prohibiting the use of the earlier liturgical books and generally ignoring requests from some quarters to continue celebrating traditional rites.<sup>7</sup> These changes, combined with others, likely led to the emergence of organized forms of the traditionalist movement.

As mentioned, this movement encompasses a wide spectrum of views, from very radical to moderate and conciliatory. The former primarily include individuals who believe that since the end of Pope Pius XII’s pontificate (d. 1958), subsequent popes, due to falling into heresy (primarily so-called modernism), either are not in any sense true popes (known as sedevacantism),<sup>8</sup> or hold their office only materially, being *de facto* deprived of the right to it and thus also of the jurisdiction proper to the Bishop of Rome (known as sedeprivationism).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A. Chadwick. “The Roman Missal of the Council of Trent”. *T & T Clark Companion to Liturgy*. London/New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016, 107–131.

<sup>7</sup> P. Milcarek. *Historia Mszy. Przewodnik po dziejach rytu rzymskiego*. [History of the Mass. A guide to the history of the Roman rite]. Kraków: Wydawnictwo AA, 2009, 276–277; A. Reid, “The *Usus Antiquior*—Its History and Importance after The Second Vatican Council”. *T & T Clark Companion to Liturgy*, 457–458; D. Pietras. *Nadzwyczajna forma rytu rzymskiego. Status prawny*. [Extraordinary form of the Roman rite. Legal status]. Dębogóra: Dębogóra, 2021, 174–175.

<sup>8</sup> Among the sedevacantists, there is also a small group known as “conclavists.” These individuals believe that, in light of the heresies of the conciliar and post-conciliar popes, sedevacantist bishops have the right and duty to elect a pope from among themselves who will not be burdened by the errors of Rome.

<sup>9</sup> Some data on these movements, which, though not recent, remain informative is provided by Pier Luigi Zoccatelli, “The Current Status of Catholic Sedevacantism and Antipopes.” [https://www.cesnur.org/2009/plz\\_sedevacantism.htm](https://www.cesnur.org/2009/plz_sedevacantism.htm).

On a less ecclesiological radical stance stands the most recognizable group of traditionalists, the members or supporters of the Society of St. Pius X (hereafter: SSPX), founded in 1970 by the French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.<sup>10</sup> They do not deny the validity of post-conciliar popes but wholly reject and subject to multi-level critique the post-conciliar changes in the Catholic Church. Liturgically, they celebrate the rites exclusively in the classical form (i.e., that which they assumed following the Tridentine reform) based on pre-conciliar books, primarily the last edition of the Missal of Pius V, issued by John XXIII in 1962.

Post-conciliar traditionalism is also manifested in various associations founded and led by laypeople. Many of these now operate under the aegis of the International Federation *Una Voce* (established in 1967).<sup>11</sup>

By the early 1980s, tensions between traditionalists (primarily the SSPX) and the Vatican had escalated to the point where the latter decided to somewhat soften its stance on liturgical matters. Consequently, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued the indult *Quattuor abhinc annos* (1984),<sup>12</sup> asserting that “the problem of priests and faithful holding to the so-called ‘Tridentine’ rite was almost completely solved” but at the same time acknowledging that “the same problem continues”. As a result, bishops were granted the authority to approve local celebrations in the classical form of the Roman rite.<sup>13</sup>

However, subsequent negotiations between Archbishop Lefebvre and representatives of the Holy See (mainly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) did not result in an agreement. In 1988, Lefebvre consecrated four bishops without the consent of Rome, leading to his excommunication and that of the bishops, as confirmed by Pope John Paul II in the motu proprio *Ecclesia Dei adflicta*.<sup>14</sup> This event also led to the secession of some members from the SSPX who chose to remain in communion with Rome. The same document created an opportunity for these members to continue their charism within the post-conciliar Church, giving rise to communities such as the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter or the Institute of the Good Shepherd, and reaffirmed the 1984 indult. These communities were to be overseen by a special commission, the so-called Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*.

<sup>10</sup> M. Karas. *Integryzm Bractwa Kapłańskiego św. Piusa X. Historia i doktryna katolickiego ruchu tradycjonalistycznego*. [Integrism of the Society of St. Pius X. History and doctrine of the Catholic traditionalist movement]. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.fiuv.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship. *Quattuor Abhinc Annos*. The Holy See. October 3, 1984. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/quattuor-abhinc-annos-indult-for-use-of-roman-missal-of-1962-2155>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II. *Ecclesia Dei adflicta*. The Holy See. July 2, 1988. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_motu-proprio\\_02071988\\_ecclesia-dei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_02071988_ecclesia-dei.html).

The softening measures from Rome did not translate into a significantly broader presence of traditional liturgy and spirituality in contemporary Catholicism. Despite papal consent, most bishops were generally unsympathetic to the faithful who were attached to the older forms of liturgy and devotion, not to mention doctrinal issues, attitudes towards the Council, etc. Additionally, relations between more radical traditionalists and the Holy See, already strained, were practically severed following the controversial episcopal consecrations of 1988 and the excommunication of the SSPX founder. As a result, these associated circles, partly voluntarily, became even more deeply marginalized.

The situation changed shortly after Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI, ascended to the papal throne. He was already known for his critical (though moderate), approach to certain post-conciliar changes, especially in the realm of liturgy, and for his favorable stance toward traditionalist circles.<sup>15</sup> In 2007, Benedict XVI issued his *motu proprio* titled *Summorum Pontificum* (hereinafter: SP),<sup>16</sup> through which he lifted most of the existing restrictions on celebrating the pre-conciliar liturgy. The document stated that the pre-conciliar liturgical books had never been abrogated and that the rite contained within them should be honored due to “its venerable and ancient usage.” The pre- and post-conciliar liturgies were described as two forms of the same Roman rite, respectively: “extraordinary” and “ordinary” (cf. SP 1). From this point onward, any priest could celebrate Mass and recite the Breviary in the pre-conciliar form without needing his bishop’s permission. Formally, this applied to Masses celebrated without the participation of the people (*missae sine populo*), though if there were faithful who wished to attend, it was not restricted in any way (cf. SP 2–4). If a group of Catholics in a given place wished to regularly participate in the liturgy according to the *Missale Romanum* of John XXIII, the pastor of the church (or the bishop if the pastor was unable) was obliged to facilitate this for them (cf. SP 5). In 2011, the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei* issued an additional implementing instruction for SP, titled *Universae Ecclesiae*, which clarified some provisions of the *motu proprio* in an expansive manner.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> J. Ratzinger. “Address to the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter”. *Inside the Vatican*, 1998, 6 (10), 58–59; idem, “Retrouver l’esprit de la liturgie: Entretien avec le Cardinal Ratzinger”. [Recovering the spirit of the liturgy: An interview with Cardinal Ratzinger]. *L’homme nouveau*, October 7, 2001, 9–11; idem, “Assessment and Future Prospects”. *Looking Again at the Question of the Liturgy with Cardinal Ratzinger: Proceedings of the July 2001 Fontgombault Liturgical Conference*. Farnborough: St. Michael’s Abbey Press, 2003, 145–153

<sup>16</sup> Benedict XVI. Apostolic Letter Given. *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970. The Holy See. July 7, 2007. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html).

<sup>17</sup> Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*. *Universae Ecclesiae*: Instruction on the Application of the Apostolic Letter *Summorum Pontificum* Given *Motu Proprio*. The Holy See. April 30, 2011. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_commissions/ecclsdei/documents/rc\\_com\\_ecclsdei\\_doc\\_20110430\\_istr-universae-ecclesiae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/ecclsdei/documents/rc_com_ecclsdei_doc_20110430_istr-universae-ecclesiae_en.html).

SP had a profound impact on the traditionalist movement. Primarily, it quite radically changed the conditions under which the movement operated, influencing its development. The movement could now grow firmly within the formal structure of the Church. As successive attempts to reach an agreement and regulate the canonical status of the SSPX were unsuccessful, those associated with it remained in a state of separation from the mainline Church. At the same time, under SP, many communities centered around the traditional Roman liturgy, and consequently around traditional Catholic devotion and teaching, came into being and remained within this stream.

The next significant turn, which currently defines the situation for traditionalists, occurred in July 2021. Pope Francis issued his *motu proprio* titled *Traditionis Custodes* (hereinafter: TC),<sup>18</sup> which revoked most of the regulations in SP that had fostered the movement's development. The official reason cited was the supposed deep correlation between a tendency to choose the older form of liturgy and the rejection "not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, (in the opinion of the authors of this article with unfounded and unsustainable assertions), that it betrayed the Tradition and the 'true Church.'"<sup>19</sup> The traditionalist communities that had been operating since SP were subjected to numerous restrictions, and, according to the explicitly stated intention of the legislator, they should ultimately disappear from the Church, "returning" to the exclusive cultivation of the reformed liturgy.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that Francis's decree affected those traditionalists who operated within a canonically regular situation. The SSPX and other more radical forms of the movement, which do not recognize the real jurisdiction of the "post-conciliar" Church hierarchy, have continued to operate without any imposed restrictions.

## Polish Traditionalism and Its Current Trends

Similar to the global traditionalist movement, its Polish branch has not been fully examined so far, although there are sociological studies regarding certain circles.<sup>21</sup> Before the

<sup>18</sup> Francis. Apostolic Letter Issued. *Motu Proprio Traditionis Custodes* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1979. The Holy See. July 16, 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html).

<sup>19</sup> Francis. Letter to the Bishops of the Whole World That Accompanies. The Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Data Traditionis Custodes*. The Holy See. July 16, 2021, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> D. Sozańska. "Tradsi w wielkim mieście. Uczestnicy mszy trydenckiej w Krakowie – portret środowiska". ["Tradsi in the big city. Participants of the Tridentine Mass in Krakow – a portrait of the community"]. *Religia i Kościół w społeczeństwie demokratycznym i obywatelskim w Polsce. Między losem a wyborem*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Społecznych UAM, 2012, 343–361; *Extraordinary Form of the Roman*



promulgation of SP, Polish traditionalists were very few in number. This was due to various reasons, from political factors (the Iron Curtain) to Church-related issues (in Polish Catholicism, post-conciliar reforms were implemented slowly and moderately, without generating a strong opposition movement). Aside from statistically marginal conservative-monarchist circles in the 1980s, traditionalism emerged in Poland only after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In 1994 and 1996, communities centered around the traditional liturgy began to form in, respectively, Poznań and Warsaw based on the indulgences of the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Collaboration between some members of these groups led to the establishment of the quarterly magazine *Christianitas* in 1999, dedicated to the traditional liturgy, theology, Latin and Catholic cultural heritage, and political-social thought. (It is published to this day, and since 2014, all its texts have also been published in an open-access electronic form).<sup>23</sup> Since the mid-1990s, the SSPX has been active in Poland, conducting publishing activities in addition to pastoral work<sup>24</sup> and running a group of schools in Józefów near Warsaw,<sup>25</sup> while some of its priests engage in online activities.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Benedict XVI's document changed the situation because the equalization of pre- and post-conciliar liturgy by the pope opened up the possibility for grassroots development of communities that could relatively unrestrictedly cultivate the Catholic liturgical tradition and forms of spirituality. According to a common pattern, Polish traditionalism, excluding marginal sedevacantist groups, generally divides into groups of people associated with the SSPX and those operating under SP (often derogatorily referred to by those associated with the SSPX as "indult" or "indultists"). This term still refers to the period before SP, when a few non-SSPX communities operated under the indulgences from the 1980s. Generally, the usage of traditionalists from SSPX denotes people who, from their perspective, are not consistent traditional Catholics because they operate "by the grace" of a hierarchy permeated by modernist heresy. Formally labeling groups operating under SP as "indultists" is incorrect because Benedict XVI's *motu proprio* was not essentially an indulgence (a specific

*Rite in Perception of Committed Catholics in Poland: Research Results*. Warszawa: Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego SAC, 2017. <https://iskk.pl/publikacje/nadzwyczajna-forma-rytu-rzymskiego/>

<sup>22</sup> In Poznań, the oldest Polish traditionalist community recently celebrated (on June 3, 2024) the thirtieth anniversary of the commencement of regular celebrations of the liturgy in the classical Roman rite. <https://pch24.pl/poznan-swietuje-30-lat-tradycji-liturgicznej-obrzedom-po-staremu-asystowal-abp-stanislaw-gadecki/>.

<sup>23</sup> [www.christianitas.org](http://www.christianitas.org).

<sup>24</sup> Ł. Bertram. *Wyrodne dzieci nowoczesności. Indultowi tradycjoniści katoliccy w Warszawie*. [Divergent children of modernity. Indult Catholic traditionalists in Warsaw]. Gdańsk; Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2016, 40.

<sup>25</sup> <https://szkoly.akwinata.edu.pl/pl>.

<sup>26</sup> "Aquinas Schools". *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/@SzkolyAkwinaty>.

permission for a particular practice deviating from existing regulations, granted to specific individuals, groups, or even nations), but rather a document stating that the earlier form of the Roman liturgy was never abrogated, and its use is therefore possible and legal. In other words, it is not permission (indult) but rather a statement that no permission is needed in this matter.

Setting aside formal-ecclesiological matters, both of these groups approach the issue of “tradition” in the Church from somewhat different perspectives. For historical reasons, the SSPX takes a much more principled approach to the issue of the Council and post-conciliar changes, formulating a consistent and principled critique of the current state of the Church and directly linking it to Vatican II. This clearly influences its adherents. Meanwhile, traditionalism in communities that emerged during the period of SP has a much more diverse approach to these issues, which could be understood as a spectrum ranging from radical positions, close to the SSPX, or even bordering on sedevacantism (especially concerning Pope Francis), to very conciliatory and moderate ones, hardly distinguishable—except perhaps in liturgical terms—from conservative “post-conciliar” Catholics. It is worth noting that SP was a document solely concerning liturgy, and it can reasonably be assumed that the majority of traditionalists in the latter group are primarily individuals for whom “traditionalism” primarily means attending Mass in the Tridentine rite. In other matters, such as the attitude toward the council, religious freedom, ecumenism, etc., they represent a range of different approaches, although statistically, criticism of various aspects of the current state and life of the Church likely prevails by a large margin.

Between 2007 and 2021, there was a slow but consistent growth of interest in the “extraordinary form of the Roman Rite” and more broadly, the “Latin tradition” among Polish Catholics (both clergy and laity). While most bishops still maintained some distance, there were cases of greater openness, with some even agreeing to administer the sacrament of confirmation according to the pre-conciliar *Pontificale Romanum* (Cardinal Grzegorz Ryś) and to celebrate pontifical masses (late Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek). The number of places where one could attend the extraordinary form weekly or more frequently increased from five in 2007 to forty-five in 2019, with an additional eighty being celebrated irregularly (these data do not include SSPX chapels).<sup>27</sup> There were also grassroots initiatives largely led by laypeople, such as the “Ars Celebrandi” workshops for priests, altar servers, and liturgical singers, aimed at acquiring the

<sup>27</sup> “Kościoły z tradycyjną Mszą w Polsce”. [Churches with traditional Mass in Poland]. <https://www.unacum.pl/2019/07/koscioy-z-tradycyjna-msza-w-polsce.html#start>

skills necessary for celebrating the liturgy in the classical form.<sup>28</sup> Various retreats, summer camps, public lectures, and other events were organized as well.

Current trends among Polish traditionalists are strongly influenced by the pontificate and certain actions of Pope Francis, who assumed office after the resignation of Benedict XVI in 2013. Another factor shaping these trends, albeit from a different angle, was the COVID-19 pandemic and certain actions taken by the Church in Poland in response.

From the outset, Pope Francis has been seen as a representative of a much more—to put it briefly—“post-Vatican II liberal” understanding of the Church and Catholicism than his predecessors, introducing various changes and advocating solutions that raise significant doubts, and sometimes even outright opposition, from more conservatively inclined hierarchs, clergy, and laity (not necessarily just traditionalists).<sup>29</sup> This has influenced the attitude of this broad group towards the pope, sparking debate about the very understanding of the papacy and its current model within global Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> In traditionalist circles, which are particularly attached to the constant elements of Church teaching, the Pope’s actions have triggered a reaction that can be described as radicalization. At this level, Polish traditionalism seems to largely reflect the global situation. Based on one of the authors’ (TD) personal contacts, we can affirm the existence of individuals who, due to Francis’s actions, have abandoned involvement in traditionalism under the sign of *Ecclesia Dei* in favor of sedevacantism. Even more frequently, there are solely verbal expressions (on social media) claiming that Francis has lost the papal office due to heresies he has fallen into. However, since the Polish traditionalist movement not associated with SSPX does not create any tighter or formal structures, the aforementioned statements should be considered as the private views of individual persons.

In this context, it is worth mentioning, if somewhat tangentially, that from one of the authors’ (TD) observations within the community, we know of cases where individuals, who were previously quite radical traditionalists associated with the SSPX, have shifted to, if it can be so termed, post-conciliar mainstream positions in reaction to Francis’s actions. They are motivated by a form of ultramontanist: one cannot remain Catholic if one criticizes the Pope; therefore, even if the Pope teaches or does things questionable from an orthodox perspective, it

<sup>28</sup> Workshops’. <https://arscelebrandi.pl/>

<sup>29</sup> G. Weigel. “The Question 60 Minutes Should Have Asked Pope Francis”. <https://eppc.org/publication/the-questions-60-minutes-should-have-asked-pope-francis/>

<sup>30</sup> P. Kwasniewski. *The Road from Hyperpapalism to Catholicism: Rethinking the Papacy in a Time of Ecclesial Disintegration*. 2 vols. Waterloo: Arouca Press, 2022; T. Rowiński, *Turbopapiestwo. O dynamicie pewnego kryzysu*. Dębogóra: Dębogóra, 2022; T. Dekert. “Tradition, the Pope, and Liturgical Reform: A Problematization of Tradition in the Catholic Church and Catholic-Orthodox Rapprochement”. *Nova et Vetera*, 2022, 20 (1), 101–131.

is better to accept and defend them rather than to deny them. Such approaches, like formally or materially sedevacantist attitudes, seem to represent a minor periphery of Polish traditionalism. Nonetheless, they are intriguing examples of attempts to resolve the cognitive dissonance that Francis's pontificate must entail from the perspective of traditional Catholics.

As one might expect, the critical trend towards the reigning Pope was significantly intensified by the promulgation of his *motu proprio* TC. As mentioned earlier, this document not only imposed numerous and burdensome restrictions on traditionalist communities within the Church (e.g., the prohibition of celebrating the traditional Mass in parish churches, the requirement for priests who celebrated in the classical form of the rite before July 16, 2021, to obtain special permission from their bishop, and for priests ordained after the issuance of the *motu proprio*, permission from Rome itself, etc.), but also the accompanying letter from Francis to the bishops clearly articulated the Pope's intention for the ultimate disappearance of the traditionalist current from the life of the Church. For the entire traditionalist movement, this was a severe blow, acting, according to Pieter Vree's metaphor, like a bulldozer driving through an anthill.<sup>31</sup>

The reactions and actions of Polish bishops, as mandated by Francis's document, were quite varied and statistically relatively moderate. In some dioceses (e.g., Tarnów), most or even all previously established places for celebrating the older form of the liturgy were maintained, while in others (e.g., Pelplin), they were restricted to one rural church on the second and fourth Monday of each month.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, there is a non-uniform approach regarding permissions to celebrate sacraments other than the Eucharist, such as baptism, confirmation, or marriage.

Despite these restrictions—or one might even suggest, partly because of them or in reaction to them—there continues to be a numerical growth of communities oriented around the traditional Roman liturgy. According to data provided by the Polish section of the Una Voce Federation, there are currently fifty-four places with regular celebrations in the classical form of the Roman rite and one hundred fourteen with irregular celebrations,<sup>33</sup> which represents an increase compared to 2021 by, respectively, nine and forty-four. Much indicates that for many Polish Catholics, the restrictions imposed by the Roman authorities have rather contributed to the popularization of this model of faith and religious practice than to its intended suppression.

<sup>31</sup> P. Vree. "Traditionis Custodes: Taking Bulldozer to an Anthill". *New Oxford Review*, 2021, 88 (8), 26–29.

<sup>32</sup> "Niedziela nie dla tradycyjnych katolików. Drastyczne ograniczenia «mszy trydenckiej» w diecezji pelplińskiej". ["Sunday is not for traditional Catholics. Drastic restrictions on the «Tridentine Mass» in the diocese of Pelplin"]. <https://pch24.pl/niedziela-nie-dla-tradycjonalistow-drastyczne-ograniczenie-mszy-trydenckiej-w-diecezji-pelplinskiej/>.

<sup>33</sup><https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=51.897513908865655%2C18.794860558593765&z=6&mid=1DWGjoiPcz4dm81CVq7CpCrDUM4A>.

The trend here is more developmental, though it is also linked with increased tension and polarization between traditionally inclined Catholics and the Roman (sometimes also local) hierarchy and that part of the Polish Catholic community which welcomed Francis's regulations.

One of the most characteristic features of this tension and the general radicalization of attitudes among Polish traditionalists after the issuance of TC is the phenomenon of a much more frequent occurrence than before of some priests and religious transitioning to the SSPX, as well as the increase in the number of the faithful benefiting from its pastoral care. This includes people transitioning from communities previously based on SP as well as from the "ordinary" Catholic circles. Although precise figures are unknown and, as far as we know, this has not been studied systematically, based on our observations and one of the authors' (TD) direct contacts with both "ordinary" Catholics and priests associated with the SSPX, we can infer that they are indeed experiencing significant growth. One of these priests mentioned in a conversation with Tomasz Dekert that there is a "rush on the chapels" of the SSPX in Poland, and that pastors are struggling to serve all the groups requesting their ministry.<sup>34</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, the second factor that influenced, though seemingly to a lesser extent, the state of Polish traditionalism was the COVID-19 pandemic. As is well known, it led to government regulations limiting the size of public gatherings, including religious worship. The Church authorities in Poland approached this with great zeal, introducing far-reaching restrictions on the number of people who could attend services, granting dispensations from the obligation to participate in Mass, promoting participation through media (TV, Internet), etc.

At the same time, many pastors, as part of measures to reduce the virus threat, began to implement, sometimes mandatorily, the practice of distributing Holy Communion not on the tongue but in the hand. This is a practice that became widespread in many Western Catholic countries during the post-Vatican II period and has been heavily criticized by traditionalists from the outset, who see it as a violation of the dogmatic truth of faith in the real presence of Christ even in the smallest particles of the Eucharistic Bread. While it was present in Poland, it was rather localized before the COVID-19 threat, but it became widespread during the pandemic.

The approach to pandemic restrictions among Polish traditionalists was by no means uniform, although there were strong tendencies among them to criticize restrictions on participation in services and the wearing of protective masks. Conflicts sometimes arose over

<sup>34</sup> <https://piusx.org.pl/kaplice>

these issues between the faithful and those pastors inclined to adhere to all government and church recommendations (e.g., this occurred in the Małopolska apostolate of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter). Within traditionalist communities themselves, Holy Communion was generally not given in the hand, even during the pandemic, but the increased prevalence of this practice in the “ordinary” churches was poorly received by some faithful who had previously not been associated with traditionalism. Both these factors—the periodic closure of churches and restrictions on participation, and Communion in the hand—certainly contributed to some transfer of both “SP Catholics” and a certain number of non-traditionalists to SSPX-affiliated communities. The latter, after all, tried to organize services with the participation of the faithful despite the bans, and Communion was always given there in the traditional manner.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, today’s dynamics of the traditionalist movement in Poland are strongly shaped by issues related to the pontificate of Pope Francis (primarily TC), as well as by the lingering effects of reactions to the pandemic measures of the Polish Church. There is a noticeable trend of radicalization, expressed mainly in the increasing popularity of the SSPX, but also evident in the activity of some traditional Catholics (including those not affiliated with the SSPX) on social media. At the same time, Vatican actions aimed at suppressing traditionalist groups based on SP seem to have the opposite effect. However, unlike during the SP period (mainly under Benedict XVI, i.e., from 2007 to 2013, but even later, from 2013 to 2021), there is also a growing, not always healthy radicalization within these groups, and a tendency to polarize, which seems to have been consciously or unconsciously intensified by the pontificate of Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis). It can be predicted that if the next pope continues Francis’s course, both in general and regarding the attitude towards traditionalists, these sentiments and tendencies will intensify, and likely also encompass broader circles. Although in some “post-conciliar” Catholic circles there is a tendency (manifested, among others, in TC) to blame traditionalists for divisive phenomena, it is impossible not to notice that the radicalization of these communities is not simply a manifestation of their deviant characteristics. It rather constitutes a reaction to the strong “liberal” tilt of the Church under Francis’s leadership. In this sense, it can be perceived as a kind of defensive mechanism within the body of the Catholic community, aiming for a sort of homeostasis.

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