

A Year of Conflict - The “War on Gender Ideology” discourse of the Polish Catholic Church, and the Liberal Backlash

Marcin Sroczynski

University of Warsaw

Abstract

“Gender” was chosen as “Word of the Year 2013” by a committee of renowned linguists affiliated with six Polish universities. Indeed, the word dominated the Polish public discourse in 2013, largely because of Poland gradually implementing the EU gender mainstreaming policies. When the government signed the *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* at the end of 2012, the Polish Catholic Church authorities launched a war on “gender ideology”. Its climax occurred at the end of 2013 when Polish bishops issued an official letter entitled *Threats to family resulting from gender ideology*. The aim of this article is to confront the multiplicity of discourses which flooded Polish media within this one-year period: the conservative journalists and priests demonising gender, the liberal backlash and counter-attack on the Church, and the few progressive Catholic columnists trying to find a way out from the deadlock. The analysis identifies the ideological components of the respective stances to

arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that the opponents discredit each other with the same set of arguments.

Keywords: “gender ideology”, Polish Catholic Church, conservative, liberal, conflict.

1. Introduction

‘Gender’ was chosen as “Word of the Year 2013” by a committee of seven renowned Polish linguists affiliated with six Polish universities¹. The term dominated Polish public discourse in 2013, largely because of Poland gradually implementing gender mainstreaming policies resulting from its EU membership, and the subsequent war on “gender ideology” waged by the Polish Catholic Church authorities. On 18 December 2012 Poland signed the *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*. The Catholic Church's negative reaction was immediate, and the debate that followed reached its climax when, at the end of 2013, the bishops gathered at the Polish Episcopacy Conference issued an official letter to be read out in all churches on 29 December 2013, entitled *Threats to family resulting from gender ideology*.

The aim of the chapter is to confront the multiplicity of discourses which flooded Polish Catholic and secular media within this one-year period. These can be grouped in three categories: bishops, priests and conservative journalists demonising gender; liberal politicians, scholars and feminists launching a comparably violent counter-attack on the Church; and finally, the few progressive Catholic columnists trying to find a way out from the deadlock by offering alternative interpretations of principles of faith.

The texts constituting the core of my analysis were collected as a result of a research carried out with Internet search engines. The initial search intended to track down content written in Polish, using the key word “gender”, within the time-frame: December 2012 – January 2014; this allowed to identify the relevant sources – newspapers, magazines and web portals which were particularly active in the discussion

1 See: <http://www.slowanaczasie.uw.edu.pl/category/slowo-roku/slowo-roku-2013/>

on “gender” during the said period. They were qualified for further analysis with additional research of their respective archives to seek content relevant to the topic. My analysis obviously has its limitations which may result from incomplete sources; however, the nature of the the analysis is not quantitative, but qualitative, and I do not think that its incompleteness significantly influenced identification of the basic directions of the debate on issues related to “gender”. The selected occurrences are these which reflect all lines of argumentation that I was able to identify, they were also put together chronologically, to be able to watch how the debate evolved.

Using critical discourse analysis, the chapter identifies the ideological components of the respective stances, apparently coherent but mutually exclusive, as well as the rhetorical and discursive strategies used to articulate them. The analysis focuses on the cultural assumptions expressed in the texts’ macrostructure, as well as particular lexical choices, all with the interest to see how “truths” are produced and sustained.² The theoretical perspective adopted in this work is based on the conviction (inspired, *inter alia*, by the work of M. Foucault) that truth and knowledge is plural, contextual, and historically produced through discourses, and therefore language and discourse “effectively construct, regulate and control knowledge, social relations and institutions” (Luke 1997, 51). The press is therefore treated as a medium which does not only reflect the political and ideological dividing lines, but also takes part in their elaboration, in shaping the discursive (political and social) reality, trying to impose a dominant vision of reality and naturalise it. The discourses described in this chapter combine and muddle statements of religious nature with political, psychological, sociological and medical arguments. The analysis reveals inconsistencies, exaggerations and half-truths, and arrives at a paradoxical conclusion that the opponents discredit one another with the same set of arguments, hidden behind different lexical and conceptual apparatuses. As a result, it becomes apparent that without a profound change in rhetoric on both sides, no discussion or common ground is possible.

² In the words of Teun A. van Dijk, “critical discourse analysts want to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in these modes of reproduction [of dominance]” (Dijk 1993, 250).

2. Conservative voices

The sources analysed in this section include catholic and right-wing web portals and magazines. The official clergy voice could be found at «episkopat.pl», «opoka.org.pl», and «ekai.pl», all under the auspices of Polish Episcopal Conference (or Polish Bishop's Conference), the central organ of the Catholic Church in Poland. Secondly, two major Catholic weeklies were analysed: «Niedziela», published by the Częstochowa Metropolitan Archdiocese, and «Gość Niedzielny», published by the Katowice Metropolitan Archdiocese, who also run the «wiara.pl» portal. Also, two major right-wing portals were involved in the debate. Firstly, «Fronda.pl» created in 2008, whose editor-in-chief from April 2010 until September 2014 was Tomasz Terlikowski, a vehement Catholic activist, journalist, philosopher, and writer. Secondly, «Wpolityce.pl», founded in 2010 by the notorious brothers Jacek and Michał Karnowski³. Additional materials were found at «deon.pl», a web portal and social network run by members of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in Poland, and their publishing house «Wydawnictwo WAM», and in «Rzeczpospolita», a national daily newspaper with a circulation of around of 110,000 copies⁴ in 2012, whose political profile is rather conservative, with a moderately national inclination.

2.1. *The first alert against 'gender ideology'*

The Catholic offensive against gender did not start in 2013. As early as in 2005, a Catholic weekly *Niedziela* issued an interview with Dale O'Leary, referred to as «an American specialist on gender ideology» (Rędzioch 2005). The interview pinpoints the major lines of reasoning which will be recycled by the subsequent texts opposing gender. These are the following:

3 The print version of the magazine is published by Fratria Sp. z o. o., whose main shareholders are members of the the powerful «SKOK» financial cooperative, a credit union controversial due to the irregularities related to their financial support for right-wing politicians in Poland, and to dubious activities which led to their deteriorating financial situation and failure of some of its members. (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej VII kadencja)

4 Total paid circulation understood as the average number of copies sold per issue in one year. All data regarding circulation comes from the "Message of the Press Distribution Monitoring Board", issued by Press Distribution Control Association as Resolution No. 44/2013 (Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy 2013).

- linking ‘gender’ to Marxism,

Apart from a narrow academic context, Marxism has very negative connotations in Poland and the term is highly unpopular among the general public. It was taught compulsory at schools during the communist era, and as such, it is associated with an external ideology, falsity and a pretext for taking away the nations sovereignty and freedom. The interview therefore suggests that any use of term ‘gender’ is already «a sign of corruption and falsehood» (Rędzioch 2005). The link between gender and Marxism is established by quoting Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, a book which called for «a sex-class revolution»⁵ It also allows to treat gender as an “ideology” rather than a field of scientific research, an argument reiterated by all critics of gender.

- marginalizing ‘gender’ as the agenda of radical feminists (who are an extremist minority),

The interview lists points which are labelled as «necessary conditions for the liberation of women according to radical feminists» (Rędzioch 2005). These would be: abortion on demand, free access to contraception, total sexual freedom, women’s full employment resulting in keeping children in nurseries supported by the state. From this, the conclusion is drawn: “New Feminism” wants to abolish biological family and, moreover, introduce its measures in a coercive way. To support this thesis a fragment of an interview with Simone de Beauvoir is quoted in which she claims that women should not have the right to choose to stay at home and raise their children.⁶

- warning against the idea to ‘blur the difference’ between the two sexes,

On the one hand, the interview refers to prenatal tests which allegedly show that even before birth the brains of a boy and girl differ: «women, from the mother's womb, are equipped with a special sensitivity to other people, which is needed to perform the role of mother.» Therefore, the basis of questioning the rigid binary difference is scientifically compromised and considered false. Moreover, it is stated that questioning a clear-cut division between the sexes is detrimental and entails the «risk of losing one's

5 «In order to eliminate sex-classes the inferior class (women) must rebel and take control of reproduction: the essence of oppression of women is motherhood and raising children» (Rędzioch 2005).

6 «No woman should be authorised to stay at home to bring up her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one. It is a way of forcing women in a certain direction.» (Friedan 1998, 397)

identity», whereas «supporting marriage and the family, fatherhood and motherhood does not endanger the rights, dignity and fundamental equality of women.»

- using nature as argument,

The interview states that «it is the natural desire of a woman to be a mother», and therefore feminists' activity is directed against women. Economically, it is also detrimental, since huge financial resources are squandered to combat that desire.

- loosely referring to Church's teachings to support the argument.

The conclusion of the interview refers the readers to God's order:

God created man and woman, the two sexes, different but equal, instituted marriage and family and laws regulating morality, and God can not be unjust. Therefore, women should not be afraid of the culture, that emphasizes and respects the differences between men and women.

To further compromise the Marxism-inspired component of gender, pope John Paul II is quoted saying that «solidarity is the alternative to class struggle and thus the two sexes should work together on sustaining the status quo.»

It is important to note that at least two lines of argumentation identified above are consistent with the argumentative strategy of the Vatican against “gender”, which was made apparent notably during the the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. First, it is to link “gender” to “radical feminists” and discredit these two together, claiming that the church protects women's rights better. In her article on Beijing conference, Doris E. Buss denounces the Vatican's «rejection of feminism, presumably radical or socialist [...], as offering an impoverished, Western-centric view of women which failed to account for women's differences» (Buss 1998, 351). Buss elaborates:

the Vatican has endeavoured to marginalize feminism by constructing it as: first, a Western-dominated movement which is unrepresentative of Southern women; second, an out-dated version of feminism which is unrepresentative of even Western women; and finally, and most critically, as relying upon a mainstream and

limited rights discourse that is of little value to women.⁽³⁵²⁾⁷

In *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, Sara Diamond sees this as a general tactic of the Christian Right, whose rhetorical attacks on feminism «are directed not at the basic feminist principle of equality but rather at a caricature of feminism as a movement of man-hating, power-mongering ideologues **who do not really represent most women anyway**» (Diamond 1998, 127, emphasis mine).

The second strategy applied by the Vatican is to denounce “gender” as the result of an “erroneous anthropology” which misunderstands the concept of equality between women and men, and wrongly undermines the important differences between the two sexes. Two major references used by critics of “gender” in this discussion are the book of Genesis which asserts the foundational role of sexual difference (Gen. 1:27), and the works of John Paul II⁸, which imply that men and women are complementary but different, and therefore reject the concept of equality understood as “sameness with men”⁹.

2.2. The first official voice from the bishops

In July 2012 the Presiding board of Polish Episcopacy Conference issued a statement in which they expressed their concern about the declaration of the Prime Minister that the Government of the Republic of Poland will unreservedly sign the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence proposed by the Council of Europe. In the letter, the bishops deem the Convention unacceptable because it is «built on ideological and incorrect assumptions» (Prezydium Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, 2012). According to the statement, the Convention treats violence

7 See also: Holy See, 1995, para.4[3]

8 More on this subject in: Robcis 2015, 914-918

9 «As most women themselves point out, *equality of dignity* does not mean “sameness with men”. This would only impoverish women and all of society, by deforming or losing the unique richness and the inherent value of femininity. In the Church’s outlook, women and men have been called by the Creator to live in profound communion with one another, with reciprocal knowledge and giving of self, acting together for the common good with the complementary characteristics of that which is feminine and masculine.» (John Paul II 1995, para. 3)

against women as a systemic problem, its source being religion, tradition and culture, and it therefore obliges signatories «to fight with the achievements of civilization, treated as a threat and a source of violence.» It also

introduces a definition of gender as socially constructed roles, behaviours and characteristics that a given society considers appropriate for women and men, which totally ignores the natural biological differences between women and men and assumes that sex can be selected. (Council of Europe 2011)

It is important to underline, that the Convention does not stipulate what the bishops accuse it of. It does say that «culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called ‘honour’» shall not be considered as justification for any acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention but it does not «oblige its signatories to fight with religion.» (Council of Europe 2011). It also defines gender as «the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men» but nowhere does it mention biological sex, or the possibility to select it. The bishops’ statement misunderstands or manipulates the content of the Convention. The confusion may be compounded by the fact that in Polish there are no two distinct words for ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, the word ‘płeć’ is used in both cases and requires a classifying adjective (‘biological’ vs. ‘socio-cultural’ ‘płeć’), otherwise the difference is lost¹⁰. Nevertheless, the statement is misleading, and most worshippers, not having read the full text of the Convention, will assume that what the bishops are saying is true.

The second argument which appears for the first time in the statement and then persistently recurs in most of the subsequent attacks on gender is the alleged threat to children stemming from the Convention. The bishops are particularly concerned with «the imposition of an obligation on signatories to educate on and to promote, among others, ‘non-stereotyped gender roles’ and therefore homosexuality and transsexuality» (Prezydium Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, 2012). Just like in the former case, this is a false statement and it is difficult to determine if it results from misunderstanding and

¹⁰ As a result, also popularised by press – the English word “gender” is used. This has two negative effects – it is foreign and incomprehensible to many, and therefore alien to the society (a similar problem concerns France, as described in Robcis 2015, 907).

misinterpreting the Convention, or whether it is deliberately misleading. The Convention encourages «including teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles» (Council of Europe 2011), but obviously «homosexuality and transsexuality» are not gender roles. This twisted argument gives rise to insinuations that behind gender stands a mysterious and dangerous «“homo-lobby” whose main interest is to encourage youth to engage in non-normative sexual activities» (Prezydium Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, 2012), a claim that re-emerges in later conservative press articles on the subject.

As an interesting analogy, it is worth noting that the alleged connection between gender and homosexuality underlaid many of the arguments used in a similar “war on gender” in France. According to the arguments used by French opponents of “gender”,

gender seems to have been imposed by a “homosexual lobby” dominant in the political circles of intergovernmental bodies such as the United Nations, in national political groups such as the Socialist Party, in the media, and in the academy. (Robcis 2015, 912)

Consequently, a “minority of LGBT activists” who allegedly had “infiltrated the government”, and who were financed by “big international banks” and supported by the media were accused of manipulating public opinion (Robcis 2015, 897). Refusing the term “gender” as unacceptably constructionist, and linking it to homosexuality and other non-normative sexualities is also part of the Vatican’s rhetoric. During the Beijing conference, the Vatican and other conservative groups launched an attack on the use of the term:

gender was seen as threatening because it opened the door to different and fluid sexuality identities which are not constrained by biological identification. For the Vatican, this meant condoning homosexuality. (Buss 1998, 348)

Finally, it is interesting to note that the Polish bishops’ statement uses a similar technique to the interview with Dale O’Leary: the emphasis is placed on the alleged loss of sovereignty and self-determination. Just like in the case of women not being able to

raise their children on their own, gender mainstreaming in education is presented as an assault on the system, taking agency away from parents who will not be able to teach their children proper values.

2.3. The bishops' offensive

From this moment bishops regularly condemn gender in the media. In an interview for the Catholic portal *wiara.pl*, Bishop Wojciech Polak, Secretary General of the Polish Episcopal Conference gave the tone to an apocalyptic interpretation of gender. The bishop states that

the philosophy of sexuality called gender [...] challenges sex/gender as a fact of nature which in turn leads to changes in the vision of the humanity. As a result, it changes the concept of family, and indeed it simply destroys it. The destruction of the family will cause the destruction of the society. (Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna 2012)

In an even more disturbing vein, bishop Tadeusz Pieronek said during a debate that «the philosophy of gender is something “worse than Nazism and fascism”» (mpr 2013) This curious parallel (drawn also by Metropolitan Archbishop of Szczecin-Kamien Andrew Dzięga) stems from the conviction that, according to the bishops, ‘gender ideologues’ promote medical procedures such as «abortion, contraception, in vitro fertilization, surgical and hormonal sex reassignment, as well as euthanasia and eugenics, or the possibility of eliminating the sick, the weak, the handicapped, as ‘defective’» (Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna 2013). This, in the Polish bishops’ eyes, likens gender enthusiasts to Nazi doctors’ attempts at the biological improvement of the Aryan race (eos/ja 2015)¹¹ In a similar tone, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki compared in vitro fertilization to the holocaust. (Jaklewicz 2015)

The preposterous link made between “gender”, Nazism and the holocaust also has its precedents in conflicts between right-wing activists and feminists. In *A Not So Foreign*

11 Demonizing gender as dehumanized, opposed to nature and illicit was another major line of argumentation in the anti-gender campaign in France. Camille Robcis quotes Bernard Debré, an elected representative from the UMP (The Union for a Popular Movement party) who called the “theory of gender” «a deviation, a madness, and even a crime» which is «even more dangerous than same-sex marriage and adoption [...] because it “killed” nature» (Robcis 2015, 895).

Affair Andrea Slane recalls the term “feminazi”, which arose out of the practice among abortion foes in the US of referring to legal abortion as an “American Holocaust”. The term calls on «images of feminists as having a sadistic disregard for human life (as opposed to traditional mothers), a primary investment in their own (often sexual) gratification, and a desire to destroy the American family» (Slane 2001, 80). Slane goes on to explain the rhetorical moves required by this analogy:

to argue that feminists are antifamily and then, by way of the metaphor of Nazism, to reassert that feminism is consequently antidemocratic. A further method of aligning feminists with Nazism, as with lesbians and gay men, is to claim that feminists hope to eradicate the difference between the sexes (echoing the images of Soviet men and women). (Slane 2001, 81)

Echoes of this argumentation can be found in a letter written by James Dobson, leader of the conservative Christian group “Focus on the Family”, following the Beijing conference (see: Dobson 1995). As it has already been demonstrated, similar rhetoric was also used in the Polish debate.

As for the “threat to children” argument, it takes on various forms in the Catholic discourse. In April 2013 the standards of the World Health Organization (WHO) in relation to sex education were published. This document caused a new wave of hostility against gender, emphasizing its alleged link to homosexuality and paedophilia.¹² During a mass in the Cathedral of Wroclaw, Archbishop Jozef Michalik stated that divorcing parents, feminists who fight for the right to abortion and the creation of same-sex relationships, and the promotion of gender ideology are the main causes of paedophilia (TPT 2013). The logic behind is that sexual education at schools is going «to extinguish in children a sense of shame, to the point they might decide to change their sex» (TPT 2013). Bishop Mark Mendyk, chairman of the Polish Bishops' Committee for Catholic Education, discredited «supporters of gender who want to introduce compulsory sex education for all, saying that “these people often deeply sexually dysfunctional themselves”» (Wesołowski 2013). He criticises the program as being «based on an

¹² An extensive analysis of the “threat to children” argument in different countries is delivered in Korolczuk 2014.

extremely primitive anthropology, promoting sex without rules and restrictions which is extreme licentiousness and debauchery», and concludes:

Most at risk are the youngest children. After such an upbringing of young people can easily fall into promiscuity in sex-drug addiction, become unable of faith or marriage and family. Everything is done to completely destroy the psyche of the child or young person.^(Wesołowski 2013)

In June 2013, Bishops in the Communication from the 362nd Plenary Meeting of the Polish Episcopate Conference wrote:

In view of the intensifying attempts to impose by various domestic and foreign entities demoralizing content and methods associated with sex education in kindergartens and schools, the bishops [...] appeal to all Christian parents [...] to protect Polish children and young people against demoralization.^(Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2013)

2.4. The conservative media

The links between gender, homosexuality, and paedophilia are exploited by the conservative weekly *wPolityce*. Commenting on the introduction of gender educators to schools the magazine states:

The aim of gender educators is to promote homosexuality in impunity and making ground for paedophile lobby. Life will become better, but not for the children, only for the paedophiles, for whom a child deprived of shame and borders will constitute easy prey.^(wSumie.pl 2013)

The article also repeats the arguments of coerciveness («gender ideology is at odds with the Polish Constitution, which guarantees parents the right to educate their children in accordance with the professed values») and loss of sovereignty (suggesting that government officials «are just a cog in the machinery of the great European indoctrination»). As Elżbieta Korolczuk accurately states, this is a common pattern in

the “war on gender” in several European countries. Comparing the specific legal regulations that are being opposed as part of protest against “gender” or “gender ideology” in Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and France, Korolczuk concludes:

Although these contested policies address different areas [...] they are frequently related to transnational treaties on gender equality, children’s rights, or anti-discrimination of sexual minorities. Importantly, they are often initiated and/or sponsored by international institutions - thus the main scapegoats for the purported ‘demoralisation’ of society are supranational agencies such as the UN and EU, and/or foreign-sponsored NGOs promoting them at the national level. Moreover, despite the different areas they focus on, most of them concern a similar issue - namely they legitimise state intervention in the private/domestic sphere and the protection of the rights of individual family members rather than having a focus on the family as a whole. (Korolczuk 2014, 47-48)

One more strategy adopted by the conservative media (rather than by the bishops) is using foreign materials to show that the West has also condemned gender, “by seeing through it” and compromising it in some way. This strategy also includes showing allies around the world, examples of states that are also fighting or have won with the “offensive of gender ideology.” Thus, the conservative portal fronda.pl quotes the Pastoral Letter of the Conference of Slovak Bishops on the first Sunday of Advent 2013 in which the bishops warn against «supporters of the culture of death pushing forth a new ideology of gender» which «not only makes people lose their dignity, but also exposes them to destruction» (AŚ/SM 2013). The website of the Polish Episcopal Conference Foundation promotes the book *The Global Sexual Revolution: The Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom* by Gabriele Kuby, a German writer and sociologist noted for orthodox or traditionalist Catholic positions on sexuality and gender¹³. The writer condemns deregulation of sexual norms which are leading to the

13 The book by Kuby is another piece of evidence of the transnational character of the “war on gender”, due to its popularity among conservative activists in different countries: «It has been translated into many languages and the author has become extremely popular in conservative circles. Ms. Kuby travels regularly across Europe, giving speeches and interviews, popularising the idea that “the global trend of gender mainstreaming threatens the very fundamental understanding of our human nature, with dire consequences for children, families, and society as a whole”» (Korolczuk 2014, 47)

“sexualization of society” which is “the source of misery”, such as:

millions [of people] addicted to pornography, millions of sexually exploited children, millions of children killed through abortion, mandatory school sexual education of children and youth as an active initiation into hedonistic sexuality, so that the young do not develop hierarchies of values and attitudes to enable marriage and parenthood. ^(AŚ/AŚ 2013)

A video which went viral (promoted by portals wPolityce and gosc.pl)¹⁴ is a 2010 Norwegian documentary «Hjernevask» («Brainwash») by the comedian Harald Eia, which mocked the researchers of the The Nordic Gender Institute by confronting their radical views with research results from the US and the UK, which they did not want to acknowledge.

Another popular set of materials were examples of irregularities in sexual education classes in Germany and Switzerland (Cichobłazińska 2013), and quoting the infamous Regnerus report to discredit LGBT parenthood (Krzyżak 2104). Finally, it is important to note that the public debate was overshadowed by voices even more radical than those mentioned above: father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a prominent Redemptorist priest, founder and director of ultraconservative Radio Maryja and TV Trwam, and father Dariusz Oko, lecturer at the Pontifical University in Krakow and journalist voiced attacks on ‘gender ideologues’ far more aggressive and preposterous than the bishops. (Zespół wPolityce.pl 2013)

2.5. The bishops’ letter

At the end of 2013 the bishops gathered at the Polish Episcopacy Conference issued an official letter to be read out in all Churches on 29 December 2013, entitled *Threats to family resulting from gender ideology* (Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna 2013) which culminated the clergy’s discourse on gender. The letter begins by quoting writings of John Paul II, Paul VI and *Gaudium et spes* (the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral

14 (fk/rebelya.pl/fronda.gliwice.pl/salon24.pl 2013), (BR 2013)

Constitution) to emphasize the importance of marriage¹⁵. The text warns that rejecting the Christian vision of marriage and the family «leads inevitably to the degradation of families and a human disaster». Such danger is seen in «the attempts to change the concept of marriage and the family imposed today, especially by supporters of the gender ideology» (Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna 2013).

The letter repeats the arguments raised by predecessors:

- gender is firmly rooted in Marxism and neomarxism, promoted by the increasingly radicalising feminist movement and the sexual revolution initiated in 1968.
- ‘gender’ promotes the principles completely contrary to reality and the traditional understanding of human nature (concerning LGBT people¹⁶, gender reassignment, IVF, contraception and abortion).
- ‘gender ideology’ has a deeply destructive nature for people, relationships, and therefore the whole social life.
- it is introduced in an insidious way, imposed by foreign bodies (i.e. the Council of Europe) and will lead to limitations in sovereignty (such as freedom of speech and the ability to express religious views).
- sex education standards of the World Health Organization (which «promote, among others, masturbation of preschool children») lead to a deep depravity of children and adolescents.¹⁷ They are being implemented without the knowledge

15 «God himself is the author of marriage (GS 48; HV 8)» (Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna 2013)

16 Here the letter repeats the curious argument that gender ideology entitles humans «to spontaneous changes already made in this regard elections within five sex, which include: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and heterosexual» which directly copies from the letter by Dobson. Anxious about the risk that the «distinction between masculinity and femininity will utterly disappear from the cultures of the world», he writes: «Relating again to “the deconstruction of gender” described above, the goal is to give members of the human family five genders from which to choose instead of two. When freed from traditional biases, a person can decide whether to be male, female, homosexual, lesbian, or transgendered. Some may want to try all five in time. Homosexuality is considered the moral equivalent of heterosexuality. For women, however, the preferred love relationship is lesbian in nature.» (Dobson, 1995)

17 A similar vision is propagated by activists in other countries. For instance, the leader of a Saint Petersburg nationalist organisation claims that liberal groups and politicians «take children from decent families and give them to pederasts» or «teach children masturbation instead of embroidery in school, with the help of German or Swedish cartoons.» (Korolczuk 2014, 48). Korolczuk also quotes similarities between Poland and the USA where the opponents of gender-equality education claimed that «the main aim of the authors was to teach children how to become homosexuals, and [...] that talking about sex with children was practically the same thing as molesting them.» (Korolczuk 2014, 48)

and consent of the parents.

- ‘gender’ also extends into the area of culture: films, popular TV series, plays, television programs, and exhibitions are using the latest techniques of manipulation to shift public opinion towards the adoption of the ‘gender ideology’.
- What is very cunningly concealed is the fact that the goal of gender education is in fact sexualization of children and adolescents. Sexual awakening from an early age leads to addiction in the sexual sphere, and in later life to human slavery. A culture of “using” the other person for their own needs leads to the degradation of man, marriage, family, and consequently – social life. Following the education implemented by youth sexual educators, a young person becomes a regular customer of pharmaceutical, erotic, pornographic, paedophile and abortion businesses. Besides, sexual slavery often combines with other addictions (alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling) and with harm done to oneself and others (paedophilia, rape, sexual violence). Such education is nothing less than dismantling the family.
- It is Church’s duty to stand up for ‘natural God’s Law’ in society. The Church cannot remain silent against possible attempts to replace Christian anthropology with deeply destructive utopias that destroy not only the individual but the whole society. Similarly, Christians involved in politics should not remain idle.

The letter in its first version had numerous explicit references to sexuality (mentioned above); however, a few hours later, it was replaced by a shorter and milder version (Cylka 2013). Nevertheless, the original letter aroused great media interest and outraged many readers and commentators. Still, the official line of the Church with regards to ‘gender’ has not changed to this day.

3. The liberal backlash

During the same period, several pro-liberal newspapers and online magazines which opposed the Church’s stance published a number of conversations – mainly with feminists, scholars (sometimes engaged in politics), and dissident men of Church – to

allow for a counter voice. The materials analysed in this section come from the following sources: «Gazeta Wyborcza», and its online version available at «wyborcza.pl», an important daily newspaper with a circulation exceeding 250.000 copies in 2012. It covers the gamut of political, international and general news from a liberal perspective. «Newsweek Polska» magazine, and «natemat.pl» portal, linked by the personality of Tomasz Lis, who created «natemat.pl» website in February 2012, and became editor-in-chief of «Newsweek Polska» in March 2012. «Fakt», a tabloid-style daily newspaper and one of the best-selling in Poland (total paid circulation of 373.721 copies in 2012). It is published by the Polish outlet of the German publishing company Axel Springer AG, and modelled on Springer's German tabloid «Bild». Finally, «Tvn24.pl», web portal launched in 2007 related to the first Polish 24-hour commercial news channel TVN 24. It is a part of the TVN Network, which in 2012 was co-owned by ITI Group and Canal+ Poland Group.

3.1. Ex-man of Church against the Church

One of the first interviews after Poland signing the *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* was with Tadeusz Bartoś – philosopher and theologian, journalist, and a former Dominican, who left the order in 2007. Bartoś criticised the official stance of the Church using the following arguments:

- no sovereignty, external influence,

According to Bartoś, by opposing the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Polish Episcopate simply pursues the policy of the Vatican¹⁸: «the Vatican has not signed many conventions, including this one; it is a consistent policy» (jk 2012).

- the Catholic Church is homophobic and applies sexual apartheid,

Bartoś reminds that Benedict XVI blessed Rebecca Kadaga, head of the Ugandan parliament, who is pushing a law to allow sentencing LGBT people to death. In addition, the Pope shared «the peculiar idea that same-sex relationships are a threat to world peace» (jk 2012). Sexual apartheid concerns the impossibility for women to

¹⁸ In her article on France, Robcis proposes the hypothesis that «“the theory of gender” is a discursive strategy devised by the Vatican and taken up by numerous Catholic activists and intellectuals to counter the rhetoric of equal rights for women, gays, and lesbians» (899).

access priesthood.

- the attack on gender is similar to Catholic Church's past actions,

In the 1920s Polish bishops vehemently opposed a bill allowing for the possibility of divorce, effectively blocking it. The bishops responded then as today: «from the pulpits they shouted that it was a symptom of Bolshevism, argued that it will bring the institution of the family down, and that is a blow, after which Poland will not raise» (jk 2012).

- the bishops' arguments are irrational and proof of total ignorance,

From reading the bishops' letter Bartoś concludes that they have not read the Convention which they oppose.

In another interview, Bartoś also suggested that the Church «may have some small obsession» with regards to issues such as «suspicions of promoting homosexuality». Therefore, not only irrationality and ignorance, but actually insanity of the Church representatives is mildly suggested.

3.2. Krytyka Polityczna and feminist voices

In an article written for the online magazine natemat.pl, Anna Dryjańska, a women's rights activist, sociologist and journalist, also likens the Catholic Church's attack on gender to its past actions in order to compromise it. Just like Bartoś, Dryjańska mentions the Church's opposition to divorces, but she also claims that the official reason for the burning of Joan of Arc on a Catholic stake was her «repeat offence of “cross-dressing”» (Dryjańska 2013). Dryjańska notes that «this woman was murdered for walking in “masculine” clothes», to conclude that «lack of respect for gender selection has been recognized as a Catholic heresy» (Dryjańska 2013).

Her second line of argument is to claim that the Churches' real interest is to secure its financial future, and that scaring people with fictitious problems like 'gender' is a means to fight women's emancipation which would threaten its position of power and the supply of money that goes with it. Denouncing the Church's entanglement with the world of money and politics was also used as argument by Sławomir Sierakowski, journalist, sociologist, publisher, founder and editor-in-chief of *Krytyka Polityczna*, a journal gathering Polish left-wing intellectuals. Sierakowski speculates that the reasons

behind an orchestrated action against 'gender' might be found in the Church's recent problems: «Poles have been outraged by the large-scale financial fraud carried out by the commission tasked with the reprivatization of Church property» (Sierakowski 2014).

Several columnists and interviewees accuse the Church of resorting to totalitarian, autocratic practices. These include, on the one hand, aspiring to hold a monopoly on the truth, and on the other hand, using propaganda to scare people into submission. For instance, Magdalena Środa, a feminist philosopher, journalist, and former Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men ridicules the Church's campaign against 'gender' by comparing it to the Communist Party's propaganda about the Colorado potato beetle being secretly dropped by the Americans from aircrafts onto Polish fields to destroy our crops (Środa 2014). Professor Krzysztof Podemski, sociologist of Adam Mickiewicz University thinks that «the mysterious 'gender'» is a new enemy used to scare people. It finds resonance with «those who hate "Jews", "faggots", "leftists" and "liberals", those who are afraid of Europe and changes» (Cylka 2013).

3.3. Paedophilia and threat to children argument

The strongest argument raised by subsequent critics of the Church's campaign against 'gender' was that its actual function was to mask "a real problem of paedophilia in Church". The argument is raised by Sierakowski, Środa, and Agnieszka Graff, a Polish writer, journalist associated with the feminist movement, and member of the Krytyka Polityczna team. She diagnoses that Church's behaviour

is an attempt to divert attention from the fact that the Church for years hiding and covering up cases of paedophilia. Blaming feminists and gender studies, or anyone else is wickedness. The time has come that the Church did in this case an examination of conscience - their own, not someone else's.^(Fal 2013)

In a similar tone, Środa writes: «The word 'gender' has grown in a few months to the size of the atrocities so great that even overshadow horrors of paedophilia. **And I think**

mainly this is the point» (Środa 2013, emphasis mine). This argument is supported by a rhetoric claiming that priests lead «unnatural lifestyles» which are «at odds with nature». Sławomir Sierakowski jokes: «priests' lifestyles, namely their celibacy, are hardly a textbook product of the theory of evolution» (Sierakowski 2014). The media discourse linking Church to paedophilia was reinforced by big paedophilia scandals in the Catholic Church. Father Wojciech Gil, a Polish priest working in the Dominican Republic was accused of rape on minors. He escaped from the Dominican Republic using a false passport, and at his home the police found pornographic materials and drugs. The case of Father Gil led to revealing a second scandal around archbishop Józef Wesolowski who was the nuncio in the Dominican Republic. Both him and Gil hunted for minors in the vicinity of tourist resorts and took groups of boys to their villa; they were accused of possession and downloading of Internet child pornography, and forcing sexual acts on minors. Newsweek Poland engaged in an extensive journalistic investigation of the matter (Cieśla 2013). Another case of paedophilia re-emerged in the media in 2013, as another priest, Zbigniew R. was convicted for multiple sexual acts with two minors and sentenced to two years in prison in September 2012. In December, 2012 Koszalin Regional Court dismissed R's appeal and upheld the judgement, so R.'s prison sentence began in November 2013 (kg / PAP 2013).

From the paedophilia scandals stemmed a more general rhetoric of the Church being dangerous to children. As a background for this discourse journalists reminded another scandal that took place in the Catholic Church in Poland a few years before: the trial and conviction of sister Bernadette, the director of the the Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo education centre for children in Zabrze. In 2010, Zabrze District Court found sister Bernadette and sister Frances guilty of psychological and physical violence against pupils and incitement to acts of paedophilia on minors. During the testimonies, the children revealed that they were systematically raped, maltreated and humiliated, all with the approval of director. As means of punishment, sisters locked the younger pupils in the same room with the older, where the younger were beaten and raped. The sisters also hit pupils with wooden coat racks and thin rulers, insulted them with vulgar language, forced to run barefoot in the snow, forbid them to play with toys or laugh out loud. (MAH 2014). Children were also punished for wetting their beds at night or

turning their heads during the mass. Sister Bernadette was sentenced to two years in prison, and in July 2011 she was supposed to report to prison in Wrocław but she did not turn up. Instead, she filed an application for a conditional suspension of the sentence of imprisonment due to old age (59) and her activity for the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo. She went to prison only in 2014, and new facts are still being revealed by the victims who seek compensation for their suffering.

4. The third way: gender-friendly Catholics

The materials analysed in this section come mainly from two sources. First, «Tygodnik Powszechny» – a Catholic weekly published in Kraków which focuses on social and cultural issues. Its most prominent figure is the priest Adam Boniecki, editor-in-chief between 1999 and 2011. Because of his progressive opinions, father Boniecki was forced to resign from this post and was moved to Warsaw by his supervisor, Paul Naumowicz, the Provincial Superior of the Polish Province of the Congregation of Marian Fathers. At the beginning of November 2011 Naumowicz imposed on Boniecki a ban on speaking to the media with the exception of writing for «Tygodnik Powszechny» without giving reasons for this decision. Since then, Boniecki has held the position of “senior editor” in «Tygodnik Powszechny», and continues to write the editorial. Second is a Catholic socio-cultural quarterly magazine «Więź» published in Warsaw, founded by lay Catholic activists who aimed at the intellectual revival and the opening of Polish Catholicism in the spirit of Vatican II.

4.1. Radzik and Kozłowska – two catholic feminists

Among the violent accusations on both sides of the barricade, a few Catholic voices spoke out in an attempt to reconcile the conflicted viewpoints. Zuzanna Radzik, a Catholic theologian and feminist authored a series of articles in «Tygodnik Powszechny», in which she shows the flaws in the Church’s officials’ reasoning, as well as the positive impact that gender studies may have on the Catholic thought.

In her articles, Radzik complicates the position of the Church towards women, admitting that religion can be both help or hindrance for battered women. She quotes a

1992 letter written by Catholic bishops in the United States:

As help, it encourages the woman to oppose being badly treated. As an obstacle, badly interpreted, can strengthen self-incrimination sacrifice and suffering, and for the perpetrators of violence it can be a source of rationalization. ^(Radzik 2012)

The bishops conclude their letter by saying «that violence and abuse, not divorce, break up the marriage» (Radzik 2012), which stands in stark contrast to the Polish Bishops' utterances. Radzik also reminds the voices of Catholic theologians, reflecting on the vocation of men and women. She explains that 'gender' teaches us that we must be suspicious of our own ideas about what it means to be a man and a woman, and in this sense, a critical look at tradition and social practice can be liberating:

“Why compassionate love, respect and caring are to be considered as being feminine, and not just human?” - asked Elisabeth Johnson, “Why force, power, rationality have to belong more to women than to men, including women?”. The anthropology of theologians using this theory is different from the traditional one of the Church, but it does not mean it is bad. ^(Radzik 2013)

Radzik concludes by quoting another classic feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schusser Fiorenzy: «Women like men are not defined by biology and reproductive capacity, but by vocation to be disciples / students and to holiness» (Radzik 2013).

Another important contribution was made by Dominika Kozłowska, graduate of philosophy at the Pontifical Academy of Theology, PhD, journalist, and editor-in-chief of the socio-cultural monthly «Znak». The magazine which regularly deals with religious, philosophical, and ethic issues was engaged in debunking the false arguments of the Polish Clergy. Also, Kozłowska, together with Agnieszka Graff and Zuzanna Radzik participated in a debate entitled “Gender: a blessing or a curse” which was held on 18 November 2013 as part of a series of discussion meetings organized by the Dominican Church in the Old Town in Warsaw. The tone of the meeting was clearly favourable to 'gender' and aimed at informing the public of its potential benefits to the role of women in the Church (Kozłowska 2013).

4.2. A special issue of «Więź»

The most prominent voice in the debate was an issue of «Więź», with over one hundred pages of articles discussing ‘gender’. A number of renowned Catholic thinkers expressed their concerns and scepticism related to ‘gender’, however in a very informed way and with in-depth reflection, criticising the intellectual abuses of both liberal and conservative columnists, as well as the Church’s official voice.

In the opening article, Małgorzata Bilaska admits that ‘gender’ may be more than merely an academic field of study, and it may indeed become a dangerous ideology¹⁹. However, she points to the fact that the actions of the Church also «bear the markings of an ideological attack» (Bilaska 2014, 8), which she criticises by quoting Pope John Paul II who, in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, «warned against the danger of fanaticism and fundamentalism of those who in the name of an ideology which claims to be scientific or religious feel entitled to impose on others their own concept of truth and goodness» (Bilaska 2014, 8). She denounces the merger of anti-gender and anti-paedophile rhetoric as panic and hysteria which wrongly spread a belief that inappropriate sexual behaviour and harm to children do not correspond to actual perpetrators, but the social movements associated with the sexual revolution of the sixties. Bilaska also denounces lack of Church experts in the field of sex, which is the result of a specific way of training in seminaries and Catholic universities, and she reminds that John Paul II in the encyclical *Christifideles laici* appealed to the Church to recognize the positive significance of science studying the cultural and historical evolution of understanding of the role of women (Bilaska 2014, 11).²⁰

In the following articles, Justyna Melonowska claims that to reconcile Catholicism and the gender perspective is simple because personalistic norm and the humanist norm

19 By ‘gender’ as ‘ideology’ she understands «a rigid worldview, a set of ideas lacking “methodological relativism,” and accompanied a program of social change based on the diagnosis, which cannot be questioned, under the threat of sanctions from the government, media ostracism, social exclusion» etc. (Bilaska 2013, 13)

20 She concludes on a lighter note, pointing to the fact in a sense it is the Church who invented gender: «Just look at the twelfth-century rule for hermitages by St. Francis of Assisi, which is still put into practice in the Franciscan hermitages. The recipe for the reclusive community of Brothers of St. Francis depended on [...] replacing gender roles» (Bilaska 2013, 16-17). The brothers should «enter the role of mothers» and «lead a life of Martha», they should also «have one or two sons» who would «lead the life of Mary».

can be a platform for understanding of people with different world views, inasmuch however, if both parties wish to partially revise their position. Gender theorists should agree that there is such a thing as human nature, and humanity is not only the acquisition of rights, whereas Catholics should recognize the importance of social equality and potentially oppressive structures such as “femininity” and “masculinity” (Melonowska 2014, 46). Sebastian Duda reminds the question asked by Mary Daly in 1973 «is a male Saviour able to be the saviour of women?» (Duda 2014, 47) to debate gender theory as an opportunity for theology to reject the patriarchal idolatry. Duda notes that the occurrence of male and female images of God side by side in the Bible is one of the main arguments in favour of a basic biblical truth about gender equality: God created man in his image as a man and a woman: «God transcends the human distinction between the sexes being neither man nor woman. God also transcends human understanding of fatherhood and motherhood» (Duda 2014, 52). Father Andrzej Draguła also reminds the disagreement to a “male saviour” in feminist theology, who reject the traditional “oppressive” interpretation of women «having to worship a male Saviour, sent by the male God, whose authorized representatives may only be men» (Draguła 2014, 57). Finally, Wojciech Eichelberger, psychologist and psychotherapist assumes that the Church is primarily a depository of the male trauma of patriarchy, and that for centuries the truths of faith have been shaped by male priests who marginalize the role and importance of women and mothers. (Eichelberger, Karoń-Ostrowska 2014, 89). Moreover, the Church’s negative attitude to sexuality seems to be inconsistent with God’s plan – the act of creation of the two sexual beings of different sexes (Eichelberger, Karoń-Ostrowska 2014, 88).

All in all, it is important to underline that the voices raised in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak* and *Więź*, are a minority, they belong to a niche current of Catholic intellectual reflection which is generally under-represented in (of not totally absent from) the mainstream media.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to show the discursive strategies are used in the “war on

gender” in Poland. The war is part of a transnational phenomenon²¹, as mobilisations against feminism and “genderism” appear «at the intersection of global and national influences, and local actors in different countries draw heavily on each other’s agendas» (Korolczuk 2014, 51). However, the national socio-political contexts differ and result in local varieties of the conflict.²² In Poland, the temperature of the debate is particularly high for a number of reasons. Unlike many Western countries, Poland is not secularised, and the Roman Catholic Church holds a very strong position: it is entangled in politics, and about 90% of the population are Catholics. John Paul II is revered and beloved by a large portion of the population, and his conservative views are treated by many as unquestionable truths. The change that came after the fall of communism in 1989 was very radical and not everyone has adapted to the new realities, the 2005 access to the European Union further accelerated the transformation, bringing first euphoria and then a certain amount of disenchantment among those who felt they did not fully benefit from the integration process. Finally, there was no academic background to the debate, as institutionalized research in gender studies, or women studies appeared in Poland much later than in the West.

The “war on gender” is a logical consequence of the pluralism of concurrent world views characteristic of the social environment of postmodernity. This form of pluralism is, in the words of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, «the basic condition for the spread of subjective and inter-subjective crises of meaning», as nowadays «value systems and stocks of meaning are no longer the property of all members of society» (Berger and Luckmann 1995, 29) This leads to the steadily mounting suspicion of “objective truths” promoted by different authorities. Kenneth Gergen notes that «the steadily increasing awareness of other voices, other perspectives, other points of view» leads to the situation in which «with each new community, the established truths – with their longstanding sense of objectivity – are thrown into suspicion» (Gergen 2000, 86). Berger and Luckmann call this phenomenon “the loss of the taken-for-granted”,

21 «Similar tendencies have been observed in other countries in the region, such as Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, or Georgia, but also in Western countries, such as France and Germany, as well as in the USA.» (Korolczuk 2014, 45)

22 For example, the “war on gender” in France had strong humanist, anti-consumerist, and anti-American connotations (Robcis 2015, 895-6), a context totally non-existent in Poland.

pointing to the fact that

The loss of the taken-for-granted with all its social and psychological consequences is most pronounced – as one would expect – in the sphere of religion. Modern pluralism has undercut the monopoly enjoyed by religious institutions. (Berger and Luckmann 1995, 46)

If one takes into account that in this situation «groups with an interest in a particular set of rules wish to use the democratic processes to legalize these rules» and «seek to legitimize these rules by reference to values relevant to all of society – however vaguely these may be formulated» (Berger and Luckmann 1995, 34), the war on gender becomes just another example of the inevitable clashes between different value systems and views of the world typical for postmodernity. And so, in Poland one observes the situation where the Church's officials' and mainstream newspapers' discourse on gender is an ongoing row between conservatives and liberals, in which the opponents discredit one another with the same set of arguments. Accusations on both sides include: “unnatural lifestyles”, obsession with sex and hidden homosexuality or paedophilia, ignorance and conviction of having “a monopoly on the truth”, undemocratic attempts to impose one point of view, acting on behalf of foreign powers or lobbies to gain money and power, using totalitarian practices like manipulation and propaganda to scare people. On the other hand, both parties declare protecting freedom, democracy, and the rights and interests of families, women, and children. The arguments raised by both parties practically never refer to theology, or the Bible. Instead, the interlocutors seek justification in sociological, political, or medical discourses related to psychiatry, they quote “experts” who are only acknowledged by their own circles, and they reject all argumentation of their opponent, discrediting their ideological bases as false. The few attempts made by the moderate Catholic intelligentsia looking for a common ground that would allow for a middle way are drowned in the overall hype which thrives on the most distinct and radical voices. As a result, the situation eerily resembles the one described by Dominic Wetzel in his article on queer Catholics in the US, where he argues that

(Those) who get to define what is and isn't Catholic, and thereby claim the symbolic power of Catholicism (are) the loudest, most conservative voices in the Catholic Church [...] Efforts to democratize Catholicism [...] or criticisms of the hierarchy are defamed as 'anti-Catholic' and largely accepted at face value in the mainstream media. [...] In sum, many of the enlightened, progressive reforms of the Vatican II era have been eroded and chipped away (and) marginalized along the way are some of the best thinkers and advocates for peace and justice Catholicism ever produced. (Wetzel 2014, 123)

Taken all this into account, it seems that the impasse in Poland only reflects a more general trend which in the local context is exacerbated by the Catholic Church's entanglement with the world of politics and a tendency for populism in the public discourse. The first ever visit (27-31 July 2016) to Poland of Pope Francis, the first ever social campaign run jointly by Catholics and LGBT people «The Sign of Peace» (launched in September 2016), as well as the European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Group Annual Conference to be held on 25-28 May 2017 in the Polish city of Gdansk may bring a breath of fresh air to Polish Catholicism, which seems to have stuck in an unresolvable stalemate.

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