

Church in Poland must make choice

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

If it weren't for the fact that we have a Polish pope, there wouldn't be very much interest in the zigs and zags of Polish Catholicism following the end of Communist rule.

Similar developments have been occurring in Ireland as well, another overwhelmingly Catholic country, but since the pope isn't Irish, Irish Catholicism remains of interest mainly to specialists in Irish culture, history, and politics.

The Polish scene is the subject of an important article in the Feb. 1, 1993 issue of the prominent German-language weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*, a publication comparable to our *Time* and *Newsweek*.

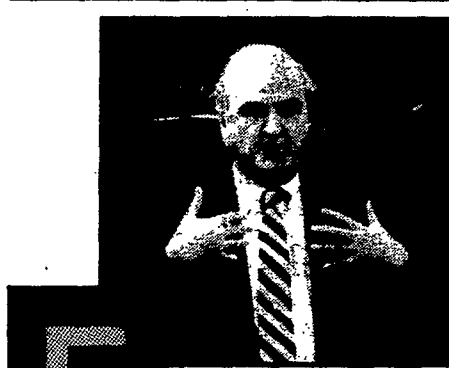
Titled, "The Catholic Fortress" ("Die katholische Festung"), the report is written by Andrzej Szczypiorski, a Warsaw-born journalist.

Szczypiorski points out that the Catholic Church in Poland is going through what is perhaps the deepest crisis in its entire 1000-year history.

The word "crisis" is derived from a Greek word meaning "to separate" or "to decide." A crisis, therefore, is literally a turning-point — a moment or a stage at which a process can go in two or more different directions.

The crisis of Polish Catholicism lies in the significant choices its leadership confronts at the present time.

On the one hand, the Catholic Church has been a "fortress" of



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strength on behalf of the Gospel and of an open society, governed by tolerance. This was especially the case during the Communist era when the church was the only real counterforce to Communist rule (at least until the Solidarity labor movement emerged — with crucial church support.)

On the other hand, the church's bishops and clergy have been inserting themselves increasingly in the affairs of the new democratic state, demanding that Catholic morality be encoded in public policies and laws.

Polish Catholic intellectuals, including the former Prime Minister Tadeusz Masowiecki, are setting themselves against the clergy's ambitious claims of power. The clergy, they say, are trying to make Poland into a

kind of faith-state.

But the clergy's efforts are not meeting with instant success. Besides the opposition from educated Catholics, church leaders are also failing to win the broad support of rank-and-file Polish Catholics.

Szczypiorski observes that the Catholicism of the masses was always complex and that it is still so today.

The majority of Poles reject the bishops' involvement in public affairs and especially their attempt to translate moral law into civil law.

Thus, they are against the hierarchy's efforts to make the teaching of religion compulsory in the public schools. And although there is little or no real support for abortion in Poland, 80 percent of the people oppose criminal sanctions for women who have one.

The bishops and clergy, of course, have not been silent in the face of this unexpected opposition from their flock. They denounce it and charge that behind it all is a plot of the left and the sinister influence of the West — a favorite scapegoat in Eastern European religious circles, Catholic and Orthodox alike.

This diagnosis is false, Szczypiorski insists, is false. The people are not rejecting Catholicism or Catholic values. They are rejecting a style of hierarchical and clerical leadership that they feel is inappropriate and counter-productive.

Polls suggest that the bishops and clergy are losing the battle. Indeed, a

recent survey discloses an astonishing turnaround in the way the Catholic Church is perceived in Poland.

Where once it ranked first in public trust, it is now seventh — below the army, the police, and even the government.

So this is the crisis Polish Catholicism faces today. If the official church cannot, or will not, learn to live within a pluralistic society, its influence will continue to wane.

Szczypiorski reminds us that a pluralistic society, even in a country so overwhelmingly Catholic as Poland, is one "which does not acknowledge the monopoly of a single valid truth."

It took worldwide Catholicism many decades to accept the reality of the new democracies. In the West, this process of trying to find mutual acceptance between church and state lasted for more than a century, and in the course of that process the church had many bitter experiences.

Szczypiorski concludes: "The church in Poland today is standing before the same situation." It has to make a choice.

Unfortunately, the early signs are that the choice is against democracy.

Let it be said that the Irish hierarchy — and a few others one can think of — are in the process of making the same historic mistake.

But leaders without followers make a sorry parade. The evidence is — in Poland, in Ireland, and closer to home — that the leaders are marching in increasingly smaller company.

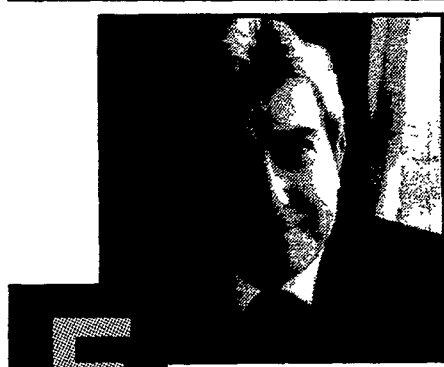
We all need co-conspirators at times

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Sam and John Adams; Moses and Aaron; Hillary and Bill Clinton; Jesus and his Father — all are examples of great co-conspirators.

Conspiracy has gotten a bad name from those who have used it for nefarious purposes, but it is a valuable — even necessary — component of the spirituality of work. The word "conspiracy" comes from the Latin for "to breathe together," and everyone who works needs someone with which to conspire.

Conspiracies are only about important things: how are we going to reach our goals, make improvements that need to be made, ensure that organizations (businesses, unions, community organizations, governments, churches) operate in the best manner possible, help people for whom we are responsible reach their



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full potential? No one can achieve such things alone. Each person must find one or two or several kindred spirits with whom to dream, plan, strategize and execute.

Co-conspirators serve many functions. They provide mutual support and challenge; keep each other focused, honest and accountable; and help accomplish what each could not accomplish alone. Conspiracies allow participants to go outside of established channels, to question assumptions, to think the unthinkable.

Most good parents, for example, are co-conspirators, even if they do not realize it. They have a relationship based on experience, trust and shared values, and they have a very important task — the raising of their children — about which they "breathe together."

People in all types of work need co-conspirators. Teachers, for example, need other teachers or a good principal to talk with about specific children or the school system itself. Business people need certain employees or fellow business people with which to brainstorm and commiserate.

Police officers need their partners, attorneys their law school friends, community organizers their mentors, homemakers their fellow moms and dads, soldiers their buddies, factory workers their union brothers and sisters. Even those who work for the church need co-conspirators — other church professionals or lay volunteers — with whom they can discuss what they hope to achieve in their ministries and who will help them do so.

In any occupation, it is those who do not have co-conspirators who suffer. They have no one with whom they can let down their hair, no one with whom to plan and evaluate, no one to provide a reality check, no one to glory in their successes or cry at their defeats.

I have at least 10 co-conspirators in different facets of my life, including my wife, my partner, my best friend, and several others. All have enriched the spirituality of my work.

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