News



Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski of Warsaw and Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Krakow, the future Pope John Paul II, and Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia are pictured at a ceremony Oct. 15, 1972, in Brzezinka, Poland. (CNS)



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When a Dutch journalist claimed to have found documents indicating that Pope John Paul II covered up clergy sexual abuse while serving as the archbishop of Krakow, Poland, in the 1960s and '70s, it sparked a predictable media frenzy in Europe's most Catholic country.

With some urging a consideration of the evidence, and others dismissing the claims out of hand, the incident appears to highlight a continuing gulf between the Polish church and its Western neighbors.

"We face serious problems here whenever issues like this arise, since it's impossible to have any serious debate about the pope," Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska, a senior Catholic presenter with Polish Radio, told NCR.

"Some people, partly for political reasons, attack him, hoping to discredit his claims to sanctity, while others insist any criticism is inherently satanic," she said. "It's a situation St. John Paul himself would not have appreciated."



Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska, a senior Catholic presenter with Polish Radio (Courtesy of Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska)

Claims about diabolical motives were made by Msgr. Slawomir Oder, postulator for John Paul II's beatification and canonization, who told Poland's Catholic Information Agency, KAI, an angry devil was using the controversy to "sow anxiety and doubt" about the late pontiff's authority "in an eternal struggle between good and evil."

They were repeated by Poland's conservative Catholic daily, Nasz Dziennik, where Bishop Ignacy Dec of Swidnica insisted the very suggestion the pope "might have made wrong decisions at some stage of his life" constituted an attempt to "undermine the nation's faith" and "poison the hearts of the faithful."

In such a heated environment, some Poles think it should be possible to discuss the allegations more objectively, without jeopardizing John Paul's saintly status.

"Even with great saints, we shouldn't insist people were above any original sin — we should see them as human beings who rose to sanctity but could also make mistakes," said Fr. Piotr Mazurkiewicz, a former secretary-general of COMECE, the Brussels-based Commission of European Union Bishops' Conferences.

"We know St. John Paul II felt a need to make his confession daily, and we also know questions may arise, with the passage of time, about certain decisions he made," said the priest. "What really matters is whether such decisions were taken in good or bad will."

The then-Karol Wojtyla was born on May 18, 1920, in the southern town of Wadowice and died after a 26-year pontificate on April 2, 2005, in Rome, where he was beatified in May 2011 and canonized in April 2014.



A banner of St. John Paul II is seen behind a sculpture of him May 16, 2018, at the St. John Paul II National Shrine in Washington. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

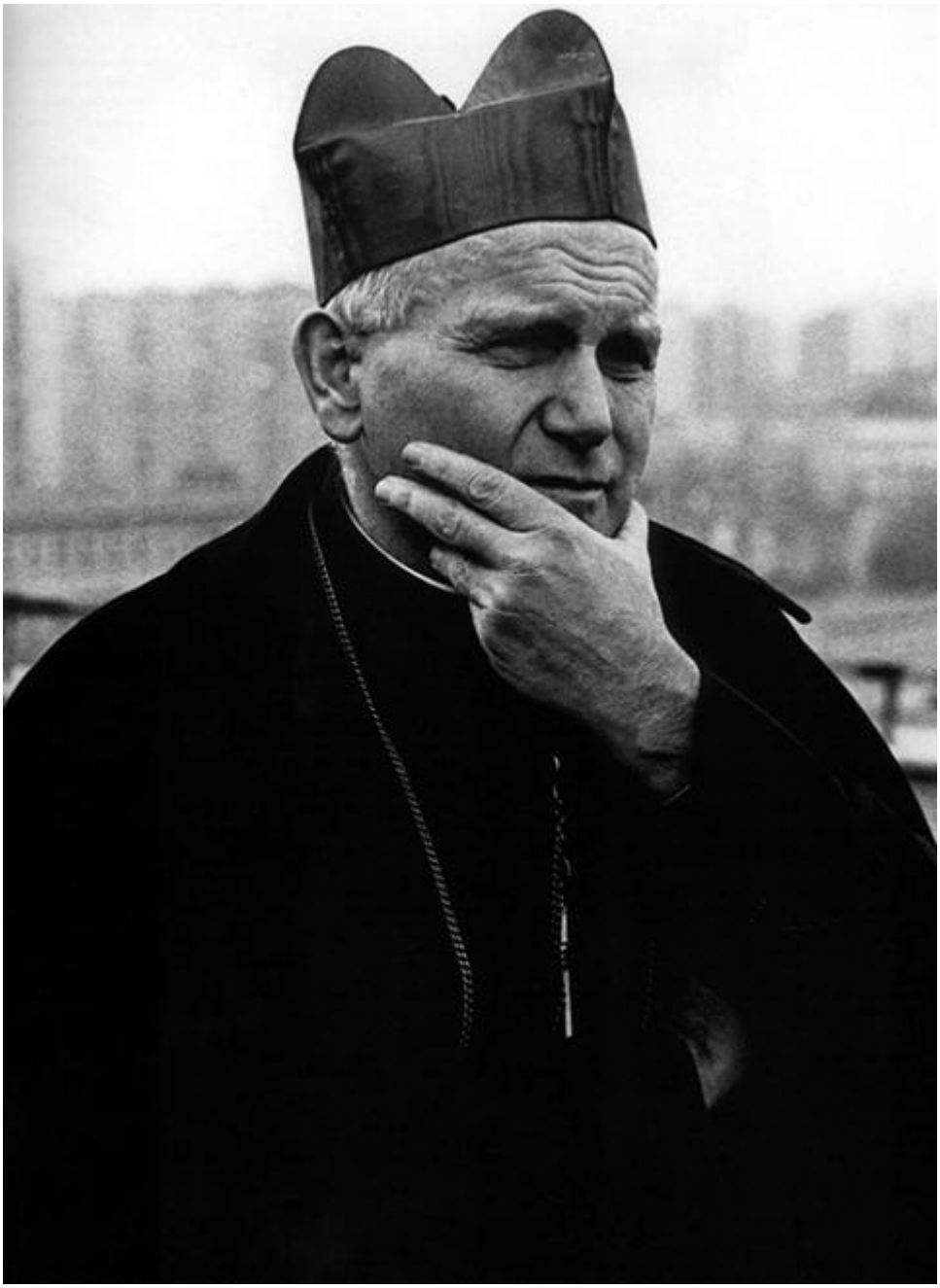
Questions have been raised repeatedly about his handling of sexual abuse claims against Catholic clergy, including high-profile figures from Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the Mexican founder and director of the Legion of Christ who was a serial sexual abuser, and Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who resigned in 2013 after admitting improper sexual conduct with priests.

In November 2020, a 460-page Vatican report exposed errors of judgment in John Paul II's promotion of the disgraced now-former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was laicized in 2019 after being investigated for claims of sexual misconduct over several decades.

Even in the pope's native Poland, some critics reacted harshly after release of that report, petitioning authorities in Warsaw, Gdansk and other cities to revoke John Paul's honorary citizenship, while supporters circulated a counter-petition, deploring the "unprecedented attack."

Since the Vatican report, Polish church leaders have staunchly defended John Paul II's record, insisting he was the first pontiff to introduce regulations protecting young people and calling abusive clergy to account.

In November, however, a Dutch journalist living in Poland, Ekke Overbeek, alleged that the future pope had known about abusive priests while leading the Archdiocese of Krakow from 1964-1978, and helped them evade punishment.



The future Pope John Paul II is pictured during his time as archbishop of Krakow, Poland. (CNS/Catholic Press photo)

Overbeek has pursued the sexual abuse theme for some years, helping reveal cover-ups among Polish clergy in a 2013 bestseller, *Lękajcie się* ("Be afraid"). He says he spent time "combing through archives" of the former communist secret police, or Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa, which "mention 10 well-documented cases of abuse" involving allegedly abusive priests who were protected by the then-Cardinal Wojtyla.

Other cases were "only briefly reported" by the secret police, Overbeek reported in a newspaper story. But the secret police archives contained "a lot of information about sexual crimes committed by clergy," and made it "apparent" that the Wojtyla knew about the abuse, said the journalist.

The journalist's new book, *Maxima Culpa*, is to be published early next year.

The book has been endorsed as "authentic" and "courageous" by Stanislaw Obirek, a former Jesuit priest now teaching cultural anthropology at Warsaw University, who has predicted it will "unravel the myth of John Paul II as the holy man almost from youth."

It has also been praised as "explosive, thorough and accurate" by Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, a well-respected canon lawyer and clergy abuse victim advocate. Doyle has predicted Overbeek's book will "overturn the pope's former image" by showing "he did nothing."

In mid-November, anticipating the latest controversy, Poland's Catholic bishops issued a statement defending John Paul II's record on handling abuse as pope, but without discussing his years in Krakow.



Msgr. Slawomir Oder, postulator for the sainthood cause of Pope John Paul II, speaks during the presentation of his book on the late pope in Rome in this Jan. 26, 2010, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Oder, now postulator for the beatification of John Paul II's parents, has insisted the pontiff's life record was fully examined before he was declared a saint,  while the Polish church's child protection coordinator, Jesuit Fr. Adam Zak, has argued that the whole church's understanding of abuse evolved significantly from the 1970s, making

it essential to see Wojtyla's decisions in a contemporary context.

Other commentators have questioned Overbeek's heavy reliance on files from the secret police, insisting these are inherently untrustworthy.

Wojtyla himself was listed as a "target to watch" from 1946 on by those police, who constantly monitored his later work in Krakow and predicted as early as 1972 — long before Poland's Catholic bishops — that he was a serious candidate for pope.

"Questions about what John Paul II knew and did as pope have largely been resolved since the Vatican report, so it seems those arguing against his sanctity are now looking to his time in Krakow," Mazurkiewicz, the former secretary-general of the European bishops, who, teaches social sciences at Warsaw's Catholic university, told NCR.

"But the reliance on secret police files, particularly relating to abusing priests who were subject to threats and blackmail, is highly questionable," he said. "The [police] routinely put out false, manipulative information to suit its purposes."

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"While this can be of interest in understanding how communist state mechanisms worked, it can only be read and interpreted with reference to other factual sources," said Mazurkiewicz. "It's unlikely a journalist from abroad, working cursorily with a different method, will be in a position to do this."

Poland's Catholic Church has been wrestling with abuse allegations for the past decade, updating its guidelines and ensuring dioceses and religious orders have safeguarding specialists.

A total of 11 mostly retired bishops and archbishops have faced sanctions for perpetrating or ignoring abuse, while several TV films have graphically documented the problem — including a six-part series, "What did John Paul II know?", which aired this autumn on the commercial TVN channel.

Poland's Rzeczpospolita daily has looked in detail at two priests specifically identified by Overbeek.

Fr. Eugeniusz Surgent, a Catholic curate from Milowek, was blackmailed by the secret police and jailed for three years in 1973 after admitting to abusing boys at a local school.

Disbelieving his claims of innocence, Wojtyla and his auxiliary bishop, Jan Pietraszko, immediately suspended the priest, Rzeczpospolita reported, but also followed contemporary canon law in withholding church sanctions because Surgent already faced punishment under civil law.

In reality, the priest, who died in 2008, had lied about the scale of his abuse, and was later reassigned, after being released from jail in 1974, to parishes in two northern dioceses, where he continued abusing children.

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Another priest, Fr. Józef Loranc, was also suspended when his parish rector at Jelesnia received complaints, landing a two-year jail term when he was arrested at a monastery.

After Loranc's release in 1971, Wojtyla told the priest (in a letter intercepted and copied by the secret police) that he would be spared canonical sanctions because of his civil sentence.

Loranc, who died in 1992, was allowed to minister in Zakopane and transferred to another parish after the archdiocese declined to act on anonymous complaints against him.

Zak, the Jesuit who leads the Polish's church's child protection office, said he hopes the Krakow Archdiocese will assist investigations into the historical decisions made about the priests, telling the KAI agency he also yearned for a "serious, source-based discussion" of the future pope's years in Krakow, which could recognize "his conditionings and mistakes," as well as "his achievements and greatness."

Other church leaders, however, have urged Polish Catholics to rally to John Paul II's defense, recognizing that knowledge of abuse, with relevant guidelines and procedures, was much less developed at the time.



Archbishop Marek Jedraszewski of Krakow, Poland, speaks during the Way of the Cross on Good Friday, April 15, 2022, in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska. (CNS/Reuters/Aleksandra Szmigiel)

"They want to strip him of his sanctity and authority, and throw him into the dustbin of history," lamented Archbishop Marek Jedraszewski, the saint's current successor in Krakow.

"We must not allow this greatest member of the Polish family to be humiliated by enemies of Poland and the church," said the archbishop. "When we stand in solidarity with St. John Paul II, we also stand in solidarity with God."

Some Poles think their church should try to present the pontiff in a more realistic light, and discourage the reflexive reaction that any criticism is somehow wrong.

"Of course, people will go on looking for evidence against him, especially in the area of abuse — maybe back to when he was a priest, even a seminarian — and some may even be naive enough to put their faith in secret police documents," Glabisz-Pniewska, the Polish Radio presenter, told NCR.

"But St. John Paul II was a human being living in the world, not some kind of unreal demigod," she said. "We need to move away from the old mentality, nurtured under communist rule, which assumes any criticism of church leaders reflects a hostility to the faith. This lack of freedom to debate honestly and objectively poses a barrier between the Polish church and its Western neighbors."

Mazurkiewicz, the former secretary-general of the European bishops, agrees that a fuller discussion is needed.

"Some image-wreckers in Poland are seeking at all costs to destroy the myth of John Paul II, to suggest he was a total hypocrite, completely different than the person we thought we knew and valued," Mazurkiewicz told NCR.

"Meanwhile, Catholics in the West don't share the debt of the gratitude felt towards the pope in Poland, where he stood at the center of events which spurred the collapse of an empire of evil, enabling us to live free in today's world," said the professor. "We have to find some reliable way of living within these divided positions."

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