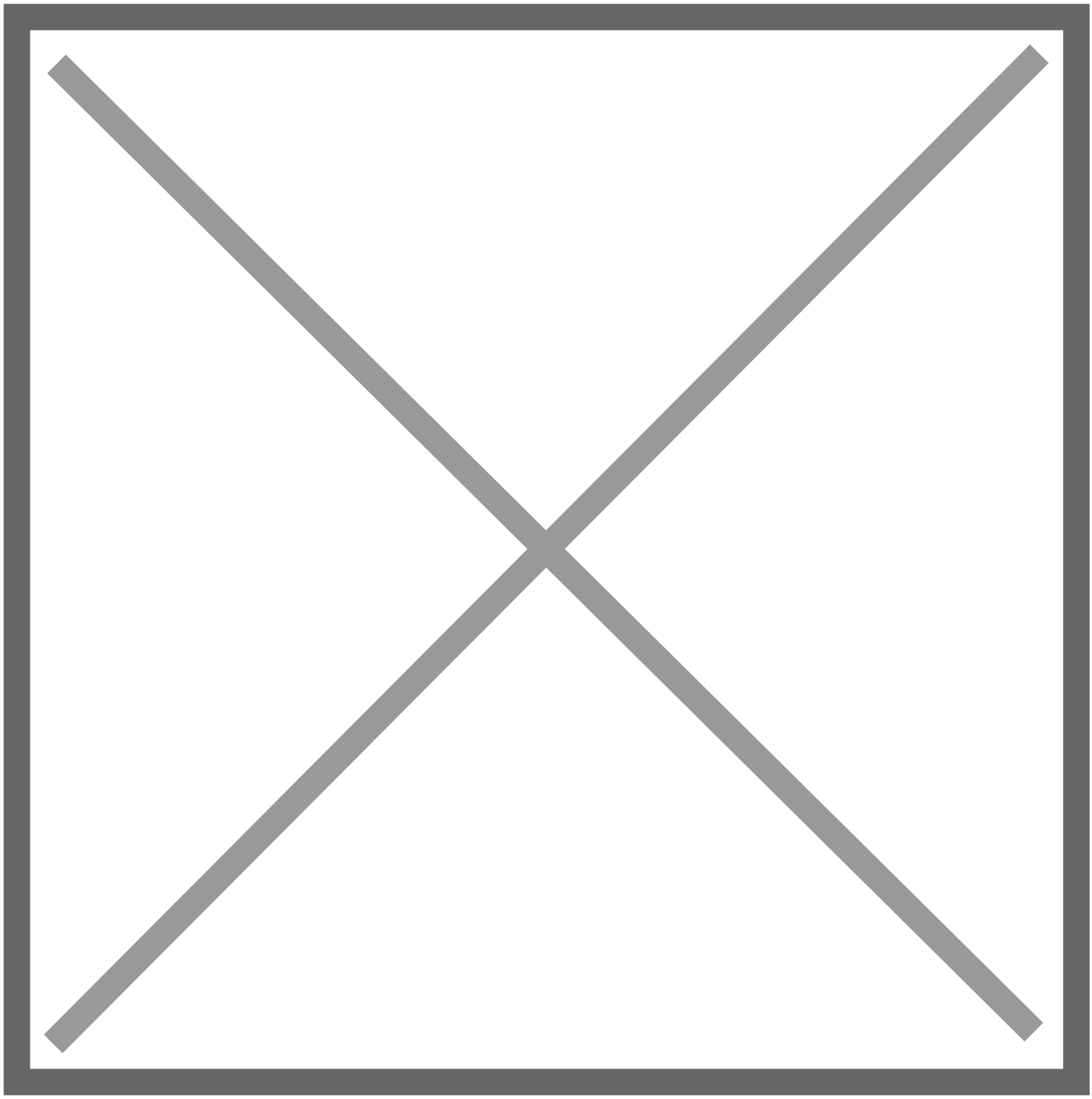
News
Analysis



Then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, archbishop of Kraków, who later became Pope John Paul II, responds to questions during an interview at The Catholic University of America in Washington July 29, 1976. Newly opened Church archives challenge a high-profile 2023 documentary that claimed that Archbishop Wojtyla (elevated to cardinal in 1967) allegedly covered up cases of clerical sexual abuse in the archdiocese, an investigative report revealed in March 2026. (OSV file/Marvin T. Jones)

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Krakow, Poland — March 24, 2026
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In 2023, following a major television documentary claiming that St. John Paul II had covered up clerical sexual abuse when he was leading the Archdiocese of Kraków, Polish experts rejected the claim and urged that archdiocesan records be opened to allow the full context.

It took a change in Church leadership in Kraków to open the archives — a move announced by Cardinal Grzegorz Rys on Jan. 30, a little over a month after he was installed in Wawel Royal Cathedral.

Once the archives had been opened, two investigative journalists gained firsthand access to the files. And after reviewing the material, they headlined their report in the journal Rzeczpospolita: "Cardinal Karol Wojtyla did not cover up cases of pedophilia" in his archdiocese.

What happened in 2023

The opposite headline — "John Paul II knew about the abuse when he was archbishop of Kraków. As a cardinal, he 'protected the institution first, not the victims'" — made waves in the media March 6, 2023, when the documentary "Franciszkanska 3" by Marcin Gutowski premiered on TVN24, a private commercial

TV network in Poland.

At the time, only the Polish Institute of National Remembrance's archives were opened to researchers — where state archives from communist authorities are stored — and based on them, Gutowski claimed that Cardinal Wojtyla wanted to silence the cases, hide them from authorities and move abusive priests to different locations without sanctioning them.

Investigative journalists with Rzeczposolita, Tomasz Krzyzak and Piotr Litka, studied those same archives around the same time — and in December 2022 published contradictory findings based on the state documentation.

Related: New report on clergy abuse during John Paul II's tenure in Poland sparks intense debate

"Looking at those same archives, we had a completely different interpretation of events," Krzyzak told OSV News, stressing that back then, he and Litka knew Wojtyla did everything according to canon law, "but, just like TVN's Gutowski, we did not have access to curial archives to obtain more information and verify what was in those state communist archives."

At the time, Church archives in the Archdiocese of Kraków were closed to reporters.

The "Franciszkanska 3" report caused a wave of national debates, with the Polish bishops announcing on March 14, 2023, that they were willing to create a commission of experts to investigate cases of abuse of minors by clergy from the past in the country — an investigation that would cover the era that St. John Paul II governed the Archdiocese of Kraków as Cardinal Wojtyla.

Fast forward three years, and on March 11, the Polish bishops' conference announced that the commission to investigate past cases of abuse had, after years of preparatory work, finally been established.

A month ahead of this announcement, investigative journalists Krzyzak and Litka had already been studying the archives of the Archdiocese of Kraków, which officially opened on Feb. 10 to researchers and journalists who requested access. On March 13, Krzyzak and Litka published the first part of their groundbreaking investigation. On March 20, the second part of their reporting went to print.

What the Archdiocese of Kraków archives say

"Our research shows that Cardinal Karol Wojtyla did not transfer priests from parish to parish when he learned of their criminal activities, but he took quick action, and some of his decisions were above-standard for the time," the March 13 report's lead said.

Asked by OSV News what the archives reveal, Krzyzak said that the archives — which look "untouched" and "complete" give a different picture of Wojtyla's actions than found in the story provided by Gutowski.

"There is no evidence that Wojtyla transferred priests from parish to parish because he learned that a person was sexually abusing children," Krzyzak told OSV News. "However, there is evidence that when he did learn about it, he took decisive — very decisive — actions consisting in simply suspending one priest or another, sending him to a place of isolation. In general, he took all the decisions that he should have taken."

Krzyzak and Litka studied two cases depicted in an earlier TV documentary in great detail.

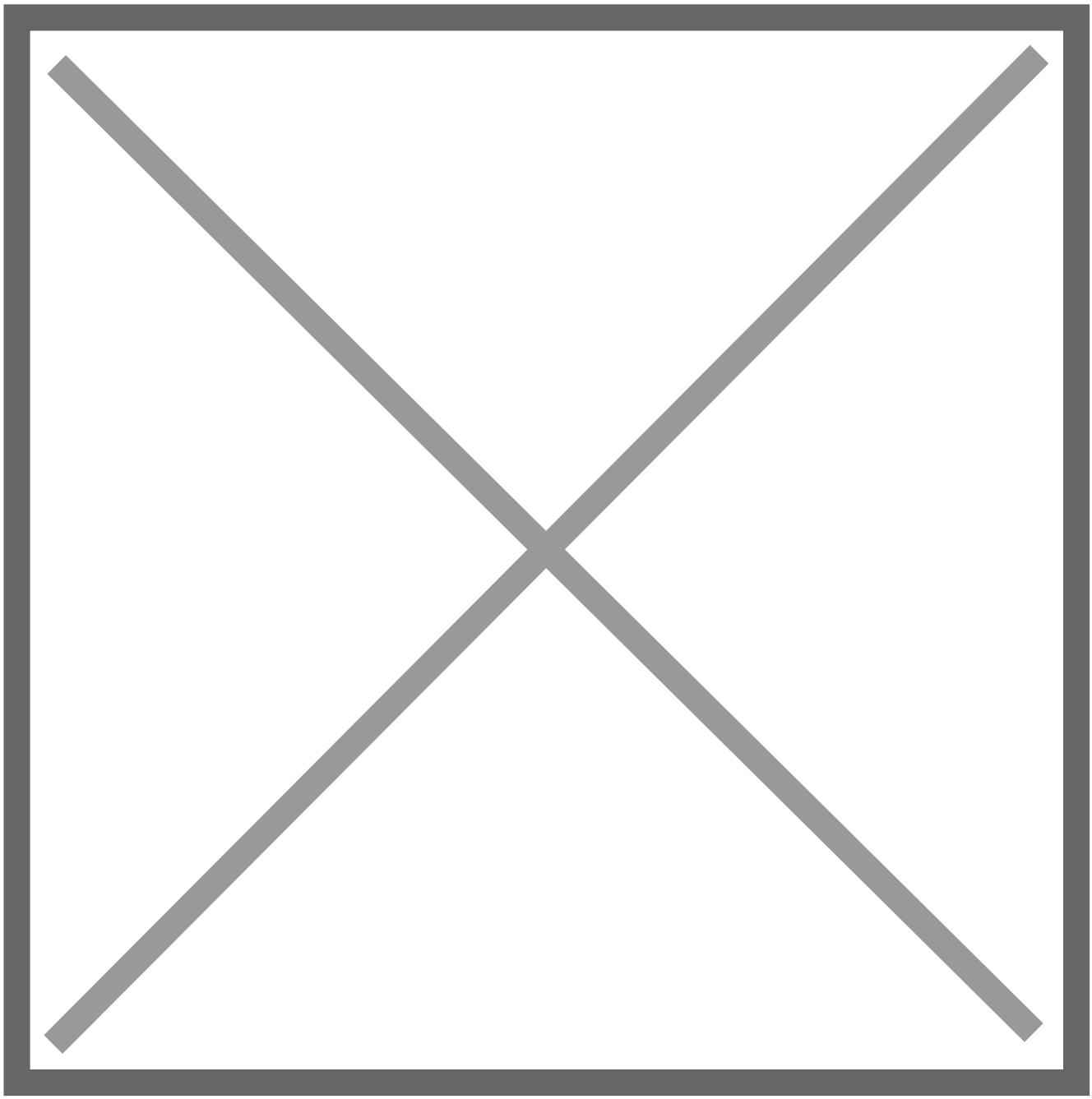
One was of Fr. Eugeniusz Surgent. TVN's documentary claimed Wojtyla relinquished responsibility for him, returning him back to his original bishop of the then-apostolic administration of Lubaczów, the future Diocese of Zamosc-Lubaczów.

The case, however, was a lot more complex.

Information about the actions of the abusive priest first came to the archdiocese in 1969 via an anonymous report.

"Anonymous reports at that time were, as a rule, thrown in the trash," Krzyzak said, explaining that when Poland was under communist rule, the communist government persecuted the Church, and anonymous reports on priests were mostly treated as blackmailing the Church by the communist Secret Service, known as Sluzba Bezpiecznestwa, or SB.

But this anonymous report was not ignored. It was treated "seriously," Krzyzak said, because the priest "was causing problems of another nature in different parishes before" by being emotionally unstable and getting into conflict with other priests and parishioners.



Archbishop Karol Wojtyla of Kraków, the future Pope John Paul II, is pictured in an undated photo in the 1960s. Newly opened Church archives challenge a high-profile 2023 documentary that claimed that Archbishop Wojtyla (elevated to cardinal in 1967) allegedly covered up cases of clerical sexual abuse in the archdiocese, an investigative report revealed in March 2026. (OSV News/CNS file)

After the anonymous report, what Wojtyla did "surpassed the times he lived in," Krzyzak said, and provided a vision the future pope had for managing his diocese:

He sent the problematic priest for psychiatric tests, and reported the anonymous letter to the bishop of Lubaczów. This bishop, Jan Nowicki of Lubaczów, reprimanded the priest at the time.

The curial archives show that, besides the anonymous letter Wojtyla had on alleged abuse of Surgent, he had no other official signals from alleged victims' families, even while the state archives claimed the contrary.

"There is no evidence that the boy's mother — as the Security Service claimed — presented the case in person at the curia. It cannot be ruled out that this was an over-interpretation by the officers (of SB)," Krzyzak and Litka wrote in their story.

Despite the report being anonymous, the priest was also immediately removed from a classroom where he had been teaching Catechism classes to children. The ordered psychiatric opinion, however, did not refer to any sexual deviances of the priest, only saying that the priest "demonstrates a clear personality deviation."

After two years of no other reports — whether anonymous or not — of his alleged abuse, Surgent was reassigned to a parish in July 1971.

Indications from the parish that reached Kraków's bishops were, at the beginning, very positive. The priest was a good governor of the parish, and managed the place well, parishioners claimed.

But in May 1973, the director of the school received indications that when the priest was supposedly teaching Catechism, he instead allegedly was abusing boys.

The Archdiocese of Krakow "instantly" — in June 1973 — started an investigation — resulting in the priest's removal from parish, "penal suspension, deprivation of office, income, as well as a ban on working in the Archdiocese of Krakow — all provided for in such cases by canon law," the investigation by Krzyzak and Litka stated.

"Other penalties — including a possible transfer to the lay state — were left to the discretion of the appropriate ordinary, in this case Bishop Jan Nowicki of Lubaczów," it said.

In August 1973, state prosecutors started investigating the case of Surgent and, after a trial, sentenced him to three years in prison. He was released early in 1974.

After his prison sentence, Surgent wrote a letter with Christmas wishes to Wojtyla, saying he offered the future pope his "unworthy prayers and expressions of deepest reverence and devotion," according to the Rzeczpospolita report.

Wojtyla answered the letter on Jan. 4, 1975, with a brief sentence: "The Metropolitan Curia in Kraków prohibits you from performing any priestly activities within the Archdiocese of Kraków /can. 2359 § 2 CIC/."

Rzeczpospolita reported: "On that day, a letter was also sent to parish priests and rectors of churches in Krakow, asking Surgent 'not to be allowed to perform priestly functions.'"

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Authors of investigation: Wojtyla took decisive action

Krzyzak, who is not only an investigative journalist, but also a canon lawyer, told OSV News that when Wojtyla "learned about such cases, he took very decisive action — suspending priests and sending them into isolation."

He stressed that the future pope was acting with a vision unusual for the time and didn't have the knowledge we have now about manipulative behaviors of perpetrators of sexual abuse: "Sending a priest for psychiatric evaluation at that time was something highly unusual — almost ahead of its time."

Rejecting the claim of those who doubt the report by Krzyzak and Litka can be objective if based on Church archives, Krzyzak told OSV News: "As time passed, nothing was removed from the archives — on the contrary, they were expanded with additional documents," he said, underlining the full transparency and cooperation of the curia at Franciszkanska 3, the legendary Kraków address where Wojtyla was once archbishop.

At the conclusion of the second part of their newest investigation — about Fr. Józef Loranc, whom Wojtyla immediately suspended and sent to solitary confinement in

the local Cistercian monastery upon learning the priest abused girls — Krzyzak and Litka wrote:

"The moment Wojtyla learned of the crimes committed by priests under his authority, he made lightning-fast decisions. He suspended clergy, removed them from the scene of the crime, and after they served their prison sentences, he did not immediately reinstate them in pastoral ministry, but ordered them to continue their penance — effectively keeping them 'imprisoned.'"

"Compared to other hierarchs who also dealt with cases of pedophilia between 1944 and 1989 ... these actions were truly exemplary."

Fr. Piotr Studnicki, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Kraków, commented: "The research demonstrates that we shouldn't be afraid of opening Church archives for the sake of research. No difficult and painful history is as terrifying as closed archives. We fear what we don't know most."

TVN's reaction

After contacting the author of the documentary "Franciszkanska 3" to comment on the newest investigation debunking the claims published in 2023 by TVN, OSV News received a link to a social media post from the author saying: "For several days now, I've been receiving questions: Why aren't you responding? I thought there was no point, because nothing particularly new had happened in the matter. Two authors went to the archives, found nothing, and based on that, arbitrarily concluded that Cardinal Wojtyla wasn't hiding anything."

Gutowski said the authors of the Rzeczpospolita report "did not confront" their findings with victims of abuse, and said officials at the Archdiocese of Kraków "for 3 years since the publication of 'Franciszkanska 3' have done NOTHING to reach out to the victims and witnesses."

Reacting to the comments of the author of "Franciszkanska 3," Rzeczpospolita's Krzyzak told OSV News: "When writing the text first in 2022, we clearly stated that telling the story through the lens of archival materials does not require us to seek out new testimonies from those who were harmed, but rather relied on the accounts that were given at the time."

"Today, after 50 years, I do not feel competent to enter into someone's life without knowing whether they have processed their trauma or not. It is not my role to knock on someone's door and intrude upon their private life," he said.

"I remain in contact with those who were harmed, but only with those who have reached out to us on their own initiative after the publications," Krzyzak added.

Two days after the initial report by Krzyzak and Litka was published in 2022, announcements were read in parishes of the dioceses of Bielsko-Zywiec (formerly part of the Archdiocese of Kraków), Koszalin-Kolobrzeg and Pelplin, asking people who had been harmed by Surgent or who had knowledge of the harm he had caused to come forward.

Fr. Marek Studenski, vicar general of the Diocese of Bielsko-Zywiec, told OSV News that "one person reported abuse by Fr. Surgent" after the announcements.

Since the perpetrator died in 2008, "we asked this person what kind of help this person would need, and referred the person to the Foundation of St. Joseph," Studenski said, referring to the foundation of the Polish bishops' conference that helps victims of clergy sexual abuse. "The person received the assistance they needed," he said.

On March 17, OSV News asked the TVN station press office what steps, if any, TVN television will take after reviewing the article by Krzyzak and Litka in Rzeczpospolita, given that it challenges the claims made in the documentary "Franciszkanska 3." OSV News also asked how TVN is responding to the calls made by public figures that the station should apologize for publishing unverified reports on a Polish historical figure of high importance.

As of March 23, OSV News had not received an answer from TVN, and OSV News forwarded the questions to Paramount, the American owner of the TVN station.