

# **T**he transformation of a Roman Catholic parish in a regional city in Central Europe

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## **Abstract**

An interesting subject of sociological research in modern times is Roman Catholic parish in a regional city in Central Europe - Rzeszów. This transformation was influenced by many factors, including the dynamic development, which from a provincial town became the a regional metropolis. As we can observe this city development was conditioned by industrialization, social modernization, technological progress and rationalization. As a result, basic factors appeared which, according to the renowned sociologists, support society secularization. During the communist era in Poland, religion was fought against administratively, and the main objective of this oppressive policy was the complete atheization of the society. The sociological and historical research has shown that in Rzeszów, since 1965, the dynamic development of parish structure took place, and a parish became an important centre of religious and social life. In Rzeszów - it is easy to indicate - that parishes no secularization processes took place, which are typical for many European countries and commonly result in the decreasing influence of religion on public life. Rather, an inverse trend could be observed, as both the religiosity and the parish activity of Rzeszów laymen was very dynamic, and affected the public life. After 1989 the number of parishioners loosely bonded with their parish increased. At the same time, the percentage of parishioners attending Sunday masses decreased. The discrepancy between the parishioners moral attitudes and Roman Catholic Church doctrine is more and more visible.

**Keywords:** roman catholic church, transformation, parish, poland, central europe

## **Introduction**

Roman Catholic parish - in Poland - is known as common and most stable local institution, with a dominant role in the lives of citizens of towns and villages. It is a central place of religious needs of parishioners and mostly known as centres of social, cultural and charity life. The bond between parishioners is an important part of a parish community, and could be defined as permanent community spirit and regionalism.

A parish - a basic unit within the structure of Roman Catholic Church is a subject to nonstop influence of various social processes. In Poland, after the Second World War, both the industry and big cities developed rapidly, what affected the social and demographic structure of the country population. Back then, Poland was in the Soviet Union zone of interest, power was held by the communists who created a repressive totalitarian regime. Only after 1989, when the communism had fallen and the system had changed, did Poland become one of the democratic states, building a civil society.

A Roman Catholic parish within a rapidly changing social situation in Poland is a very interesting subject of research considering both the period of the communists oppressive policy on religion, and the following twenty years in an already democratic Poland. At that time, in Western Europe, in the realms of society modernization and religion privatization, the process of secularization escalated and resulted in the decreasing influence of religion on public life. Ever since, the power of religion and its institutions (parishes, too) is dwindling, as well as their ability to affect various segments of social network. Due to pluralism and individualism, religion becomes more and more a personal matter, and every person uses it with regard to their special needs. This results in limiting the impact of Roman Catholic Church on social life, as well as in separating religion from morality, religious subjectivism and in accepting only selected articles of faith. The bond between believers and their parish weakens, churches become empty, some are even transformed into museums, culture centres, and some are sold and intended for public utility (e.g. for shops, shopping centres).

Taking into consideration the social processes described above, the author of this paper carried out sociological research which main

objective was to present the transformation of a Roman Catholic parish with Rzeszów as an example. In the post-war period, this city became one of the most rapidly developing regional centres in Poland. Thanks to the emergence of many industrial plants and the influx, Rzeszów became a regional metropolis and the capital city of a voivodship – a local government unit of the highest level. In the People's Republic of Poland, and then in the Republic of Poland, the city was developing intensively, becoming an important administrative, industrial, trade, academic and cultural hub of South-East Poland. Within last seven decades, Rzeszów, a small town of 28,100 residents in 1950, was promoted to a regional city of 181,200 residents in 2012. It should be mentioned that this is an upward trend.

The dynamic, both spatial and demographic development of Rzeszów was coupled with industrialization, modernization, technical progress and Weber's rationalization. As a result, there appeared basic factors which, according to the renowned sociologists (such as Max Weber, Emil Durkheim, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann), support society secularization. What is more, during the communist era, the government attempted to eliminate religious institutions, especially those of Roman Catholic Church. Religion was fought against administratively and the main objective of this oppressive policy was the complete atheization of the society. It was obvious that these methods were designed to strengthen secularization trends consistent with the lay Leninist society paradigm. Thus emerge extraordinarily interesting research problems: To what changes was a Roman Catholic parish in Rzeszów a subject in the times of modernity? Was the religious and social role of a Roman Catholic parish in the intensively modernized and administratively atheized society of Rzeszów dwindling since the 1960s (when the sociology of religion was dominated by the argument on secularization)?

To show the continuity of social processes, while maintaining the clarity of the description and the relationship between past and present, in the context of the historical background, author of this paper uses a sociological theory of empiricism enriching the historical background for the broader and deeper implicate context for the reader as a way to refer the described phenomena. The research presented in this article was based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are, among others: source materials from parish archives (statistical data, parish reports, parish registers, chronicles etc.) and data published by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) and the Institute of Catholic Church Statistics (SAC). The secondary sources are: 40

qualitative interviews with a diocese bishop emeritus and with the former and present parish priests of Rzeszów parishes, or with people appointed by them.

### **The dynamic, spatial and demographic development of Rzeszów**

Two months after the Second World War was over, on 7 July 1945, Polish authorities issued a decree in which Rzeszów was appointed the capital city of a voivodship. This decision had a significant effect on the city comprehensive development. The communist elite of Rzeszów wanted it to be the symbol of the authorities success and a model socialist city. The city socialist character and the supremacy of people's government was to be emphasized by the massive socrealistic edifices, the monument of the Revolutionary Deed seated on the junction of two main roads, the huge panel blocks of flats and industrial plants. The spatial, industrial, social and demographic development of Rzeszów was a priority. The growing administrative importance of Rzeszów meant creating many offices and public institutions, and establishing the city as the centre of the region political and cultural life. People from different milieus arrived, artists, people who organized new local authorities and arranged the city space. The city prestige was enhanced by schools, large academic centres, and big production plants offering employment and housing. Because many industrial and trade centres came into being, the demand for workforce increased within various professions. Both the city residents and people from neighbouring villages came to Rzeszów to work and live in the newly built housing estates.

The population changed under the influence of many factors. The most important ones (between 1946 and 1989) were the migration (about 47%), population growth (about 30%) and the modification of administrative division (about 23%). The size of migration was impressive – by the end of the 1970s almost 75% of Rzeszów residents were not native to the city<sup>1</sup>. This process continued with a varied intensity up to the end of the 1980s and was inhibited in the 1990s by the beginning of political transformation in Poland. In the 1990s, the influx of new inhabitants declined by 50% and was accompanied by constant emigration (Malikowski, 1989: 96-100; Idem, 1991: 152; Solecki, 2002:126-127).

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<sup>1</sup> By *native to the city* the author means 'born in Rzeszów'.

However, the population of Rzeszów was incessantly growing because of the high population growth. Throughout the post-war period, up till the 1980s, Rzeszów was, demographically speaking, a young city. What was distinctive about the age structure of residents, was low and almost invariable age median. In 1950, it came to 28 years of age, and in 1980 to 28 years and 9 months. This factor affected the unusually high population growth rate which amounted to 14.5 per mill in 1960, and to 12.1 per mill in 1980. Later, although the population growth rate was still positive, it indicated a downward trend, because in 1990 it came to 6.3 per mill, and in 2010 to 3.0 per mill (Malikowski, 1991:155-156; Mały rocznik, 1961:16; Rocznik statystyczny, 1981:28; Województwo podkarpackie 2011:62 ; Podstawowe dane statystyczne 1990: 30).

The population size depends on the city territorial expansion onto neighbouring villages which make an attractive residential area. Between 1951 and 2010, the borders were expanded four times by annexing neighbouring villages. As a result, the area of Rzeszów increased fourteen times, for in 1951 it amounted to 8km<sup>2</sup>, and now it comes to 116km<sup>2</sup>. The biggest territorial expansion took place between 2006 and 2010, and it amounted to 62.68km<sup>2</sup>, that is 54% of the city current territory (Malikowski 1991: 153; Urząd Miasta Rzeszowa).

As mentioned above, the migration, population growth and territorial expansion decided on the size of Rzeszów population. The increase in the number of residents was one of the elements that created this big regional centre. In 1950, the city population amounted to 28,100, and in 2012 it came to 181,200, so it increased sixfold. The highest population growth dated between 1970 and 1990, and amounted to 70,900. The most important factors which stimulated this influx were: (1) low degree of urbanization of areas where the immigrants came from; (2) Rzeszów attractiveness in view of lack of other big cities nearby and (3) local government policy which favoured selective migration. Currently, the city is divided into 29 districts. (Malikowski 1991:151-155; Idem 1989: 21-23, 87-100; Bonusiak, 2010: 144-145; Urząd Miasta Rzeszowa).

### **The activity of parishioners while establishing new parishes**

The spatial development of Rzeszów, the growing number of residents and the reorganization of parish structure made it necessary to build new sacral buildings. The biggest agglomerations of Roman Catholics were the housing estates of panel blocks of flats. Thus the

necessity of building churches and chapels, so that each local Roman Catholic community had their own temple. Sacral buildings were supposed to lay the foundation for the parishioners spiritual life and various congregations of laymen. New churches were particularly in demand in the big housing estates where people from rural areas settled in new apartments, together with their traditional religious models based on the faith of their fathers. Their religiosity was closely connected to the institutional Church which prescribed a model of religious life combining values, rules and religious behaviour patterns, as well as roles to be performed by its members. Both the attitudes and behaviour of lay believers were shaped to fit the model of life promoted by the Church and all related expectations. The priest, as a representative of the hierarchic Church, enjoyed respect of the local community (W-1, W-10, W-19).

In the People's Republic of Poland, the development of churches chain was inhibited by the local authorities and security service which by implementing the communist policy on religion limited the pastoral activity of the Church. The city authorities applied various methods to obstruct the construction of new temples. Their strategy was usually delaying and hampering all procedures related to sacral building, and then issuing a negative decision. The decision was most often motivated by the lack of building materials or of demand for new churches. Office clerks were really persistent when issuing permits for the construction of sacral buildings in new housing estates. The nuisance caused by music, chanting and bells was the reason for negative decision – such a building should not be located in the middle of a modern housing estate. Besides, the law did not see a church or a chapel as a building of public utility, so it could not be a part of the spatial plan and the possibility of obtaining a parcel of land was virtually none. These made up impediments were a cover-up for the communist policy of gradual atheization of the society. The parishioners, however, were not easy to intimidate or discourage. At that time, the neglect of society basic religious needs was the source of serious conflicts with the authorities during the construction of parish churches in Rzeszów (W-19, W-22, W-23. See: S. Bober, *Persona non grata. Biskup Ignacy Tokarczuk i władze PRL*, wyd. 1, Lublin 2005: 146-151, 206-221; A. Garbarz, *Działalność duszpastersko-społeczna arcybiskupa Ignacego Tokarczuka*, Rzeszów 2006: 312-317).

The development of sacral building in Rzeszów, both in the communist era and in the following two decades, was very dynamic. Between 1975 and 2010, 22 parish churches were built or extended in

Rzeszów. Nowadays, within all Rzeszów parishes, there are 30 parish churches, 4 succursal churches and 28 chapels. Often, these monumental buildings are a part of a pastoral centre. All parishes, with one exception, have their own temples to meet the needs of their parishioners. The youngest parish is currently building a church, though it has a wooden chapel where the masses are said.

Most of the city churches were built after 1980. Previously, the temples were located in temporary, improvised chapels. In Rzeszów, sometimes, the chapels were arranged in private houses or quickly constructed barracks. They were secretly prepared and then consecrated by one of the bishops. These chapels were illegal, so the parishioners stayed in for days, and nights, praying and preventing security service from seizing the building. (W-10; W-2; W-21, W-27; Schematyzm diecezji rzeszowskiej 2010 )

The development of parish structure in Rzeszów had a great influence on the parishioners activity. The co-operation of priests and laymen in establishing the parishes and constructing churches released the spirit of diligence, generosity and dedication, and brought back self-confidence. Carrying out an uneasy, both financially and logistically, task required teamwork and a big share of time. Solidary co-operation strengthened the ties among parishioners and priests. The authority of priests was built up, as well as their role in the local community. Many people felt more emotionally connected to a church built at such an expense of their money and labour. Sharing this effort was an opportunity to get into relation with each other, it intensified devotion for common cause and deepened attachment to one's own parish even in the not so much religious people. Engaging almost all of the parishioners in the life of a parish was a chance to integrate local community and to promote being active, not only spiritually, but also socially and patriotically. Many of those who were, so far, passive and anonymous started to act, to perform various roles in their parishes and local communities. Both the newly established parishes and newly built churches were very important as stabilizing and integrating factors in the new housing estates<sup>2</sup>. New residents, relocating from the countryside to the city, were especially threatened with the loss of traditional local ties and progressive isolation. Besides, the inhabitants of housing estates were menaced by the negative effects of industrialization and urbanization, which made attitudes, behaviour,

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<sup>2</sup>A parish was usually the first integrating agent within the new social space and diverse population structure.

and ethical and religious values relative. Establishing new parishes made it possible to meet the residents basic religious needs and to sustain their attachment to Roman Catholic faith and tradition, according to their family custom. What is more, participating in the parish temple construction was a chance to enter into stable social relations, to integrate with a new place of residence, to put down roots, to bond with the parish. It was also affecting the intensity of religious practices and shaping moral attitudes. Thanks to establishing new parishes and erecting many temples, the local Church grew bigger and stronger. New churches became the premises of numerous prayer groups, associations and confraternities which activities showed the growing commitment of parishioners in the life of their parish, as well as in the local and regional community. (W-1; W-10; W-28; Bełch, 1990: 201-203; Szareyko, 1994: 92-104).

In 2010, there were about 420 groups (representing 90 associations and movements) in Rzeszów parishes with about 28,500 members (19% of all city parishioners). Usually, parishioners organize themselves in Parish Pastoral Councils, Parish Caritas Teams, the Living Rosary, Catholic Action, the Domestic Church, Catholic Families Associations, both Radio Maryja and Radio Via Friends Associations, the Friends of the College Seminary Association, Parish Choirs. Young people prefer: the Light-Life Movement, Catholic Youth Association, Altar Servers, Academic Pastoral Care, Parish Scholas. Temperance movement plays a very important role in local parish communities, especially the Crusade for the Liberation of Man. Organizing such groups and associations is recommended by the Synod of Rzeszów Diocese (According to own study).

Conducted research show that most of Rzeszów parishioners express attachment towards their parishes through engaging in the parish social and pastoral life. The most active are people who belong to parish communities and associations. They are, usually, long-time parishioners who make generous contributions for the sake of local community, regularly participate in masses, very often take Communion, and combine religiosity with morality in their everyday life. Among those closely related to their parish are people who took active part in the construction of parish infrastructure, and that is why they feel committed to it. They are aware that through their work, contributions and prayers they have laid the foundation of local parish community and church buildings. Those parishioners of merit are usually middle-aged or older. However, the activity and involvement once raised in them, and their strong attachment to their own parish

and temple still have a great impact on the attitudes and behaviour of those people and their descendants, who inherit their values (W-1, W-10, W-19; W-23).

In an industrialized and urbanized society, contemporary Rzeszów parishes try to oppose secularization and religion privatization. Their activity is aimed at the development of parishioners spiritual life, desecularization and deprivatization. What is more, it shows the potential of Roman Catholicism which can effectively affect modern society. The parish evangelization activity is not limited to tasks typical of religious and church institutions (these are the basic forms of the Church presence in public life), but it endeavours to include the most important aspects of human life. Parishes promote Christian culture, support patriotic and religious organizations, inspire charity, launch prevention campaigns, help the addicts, run kindergartens and social therapy centres, organize summer camps for children, care for parishioners intellectual formation, co-operate with local government units and other institutions. Of course, church infrastructure does not serve only the religious needs of the parishioners, but also the cultural ones. Very often, national holidays and local festivities are celebrated in the churches or parish houses. Concerts are held there, as well as exhibitions, lectures, symposia, performances, commemorative meetings, meetings with special guests, and Christmas parties for various groups and associations etc. (W-2; W-8; W-27; W-36).

Despite many pastoral events taking place in Rzeszów parishes, the bond between parishioners and their parish is loosening. Both the political transformation, and the society adaptation to a liberal and consumer way of life have caused changes in Rzeszów parishes. Part of laymen do not identify themselves with their parish, and do not get involved in the parish life, apart from formal matters. Those people see their parish as a sort of religious service agency. A modern parish is a place where the paradigm of evangelism and the paradigm of secularization meet. The process of religion privatization is developing. Nowadays, every person decides where is religion in their lives, is it important or is it not? More and more parishioners prefer loose relationship with their parish, they only declare themselves as Roman Catholics and formally appear in parish books. Believers do not identify religiosity with the Church, it is their business. Part of Rzeszów residents, especially the young ones, do not act according to objective and universal moral rules, but are guided by their subjective and conformist convictions. There is a dissonance between both the fundamental articles of faith, and the common philosophy of life and

behaviour of the baptized. The involvement of many Roman Catholics in the life of local parish communities is usually shallow, because its form is usually traditional and superficial (W-2, W-19, W-23; W-36) Zob. Mariański 1997: 143-164; Idem, 2004 (a): 69-71; Idem, 2004 (b): 344-361).

### **Summary**

Rzeszów is undoubtedly a very interesting subject of research for a religion sociologist, as it is the only voivodship city where the city development was accompanied by the development of parish structure, despite oppressive communist policy on religion. What was a true social phenomenon, was establishing new parishes and building new churches without legal permits, as the communist authorities would not issue one. The authorities did their best to transform Rzeszów into a leading socialist city without pastoral centres and churches. Nevertheless, these actions were to no avail, and new parishes and new temples were erected despite reprisals and penalties. Owing to the determination of local clergymen and laymen, on entering new, democratic reality Rzeszów had well-organized parish structure, unlike other Polish cities with parishes of several thousand or even a hundred thousand parishioners. In the following years, depending on Rzeszów residents needs, the structure of parishes was reorganized. In 2011, there were 30 parishes in the city, all of diverse territory and number of parishioners.

The process of creating smaller parishes, both in terms of space and population, improved the church structure functionality. Smaller units were more effective in meeting the parishioners religious needs and in strengthening the parish community ties. This was extremely important when the authorities attempted to fight off religion, as it helped local parish communities to survive, and boosted laymen religious and public activity. Establishing parishes, building churches, and providing traditional pastoral care – those were just a few of many effective ways of sustaining religiosity in Rzeszów residents. The dense parish and church structure, and the uniformity of attitudes, behaviour, values, beliefs and awareness, as well as strong social ties have created favourable conditions for the parishioners moral and religious life to develop. Shared experience of difficulties have integrated local communities for many years and set their attachment to the Church, both local and regional. What is more, the parishioners spiritual life was deepened, because having a nearby temple

encouraged frequent receiving sacraments and performing communal religious practices. The concentration of the parish and church structure resulted in growing laymen activity, who used their teamwork skills acquired while participating in Catholic groups and associations.

The transformation of a Roman Catholic parish in Rzeszów shows that industrialization, social modernization, technological progress and rationalization did not implicate secularization of the city. From the early 1960s to the end of 1980s, an inverse trend could be observed, as both the religiosity and the parish activity of the Rzeszów laymen was very dynamic. Minor changes in Rzeszów Roman Catholics attitudes and behaviour are noticed since 1995. These include a slight decrease in the number of parishioners participating in Sunday masses, accompanied by an increase in the number of parishioners receiving Communion. Furthermore, the bond with the parish is weakening and the parishioners morality is no longer so strictly based on the rules of Roman Catholic Church. The sociological research indicate the growing discrepancy between the real moral attitudes of Roman Catholics, and their general religious declarations and the Church doctrine.

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