

Fifth Conference of the International Church Reform Network Warsaw, Poland. September 22-27, 2019



The fifth meeting of the International Church Reform Network was held September 23-27, 2019 in the town of Białobrzegi, 35 km from the centre of Warsaw. Significantly, this was the second gathering to have taken place in Eastern Europe in successive years. In 2018, the ICRN met in Pezinok, near the Slovakian capital, Bratislava.

The venue for the 2019 Conference in Białobrzegi was the aptly named *Marina Diana Hotel* situated on the banks of Lake Zegrzynski artificially created out of a bend in the Pilica river, a tributary of the mighty Vistula. There was certainly a very large marina there. The hotel was probably built originally to accommodate well connected holiday makers during the Communist era. The staff went out of their way to make our international group as welcome and cared for as they could. Twenty six participants came from Western and Central Europe, Russia, the USA, Brazil, India and Australia:

Markus Heil, *Pfarrei Initiative* (Parish movement), Switzerland; Deborah Rose-Milavec, Co-Director of *Future Church USA*; Christian Weisner (*Wir sind Kirche*, Germany) ; Helmut Schüller (*Pfarrer Initiative*, Austria); Peter Križan (*ok21 Society for open Christianity for the 21st century*, Slovakia) ; Max Stetter (*Pfarrer Initiative*, Germany) ; Ian McGinnity (*Australian Council of Priests*); Martha Heizer (*Wir sind Kirche*, Austria) ; Jeannine Gramick (*New Ways Ministry*, USA) ; Rastislav Kočan (*ok21*, Slovakia) ; Bob Bonnot (*Association of US Catholic Priests*, USA) ; Erich Baldauf (*Pfarrer Initiative*, Austria) ; David Timbs (*Catholics for Renewal Inc.*, Australia); Patricia Fitzsimons (*Association of Catholics in Ireland*); Edson Silva (*Global Council Forum*, Brazil); Nora Ganescu (facilitator, Romania/Belgium); Peter Antonov and Tony (Antonia?) Dubinine (independent Latin Rite Catholics, Russia/Bulgaria) ; Brendan Butler (*We are Church*, Ireland); Hans Bendsorp (*Pfarrer Initiative*, Austria; Zuzana Radzik (*Forum for Dialogue Jewish-Christian Center, Warsaw; Voices of Faith*) ; Colm Holmes (*We are Church*, Ireland, *IMWAC*); Roy Donovan (*Association of Catholic Priests*, Ireland); Virginia Saldanha (*Indian Christian Women's Movement*); Basilio Buffoni (*Noi siamo Chiesa*, Italy).



Most of the conference participants gathered on the sun deck of the hotel, Białobrzegi, PL.

The conference program:

Sunday, September 22

Most of the participants had arrived in time for the Sunday evening meal together at the hotel which. This was followed by an hour and a half session to give people the opportunity to introduce themselves, say something about the groups they represented and their particular advocacies. The conference convenor also outlined the programme for the following four days including a preview of what to expect from the series of presentations by our Polish colleagues scheduled for the next day.

Monday, September 23

After reflective singing of *Laudate omnes gentes, laudate Dominum*, a full day of immersion into contemporary Polish Catholicism began. Seven Polish lay women and men, involved in academic life, the print and electronic media, inter religious dialogue and law professions, provided us with extraordinarily rich, detailed and illuminating insights into how Catholicism in their country has been shaped over a thousand year. It was a long history of interaction and conflict between secular and religious forces, invasions, wars including the German–Polish War (1002–18) that involved Poland challenging the legitimacy of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV of Bavaria (1015–1018), inter-ethnic tensions, demographic shifts, political alignments and other factors.

Conference co-host, Zuzanna Radzik led off the morning session with a breathtaking ninety minute journey through Polish history from the conversion of the nation to Christianity in 966 AD to the present day. Zuzanna is a practising Catholic, an accomplished author, theologian and advocate of reform of the Catholic Church in her country. While she is principally involved in Christian – Jewish dialogue, Zuzanna is also active in the Rome based Voices of Faith.

88 year old Halina Bortnowska spoke next. She was the first female theology graduate in Poland. Her professor of theological ethics at the University of Lublin was Karol Wojtyla. She became a life long friend of Wojtyla right through his life as bishop, Cardinal archbishop of Krakow then as Pope John Paul II. She edited Wojtyla's *Love and Responsibility* (first published in 1960) and, as a journalist, Bortnowska covered the third session of Vatican II. She has now become so thoroughly convinced of the need for a deep and comprehensive reform of the Polish and universal Church that she has recently written to Pope Francis urging him to summon a third Vatican Council.



Halina Bortnowska (88th birthday that day) chats with Deborah Rose-Milavec (*Future Church USA*)

In her highly cultured, faultless English she put a very human face on Wojtyla as academic and bishop but had little to say about him as John Paul II. Halina indicated that gradually people like her found it impossible to get past JP II's gatekeepers, particularly Stanislaw Dziwisz, his private secretary and later Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow. She hinted how saddened, even hurt she was at the exclusion.

Halina noted however that it was a different matter for two other significant women, both married, who were close friends and collaborators with Wojtyla/JP II's for decades: Firstly, Polish-American philosopher Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka who was strongly influenced by phenomenology as was Wojtyla, advised him closely on many aspects of his thinking, philosophical language and writing. She also translated some of his works into English. Tymieniecka, unlike Bortnowska, enjoyed access to the John Paul almost to the very end of his life.

Secondly, Wanda Póltawska was another life long friend and co-worker with Wojtyla/John Paul II. A factor that intensified the friendship between Wojtyla and Póltawska was her sufferings during WWII which inspired him greatly: "Póltawska was captured by the Nazis aged 18, taken to Ravensbruck (all female) concentration camp worked half to death, experimented on medically, and was lucky to survive." She later became a distinguished academic and important advisor to Wojtyla/John Paul on theological ethics related to abortion and to contraception. As Professor of Pastoral Medicine at the Pontifical Academy, Kraków, Póltawska authored a rather laboured 1993 study on "Priestly celibacy in the light of medicine and psychology." In this piece she reflects strong elements of the disembodied voluntarism that underpins much of

Karol Wojtyła's thinking about the human person. It was published in the Congregation of the Clergy/Roman Curia area of the Vatican website.

Eventually, Póltawska and her husband, philosopher Dr Andrzej Póltawski, moved to Rome where she was a lecturer at the Lateran University (1981-1984). It is likely that she was a drafter of John Paul's *Familiaris Consortio* (November 1981). Since the Synod on the Family in 2015, critics of Pope Francis have asserted that his post synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* contradicts the teaching of John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*. Strictly speaking it does not but John Paul's heavy reliance on *Natural Law* theory and the appeal to reason to support his thinking, he effectively limited mainline moral theology the principal sources of which are Scripture and Christology.

What Francis does in *Amoris Laetitia* is to reintroduce a corrective to John Paul's rationalistic presuppositions by locating his teaching in faith, revelation and Scripture as he addresses intractable situations wherein marriages break down and annulments for one reason or another are rendered impossible. The authority of Francis' *Apostolic Exhortation* is the standard Catholic moral solution known as the internal forum. It is classic Aquinas with a strong element of Ockham as well. The document highlights both the doctrine of the primacy of conscience and the principle of gradualism in human moral development. The internal forum solution shares similarities with the Eastern Orthodox *Ekonomia* that, in certain circumstances, it calls for pastoral flexibility in the application of the moral law for the common good.

More importantly, *Amoris Laetitia* marks a significant point in the re-emergence of Catholic moral theology from the catacombs after the decades of micro-management and censorship typical of the John Paul II-Benedict XVI papacies. It is the return to free, intelligent and transparent conversation about matters of morality perhaps more than *Amoris Laetitia* itself that has probably ignited the ire and resentment of those who oppose Francis and his encouragement of *parrhesia* (open, fearless conversation). International networking of ethicists and moral theologians is proving to be of critical importance for the re-establishment Catholic moral theology as central to the Church's claim to be a credible and authoritative voice in the world.

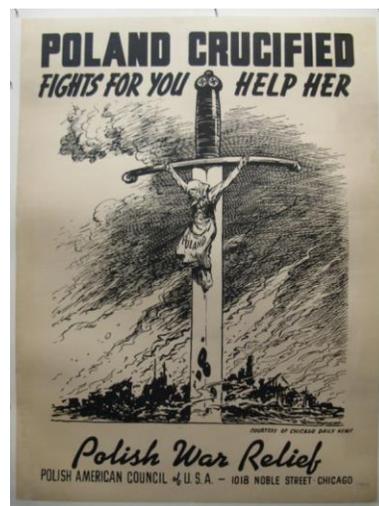
Halina Bortnowska was followed by half a dozen younger Polish Catholic women and men who lead professional lives in academia, media, publishing and law. They are a most impressive group of informed, committed and courageous people who have, without any pretensions, assumed a prophetic role in very challenging times for the Polish Catholic Church. All of them spoke about their experience of isolation and the resistance they have met as a result of their advocacy for reform and renewal at all levels of the Catholic Church in their country.

Following from Zuzanna Radzik and Halina Bortnowska, the other speakers who addressed the conference through the rest Monday were:

Stanisław Zakroczyński, lawyer, historian and author; Katarzyna Sroczyńska, journalist and presenter on *TVP 3* Poland; Dawid Gospodarek, multi-media entrepreneur, publicist and Catholic documentary maker; Mateusz Burzyk, Philosophy, Political economics, Jagiellonian University, Kraków; Mizsa Tomaszewski, Institute of Philosophy, Warsaw University.

While all of these speakers brought their own particular angle and expertise to the conference, they all spoke out of a common sense of faith and pride in what Polish Catholicism had contributed to the Universal Church. They expressed genuine love and compassion for their Church which is now deeply divided and convulsing a result of scandals caused by the revelation of the scale of clerical child sexual abuse of children, other vulnerable people, and the culture of episcopal denial and cover.

Zakroczyński spent some time describing the long term damaging effects of excessive nationalism in Polish life that has often resulted in the blurring of the identities and roles of Church and State especially during times of crisis and threat. The 1939 graphic below illustrates the way a symbol that is central to the identity and worship of a religious tradition has been manipulated by politicians and fundraisers.



Several of the panellists also spent time offering their assessments of John Paul II, his teaching and behaviour as Pope as well as the particular influence he brought to bear on the Polish Church between 1978 and 2005. One particular areas that was singled out was what some described as John Paul's was arrogance and pretentiousness in the way he taught and promoted the *New Evangelization*. Some speakers expressed the view that John Paul's original intention was for the Polish Catholic Church to mount a campaign to re-catechise and 're-certify' decadent and apostate Western civilization. This line is still being pursued by apologists like Robert Barron, auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, probably most of the US bishops and not a few in Australia. George Weigel is one of its keenest spruikers in the conservative American media.

A common criticism of the John Paul II/ Benedict XVI years is that national episcopates were weakened, even neutralised, by the appointment of a succession of supine and compliant bishops to the Polish hierarchy. Speakers expressed their unease that even years after his death, the personality cult of John Paul II is vigorously promoted and exploited by both ecclesiastical and commercial interest groups. A spectacular example of this is the national Sanctuary of John Paul II on the outskirts of Kraków. The mover behind the pilgrimage site it is Stanislaw Dziwisz, Cardinal Wojtyla/ Pope John Paul's former private secretary. He was eventually appointed Cardinal Archbishop of that city.



Central altar with the relic of John Paul II's blood in a glass case at the Sanctuary complex II in Kraków

It now appears that the Polish Catholic devotion to St John Paul II has been elevated to even higher levels of intensity since the Polish bishops conference formal opened the cause for the beatification of Wojtyla's parents, Emilia and Karol Sr. In another move to aggrandise the cult of the late Pope, on October 22, 2019, his feast day, the Polish bishops conference, supported by the emeritus Archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Dziwisz, petitioned Pope Francis to have John Paul II declared a Doctor of the Church and co-patron of Poland.

Other features of Polish Catholic life that troubled a couple of our speakers including the observation that John Paul is still more often quoted by Polish Church leaders as an authority than the teaching of Francis. From the little the Polish bishops have published about Francis' pastoral initiatives and frequent calls for a conversion to a synodal Church, the understandable impression is that they are tone deaf. Francis's insistence on the need for reforms of ecclesiastical institutions, including collegiality and subsidiarity, are routinely ignored by bishops and priests alike.

Some of the speakers expressed the view that, for many bishops and other religious leaders, John Paul II represents the peak divine affirmation and validation of Polish Catholicism and validation of its evangelical mission to the world.



L>R: Zuzanna Radzik, Mizsa Tomaszewski and Mateusz Burzyk

Other disturbing matters that surfaced in the course of the day were deep seated clericalism, the marginalisation of women and the appalling levels populist hate speech and other forms of aggressive behaviour directed against asylum seekers, refugees and LGBTI people. Coincidentally, the ICRN conference was held during the closing weeks of the presidential and senatorial election campaigns. Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Law and Justice Party, publicly vilified LGBTI people frequently in stump speeches even labelling them on one occasion a “threat to Polish identity, to our nation, to its existence and thus to the Polish state.”



L>R: Dawid Gospodarek, Zuzanna Radzik and Katarzyna Sroczyńska

TV journalist and presenter, Katarzyna Sroczyńska, complained about how difficult it is to initiate an informed and dispassionate public conversation going about the massive socio-economic and religious divides in Poland. The problems facing the nation are immense; they are getting worse and are not being deal with in a sane manner. She insisted that Poles, if they genuinely desire social equilibrium, must address the issues that are tearing them apart both politically and religiously. These are mattes as fundamental as the unhealthy partnership between Church and State, the enormous disadvantage experienced by women in most areas of national life, the realities of

gender identification and sexual orientation. Figures now show that 3% of Polish females are lesbian while close to 20% of males identify as gay.

The revelations of the scale of clerical child sexual abuse in 2018 film film “Kler” (Clergy) and the 2019 the documentary “Just don’t tell anyone” have caused uproar among Poles and triggered a devastating loss of confidence in the Catholic hierarchy. Large numbers of young people too are so alienated now that they are choosing not to protest their outrage but rather simply to ignore the Church and walk away from it. Only 14% of the younger generation at present regard the Church as important in their lives. The Polish Catholic hierarchy is tripping over its own stumbling block.

Furthermore, Church authorities are evidently not taking seriously enough the fact that 42% of Polish Catholics are now disengaged from regular faith practice and the bishops are showing few indications that they are energetically seeking answers. A recent survey has shown that 55% of Poles are in favour of optional celibacy and that 36% are in favour of women’s ordination to the priesthood. Any ‘collateral damage’ as a result of the catastrophic CCSA scandals is yet to be measured. According to some of the speakers, genuine, long lasting and systemic reform of the Polish Church is becoming almost too difficult to imagine.

In response to a question about where Polish clergy stood in relation to Pope Francis and his leadership, Dawid Gospodarek said that in his experience Polish priests have distanced themselves from Francis, his teaching especially about social and ecological conversion and are simply passing the time till he dies.

Gospodarek’s colleague, Mizsa Tomaszewski, is similarly convinced that the Polish bishops too are so hopelessly bogged down in their own cultural inertia that they will only change if they are forced to do so by direct Vatican intervention or as a result of massive and concerted public pressure. But there are no doubt bishops and priests who are bucking the trend. There are some signs that the constant appeals by Francis for bishops to accept their responsibilities and the mounting public demands for them to conduct themselves with more transparency and accountability are having a positive effect on a growing some bishops and priests.

Tuesday, September 24

The was devoted to the ongoing projects of the working groups, their progress that has been made and topics related to them. The working group established at the Chicago conference in 2016 tabled the final draft of the *Charter of Rights and Responsibilities*. After discussion about its principles, the Charter was adopted unanimously but with the recommendation that Basilio Buffoni (*Noi siamo Chiesa*, Italy) and David Timbs (*Catholics for Renewal Inc.*, Australia) add a brief preamble to the list of fifteen principles. Brendan Butler (*We are Church*, Ireland) suggested that principle n 40 of *Justice in the World* be quoted at the end of the Charter to add another essential evangelical perspective to the document.

The Charter has now become the intellectual property of ICRN and members have committed to promoting its use in their own local Churches and reform groups. The document has been posted on the ICRN [website](#) and also on that of the [*Association of Catholic Priests*](#), Ireland.

(Fr) Roy Donovan has already arranged for it to be posted on the ACP [website](#). He also intends to put the Charter on the agenda for his own parish council with a view to opening it up for a wider conversation among the members of his local community. He has also intends to table it at a regional meetings of priests and also at the Association's 2019 AGM. Roy Donovan's advocacy is not isolated. Catholic reform group in Ireland have been calling for the establishment of an official Church body or forum where matters of restorative justice and redress will be dealt with.

One of these injustices that is related to scandal of clerical sexual abuse of children, has been the high number of false allegations made about priests many of whom have found themselves isolated and without support or redress. Not surprisingly, there have been a number of suspected or proven [suicides](#) by priests. Roy hopes that the Charter will help his colleagues to understand better and to gain confidence in asserting their rights to due process and justice. An open wound remains in the Irish Church and that is, the ongoing injustice meted out to five Catholic priests who were silenced years ago without any due process. The scandalous injustice suffered by +Bill Morris has never been far from the minds of ICRN members.

Wednesday, September 25.

The day's agenda was taken up primarily with ICRN itself, its purpose, membership and future. Initial discussion focused on its rationale as an international [network](#) of reform groups and what its members value most about it. It was agreed that ICRN should continue as an international forum for not only the sharing of ideas but also for the development of common strategies for Church reform at both local and international levels. The fact that the Synod on the Amazon was about to begin in Rome and two national synods, Australia and Germany, are in the advanced preparation stages, ICRN members have grounds for confidence that Pope Francis' vision of synodality is not just a pipe dream but a reality. ICRN has a small but an important role in helping to promote synodal culture at all levels in the Church.

ICRN's leadership and future viability were discussed at length. Marcus Heil has announced his retirement from the Steering Committee and from most group activities. Helmut Schüller also declined to be re-nominated for a leadership position given the very time consuming programme he has in preparing his parish community for transition into a priest less community. Markus, Helmut and Deborah also raised the matter of future funding and the current financial constraints experienced by ICRN as a result of far less money coming from European Foundations than in previous years. For example there were no funds available this year to subsidise two participants from disadvantaged countries.

The participants voted unanimously for ICRN to continue and to work to break out of a well grounded perception that it is far too Eurocentric in its present membership and focus. With that in mind, Virginia Saldanha offered on behalf of a coalition of Indian reform groups to host the next ICRN conference in Mumbai, India, during a cooler month either at the beginning or towards the end of 2021.

PM session: Jeannine Gramick spoke about her work with *New Ways Ministry* which she co-founded with the late Salvatorian priest Fr Bob Nugent. Both were banned by Cardinal Ratzinger from ministry to gays and lesbians on the grounds that, they have "caused confusion among the Catholic people and have harmed the community of the church." In the course of her address, Jeannine offered valuable information about the difference ways people identify gender/sex wise in the LGBTI community and what challenges they face in their daily lives to experience acceptance and live with dignity through the support of family, friends, social and religious groups. Jeannine spoke about the deeply offensive reference in the Catechism of the Catholic Church to 'intrinsically disordered' orientation and the need for reform groups to advocate for its removal from the CCC. She also talked about other messages, often ambivalent, to LGBTI people coming from various religious denominations and churches especially the fundamentalist evangelicals. She spoke briefly about the scandalous vilification of the LGBTI community by some members of the Polish hierarchy and requested the ICRN meeting draft a letter of concern to the Polish episcopal conference. Her proposal received unanimous support.

Thursday, September 26

The final full day was spent developing ideas proposed by the working groups on "models for a future church." Two in particular have attracted keen attention particularly from participants who have been advocating over decades in their own countries for fundamental shifts in the Church's responses to the critical decline in the number of priests in active ministry and its related effects on parish community life. Firstly, a proposed evangelical solution from south eastern Africa.

Joseph Healey MM has been working for decades in southern Africa to establish small Christian Communities somewhat but not exclusively along the lines the post Vatican II Latin American *Comunidades eclesiales de base*. So far there are around 160,000 of these small local faith communities that are flourishing in nine southern African countries. Healey explains his thinking and theological rationale in his 2018 book, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*.

Secondly, Helmut Schüller's has spent years on a project to form a nuclei of women and men to provide completely lay leadership in his parish. At the centre of Schüller's pastoral plan and catechetical preparation is intense communal study of the Sacrament of Baptism and the variety of gifts that flow from it and with special focus on the key ecclesial ministries of teaching, preaching and community leadership. *Pfarrer Initiative* Austria, with the support of international reform groups, has been leading the

way in this area for well over a decade. Following another two year period of education and ministerial formation, Schüller intends to approach the Archbishop of Vienna to ordain a number of parishioners to Sacramental ministry. The *viri probati* solution being debated at the Synod of the Amazon could prove to decisively important in supporting the appeal.

A final important task led by Jeannine Gramick, Rose-Milavec, Colm Holmes and Basilio Buffoni was the preparation of a press release /statement on scandalous anti LGBTI hostility and toxic rhetoric coming from some of the Polish bishops who clearly endorse the socially conservative *Law and Justice Party* that has just been re elected:

“Law and Justice has governed Poland since 2015 and is popular for its social conservatism and generous social spending. It ran a campaign that highlighted its social programs and vowed to defend traditional Roman Catholic values against an onslaught of gay rights and other liberal ideas from the West.”

The conference unanimously approved the Warsaw Statement on the physical and verbal attacks on LGBT in Poland, Thursday September 26, 2019 the background and text of which can be found at New Ways Ministry, “Polish Archbishop Says LGBTQ Is ‘Great Threat to Freedom’ as Catholics Demand End to Violent Rhetoric”. A letter in English was sent by Colm Holmes on behalf of ICRN to the President of the Polish Catholic bishops conference, Stanisław Gądecki, Archbishop of Poznań.

The original international Catholic reform network of priests associations and lay reform groups began at a meeting in Bregenz, Austria in October 2013. Three of its founding members, Tony Flannery (Ireland), Helmut Schüller (Austria) and Markus Heil (Switzerland), have now stepped down from leadership positions. At the Warsaw meeting a new steering committee members was elected for the next two years. They are:

Deborah Rose-Milavec, *Future Church*, USA

Martha Heizer, *Wir sind Kirche*, Austria

Virginia Saldanha, *Indian Christian Women’s Movement*

Colm Holmes, *We are Church Ireland, IMWAC*

Max Stetter, *Pfarrer Initiative*, Germany

Rastislav Kočan, *ok21*, Slovakia

The Conference wrap up.

The Eucharist was celebrated before the final dinner of the conference followed later by Helmut Schüller's kind launch of Catholics for Renewal's book, *Getting back on Mission. Reforming our Church Together*. He spoke briefly but warmly about the significance of the book, not only for the Australian Catholic situation, but also about its applicability and portability across international Church borders. Helmut was particularly impressed with the attractive power of the cover image, the book's title, subtitle and the long list of credible recommendations made in the book. His remarks were followed David Timbs reading three key paragraphs from Peter Wilkinson's address at the Melbourne launch on September 17. It served as a short but useful explanation of Catholics for Renewal's advocacy, the historical genesis of the book/submission and the documentation produced by the groups since 2010-11. The introductions provided stimulus for an hour of general discussion plus Q & A made even more lively courtesy of the drinks and nibbles generously donated by ICRN colleagues from Austria, Switzerland and Germany.



L>R Helmut Schüller, Deborah Rose-Milavec, David Timbs, Ian McGinnity.

A number of ICRN members who either hosted or were major contributors to past conferences and to the 2019 meeting in Bialobrezegi were presented with complimentary copies of *Getting back on Mission*. They had been kindly donated by Garratt Publishing. Those who received these copies were: Helmut Schüller, Markus Heil, Deborah Rose-Milavec, Peter Križan, Gerry Bechard, Ian McGinnity, Max Stetter, Zuzanna Radzik and the remaining copy to Edson Silva from Brazil. A number of people purchased copies online through Book Depository and others express their intention to do so. Almost all the flyers were snapped up as well. The twenty two participants who remained for the book launch on Thursday night said their farewells on Friday morning, September 27 and began leave for the journey, long or short, back to their respective countries.

Catholics for Renewal are particularly grateful to a generous supporter who made it possible for David Timbs to attend the September 2019 ICRN meeting in Poland.

