

In a “revolutionary” move, Poland to reduce subsidies to the Catholic Church

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In an unprecedented move that is seen by some as "revolutionary", the Polish government is seeking to realign its relationship with the Catholic Church – and not in a way that the Vatican will like.

It seeks to cut some of the enormous cash subsidies that the state gives to the church – starting with a state fund that is used to finance social security contributions for priests. Created under the former communist regime, the fund was ostensibly designed to compensate the Church for the nationalisation of its properties but other denominations and religions also benefit. Last year, the subsidy came to 21.5 million euros, with the Catholic Church the main beneficiary.

Polish feminists recently demonstrated in Warsaw demanding that the Government "cut the umbilical cord" with the Church.

According to various sources, the Catholic Church receives between 300 and 350 million euros a year in state subsidies. The first moves by the centrist government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk affects less than 10 percent of this sum.

To replace it, the government has proposed that from 2013 taxpayers can choose to allocate 0.3% of their income tax bill to a church or religious community of their choice. Authorities predict the new system will generate about 100 million zlotys in social insurance coverage which will apply to the minority Jewish and Islamic as well as Christian clergy in Poland.

But this is not going far enough for the new openly anti-clerical Palikot Movement, which stormed into parliament in last October's elections. The party founded and led by Janusz Palikot, came from nowhere to take third spot in the polls and 40 out of the 460 seats, even though 90 percent of Poles still declare themselves to be Catholic.

Former vodka tycoon Palikot told Agence France Presse: "Just for catechism lessons in schools, the state spends the equivalent of 100 million euros a year. Why don't we use that money to build pre-schools, when it's apparent that we have the biggest nursery school shortage in Europe?"

The change of policy is probably caused by a combination of increasing fiscal pressure and the rise in popularity of the anti-clerical Palikot Party – as well as more liberal influences coming from Western Europe.

None of this pleased Archbishop Jozef Michalik, chairman of the Polish bishops' conference, who thundered: "It was a premeditated attack against the Church. There are those who are seeking to accumulate political capital." The Archbishop of Gdansk, Leszek Slawoj Glodz, added: "The religious war lasted 50 years, during the time of communist Poland. We don't want another one and we are open to dialogue, a substantive discussion."

Stanislaw Obirek, an anthropologist and former Jesuit, commented: "The Church is terrified that eventually the Government will establish the kind of tax system there is in Germany" where people

are obliged to designate a specific religious institution as a beneficiary for a supplementary part of their taxes. "The Church still wants everyone to approach it on their knees," he said.

However, he added, "Society will cease to be just a milch-cow. It will become a partner which is either willing or unwilling to give the Church money. The Church isn't ready for this revolution."

Adam Szostkiewicz, a commentator specialising in religious matters, concluded: "From a financial standpoint, this is negligible, but symbolically it is political dynamite."

In liquidating the fund, he told AFP, the government wants to play the equality card as it imposes reforms on Polish pensions that will affect a range of social groups. The Church, meanwhile, is afraid that the State may end all funding in the future.

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