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Church Leadership and Government Influence
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The recent resignation of Bishop Stanislaw Wielgus of Poland, just before he was to be installed as the Archbishop of Poland, casts a light on problems inherent in church-state relations. It shows once again that when religion and government get involved, the outcome can be bad for the church.

In Poland, the communist-era government acted through the secret police. They pressured individual clergymen to become government informants. The police got the information they wanted (presumably), while the priests were forced into being deceitful and compromising their moral character.

In the post-communist period, such compromises either remain hidden, extending and compounding the moral lapse, or come into the open, where they damage both the individual and the church itself. The resignation of Bishop Wielgus may be an extreme case, but it was followed within a day by the resignation of the rector of Krakow's historic Wawel Cathedral, for the same reason.

From the little information we have, it seems that the communist-era secret police targeted church leaders. While the police recruited informants from all walks of life, among the Catholic Church, they sought out the best and the brightest priests.

Wielgus, a young university professor, had to sign a form agreeing to inform when he became prominent enough to travel to academic meetings outside Poland. He was not alone; it is estimated that at least 10 percent of Polish priests became informants during this time. Thus, the generation now in church leadership positions includes those who were targeted by the communist government and compromised. This forced government cooperation may have decapitated the Polish Catholic church.

The Polish church may be in for some difficult times over the next few years. There are predictions that lay church members will have a crisis of faith in their leaders. But I predict that it will be overcome, at least in the long run. The Christian church has faced similar leadership difficulties before and has managed to survive and ultimately grow stronger.

Back in the third century A.D., before Christianity organized itself into a single institution that spanned the Roman Empire, Christians occasionally would find themselves the object of Roman persecution. The persecution under Emperor Decius in 250 was the first to disrupt the link between Christian leaders and the wider membership. He

ordered all Roman citizens to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods and to sign statements to that effect. Those who did not would be killed. After the execution of a number of Christians who refused, it became clear that this edict was being enforced. Afraid for their lives, hundreds, if not thousands, of prominent Christians forswore their baptism by sacrificing or by signing the statement.

When the persecution ended, Christianity faced the problem of what to do with those who had sacrificed to pagan gods but who now wanted to continue their lives as Christians. More pressing were those who wanted to continue in their roles as priests and bishops. Given the vast numbers of church leaders who had apostatized, the persecution had effectively decapitated the church.

Across the empire, the lay people had different reactions. Some were forgiving and willing to let the leaders resume their positions, while others were outraged and wanted nothing to do with the apostate clergymen.

Two bishops of the time, neither apostates, took opposite positions. Bishop Stephen of Rome allowed the church leaders to resume their positions after due contrition and penance, while Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (in North Africa) banned the apostates from returning to their positions as clergy.

Different local churches sided with different bishops. The congregations debated and argued, divided and split, over this question. It was a matter not just of morality, but of salvation -- who could administer the mass and effect the forgiveness of sins? The argument was so strong in Spain that when the church leadership followed Stephen's teaching and retained their positions, the people went over his head to Cyprian who instructed the affected bishops and priests to step down.

While history does not record the end results of this dispute, it is clear that Christianity got through the crisis. Less than a century later, Christianity was being promoted by Emperor Constantine and his successors as the Empire's preferred religion, and the Bishop of Rome was beginning to take on the authority that would make him Pope.

So, to make a historical comparison, although the Polish church is in a period of crisis over the purity of its leadership, they will get through this and become stronger in the long run. Indeed, since being an informant is religiously much less serious than apostasy, I expect that the Polish leadership crisis will take much less time to resolve than the one after the Decian Persecution.