

The Attitudes of High School Graduates Towards the Catholic Church in Poland: A Catechetical and Pastoral Study

This dissertation undertakes a comprehensive analysis of ecclesial attitudes among Polish high school graduates attending general secondary schools. Its primary aim was to determine the extent to which final-year students identify with the Catholic Church and to formulate specific catechetical and pastoral recommendations that could foster a more positive relationship with the Church. The author notes that existing conceptualizations of “religious attitude” often fail to account precisely for an individual's stance toward the Church as a community. Consequently, the study introduces and defines the term “ecclesial attitude” as a relatively stable disposition toward the ecclesial community, comprising three components: cognitive (knowledge and beliefs), emotional (feelings and evaluations), and behavioral (practices and actions).

The research was conducted in three phases. The first phase involved a thorough analysis of the core *Curriculum for Catholic religious education* and the *Program of Roman Catholic instruction* implemented in Poland since 2018. The focus was placed on content related to the nature of the Church, its mission, the justification of its authority, and the call to active participation in the community. These curricular elements were examined in relation to the three components of ecclesial attitude to assess how effectively school-based religious education supports the formation of ecclesial knowledge, convictions, and practices.

In the second phase, the author developed a validated, original survey instrument designed to measure ecclesial attitudes across their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The questionnaire was divided into thematic blocks assessing knowledge about the Church and its teachings, the degree of doctrinal acceptance and emotional disposition toward the Church, and engagement in religious practices and parish life. In the third phase, the survey was administered to a representative sample of 1,509 high school graduates across Poland, constituting approximately 0.5% of the 2022/2023 graduating cohort.

The quantitative results yielded several unexpected findings. Only 29.2% of respondents demonstrated a very low level of ecclesial knowledge, challenging the widespread assumption of religious ignorance among youth. The majority claimed familiarity with basic doctrinal issues, albeit at varying levels of depth. In the domain of conviction, the anticipated widespread rejection of Church teaching did not materialize—moderately positive or neutral attitudes predominated, while only a small fraction of participants explicitly rejected the faith. The weakest component proved to be behavioral: as many as 62.2% of respondents reported infrequent or no participation in religious practices, confirming a low level of engagement in parish life.

A multidimensional analysis allowed the identification of three primary types of ecclesial attitudes: negative (1.99% of respondents), marked by low knowledge, negative emotional stance,

and lack of engagement; neutral (2.12%), characterized by moderate knowledge, ambivalent emotions, and occasional participation in religious life; and positive (4.17%), distinguished by high levels of knowledge, regular religious practice, and a strong sense of community belonging. The group exhibiting a positive attitude outnumbered the negative group by a ratio of 2.1:1, decisively challenging the hypothesis of a predominantly negative youth disposition toward the Church. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that regular religious practice within the family strongly correlates with both religious knowledge and engagement. A statistically significant relationship was also found between the emotional and behavioral components: positive religious experiences were associated with higher communal involvement.

The qualitative portion of the study, based on an analysis of open-ended responses from selected participants, provided valuable insight into the motivations and obstacles influencing faith development. Students shared authentic spiritual testimonies alongside reflections shaped by media narratives, which were often critical of the Church. These responses informed a set of targeted pastoral and catechetical recommendations. First, it is recommended to enhance the pre-evangelization phase by systematically training catechists, clergy, and lay leaders in empathetic accompaniment of youth and the effective use of digital tools for witnessing faith. Second, sacramental catechesis at the parish level should be flexible and adapted to the actual dispositions of candidates, both in terms of preparation timelines and instructional methods. It is also crucial to foster small formation groups led by competent leaders who should receive ongoing support, especially in the areas of digital and interpersonal communication skills.

The dissertation successfully achieved its goal of diagnosing the religious attitudes of Generation Z and developing practical tools to support young people in their journey toward Christian maturity. It also identified directions for future research, such as comparing the attitudes of Generations Z and Alpha, evaluating the effectiveness of online pastoral initiatives, analyzing the impact of parish environments on youth religious formation, and monitoring the consequences of changes in school-based religious education. Implementing these research projects will deepen the understanding of the processes shaping religious attitudes and enhance catechetical and pastoral strategies in an increasingly dynamic social context.

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