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People attend Mass at the Jasna Gora Monastery, Poland's most revered Catholic shrine, in Czestochowa, Poland, Sept. 24. An increasing number of Poles appear to be questioning their relationship with the Catholic Church, and some cite its closeness to the government as a key reason. (AP/Michal Dyjuk)

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CZESTOCHOWA, Poland — October 16, 2023

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Dominika Gala grew up going to Mass with her grandmother and attending Catholic school in Warsaw. After her grandmother's death in 2010, she began to drift away from the church.

A decade later, when the Catholic leadership backed a near-total abortion ban in Poland, Gala made her fervent disagreement clear.

She formally left the church in October 2020, just weeks after Poland's top court closed a major loophole in the country's [abortion laws](#) that were already among the strictest in Europe. She has since helped her mother and several friends leave, and now helps lead a civic initiative to limit religion's role in public life.

"There's a strong link between the church and the bad things happening in Polish politics," Gala, now an atheist, told The Associated Press.

As the Law and Justice government sought an unprecedented third consecutive term in the Oct. 15 parliamentary election, the conservative, nationalist ruling party sought to bolster its image as a defender of Christian values and traditional morality. Yet many Poles are questioning their relationship with the Catholic Church, and some cite its closeness to the government as a key reason.



Dominika Gala poses for a picture at her home in Warsaw, Poland, Oct. 6. After her grandmother's death in 2010, Gala began to drift away from the church. A decade later, when the Catholic leadership backed a near-total abortion ban in Poland, Gala made her fervent disagreement clear. (AP/Michal Dyjuk)

For Gala, the breaking point was the abortion ruling but she is also put off by Law and Justice's harsh anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. She feels the alliance between the church and party has led to increased religious encroachment into Poles' daily activities.

"The church should stay within the church, where it should gather its faithful and build community. It shouldn't be in schools, at the openings of swimming pools, roads and shopping malls," she said.

Poles, following a path taken by some other traditionally Catholic nations, are becoming increasingly secular, accelerated by disgust over clerical abuse scandals that have rocked the Polish Catholic Church in recent years.

About 70% of Poles included in the 2021 census identified as Catholic, down from 87% a decade earlier, according to [data](#) released last month by Poland's Central

Statistical Office. Other recent studies say younger generations in particular are turning away from religion.



The Jasna Gora Monastery in Czestochowa, Poland, pictured on Sept. 23, is Poland's most revered Catholic shrine. (AP/Michal Dyjuk)

Law and Justice's tenure has been marked by bitter clashes with the European Union over whether some of the party's steps have weakened democracy. Yet some church leaders still praise the party's policies.

When Law and Justice politicians lashed out at the [LGBTQ+ rights movement](#), Archbishop Marek Jedraszewski of Krakow also derided the activists as a "rainbow plague" in a 2019 sermon at St. Mary's Basilica, Krakow's most famous church.

Some have accused the church of hypocrisy following the recent police investigation of a priest accused of organizing a gay sex party at his apartment in Dabrowa Gornicza, in southwestern Poland.

That news has reverberated in the historic cathedral city of Czestochowa, an hour's drive north from Dabrowa Gornicza. It is home to a revered monastery and a famed Virgin Mary image that draw more than 1 million pilgrims annually.

Tatiana Niedbal, a community activist from Czestochowa, cited the accusation against the priest as evidence of the church's double standards.

"Priests try to tell me how to live, all the while doing such things themselves. I can scarcely imagine the feelings of people who have been going to this priest for confession," she said.

Poles critical of the government see Czestochowa as a symbol of how entrenched the church is in right-wing politics. Law and Justice leaders have joined the pilgrims flocking to Jasna Gora monastery to pay respects to its Black Madonna icon, sometimes using the trips to make political addresses.



Political campaign posters hang on a building in Czestochowa, Poland, Tuesday, Oct. 3, ahead of the country's Oct. 15 parliamentary election (AP/Michal Dyjuk)

The party faced criticism after its powerful leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, slammed the political opposition in a bitter speech at Jasna Gora in July. Kaczynski, during a pilgrimage organized by an ultraconservative radio station, accused them of trying to "destroy the Polish nation."

University student Patrycja Kalecinska, 21, of Czestochowa, said the church "has had a disastrous impact on politics." Her two friends resting on a bench in the city's main square nodded in agreement.

"Not everyone is a Catholic, and the Catholic faith should not be an influence on all citizens," said Kalecinska, one of the young adults distancing themselves from the church.

A 2021 study by leading Polish pollster CBOS suggests the number of regularly practicing Catholics ages 18-25 fell by more than half in the previous six years.

'There's a strong link between the church and the bad things happening in Polish politics.'

—Dominika Gala

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Since Poland's transition from Communism to democracy in 1989, successive governments have offered the church state subsidies, tax breaks and a privileged status in the country's cultural life. Yet on a local level, a quiet rebellion has been brewing in Czestochowa.

Since 2010, the city has had a left-wing mayor, Krzysztof Matyjaszczyk, who backs a clear separation between church and state. The secular left also dominated Czestochowa's city council for much of the past 30 years.

Zdzislaw Wolski, a doctor and left-wing lawmaker running for reelection, said he expected the "close alliance" between the church and Law and Justice government to be "a very unfavorable course of action for the church in the long run."

Acts of "apostasy," or formally quitting the church as Gala did, are on the rise in Poland. A Facebook group "Apostasy 2020," which advises members on their legal rights and church procedures, has over 22,000 subscribers; other groups seek to help parents whose children face pressure to attend religion lessons in public schools.

Several Poles who formally left the church told the AP that what they considered "hypocrisy" and closeness to the government were factors in their decision.



Mateusz Chudzicki, 24, poses for a picture in Pabianice, Poland, Sept. 28. Chudzicki and several other Poles who formally left the church told the AP that what they considered "hypocrisy" and closeness to the government were factors in their decision. (AP/Michal Dyjuk)

Mateusz Chudzicki, 24, who lives near the city of Lodz in central Poland, cited sex abuse scandals as a major reason for leaving. Dramatic clerical abuse revelations in a 2019 documentary, "Tell No One" by Tomasz and Marek Sekielski, rattled Poles with its shocking stories of repeat offenders and a failure to stop them.

"I'm not the kind of fanatically anti-clerical person who thinks the church is exclusively evil," he said. "But I think the church in Poland needs such a shock."

Chudzicki added that he was "deeply religious" for much of his youth, relishing his religion lessons at school and attending church often with his parents.

As he left home, he began questioning the faith, eventually became an atheist and ultimately quit the church because of his growing distrust of the institution.



A woman walks on her knees at the Jasna Gora Monastery, Poland's most revered Catholic shrine, in Czestochowa, Poland, Sept. 23. (AP/Michal Dyjuk)

The Catholic Church has long inspired respect and devotion in Poland, with many seeing it as a repository of Polish culture and traditions during periods of foreign domination — from the late 18th century, when Poland's territory was gobbled up by three expansionist neighbors for over 120 years, until the Communist era.

According to Wojciech Klimski, a sociologist from Warsaw's Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, mass secularization in Poland was long held at bay by

memories of the persecution of the church under Communism and the church's support then for dissidents.

For older Poles, Klimski said, the late Polish-born Pope John Paul II and his contributions to ending Communism were crucial. He said younger generations were more likely to focus on the church's current actions.

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Dominican Fr. Maciej Biskup, a friar who heads a monastery in Lodz, said the Polish church needs to learn how to dialogue with broader society.

He cited "muted or inappropriate" responses from church leaders to the government's actions, such as its anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and attempts to influence the judiciary, as well as the tendency of priests and bishops to "sermonize rather than listen," as key reasons why more Poles are disinterested.

"They may not be turning away from spirituality or a search for God, but from an institution that many see as having lost its credibility," he said.

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