

Catholicising Reproduction, Reproducing Catholicism: Activist Practices and Intimate Negotiations in Poland, 1930 – Present

What was the reaction of Catholics in Poland regarding the abortion legislation from 1956? What did the priests and bishops say in sermons on contraception in the 1930s and in state-socialist Poland? What exactly is “natural family planning” and when it started to be propagated among Polish Catholics? Does giving birth “in a natural way” mean the same as giving birth “in a Catholic way”? We are looking for answers to these questions, because our goal is to investigate the relationship between Catholicism and reproduction in Poland from the 1930s to the present. Using methods and accomplishments of cultural anthropology (especially anthropology of religion and sex), socio-cultural history and history of medicine, we want to learn about and understand both Catholic activism regarding reproductive issues and intimate practices of Polish Catholics in this sphere of life.

We are primarily interested in three areas of Catholic reproductive activism and intimate practices: contraception, abortion, and childbirth. Thanks to archival research and analysis of press and publicity materials, participant observation, in-depth interviews and oral history we will examine ebbs and flows in Catholic hierarchy and followers responses to these crucial areas of social and private life. We will be interested in finding differences and similarities between the various groups of Catholic activists and worshippers regarding i.e. contraception. We will also try to find out what was the impact of Catholic reproductive activism on legislative changes initiated in Poland after 1989.

The relationship between Catholicism and reproduction, although crucial for understanding the practices and activities of Polish society in the past and today, has not been so far systematically and deeply studied either from an anthropological or historical perspective. Few researchers on these topics adopted a bottom-up perspective, which is one of the main assumptions of our project. There are many unverified beliefs as well as generalizations and unsubstantiated judgments on the influence of the Catholic Church on the reproductive practices of Poles. Little is known about the influence of the Church and Catholic religious doctrine on the actual intimate practices of Poles both in the past and today. A completely unexplored subject is the Catholic activism in the sphere of the so-called “natural birth” that has been developing since the 1970s. It is also local, grass-root anti-abortion activism that requires a thorough study, also in its international dimensions and feasible foreign inspirations.

We expect that our research will contribute to a more comprehensive and fuller understanding of the relationship between Catholicism and reproduction in Poland during the past ninety years, allowing us to trace contradictions, continuities and change in the Catholic reproductive activism and intimate practices of Polish Catholics in this sphere. Another result of the project will be the incorporation of new, rarely present topics in the fields of cultural anthropology and social and cultural history. The tangible results of the project will also include scholarly articles, a website and dissemination of the findings to both the scientific community as well as a wider public.