

MONASTIC POLITICS: POWER AND STATUS IN RELIGIOUS ORDERS

Evidence from Polish monastic institutions

Religious orders and their organizational units – monasteries – have long been in the focus of interest of historians of religion and sociologists, who saw them as pioneers of rational, goal-oriented organization (Weber) or examples of total institutions (Goffman). It is, however, rarely noticed – and even less frequently becomes the subject of scientific inquiry – that monastic institutions constitute a fascinating, very complex political microsystem. The power of superiors is theocratic (that is, mandated by God, as they and their subordinate believe) and democratic – they are elected by the community. They control every aspect of the monks' and nuns' life, and yet they are constrained by monastic rules, canon law and tradition, and they share power with collegial bodies (chapters, councils). The religious, bound by the vow of obedience, should submit to their will unconditionally, but, in reality, the level of such submission and the extent to which members participate in deciding about community's affairs, vary considerably.

The goal of the project is to study this political complexity of orders and monasteries, and, in particular, to address the following questions: a) What is the real distribution of power in monastic institutions (as opposed to what monastic rules, Church law etc. postulate)? b) How do superiors justify their power and the rank-and-file members interpret and rationalize their subordination? c) How do various electoral formulas affect the behavior of voters (the members) and the candidates; are there instances of electioneering? d) What are the mechanisms superiors use in exercising their power, what means do they use to discipline their subordinate? e) What are the factors of status – the place in the monastic hierarchy – and how does this status position translate to power? f) How are monastic power relations influenced by the Church on the local (bishops) and central (Vatican) levels?

To answer these questions, the research team will collect data from various types of published and unpublished sources, as well as from individual, in-depth interview with nuns and monks (around 1400 interviews altogether) and observations in Catholic monasteries of various kinds (contemplative and active, more or less cloistered etc.) in Poland. The dataset thus collected will then be analyzed qualitatively, and, to a lesser extent, quantitatively, with the use of professional data-analysis software. This will allow to address the issues of institutional regime, power-sharing mechanisms, and legitimation of power, as well as to study the relationship between indicators of power and status and various factors that affect them, such as seniority in the order, gender, priestly ordination or lack thereof (in male orders), the level of ascetic practices etc.

The results of this three-year project will be presented in the form of articles in high-impact scientific journals, and papers at international conferences. Due to an exceptionally large sample and novel use of political science theories to study a small political system, the project should expand our understanding of mechanisms of political power not only in religious orders, but also in other “total” organizations, both religious and secular.