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Agnieszka Pasieka*

Vienna University

WEAPONS OF THE WEAK OR WEAK WEAPONS? WOMEN, PRIESTS, AND POWER NEGOTIATIONS IN ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISHES IN RURAL POLAND[1]

Drawing on James Scott's works on "everyday resistance" and "weapons of the weak", this article inquires whether Roman Catholic women's gossip and jokes about priests may lead to a redefinition of priest-parishioners' relations. Using ethnographic material collected during field research in rural Poland, the article demonstrates the ambivalent nature of anticlerical jokes and rumours, which, rather than constituting a tool of change, reaffirm the existing order. In putting forward this argument, the article critically engages with Scott's theory and reflects on the problematic role of researchers in presenting the issue of agency and resistance. The analyzed case-study from the Polish countryside constitutes a point of departure for addressing a broader context of church-state relations and the situation of women in the Catholic Church in Poland.

Keywords: women, Catholicism, priests, gossip, jokes, resistance and domination

On a foggy autumn morning, I am sitting in Jana's kitchen, drinking coffee and eating freshly made pancakes. Jana lives in a small, remote village near the Slovakian border – remote even by the standards of the entire, rather peripheral rural district which I have chosen as the object of my ethnographic study[2]. There are three of us chatting: me, my elderly host, who jokes that I might not see her again, and her social caregiver, Stefa, an energetic woman in her early forties, who laughs when she hears this and tells the old lady: "You will chase Death away when he comes to take you." Upon hearing it, Jana smiles roguishly and says how much she appreciates the caregiver's visits. While Stefa cleans the house, from time to time looking out through the window, Jana recalls the "good old times" and complains about

* Corresponding author: Agnieszka Pasieka, Institute for East European History, University of Vienna, Spitalgasse 2, Hof 3, 1090 Wien; e-mail: aga.pasieka@gmail.com.

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[2] I conducted my yearlong fieldwork in Southern Poland, in a rural district I anonymized as Rozstaje. The district is composed of over a dozen villages and inhabited by around 6,500 people.

the new priest who is only interested in making money. At some point, a car stops next to the neighboring house and Stefa comments: "Strange… usually Marta passes here 5 minutes earlier, why is she here so late… maybe she went to the shop, there might be a sale, I need to check it out… She is speaking on the phone, yes, she does this every morning because she has to report to her husband – he is soooo jealous – that she has taken the children to school, and she will be back home, she has just dropped in on Ala for a coffee. But wait… why is she speaking on the phone at 8:05? She only has 'free minutes' with her husband till 8 o'clock. Is she calling somebody else…? Well, Ala will definitely tell me about it later".

In her ethnography of a Spanish village from mid-1970s, Susan Harding notices that "a village is created by women's talk" (Harding 1975). In my own ethnographic fieldwork, I found this observation to be valid also in the context of 21st century rural Poland. Despite the villagers' laments over declining sociability and devastating impact of "all those mobiles and all those internets" [original quote], female networks of communication remain central to rural life. Not only is all sorts of information spread through informal channels, but key decisions are also made through such networks. Although my introductory description of "kitchen talk" seems to depict mere gossiping, in course of my study I could observe that female networks of communication easily translate into networks of help and support (a few months later, when Jana became very ill, it was a big help to know that Marta would drive to her house and could possibly take her to the doctor). Kitchens, invariably female domains, provide room for confidences and advices, familiarity and intimacy, and for expressing what could not be easily expressed beyond its walls.

What is particularly important about female interactions in the area studied is the fact that Rozstaje is not only a peripheral district in which informal networks of support and cooperation matter tremendously, but that it is also a religiously diverse realm. To illustrate this point, I shall add that Jana is Greek Catholic, Stefa is Roman Catholic, Ala is Orthodox, and Marta is a Jehovah's Witness. The presence of non-Catholic communities, which make up about 30% of the local population, makes the area quite exceptional in the predominantly Roman Catholic Polish context. Although I focus here mostly on the Roman Catholic communities, the presence of "religious others" deserves attention in the context of herein discussed issues. As I demonstrated elsewhere (Pasieka 2015a), women's networks of communication often work beyond religious divisions and contribute to the village cohesion, not infrequently challenging the power of the authorities – whether religious or secular – which try to divide the inhabitants. Thanks to their activities in the local public sphere, female villagers are perceived and perceive themselves as key local social actors (Pasieka 2013). In course of numerous meetings with local women I often heard that "the man may be the head but the woman is the neck and she can turn the head as she wants to".

So far, so good: female communication is a positive tool, important for local social life and able to challenge the power of male leaders. Women create a warm and secure sphere and their friendship and cooperation is a remedy for various social troubles. Yet the opening story of this article might have been written in quite a different manner, for example like this:

On a foggy autumn morning, Marta is driving back home after fulfilling her daily duty: bringing her grandchild to school. Fifty-year-old Marta lives with her family in a remote village near the Slovakian border. Hers is the only family in the village that belongs to the Jehovah's

Witnesses community and every Friday and Sunday Marta and her relatives go to the district center for a religious service. Driving slowly on the hard-paved road, Marta is passing by the run-down dwelling of Jana. She can spot through the window the figure of social caregiver Stefa, whom she likes yet prefers to avoid, as she is tired of stories about the "adventurous" Roman Catholic priest from Stefa's parish. Usually, though, she stops at her neighbor's house, at Ala's. Should she do it today, too? Ala is a dear friend but she likes talking. She will ask Marta, "in passim", how is Marta's son doing and who is that new pretty girl who hangs out regularly at Marta's house? Isn't she, "by the way," Roman Catholic? Marta's daughter-in-law left her son and their small child and moved abroad to start a new life with another man and his children. The rumor has it Marta's son was a violent drinker, and thus he deserved to be left. "Those Jehovah's Witnesses, supposedly such goody-goody people!" people would remark with sarcasm. Every time Marta's ex-daughter-in-law showed up in town or her son went out with a new girlfriend, people would ask questions, and comment, and laugh.

The aforementioned "kitchen," which evokes a cozy sphere of honest friendly talks, may well be a place where the webs of social control are strengthened, as concern for others' well-being, gossiping, and intrusive prying are often tightly woven. In this article, I focus on diverse "kitchen stories" regarding priest-parishioners' relations in order to problematize their perception as "backstage talk". Rather than viewing them simply as "subversive to official truths" (Lomnitz 2006: 157), I wish to expose the double-edged character of "off-stage voices" and demonstrate that they may also reinforce the "official truths". The contestation of the knowledge or authority of religious leaders through rumors and jokes may seem a powerful weapon for the parishioners, but may ultimately be not only the "weapon of the weak", to quote a well-known formulation of James Scott (1985), but also a *weak* weapon, which hinders rather than enhances social transformation. Referring to the anthropological discussion on the problematic understandings of the notion of "resistance" and following the trail blazed by scholars such as Sherry Ortner and Lila Abu-Lughod, I intend to demonstrate that "dominant" and "subaltern" strategies should be viewed as at times complementary and similar.

I shall pay attention to two such strategies of everyday talk: jokes and gossip. I will do so by presenting two kinds of stories: one that examines skillful use of rumors and jokes in re-defining priest-parishioner relations and one that exposes the ambiguous role of gossip in an ill-famed parish. But first I will explain why I find it important to focus on women's relations with religious authorities and women's everyday talk.

JOKING, RUMORMONGERING, AND THE PROBLEM OF RESISTANCE

Women's position in the Catholic Church may be characterized by various adjectives. It may be described as "precarious" since women are excluded from performing both key functions and many lower-level ones. Women's position may be also defined as "paradoxical," given that religious communities tend to be composed predominantly of women but governed by men. It may be also portrayed as "mirroring" women's position in the society at large, since in many, if not in most dimensions of social life, women are still more or less openly discriminated against. It can be also described as "vague" if we consider that many aspects

of women's role in Church are open to interpretation and leave room for (more) female presence.

Numerous scholars have inquired how female Catholics respond to this ambiguity, discussing possible contexts of female authority within male-dominated religious institutions and the potential of religion for women's empowerment – by preventing violence (Bax 1993), elaborating religious knowledge (Gemzöe 2000), and using religious teaching and activism to re-define women's role in public (Flinn 2010) and private spheres (Drogus 1997). A wealth of examples can also be found in contributions on the Orthodox Church (e.g. Weaver 2011) and Evangelical Christianity (e.g. Eriksen 2014). Still, in acknowledging the importance of women in shaping the religious sphere, anthropologists emphasize that women's role is always a negotiated and an acquired one, the result of their struggle for recognition within the male-dominated systems.

In what follows, I would like to discuss one such negotiation, namely the ways in which Roman Catholic women talk about priests and how this relates to power relations. I ask: does rumormongering about clergymen's behavior by female parishioners contest the limits of priests' authority?[3] At first sight, such a way of negotiating one's role appears much more limited and less far-reaching than women's pursuits described above. And it appears so at second and third sight as well. For while the comparative insights constitute an inspiration for our own work, they also shed light on the particularities of Poland. Although anthropologists have studied many "traditionally" Catholic societies, in few places is the Church as powerful and omnipresent, and competition on the local "religious market" as scarce as in Poland. Polish women, whether they act in, for or against the Church, face a locally and nationally important player: a religious, social and political institution, deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural-political landscape. The Church's strong position, and by extension that of priests, plays a vital role in demarcating women's sphere of actions. With this observation in mind, let us now turn into the question of what kind of actions are accounted for by gossip and jokes.

As the limited scope of this paper cannot do justice to the rich literature on jokes and gossip, I limit myself to presenting a key point. In presenting interactions with and among female villagers, I draw on the literature that has shown the role of jokes in creating solidarity and building intimacy, as well as in questioning authority and inverting existing hierarchies of social life (e.g. Crawford 2003; Douglas 1968; Shifman and Katz 2005). In so doing, I address the ambiguity of jokes about priests, used by women to mock clergymen's weaknesses and stress their own role in church. Analogously, I inquire into different ways gossip and rumors[4] operate, tackling both their contribution to group cohesion and the reinforcement of norms (Gluckman 1963) and their possible disintegrative effects (Paine 1967). In highlighting the specificities of the structure of rumors – their dynamic character, openness to modifications, and collective construction – I consider particularly important the transition from analyzing rumors as "a deviation from truth" to their understanding as "an effort to arrive at a consensus

[3] I am far from claiming that men do not gossip. My focus on women's everyday talk results from the simple fact I was interested in finding out how *they* tackle the problem of discrimination within the Church's structures.

[4] I treat the two notions as synonymous. For a discussion on different understandings and functions of rumors and gossips, see: Gluckman 1963; Stewart and Strathern 2004.

of opinion about what is the truth" (Stewart and Strathern 2004: 44). Drawing on these ideas, I ask if is there anything specific about women joking and gossiping about religious authority and, provided there is, how do we explain this phenomenon without falling into a stereotypical view of "female prattle"? According to anthropologists studying peasant communities, the specificity of women's communication results from division of labor in rural realms and women's role in connecting and mediating between domestic and public spheres (Martin 1990; Rogers 1975). However, gossip is very frequently described as "women's talk", not as a characteristic of female communication but as a way of contrasting the mainstream with subsidiary discourse and presenting gossip as a tool of expression of discriminated-against groups (Sampson 1984; Turner 1993). Jokes too are considered vehicles for expressing criticism and communicating what is impossible to articulate openly and directly (Handelman 1974; Oring 2004), and are often the only means for coping with oppression (Bryant 2006). Consequently, an understanding of rumors and jokes as a tool used in a situation of unequal power relations leads us to the discussion of "resistance."

I refer here to influential works by James Scott (1985, 1990) in which, exploring "everyday forms or resistance" and "weapons of the weak", he calls for more scholarly attention to different discursive forms – such as mockery, rumors, jokes, and folktales – which are expressed by dominated people when they are out of sight, and which represent critiques of power. Such "hidden transcripts", as he defines them, have the potential to "confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript", that is in "the self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen" (Scott 1990: 4–5, 18). Although those hidden discourses have the potential to come "on stage" and make claims, in Scott's view, "many, perhaps most, hidden transcripts remain just that: hidden from the public view and never 'enacted"' (Scott 1990: 16). Scott investigates the conditions which allow elements of the hidden transcript to "storm the stage" and the constantly negotiated frontier between the public sphere and the hidden transcripts in manifold contexts, such as American black history, serfdom in Russia, the caste system in India, or the Solidarity movement (Scott 1990). The richness of examples, combined with applicable theoretical concepts and thought-provoking insights about power, have made Scott's work extremely popular and highly referred to. Nonetheless, his work has also received harsh criticism, and referring to some of his commentators is extremely relevant for matters described herein.

First, Scott tends to reify the distinction between "the dominant" and "the subaltern", thereby neglecting the question of what their discourses and practices have in common as well as assuming a necessarily conflictual relation between the two (Ortner 1995; Gal 1995). Consequently, "alternative stories," "voices of subordinates" and "narratives of oppression" stand for the true, good, innocent voices, which, in turn, easily leads to idealization and romanticization of dominated groups' practices (Abu-Lughod 1990). Gossip, mockery, and derision often seem far from harmless. Yet in fact they easily turn against those who use such means: resulting in high levels of social control and demanding compliance, they operate like the *dominant* strategies. Second, an over-simplified picture of the powerholders and the powerless makes the social order appear to be bi-polar, as if it was not made of Vmultiple apexes and multiple, cross-cutting, and conflicting lines and axes of domination" (Leeb and Roseberry 1992: 134) and as if social actors did not enter into diverse, horizontal

and hierarchical relations. What his conception fails to provide is a complex view of societal relations which would do justice to the problem of "hierarchy" by recognizing that social order involves, in fact, multiple – and multifarious – "hierarchies". Third, although many critics appreciate the spatial and temporary span of Scott's works (e.g. Kelley 1992), others point out that the overly heterogeneous material hinders, instead of enhancing, comparison. In her pointed critique, Susan Gal (1995) asks if it is right to assume (as Scott does) that linguistic tropes such as irony and ambiguity have a universal meaning and *always* and *everywhere* function as subversion or resistance. Her answer is obviously negative, as she reminds us that "linguistic forms, practices, and their effects – whether dominating, resistant, or hegemonic – […] [are] constructed and mediated by linguistic ideologies that vary across space and history" (1995: 409). There is no universal relation between power and linguistic forms, Gal underlines. With these critical remarks in mind, I shall proceed now with my discussion on use of gossip and jokes in Rozstaje – and their highly contextual meaning and function.[5]

RUMORS AND JOKES IN ACTION[6]

The first story relates to the Christmas Eve I spent with the family of Melania, an eighty-year-old widow who lives in one of the few exclusively Roman Catholic villages of the Rozstaje district. The village's 200 inhabitants belong to the same parish church and proudly take care of it, including attending to the priest. During my visits[7] in the village, the middle-aged priest often mentioned visits to various parishioners and I also saw female parishioners and children bringing him eggs, poultry and bread. Being one of the priest's closest neighbors, on the occasion of my visits Melania also often invited him for a coffee and "gossip" (*ploteczki*).

As a matter of fact, all our meetings involved gossiping. The moment she saw me approaching her home, Melania would start making coffee. We would sit on the balcony or near the kitchen window; in one way or another, the old lady was able to observe and greet all the people who were passing by and give me an update on everyone's news. Given her sharp tongue and disposition to story-telling, all the news would be transformed into long and colorful accounts. Melania would comment at length on the sermon from last Sunday or the way her neighbor was dressed during the service. Although very much attached to the Church, Melania would never hesitate to protest if an action by the local priest or a decision of the Church's hierarchy was in conflict with her own understanding of faith. For instance, the Church's objection to in vitro treatment was unacceptable to her, as what she values most is to be a parent. Melania claims that everyone deserves to achieve this and should be supported by the state. She stresses that it is Mary and Joseph who show how important the family is.

Thanks to my close contact with Melania, I was invited to spend Christmas Eve with her family. Both the festive dinner and the following midnight mass proved to be yet another opportunity to observe the specificity of local networks. From the very beginning of the

[5] Please, see also the forthcoming reader *Opór i dominacja* (Pasieka and Zielińska 2016).

[6] Parts of this section have been published in: Pasieka 2011; 2015b.

[7] I conducted my research in several different villages and moved frequently between them.

evening I found that the adult members of the family – Melania, her son and daughter-in-law – were a bit upset. Only after we had finished eating and the five children had gone to the other room to watch TV did the hosts open a bottle of wine and Melania start to say what was on her mind. The reason for my hosts' bad mood lay in the fact that the priest had refused their invitation to Christmas dinner and decided to spend the evening with his lover, who, according to Melania, lived in a village about 40 kilometers from the parish. Obviously, the priest did not tell her his plans, but my hosts took it for granted that not spending Christmas Eve in the village meant that he celebrated it with his lover. They also claimed that it was unlikely that he would go to his hometown, as it was too far away and he would not manage to come back for the midnight mass. What surprised me was not only that they provided the same explanation for the priest's absence, but also that a priest having a lover was not seen as something exceptional. As Melania's neighbour told me later, "In the history of this parish we haven't had a priest who didn't have a lover. Actually, there was even a lover who was so rooted in the parish that she decided to remain here after the priest had left and immediately 'made friends' with the new one…" However, according to the inhabitants, it is one thing to have a lover and another to reject an invitation from parishioners to spend Christmas Eve with them. The priest went too far, lacking respect for the inhabitants and violating the priest-parishioner relationship (which, as I observed during my fieldwork, could be defined as a rule of not standing in each other's way, provided both sides respect the rule). The way in which the reasons for the priest's absence were explained takes us back to remarks on gossip as a process through which a certain version of the facts is established (Stewart and Strathern 2004). However, as I demonstrate below, what counts even more is the potential of a rumor to become a tool for expressing disapproval and stressing binding norms.

Melania knew how to show the priest what she thought about his behavior. Given her "central" position in the village network (cf. Paine 1967), the message about the presumed reason for the priest's absence quickly spread from neighbor to neighbor and from house to house. As a result, when midnight came and the priest entered the church in order to celebrate the mass, he found a surprisingly small number of parishioners, with half the church empty. Despite the very low temperatures, most men remained outside while the women sat next to one another inside. I went for the mass with Melania's son, as my elderly host was too tired to attend the service. Upon noticing my presence, some villagers expressed their surprise that I stayed for Christmas in the area instead of going back to my hometown and my family. "Work is work but Christmas is Christmas", one of the men remarked and a lady whispered "Is she an orphan?" Given that I spent a good deal of my fieldwork explaining what I *actually do,* upon hearing it I thought – quite prematurely as it turned out – that I did not need to worry about those comments.

Soon after the mass started, I got the impression that the female parishioners were playing a game with the priest, using all available stratagems to emphasize their role as parishioners. First, the altar boy who collected the offerings during the mass returned to the sacristy with a nearly empty basket. Secondly, to stress the importance of Christmas, the priest asked the gathered people to kneel during the prayer "I believe in one God", while reciting the words about Christ's birth. In response to the priest's request, villagers said the shortened version of the prayer and nobody knelt. The priest must have felt that the atmosphere in the church

was as cold as the temperature outside and kept the mass as short as possible, even leaving out the final carol, which in the Polish Catholic tradition is said to be the most solemn part of the midnight mass. After the service was finished, I followed the priest to the sacristy to wish him Merry Christmas. It was noticeable that he was disturbed, especially by the contents of the basket. He closed the sacristy and we walked out together. Talking to him about my research progress, I did not notice a huge puddle that the cold weather had transformed into an ice rink. Inattentive, I slipped and was about to fall down, yet the priest flung himself to help me. In that way, I found myself in the priest's arms, observed by dozens of people who remained outside to exchange Christmas wishes. Seeing their astonished faces and trying to prevent the switch from "poor orphan" to "evil lover", my host loudly commented on how wonderful was it to have me for Christmas and then, grabbing my arm, told me it was time to go to bed. Back at home, Melania asked me to watch together the final part of the midnight mass transmission from the Vatican, the viewing of which was accompanied by yet more stories from the parish's history.

A few weeks later I discussed the "Christmas events" with cleaning ladies at the local school, who, having finished their work, enjoyed drinking coffee together. My interlocutors discussed the local priest's behavior and that of other clergymen in the area. The women criticized the priests' immoral lives and their hypocrisy but, at the same time, they did not question their role as church leaders. As usually, they made some jokes on the priest's appearance and potential successes in love life. Despite very critical opinions about the fictitiousness of celibacy and financial irregularities, my interlocutors were convinced that there was neither the possibility to change the situation, nor any sense in trying to. They repeated that priests were protected by bishops and that problems in their village were common throughout the whole country, just because the Church was such a powerful institution which did not care about ordinary people. "Why should we change the priest if the next one will behave in the same way?" was their rhetorical question.

In short, gossip helps to neutralize the priests' power and provide some kind of control over them in some contexts, such as the described religious service. Knowledge about priests' actions and weaknesses, spread through informal channels of communication, allows them to remind the priest that they not only depend on him, but he also depends on them and on their offerings. Adroitly managed gossip proved to be very successful in bringing people together, as emphasized by Gluckman (1963), and making clear which norms and values are socially accepted. However, the question that remains is to what extent anticlerical comments can *actually* diminish the priests' power and whether discursive strategies of challenging hierarchy facilitate or hinder *actual* social change?

In order to address this question, I shall recount the story of a Roman Catholic parish from another village. The nature of the priest-parishioner relationship in this community was one of the topics most frequently raised in my conversations with Catholics and non-Catholics, women and men, clergymen and lay people, who inhabited different localities. Thus, the account below is based on the accounts of many, mostly female, informants. What they told me was the story of a powerful priest who heads one of the biggest parishes in the district and is doubtlessly the best-known local Roman Catholic priest. This middle-aged, self-confident clergyman owes his fame to two factors: his busy "social life" and his financial empire. As

to the first, I heard countless stories about the priest's love affairs and the children conceived in these relationships. Actually, the only element that varied in the stories was the number of the priest's children: some people spoke about two, some about five (the latter, hearing that other inhabitants had only spoken of two, said: "Yes, to be more precise, two in our village and three others in neighboring ones"). Leaving aside the accuracy of such stories, their existence is helpful for understanding how people perceive the clergyman. Gossiping about the priest, the villagers did not only tell me that the priest had a child with one of the female villagers, but they found it important to tell me the whole story in detail. Describing his relationships with female parishioners, they referred to his vulgar way of speaking and his insolent behavior, which, in their view, was evidence of how powerful he felt. They always depicted him as a cold, manipulative person who could offend others without fearing any consequences and who could "buy" silence and consent, for instance, by paying his lovers' husbands for "adopting" illegitimate children or by sharing with the bishop the money he had gained by selling some of the parish's land. Describing the priest's affluence, they would describe a painter's atelier that he supposedly created for his artist-lover in the presbytery attic, and speculate about the value of his newest car.

The link between sexual and financial aspects is a common trope in the discourse on religious power (Badone 1990; Brettell 1990). The doings of the "almighty" priest were always interpreted through the lens of his "economic power", the conviction being he could afford to act however he wanted. I discussed elsewhere (Pasieka 2015b) the way this controversial priest managed to get his hands on the different properties in the area and enrich himself by demanding constant donations for the new parish church, procuring the land which used to belong to the Greek Catholic community, opening a guesthouse for tourists, and installing a mobile phone company's radio mast on the church tower. In describing these cases, villagers would always provide me with a long description of the event in question, specifying the exact amount of money the priest paid or gained and the tactics he used to achieve his goals. Obviously, as gossip is open to modifications and collectively constructed, details of the story would differ and the priest's power grew along with the gossip network. Oftentimes, people would conclude a story by mocking the priest's appearance, wondering what "women saw in him" and suggesting he abused alcohol. Nonetheless, each and every time they described him as a rude man and emphasize that everything he did benefited himself and not the parish. His lifestyle – expensive cars and holidays abroad – as well as comparisons to other (non-Catholic) clergymen who do not impose large payments on parishioners and delegate financial issues to specially elected committees fueled the people's discontentment.

Obviously, the question is why do the parishioners complain about the priest collecting money and his immoral behavior, yet tacitly accept the situation and continue to participate in religious practices? This kind of ambiguity is highlighted by scholars studying "popular religiosity"; they observe that anticlericalism does not mean a rejection of religion, but rather a negotiation of the limits of the church's power (Riegelhaupt 1984; Taylor 1990). However, the case analyzed here suggests that "the limits of the church's power" are hardly negotiable by the parishioners. When asked whether it would be possible to challenge the priest's dominance, the parishioners' answer was a decisive "no". They always explained to me that there were only a few people who rejected the priest's practices. A group who disagree with

the priest's activities wrote letters to the bishop in which they expressed their concerns about his conduct. However, the letters did not yield any results. As my informants explained, the bishop is a good friend of the priest, so he would never remove him from the parish. They also shared with me rumors about fictitious letters of support that the priest had fabricated and sent to the bishop and complained about the lack of solidarity in the village: some maintained that the priest had a group of "agents" who denounce people who are critical of him and that people who were denounced would "pay for the consequences." They also claimed that "the agents" sent the bishops letters which spoke in favor of their priest, whenever they knew that other villagers had written a letter of protest.

Nevertheless, the priest's power does not only lie in the hierarchy's support. "Rumor has it" that some time ago, after the priest had placed on the church door a list of parishioners who had not paid their monthly donation, one villager tore it off and threatened the priest with legal action for defamation. The list disappeared, but a few weeks later the villager's son was informed that he would not be admitted for confirmation. According to the villagers, this kind of "payback" is the most common strategy applied by the priest: the performance of rituals – baptisms, weddings, and most of all funerals – remains his most powerful tool. First, depending on how obedient the family of parishioners is and on how much is it ready to pay, he performs the rituals for them with more or less solemnity. If the family of the deceased pay well, he accompanies the coffin to the cemetery; if the family does not, he attends only part of the ceremony and holds a special sermon, speaking as much as possible about the deceased's "dark sides". The rites of passage are highly important to the community: they are not (only) a question of belief or faith, but also a question of social representation, tradition and dignity as well. Having a decent wedding or having their children admitted for their First Communion is of the highest importance for the villagers. Hence, whenever we discussed financial abuse and protest (or rather the lack of the latter) against the priest's practices, people repeated that they had to think of their relatives, their children's future, and so on. Despite all sorts of critique, people continued attending the church and the clergyman's services.

RUMORS' AND JOKES' INACTION

To conclude, being dependent on the priest, or rather believing and claiming to be dependent on the priest, the parishioners attempt to humiliate him by repeating rumors about his love affairs and immoral conduct while highlighting the strength of his position (his "financial" and "mental power", as they call it) in order to justify their obedience. This device, however, turns against them. Endlessly spread rumors end up creating an atmosphere of absolute control, the situation in the parish remains unaffected, and the parishioners humiliate themselves in the eyes of other religious communities.

Most of the above accounts were shared with me by women. As emphasized earlier, I am far from claiming rumormongering is "typical" for women. The fact they were my source of information resulted, on the one hand, from the fact that I interacted with them more than I did with men and, on the other hand, from the fact that among all the maltreated parishioners women were definitely the more aggrieved party. There were female teachers who

were "accidently" touched by the priest at the school, and it was the females who bore most insults from the rude clergyman. However, rather than being solidary, interviewed women limited themselves to gossiping. They gossiped about the priest, but also about women who supposedly had an affair with him, about devout female parishioners who "only had eyes for the priest" or about "alleged agents" at the priest's service. Highly critical and outraged in private, they continued expressing subordination and politeness when "on stage."

Rural anticlerical gossiping and joking may entail a lot of good humor and constitute a part of village sociability. Yet first and foremost it accounts for a situation in which people feel helpless and weak in relation to a powerful priest and where the only way they deal with this is by backbiting. Likewise, chattering may be a means of expression and solidarity, and community-building practices, but it may also be a flimsy, or even destructive, element of the social fabric. This is not to suggest that the story of the Christmas Eve "power game" should be juxtaposed with the account of the ill-famed parish, nor to suggest differentiating between "good" and "bad" rumors and jokes. Neither picture can be drawn in black and white only, even though I am aware that the second case differs from the first in the tone in which it was told. Undoubtedly, the reason for this was what was at "stake" for the people concerned. The story of priest's absence on Christmas Eve provokes fewer emotional comments than the fact that the presumed son of the Roman Catholic priest is derided and has a hard life at school because of his physical resemblance to the priest.

I shall conclude these observations with a final vignette, which well demonstrates the role of jokes in highlighting "the discrepancy between the people's sense of the falsity and their pretended blindness of it" (Oring 2004: 225). Close to the end of my fieldwork, I visited one of grammar schools, where I talked to one of the teachers who had been described to me as an important local leader. We were sitting in the staff room when a minute student entered and said that she could not participate in the sports competition being held that day. The reason was that the day before, while she was walking down the stairs, the Roman Catholic priest had tickled her and she had fallen down. The teacher was surprised and asked what had happened. The girl described the situation, to which the teacher replied that they would return to the conversation later and that the girl was excused from sports activities. When the student left, she said: "This is like a joke that a friend, also a teacher, texted me this morning: 'How are the priests in Poland punished for pedophilia?' The answer is: 'With a transfer to another parish'." I asked her if she thought that there was some truth in this joke and she answered with a bitter smile: "Certainly". Then I asked her whether it was enough to tell a joke in this situation. She smiled.

ALL QUIET ON THE POLISH FRONT

Seven years after my first visit to Rozstaje, I know I can no longer visit Jana's kitchen; she passed away after a long illness. I know that Melania is doing fine and that her parish has a new priest; "He is timid and a bit sluggish", Melania tells me on the phone in a disappointed voice. And I also know that the "irremovable" potent priest from the big parish was eventually forced to leave his dominium. His critics claim he was – finally – dismissed after he had

publicly ridiculed a handicapped student and that his dismissal as religious teacher was followed by his dismissal from the parish. As the records of the bishopric I have consulted show, he now administrates another parish in the region (*Is it a joke?* one would like to ask). Given the cost of his removal, it would be hard to speak about a parishioners' victory. Similarly, this circumstance does not make me think that many things have changed since I concluded my research. Even though recent years have witnessed a number of important discussions regarding, broadly speaking, the abuses of the Church's power, they certainly have not opened up a new chapter in church-society and church-state relations. Quite the contrary, recent "debates" on state funding of the Church, abortion, and in-vitro treatment have demonstrated both the rigidity on the Church's side and the hostility towards any change, also – or rather first of all – in the context of women's rights (see Szwed 2015).

While critical voices and discussions (e.g. those provoked by Zuzanna Radzik's acclaimed book) do appear, they seem to reach mostly those people who do not need to be convinced that "a different Church is possible". Women who continue to be *actively* engaged in the Church life seem to follow one of two paths: one is chosen by those women who strive to transform the Church and trust that change is possible, while and the other is the option of those female members who accept the gender hierarchy that Catholicism entails and who thus strive to find space for self-realization within clearly defined limits, demarcated by male religious authorities. Throughout my research, I got to know numerous women following the second path: while listening to rural housewives who co-organize the religious life of the village, talking to the female parishioners who are in charge of decorating the church and singing and baking bread for the priest, and participating in endless gatherings and chats on we-are-in-fact-the-neck-that-moves-the-head. Anthropologists studying female religiosity define such practices and discourses using expressions such as creation of meaning, elaborating religious knowledge, bonding with fellow female parishioners, and self-fulfillment. Inspired by their works, I like to think about my female informants and their stories in terms of "agency" and "empowerment".

A particularly inspiring source of such an approach is the scholarship of Saba Mahmood (e.g. 2001) who points out that "resistance" and "subordination" should not be placed in binary opposition and that resistance is not a paradigmatic act of agency. I agree with her critique of prescriptive aspects of feminism, especially of the over-simplified take on "tradition" – seen as a source of coercion and oppression and thus as an institution which by definition should be opposed by women – which feminist scholarship often presupposes. Nonetheless, I find it important to ask: how do we determine the boundaries between resistance and compliance, choice and coercion? Scholars studying "agency" and "resistance" have proven this boundary to be far from obvious, sometimes blurred and sometimes contextual. But does the conviction about "blurredness" really bring us closer to understanding the "agents" we study? If we return to the example that was frequently brought up during my research, namely the pride of women who decorate local parish churches and *claim to* feel creative, needed, and important thanks to this task, this problem emerges with great clarity. Do they decorate the altar because they want to, because they cannot do much else, or simply because someone has to do it? Do they find it meaningful and therefore do it or, on the contrary, are they are in charge of this task and therefore need to give meaning to it, and perhaps play up its importance? In

short: is it not that we might perceive and foreground women as "agents" because *we want* to see them as such?

The rumors, gossip and jokes I discussed in this paper are also a good example of a tendency to idealize the dominated groups' strategies and to overplay their potential. It is tempting to perceive humorousness and inventiveness reflected in people's comments on the authorities as an act of criticism, disagreement, or even rebellion. But once we probe deeper and ask whether a joke or a rumor can substitute for an action, we realize that they do not change much and that, as Elliot Oring observes in reference to jokes (2006: 222), rather than being a sign of change, they are often an assertion of defiance and defeat. Seen as an opportunity to invert hierarchy, they simultaneously reaffirm the existing order[8], exposing people's own contradictory behaviors. They may function as revenge and cause "temporary" problems for a priest but in the long run they seem to have a poisoning, rather than a sanitizing, effect, increasing tensions and even a sort of "control-mania" among the inhabitants. Constituting a basic trope of everyday communication, they may be used against anyone: an authority, but also a member of a different religious community, a neighbor in trouble, or even a victim of the same priest who is so strongly criticized and condemned (and gossiped about). At the end of the day, they hardly alter power relations; they just make unequal power relations easier to swallow.

Scott (1990) himself provides an example of ascetic priests whose reputation is damaged by jokes implying their lives are far from exemplary. In his view, jokes prove here to be a successful "weapon of the weak". Saying that this observation is wrong would be as simplifying as Scott assumption that the use of jokes and rumors can be easily generalized as they play a universal role, that of resistance. Rather, it is important to emphasize once again the necessity for caution when using theoretical concepts for comparative purposes. Scott's hypothesis may certainly be valid in some settings, yet it is not in the socio-religious-political context presented in this article, in which the power of priests and women depends on many more factors than gossip (or lack thereof). One may ask: what's left once we recognize the limits of comparability and defy the seemingly all-applicable and transparent language of social sciences? Arguing with and against Mahmood – subscribing to her criticism of reductionist notion of agency linked with the "desire to be free from subordination" yet seeing the danger of falling into a similar trap by making assumptions about agency *within* the structures of subordination – I only wish to emphasize anthropology's role first and foremost in making sense of what people do and think, without presuming why, for what, and against whom.

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[8] This is not to suggest I contend women *should* oppose social order or tradition. I speak about the contestation of social order referring to my informants' observations on the situation in their parishes and in the Church at large.

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BROŃ SŁABYCH CZY SŁABA BROŃ? KOBIETY, KSIĘŻA I WŁADZA
W KATOLICKICH PARAFIACH NA POLSKIEJ WSI

Odnosząc się do szeroko cytowanych prac Jamesa Scotta poświęconych „codziennym praktykom oporu" i „broni słabych", w artykule zadaję pytanie, czy plotki i żarty na temat księży, stanowiące istotny element codziennej komunikacji kobiet należących do badanych przeze mnie katolickich parafii, uznać można za skuteczne strategie redefinicji relacji pomiędzy parafianami a księżmi. Opierając się na materiale zebranym podczas badań terenowych w kilku wsiach południowej Polski, staram się ukazać ambiwalentną naturę antyklerykalnych żartów i plotek, które zamiast stanowić narzędzie zmiany, prowadzą raczej do utwierdzenia *status quo*. Zebrany materiał etnograficzny służy mi w tym przypadku nie tylko do polemiki z teorią Scotta, ale też do krytycznej refleksji na temat problematycznej roli badaczek i badaczy w przedstawieniu zagadnień „sprawczości" i „oporu". Analizowany przeze mnie materiał stanowi także punkt wyjścia dyskusji na temat stosunków państwo–Kościół i sytuacji kobiet w polskim kościele w szerszym kontekście.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiety, katolicyzm, księża, plotki, żarty, opór i dominacja