

Clergy: An uncompromising film about the hypocrisy and corruption of the Catholic Church in Poland

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Clergy, the new film from director Wojciech Smarzowski, reaffirms his place as one of Poland's leading directors. His 2016 film *Hatred (Wolyn)*, dealing with a traumatic event in Polish-Ukrainian history, stirred up controversy and attracted a wide audience in Poland.

Smarzowski's latest offering, *Clergy*, was released in Poland in the autumn of 2018 and broke several box office records. Nearly a million people viewed the film on its opening weekend, the best result for a Polish film in Poland in three decades. To date over five million people have seen the work, which depicts in uncompromising fashion the hypocrisy and corruption of the Catholic Church in contemporary Poland.

At a recent festival of Polish films held in Berlin, the individual introducing *Clergy* noted that Smarzowski had been denied permission to film his movie in any Polish church. Instead he had to move production to the neighbouring Czech Republic to complete the film. It was also pointed out that the target of Smarzowski's film was the institution of the Catholic Church and not individual believers.

Clergy opens with a drinking session involving the film's three main protagonists—the priests Leszek Lisowski (Jacek Braciak), Tadeusz Trybus (Robert Wieckiewicz) and Andrzej Kuku?a (Arkadiusz Jakubik). Between shots of vodka, Trybus is quizzed on passages from the Bible, all of which he knows by heart. At the end of their drinking orgy, the three priests set up their own obstacle race through the rooms of the house. Every successful round is rewarded with yet another shot.

It turns out all three have secrets to hide. Trybus shares his house with a woman whom he makes pregnant. When confronted with the news, the shocked priest asks his lover, "But ... how ... didn't you take any precautions?" "My faith didn't allow me," she replies. The priest is adamant. To avoid a scandal, "You must get rid of it."

The second priest, Lisowski, is higher up the clerical

ladder and acts as adjutant to the thoroughly crooked and foul-mouthed Archbishop Mordowicz (Janusz Gajos), who is up to his neck in sordid deals with criminal gangs and politicians. When crossed, the archbishop is quite ready to blame "Jewish" so-and-sos for the consequences of his own misdeeds.

Mordowicz drives around in a brand new Bentley with chauffeur and dispatches servile priests to an anteroom in his palace to fetch huge sacks of money to pay off bribes to building firms and politicians. In one scene, we see the collection plate being passed around in a church where ordinary Poles donate what they can afford. The funds from such collections, swelled by numerous generous donations from the Polish state, provide the mounds of money needed to finance the archbishop's lavish life style, as well as the drinking bouts of ordinary priests.

In another scene, we witness the archbishop urging a leading politician to insert one of the Polish Catholic Church's main demands, a "total ban on abortion," into the government's program. The politician starts to speak, but is promptly put in his place. "With all due respect, dear MP, now I'm talking," declares the archbishop in the manner of an autocrat.

Lisowski has the job of carrying out and covering up for his master's dirty work. He dreams of a transfer to the Vatican and is prepared to go to any lengths to achieve it, including blackmailing his boss.

Through the figure of the third priest Kuku?a, Smarzowski addresses the issue of the clerical abuse of young boys and girls. Kukula is accused of abusing a boy from a broken family and is promptly shunned by his congregation. The archbishop's office immediately goes into damage control mode. The accused priest is transferred to a monastery that functions as a sort of clinic for the recuperation and rehabilitation of clerics with all sorts of problems and crimes on their conscience. The young victim of the priest is paid to keep quiet with a television and video game console.

In the course of a series of flashbacks, we realise that Kukula himself was the subject of brutal abuse as a young boy in a home run by a sadistically cruel nun. The perpetrator Kukula is himself the victim of the Catholic Church's inhuman policy of celibacy for its priests—a vicious circle destined to perpetuate physical and mental abuse.

Smarzowski's target is the organised Church, not its individual representatives. The figures in the film are not caricatures, not least due to the outstanding performances by the cast of actors. Two of the priests, Trybus and Kukula, recognise their wrongdoings and seek to make some amends. The archbishop's plans to suppress details of Kukula's pedophilia come unstuck when the latter decides to go public and reveal the true extent of child abuse by members of the clergy. Once again the archbishop's team go into action to ensure that Kukula's revelations are smothered. The next morning they are able to report: Mission accomplished. There is barely a word in the press about the priest's misdeeds.

Kukula is ditched by the Church. The priest is unstable (“For some time, his behaviour revealed that he suffered from some kind of mental health problems”), Archbishop Mordowicz tells the media, which is quite prepared to print his version of events.

In addition to its portrayal of a Church official who controls a financial empire, the media and leading politicians, *Clergy* includes one scene in which a fascist group practice their racist chants from within the secure walls of a church building.

The reaction to Smarzowski's film in Poland by the Church and the government was predictably prompt and ferocious. It was dismissed by Church officials as “vulgar clergyphobia.” Some towns, under the influence of the Church, sought to prevent showings of the film.

Senior members of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, which relies heavily on the Church for electoral support, called for the film to be banned. The deputy culture minister in the PiS government, Jaroslaw Sellin, accused *Clergy* of fostering “negative stereotypes,” while Paweł Soloch, head of the National Security Bureau in Poland, compared the film to Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda.

Poland's leading news program, which is closely aligned with the PiS, described *Clergy* as “yet another attack on the Catholic Church, brutal and untrue.” The right-wing newspaper, *Gazeta Polska*, responded by whipping up anti-communism and reproduced the film's poster on billboards across Poland using the image of a priest who was a victim of the Stalinist security services. The text to the poster read: “The clergy: our treasure in the fight against Nazism, communism, LGBT and Islamists.”

In fact, the criminal activities addressed in the film realistically reflect the deeply reactionary role of the Catholic Church in Poland.

Smarzowski spoke with victims of clerical abuse before making his film, which includes statements from such victims read by actors. Some are too traumatised by what had taken place to properly speak out. Since the film's release, the number of victims reporting mistreatment has increased ten-fold.

In regard to the abortion issue, it is no secret that the Catholic Church is the driving force behind the campaign to ban all medical assistance to pregnant women. A bill to ban abortion was introduced by the far-right Catholic organization, Ordo Iuris [Legal Order], in 2016 and agreed by parliament. The bill would have provided for a complete ban on abortions, including for minors and victims of sexual assault. It was only dropped after massive protests swept the country.

Smarzowski's film also realistically portrays the links existing between ultra-right and fascist groups, the media and the organised Church.

The ultra-conservative priest Tadeusz Rydzyk runs a Catholic media empire, including the pro-government Radio Maryja station, a television station and a daily newspaper, which all pump out anti-Semitic, homophobic and Islamophobic content. Rydzyk was fined for illegal fundraising in 2011, but his business empire continues to receive government grants and contracts worth millions of euros.

In 2016, the Islamophobic and anti-Semitic priest Jacek Miłdlar held a mass at Białystok cathedral for members of the neo-Nazi group National Radical Camp (ONR). Another far-right group, All Polish Youth, campaigns against abortion and gay marriage under the slogan of “Great Catholic Poland.”

Smarzowski is a courageous filmmaker. *Clergy* deserves a wide international audience.



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