

Polish church crisis echoes Vatican slowness on U.S. abuse scandals: Allegations of collaboration lead to resignation

News in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

The abrupt resignation of a top Polish prelate, amid allegations that he collaborated with Poland's Soviet-era secret police, has once again shone a spotlight on the reluctance among Roman Catholic officials to confront scandal within their ranks.

Five years after the clerical sex-abuse scandal rocked the church in the United States, observers say the church again faces a crisis that undercuts the credibility of its leadership.

More significantly, they say, both scandals expose a common tendency in the Catholic hierarchy: that of ignoring inconvenient truths until they boil over into full-blown public scandals.

The crisis in Poland came to a head January 7 when Stanislaw Wielgus, the archbishop-designate of Warsaw, abruptly resigned during a mass intended to celebrate his inauguration as Poland's top prelate. The day after Wielgus stepped down, another top Catholic cleric, Janusz Bielanski, resigned as rector of Krakow's Wawel Cathedral, strenuously denying allegations of collaboration.

The spectacle capped weeks of acrimony in which Wielgus and his supporters, including the Vatican, tried to fend off allegations in the Polish press that the prelate had collaborated with Poland's feared communist-era secret police.

Senior church officials, such as Cardinal Jozef Glemp, Warsaw's outgoing archbishop, have defended Wielgus, arguing that his collaboration was nominal—perhaps even routine—and did not compromise his ability to lead.

The Rome-based *La Repubblica* newspaper reported that Pope Benedict XVI was “furious” about those who had withheld information from him.

On January 12, Polish Catholic leaders in Warsaw declared themselves open to investigations. “The church is not afraid of the truth, even if this is a hard, shameful truth and approaching this truth is sometimes very painful,” the bishops said.

The Vatican’s secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, said he was “happy” that the Polish bishops decided to pass background information on to the pope, adding that “a lack of communication is dangerous in all fields.”

Addressing Polish pilgrims in Rome January 14, Pope Benedict urged the faithful to listen to the word of Christ, “especially in difficult moments of life, when we are seeking the truth and help of God.”

Wielgus has argued that his contacts did not harm anyone. Studies of Soviet records indicate that as many as 10 percent of Poland’s 30,000 clergy members are suspected of having ties to secret police.

“Some may try to deny the reality, but, like the sexual-abuse scandal, this story too will have legs,” said Richard McBrien, a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

In the American abuse scandal, intense anger was focused on church leaders who either knew of wrongdoing and failed to stop it or were not aware but should have been.

What disturbs some church insiders is that the troubles in Poland, like the U.S. scandal, were unearthed by the media while hierarchs issued denials or downplayed their extent. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of the journal *First Things*, called that “deeply disappointing.” Wrote Neuhaus in the journal’s online edition: “It is not entirely inappropriate to see some parallels with the negligence and evasion of American bishops in connection with the sex-abuse scandals in this country.”

Also troubling to many observers is that the scandal erupted in Poland, long trumpeted as one of the church’s great success stories. It was in Poland, after all, that the church mounted its historic challenge to Soviet Russia, producing one of communism’s greatest foes: Pope John Paul II.

That legacy, however, did not spur John Paul to address the collaboration issue during his 26 years as pope. Writing in *La Repubblica*, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, who was John Paul's chief spokesperson, said it was "very clear" to the late pope that collaboration with the secret police was widespread among Polish clergy.

The late pope was reluctant to address issues he considered divisive, said a Rome-based Polish priest who knew John Paul and requested anonymity because he was not authorized to give interviews on the topic. "It wasn't in the Holy Father's character to get mixed up in this kind of mess," he said.

Veteran Vatican-watcher John Allen, senior correspondent of the *National Catholic Reporter*, noted that the Vatican does not like to see a bishop resign under fire. He pointed, however, to the pope's swift action in removing Wielgus once the archbishop had admitted contacts with the secret police. "For the church," Allen wrote on the newspaper's Web site, "it suggests the Vatican under Benedict XVI is learning something about crisis management." -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*