

**Rev. Artur Szela, PhD**

Metropolitan Major Seminary in Wrocław

e-mail: as.biuro@wp.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-7981-8758

DOI: 10.26410/SF\_2/23/3

---

# CONCLUSIONS FROM PRELIMINARY RESEARCH INTO SECURITY AT RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS

---

## Abstract

Interest in the question of security at religious celebrations and sacred buildings has been growing significantly in recent years. There are many reasons for this state of affairs. These include, on the one hand, the organisational complexity of ensuring security and the lack of widespread knowledge of church structures, and on the other hand, the threats to these celebrations. By virtue of their competences, the issue of security at religious celebrations naturally becomes the object of interest of academic centres and research groups unrelated to such celebrations. One of these organisations is the Institute of Social Security operating within the Social Observatory Foundation. The initiatives undertaken by this institute are of a systemic nature and are conducted mainly in the field of security studies. One manifestation of these initiatives are the annual academic meetings organised in the form of conferences and workshops, as well as participation as members of research groups established for the purposes of exercises organised by Polish rescue and police units. This article is an attempt to initiate a scholarly discussion outside the implementation of academic projects conducted within the framework of research projects. Its aim is to stimulate reflection on the complex nature of the process of ensuring the safety of participants at religious ceremonies, with the main emphasis on the safe attendance of the worshippers participating in them.

## Key words

security, threat, religion, offence, crime, public safety, public order

## Introduction

Religious celebrations are a common social phenomenon during which many religiously motivated people meet. Religious motivation is the result of a striving to satisfy a spiritual need that belongs to the group of psychological needs (secondary, social).<sup>1</sup> It is heterogeneous – it cannot be assigned to a specific category of basic needs.

Numerous religious celebrations take place in Poland.<sup>2</sup> Some of them are national religious events; some are international. National religious celebrations are primarily small or medium-sized. They are held on church premises (masses, funerals, administering sacraments) or in public places outside the church, including public roads (pilgrimages, processions, funeral processions). A feature of small or medium-sized national religious celebrations is that their organisation accords with the accepted customs for their staging. This is clearly visible during religious celebrations that use public roads in a special way.

A church organiser who is familiar with the local community and the institutions functioning there often organises religious ceremonies or other collective events of a religious nature based on accepted norms rather than on the applicable regulations. Formal violations (lack of specific agreement on the use of roads with the appropriate road manager) usually do not result in danger. However, it should be noted that

such informal conduct, although it may not have negative consequences in normal circumstances, may contribute to endangering participants of a religious ceremony in a difficult situation.<sup>3</sup>

A difficult situation forces a departure from the structure of ordinary activities in order to achieve a goal that has previously been achieved without any problems. Sticking to customs may result in a clergyman, who previously knew what to do based on acquired behaviour, beginning to make mistakes in the event of a new threat that could place worshippers in danger – as was the case on the occasion of the Łowicz pilgrimage mentioned elsewhere. It is worth noting here that the authority of the erring clergyman caused the pilgrims, regardless of the advice of the Police, to continue to attempt pilgrimages despite the threat posed by the pandemic. Interestingly, third-party groups of believers (e.g. Catholic associations from Podkarpacie) did not see the police's behaviour as concern for the safety of the faithful, but as repression.

It seems right that in a situation where a clergyman's attention is – often understandably – particularly absorbed in religious matters, he should appoint a person responsible for the safety of participants in a religious ceremony. Such a person, who is a type of safety or security manager, should have both appropriate qualifications (knowledge, skills, and experience) and psychological qualities (stress resistance and the ability to draw

1 More: *Bezpieczeństwo uczestników zgromadzeń religijnych*, eds. B. Wiśniewski, A. Prędecka, J. Bryk, A. Szela, Warsaw 2016; *Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria – Badania – Praktyka*, eds. A. Czupryński, B. Wiśniewski, J. Zboina, Józefów 2017.

2 More: B. Wiśniewski, G. S. Sander, *Zagrożenie, kryzys i sytuacja kryzysowa – jako uwarunkowania życia współczesnego człowieka*, „Bezpieczeństwo i Technika Pożarowa” 2016, No 41, p. 13-14.

3 More: *Bezpieczeństwo uczestników zgromadzeń...*

the clergyman's attention to important security issues). Such a person should have the ability to cooperate with non-church entities ensuring external security for religious ceremonies. It is worth noting that where religious celebrations are particularly large or their dimension is international, cooperation between the Church and the police, and also with other uniformed organisations – local police, emergency services – brings definitely positive effects.

By law, the Church is the independent host and organiser of religious celebrations. However, both the Church and its members, participants of religious gatherings, will benefit from the fact that security is handled by people who are appropriately prepared, who follow formal rules and who cooperate, to the extent necessary, with other bodies to help the Church ensure the safety of participants in religious celebrations.

## Methodological assumptions

The process of conducting the research for this article involved both theoretical and empirical research methods.

In this context, it should be noted that, according to the literature on the subject, a method is „a consciously applied course of action leading to achieving the intended goal”<sup>4</sup> and „a repeatable and effective way of solving a general research problem.”<sup>5</sup>

From the point of view of the effectiveness of the research process, the author's use of the qualitative and quantitative methods used in the social sciences was important.

- During the research, the author used:
- inductive reasoning, in which general statements are derived from detailed information,<sup>6</sup> which allow the formulation of new statements;
  - analysis, which is a research procedure consisting in dissection of the whole into its components or isolation of individual elements of the whole in order to learn about the whole; thanks to knowledge of these individual parts,<sup>7</sup> the identification of the scope of projects that make up the process of ensuring the safety of participants in religious ceremonies is made possible;
  - generalisation used to isolate features and repeatable phenomena occurring during these celebrations.

## Security at religious celebrations – state or process?

Many definitions of this concept can be found in the literature on the subject.<sup>8</sup>

The level of security is influenced by many factors which, due to their importance, impact, and effects, can be divided into several groups. Adopting these criteria, these factors can be arranged in four groups as determinants: basic, signalling, effect, and accompanying and

4 Ibidem.

5 L. Sołoma, *Metody i techniki badań socjologicznych*, Olsztyn 2002, p. 27.

6 M. Cieślarczyk, *Teoretyczne i metodologiczne podstawy badania problemów bezpieczeństwa i obronności państwa*, Siedlce 2009, p. 46.

7 R. Podgórski, *Metodologia badań socjologicznych. Kompendium wiedzy metodologicznej dla studentów*, Bydgoszcz-Olsztyn 2007, p. 74.

8 B. Wiśniewski, *System bezpieczeństwa państwa. Konteksty teoretyczne i praktyczne*, Szczytno 2013, p. 37.

design, forming a logical, consecutive whole.<sup>9</sup>

Safety at religious ceremonies may be considered as the state of an absence of threat to the course of the gathering, as well as the state of an absence of threat, of peace and confidence for the participants at the ceremony, which is the totality of the worshippers participating in such celebrations of religious nature. This state is free from destructive factors that pose a threat to general and public safety.<sup>10</sup> Such threats are threats to the internal security of the state. This security, as understood by the state, is an important element of the internal security of the state, the importance of which is closely related to the social and cultural importance of the religious life of Poles. If safety understood in this way is the work of human behaviour, then its product is a safe celebration and the safety of all its participants, especially the priest and the faithful.

The safety of religious celebrations is a requirement that determines the necessity to meet religious needs. The sense of security that occurs when security requirements are met is a state in which the situation is perceived by the person participating in it as being free from threats.

This security may take the form of a specific security process related to the desired activity of those participating in a religious gathering. Referring to the activity of such people, we can distinguish those that are reactive (clergy

and worshippers – participants in the ceremony) and proactive (organiser – the Church, services subordinate to the Church and non-church organisations and institutions whose purpose is to ensure safety in the place where the faithful are gathered). Because the security process is a complex and multi-entity activity, it is based on cooperation between individual elements of the security system.

Taking the above into account, it is reasonable to state that the basis of the security process is properly coordinated and synchronised collective action taking the form of cooperation between all entities that can help – including those that facilitate or enable – to ensure that religious celebrations are not threatened or at least reduce the effects of any threat. The security process should be efficient. For a complex collective operation to be effective and economic, it must be properly organized, including being properly planned. Operational planning is based on setting the goals for anticipated events and performing a risk analysis.<sup>11</sup> Anticipation and risk analyses are related to the degree of certainty regarding predicted phenomena, their nature, strength, and the effects of the measures used. Uncertainty is a source of failure for future actions, limits rational decision-making, and arouses fear, which – when applied to the participants at a celebration – is a potential source of panic behaviour in the crowd.

9 B. Wiśniewski, *Praktyczne aspekty badań bezpieczeństwa*, Warszawa 2020, p. 16.

10 More: B. Wiśniewski, T. Zwęgliński, *Wybrane problemy bezpieczeństwa dużych skupisk ludzkich innych aniżeli zgromadzenia publiczne i imprezy masowe*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Collegium Witelona” 2022, No 43(2), p. 92.

11 More: *Wyzwania, szanse, zagrożenia i ryzyko dla bezpieczeństwa narodowego RP o charakterze wewnętrznym*, eds. R. Jakubczak, B. Wiśniewski, Szczytno 2016.

## Practical aspects concerning the safety of religious celebrations

Religious celebrations are specific meetings of many people with a religious goal, which is prayer, getting closer to the Absolute, which is God, and participation in a religious community.

There is no doubt that when it comes to the safety of religious celebrations, we are talking about a social group characterised by:

- the presence of more than two people;
- the occurrence of interactions between its members;
- the awareness of belonging to a specific group;
- preference for the same or similar system of values, symbols, and attitudes;
- having an internal structure that determines the positions and social roles of interconnected people;
- the creation of norms, specific values, rules of conduct and patterns;
- the behaviour of group members and their compliance.

It is in the generally understood social interest that actions taken to ensure the safety of participants at religious ceremonies are, above all, feasible but also carried out efficiently. Feasibility depends on situational and dispositional capabilities. Situational opportunity is created by the environment in which the religious ceremony is performed. Other conditions accompany particular types of religious meetings which can be divided according to the following criteria:<sup>12</sup>

- availability of places where religious gatherings may take place;

- accessibility of the gathering for its participants;
- characteristic use of places for religious meetings;
- types of buildings where religious gatherings are held;
- cultural significance of places and facilities used for religious gatherings;
- size of the religious gathering;
- the degree of organisation of the participants of the religious gathering;
- level of threat to religious gatherings;
- scale of interest in religious gatherings.

Situational potential is also created by the social environment; here, mainly caused by the reactive participants of the ceremony, often unprepared to demonstrate appropriate behaviour in the face of potential threats.

Dispositional capacity is created by knowledge, skills, efficiency, and strength, as well as the motivation of members of the organisational, management, and medical staff. Following from the conduct of this research and in the opinion of the experts interviewed, it can be concluded that all entities responsible for the safety of participants in religious ceremonies must be properly prepared. This preparation should take the form of realistic exercises resembling the conditions anticipated in the action plan.

Rational preparation for religious ceremonies must be accompanied by an awareness of potential threats, including their causes and effects as well as their frequency of occurrence, which allows for risk management and, consequently, for making the security team more resistant to any threat such that it cannot develop from being potential to real in

12 B. Szacka, *Wprowadzenie do socjologii*, Warszawa 2003, p. 183–188.

form. Research shows that these threats are numerous, have a diverse nature and can be classified as threats to both general and public security.

Taking the above into account, it is right to recognise that the essential determinants of the safety of religious celebrations include the type of religious meeting, the profile of its participants, and threats to the safety of both the celebrations and their participants.

In the organisation of security at religious ceremonies, it is possible to identify three stages: a preparation stage (including defining a clear goal of the operation, planning consisting in defining the tasks for individual bodies cooperating with each other, preparing the security and medical services of the Church and the equipment, i.e. tools and rooms that these services will use); an implementation stage (actions, including cooperation, in accordance with the plan); and a control stage (assessment of the implementation of the tasks and the degree to which the goal was achieved, as well as drawing conclusions).

Properly organised religious celebrations require close cooperation between the organiser, which is the Church, and external bodies.

Cooperation is mainly based on mutual exchange of information regarding both preparations and the current situation during the religious gathering. According to experts, large religious ceremonies are preceded by the creation of interdisciplinary teams, which include representatives of the voivode, his subordinate institutions, and a representative of the Church. It is good practice to appoint a representative of the Church

from among people who understand the essence of security operations. It would be advisable for such a person to be the equivalent of the security manager of the given religious gathering. Such a person not only represents the Church, but also has appropriate knowledge, skills, and experience related to the safety of public gatherings, including mass events. According to most experts, it is advisable for the security manager to understand the specific nature of the activities of the institutions with which the Church is cooperating in ensuring the safety of a religious gathering.

Safety problems for participants in the celebrations in question are mainly related to cooperation. In the context of the above, it should be noted that the smaller the religious gathering, the lower its rank and media importance, the less effectively can the cooperation between security bodies be assessed. In extreme cases, there is a lack of cooperation.

Lack of cooperation occurs when the Church as the organiser of a religious gathering does not inform the relevant organisations that should receive this information by law (e.g. the obligation to request permission for the use of a public road in a special way).

Failure to provide information about a planned religious gathering or the lack of required arrangements often results either from a clergyman's ignorance of the need to take such steps or from the belief that such arrangements are not necessary because in a given local community there is consent or custom for this, and that there is no other way of performing the religious activity. Often, arrangements are made, but not on a formal basis,

rather in unofficial conversations held between the clergyman and a representative of the institution responsible for road safety on a given public road.

The source of problems for bodies cooperating in the sphere of security at religious celebrations is the clergyman's belief that he himself will be able to perfectly ensure the safety of the religious gathering he is leading.

It is often the case that clergymen do not want to delegate their powers regarding the safety of a religious gathering to another person competent in this area. The lack of preparation of the clergyman to act in a situation where there is a threat and the failure to organise security for a religious gathering result in the reluctance of non-church entities to cooperate with them. The biggest problem occurs when a clergyman tries to impose his will on external bodies in the belief he is infallible.

The above problem could be solved if the clergyman had the support of a security manager with appropriate knowledge, skills, and experience in ensuring security. Such a person, being on the one hand a member of a religious community representing the Church, would, on the other hand, also understand the external bodies cooperating with the Church.

## Concept of safety at religious celebrations

Contemporary conditions for the safety of participants at religious ceremonies are extremely complex and require thorough research.

As the basis for this research, a concept may be adopted that can be

perceived as a product taking into account logically related elements connected to:

- medical, sanitary, and hygienic requirements;
- requirements from the realm of public safety and order;
- public security requirements;
- obligations of the organisers;
- possibility of support from state institutions;
- possibility of support from non-governmental organisations.

It is obvious that this concept should be based on the findings that: the safety of participants at religious ceremonies is mainly determined by the nature of the ceremonies and the risks associated with them, the legal requirements applicable to their organisation, and the possibility of support for the organisers of these ceremonies from state institutions and non-governmental organizations, in particular:

- the safety of religious celebrations is closely related to the level of uncertainty, threats, and risks associated with their organisation;
- the essential determinants of the safety of religious ceremonies are their type, the profile of the participants, and threats to the safety of participants;
- organisation of national religious celebrations involves those regulations related to entrusting responsibility for ensuring security to the Church, and in the case of international celebrations to state institutions responsible for internal security;
- previous experience related to ensuring the safety of participants at

religious ceremonies indicates the possibility of using solutions employed during the organisation of public meetings and mass events to the extent specified by the sources of generally applicable law and those regulating the issues of relations between the state and the Catholic Church;

- the concept of ensuring the safety of participants at religious ceremonies should be based on the applicable legal framework and include proposals for solutions in the areas of medical, sanitary, and hygienic security, public safety and order, general security, as well as support for the organisers' activities originating from state institutions and non-governmental organisations.

The concept should pay particular attention to the necessity of appointing a person to the position of security manager who would have broadly understood competences to manage security as part of the religious ceremony. Moreover, attention is drawn to the importance of the proper organisation of activities undertaken to ensure security and the need to cooperate between the Church Party – as the organiser – and non-Church Parties representing state institutions and non-governmental organisations.

It should be remembered that well-organised joint operations (cooperation) bear the hallmarks of teamwork; this contributes not only to the achievement of the intended effect, but also produces a synergistic effect, thanks to which collective action may be considered successful, because the effects of the actions exceed those envisaged.

A well-organised team activity carried out in this way gains the value of success, and thus influences the building of respect for the Church institution and the institutions and organisations supporting it, deepens social trust, contributes to an improvement in the sense of security and an increase in the level of real security, which in all respects is valued and socially desirable.

## Conclusions

Religious celebrations are special types of gatherings, and their safety is closely related to the level of uncertainty, threats, and risks associated with their occurrence. To ensure the safety of religious celebrations, they should be properly organised and based on a risk analysis aimed at the greatest possible reduction of any uncertainty. The action plan should take into account cooperation between all properly prepared bodies that are important for the safety of religious celebrations.

## Bibliography

- Bezpieczeństwo uczestników zgromadzeń religijnych*, eds. B. Wiśniewski, A. Prędecka, J. Bryk, A. Szela, Warsaw 2016.
- Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria – Badania – Praktyka*, eds. A. Czupryński, B. Wiśniewski, J. Zboina, Józefów 2017.
- Cieślarczyk M., *Teoretyczne i metodologiczne podstawy badania problemów bezpieczeństwa i obronności państwa*, Siedlce 2009.
- Podgórski R., *Metodologia badań socjologicznych. Kompendium wiedzy metodologicznej dla studentów*, Bydgoszcz-Olsztyn 2007.
- Sołoma L., *Metody i techniki badań socjologicznych*, Olsztyn 2002.



- Szacka B., *Wprowadzenie do socjologii*, Warsaw 2003.
- Wiśniewski B., *Praktyczne aspekty badań bezpieczeństwa*, Warsaw 2020.
- Wiśniewski B., Sander G. S., *Zagrożenie, kryzys i sytuacja kryzysowa – jako uwarunkowania życia współczesnego człowieka*, „Bezpieczeństwo i Technika Pożarowa” 2016, No 41.
- Wiśniewski B., *System bezpieczeństwa państwa. Konteksty teoretyczne i praktyczne*, Szczytno 2013.
- Wiśniewski B., Zwęgliński T., *Wybrane problemy bezpieczeństwa dużych skupisk ludzkich innych aniżeli zgromadzenia publiczne i imprezy masowe*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Collegium Witelona” 2022, No 43(2).
- Wyzwania, szanse, zagrożenia i ryzyko dla bezpieczeństwa narodowego RP o charakterze wewnętrznym*, eds. R. Jakubczak, B. Wiśniewski, Szczytno 2016.

## About the Author

---

**Artur Szela**, polish a Catholic priest. Doctor of social sciences. In his scientific work he deals with the problems of Catholic social teaching, security and threats.