

Article

Sexual Morality of Young Poles as a Challenge for Religious Education

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Abstract: As indicated by numerous sociological reports, the morality of young people is currently undergoing dynamic changes, and this applies especially to morality in the sphere of sexuality. The purpose of this article is to analyze the opinions on sexual morality expressed by young Poles. The results of this analysis can help to develop a better program for their religious education. The analyses are based on the results of social quantitative surveys conducted in 2020 on a random sample of 410 high school seniors (age 18–20) residing in cities of various sizes and in rural areas. The research verified the following leading hypothesis: “The morality of young Poles regarding sexual activity is becoming increasingly autonomous and is formed independently of the morality model that is offered by leading educational institutions, particularly family, Church, and school”. The detailed hypotheses were only partially confirmed. The empirical material presented in the article confirms that the moral education of youth in the sphere of human sexuality currently being implemented in Poland is inefficient and requires changes to several pastoral postulates. First of all, young people must not be treated as passive recipients of pastoral programs or strategies. They want to be the creators of the social, cultural, and religious changes taking place. Reaching the hearts of young people with the message of the Gospel requires immersing oneself in their life experience, perceptions, and understanding of reality, as well as their highly individualized axiology and complex decision-making processes. Young people should be set moral requirements also in the sphere of sexuality, as this is necessary for their personal development and the preparation of the foundations for a good life as an adult; however, this must be done with perceptible love and from the position of a witness of a positive and happy life.

Keywords: sexual morality; youth; religious education; pastoral theology



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1. Introduction

Initiated by the “Solidarity” movement, social changes in Poland culminated in 1989 when the communist government suffered an electoral defeat. This was the beginning of systemic transformation, including changes in the sphere of politics, economy, and culture. Important constituents of these processes are changes in the field of religious beliefs and morality, particularly sexual morality. The dynamics of these changes are shown in the results of many sociological studies, which confirm that the sexual morality of young Poles is undergoing a rapid process of individualization. This aspect of morality is becoming increasingly autonomous, and this process is known as the “socio-cultural megatrend” (Mariański 2021, pp. 142–43). An important task for practical theology is to understand the directions of current sociocultural changes in order to develop a better educational program for the young generation. Sex education, in particular, is a major challenge for catechists and priests. On the one hand, in Catholic circles, sexual topics are still to some extent taboo, and there are concerns about addressing sexual issues in open social discourse; on the other hand, young people have the right to receive solid knowledge about sexuality, because without it they will be unable to cope in their personal and professional lives (Levand 2021, p. 3).

In the religious education of young people, it is necessary to simply and clearly present the requirements imposed by the Catholic Church in the sphere of sexual morality. The demand for the education of young people on sexual morality is high, and the authors of this study are aiming to meet this demand. The article uses the results of a social empirical survey conducted among young Poles. Interdisciplinary research in pastoral theology has great potential related to the acquisition and interpretation of multifaceted empirical data and the delineation of new research fields. Cooperation between pastoral theology and the social sciences is therefore essential, but it is always necessary to strictly define the methodological paradigm of this cooperation (Szymczak 2020, pp. 503–27). In this study, the opinions of young people obtained in empirical surveys conducted in accordance with the standards of sociology are used for a theological and pastoral analysis aimed at formulating conclusions and postulates for the improvement of sex education for young people. From an epistemological point of view, it is important to note that all the conclusions and pastoral proposals in this paper are formulated from the perspective of Catholic theology. The reason for this kind of approach is that the young people surveyed in the research are Catholics, like 92% of the Polish population. In addition this paper is prepared for the special issue on Catholic education. The order of the research tasks undertaken is as follows: definition of sexual morality, background of the empirical survey, research assumptions and hypotheses, presentation of survey results, summary of survey results, discussion, and pastoral postulates concerning sex education for youth.

2. Definition of Sexual Morality

Although today morality is the subject of interdisciplinary reflection, defining the concept of morality is still a key issue. For its description, and especially for its use in empirical research, common-sense intuitions about this concept are not enough. Here, the object of study must be clearly defined; therefore, it is necessary to adopt a stipulative definition of morality, i.e., one that will cover a certain set of designators of morality commonly falling under this term. From a sociological perspective, morality is seen as a social phenomenon that encompasses values, norms, orders, duties, and patterns of behavior associated with good or evil. They are recognized in a social group or wider society as binding (Mariański 2015a, p. 424). In a fairly broad definition of morality, T. Luckmann highlights the following elements: (a) morality is a relatively consistent set of ideas about what is right and what is wrong; these ideas go beyond the immediate satisfaction of momentary demands; (b) they are intersubjectively constructed in interactions and transmitted in complex social processes; (c) in the generational transmission, certain perceptions take the form of traditions and are accepted as the basis of a decent life, while others are prohibited; in this way, a certain coherence of views is achieved and becomes the basis of the moral order of society; (d) social reality is created in interactions, and the essence of this community is a certain moral order (Luckmann 2006, p. 938). Similarly, sexual morality, as a subject of research, can be defined as a set of the indicated elements related to sex life.

It should be noted that cultural rules, as the smallest units of the axiological and normative system, do not occur in isolation but group together into larger entities. From a sociological perspective, their integration may concern forms (procedures, institutions, social roles) or content (customs, morals, laws). Undertaking a study of morality, the authors of this article assume, drawing on P. Sztompka, that moral rules “apply to such spheres of life, in which an individual’s action is not indifferent to the welfare, happiness, health, or success of other individuals. Such actions cannot remain private because they involve the interests of others, enter their area of autonomy and freedom, can cause them pain. [. . .] They are the strongest expression of man’s social nature” (Sztompka 2021, p. 505).

3. Background of the Empirical Survey

In this study of the sexual morality of young people, a sociological perspective is adopted. Its advantage is that in the description of moral phenomena, sociology uses an axiologically neutral concept of morality. In this approach to morality as an object of

study, moral acts are behaviors ethically evaluated both positively and negatively. From a sociological perspective, morality emerges as a historical and social construct, as the result of communication between individuals and social groups. In modern societies, there are institutionalized and non-institutional forms of morality (Mariański 2021, pp. 128–29). The sociology of morality is a sub-discipline of general sociology, adopting its research perspective. As an empirical science of moral facts, it involves the study of environmental variations in morality, changes in morality in social groups and broader societies, and the dependence of moral attitudes and behavior on social, demographic, and cultural factors (Mariański 2015b, p. 771).

In the empirical understanding of sexual morality, an environmental frame of reference was used. The study is about morality actually operating in the youth environment. However, it does not overlook the fact that this model of morality is institutionally, socially, and culturally oriented. In the case of the surveyed young Poles who participate in school religion classes, it is necessary to consider a set of values, moral norms, behavioral patterns, and role expectations present in the normative system of the Catholic Church. These are passed on in the process of socialization by the Church and its cooperating entities for religious education (Baniak 2015, p. 442).

4. Operationalization of Concepts and Research Hypotheses

In the model of sexual morality research adopted in this article, attention is drawn to the attitudes of respondents towards specific norms of sexual life promoted by the Catholic Church and towards behaviors in terms of their acceptance or rejection. Sociologists suggest that based on global changes in the morality of Polish society, a certain picture of its secularization and autonomization can be empirically captured by examining the morality of marital and family life. This is not because these spheres are the most important in the morality of Catholics, but rather is due to the specific nature of tenets of Catholic ethics in the referenced scopes. These tenets differ significantly from the moral ethics of various secular institutions, and even from those of other Christian denominations (Potocki 2017, p. 215). In the face of increasing contestation of the religious and moral doctrine of the Catholic Church, the respondents were asked about their personal views on the most prominent moral issues of recent years, such as intercourse before marriage, living together before marriage, contraception, marital infidelity, abortion, in vitro fertilization, and homosexual relationships.

Based on previous research on youth morality and the authors' own observations, the leading hypothesis was formulated. It reads as follows: "The morality of young Poles regarding sex life is becoming increasingly autonomous and is formed independently of the morality model offered by leading educational institutions, particularly family, Church, and school. Selective attitudes are becoming more and more common in this area". On the other hand, referring to the level of acceptance of specific values and norms, the following detailed hypotheses were formulated:

1. Young Poles mostly condone sexual freedom in relation to certain behaviors.
2. Moral principles related to respect for human life are largely respected or relativized to specific circumstances.
3. The surveyed young Poles cherish pro-family values.
4. In terms of the norms of sexual morality present in the religious model, young females and youth from rural areas show a higher level of acceptance than male youth and residents of large cities.

A quantitative empirical survey was conducted to verify these hypotheses within the archdiocese of Wrocław. The young people researched were selected deliberately, as the research covered only those students who were in their final year of secondary school (in general or technical education). We aimed to determine the views of youth (18–20 years of age) who would be making major life decisions in the next few months. Other criteria taken into consideration included gender as well as the place of residence of the respondents (city or village). The authors are aware of the fact that the deliberate

selection of certain respondents does not fully guarantee the representativeness of the survey. As such, the results are of a purely illustrative nature, aimed at indicating trends of cultural transformation among Polish youth. Such research is particularly useful in the field of practical theology, as it guarantees both realism and greater accuracy of changes proposed in the area of pastoral theology strategies. Due to the fact that the research in question is not fully representative, where possible, the results of surveys that represent the views of the entire population of Polish youth, carried out by national research institutes like the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), will be presented alongside our research results, for the purpose of comparison. Therefore, the research results will be validated in comparative categories. This brings our attention to the fact that due to the differences in the methodological conceptualizations and the form of the questions put to the respondents, the results provided by various research institutions might not be fully comparable.

The interviews were carried out by way of questionnaires completed during lessons in the classes that qualified for the survey. The questionnaires were filled out by all the students present on a given school day. The respondents' statements were anonymous in order to comply with the ESOMAR standards. During the survey conducted in classrooms, a total of 450 completed questionnaires were collected, of which 410 statements were qualified for final analysis. The group for analysis included 234 women (57.1%) and 176 men (42.9%). Of those surveyed, 154 students attended a general education high school (37.5%) and 256 (62.4%) attended technical schools. Among the respondents, 50.9% lived in rural areas, 29.6% in cities with up to 100,000 inhabitants, and 19.2% in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The Chi-squared statistic was adopted to determine the relationship between the variables, while Cramér's *V* coefficient was used to measure the strength of the association. Statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$ (Wieczorkowska and Wierzbiński 2007, pp. 292–309).

5. Survey Results

Marital and family morality includes many norms regulating behavior in this area of life. Conforming to these guarantees order and harmony in family life. Many of these norms are passed on as a tradition, and in this case, they are treated as moral values, more deeply rooted in society. Sociologists concerned with religiosity and the moral attitudes of young Poles draw attention to the processes of secularization and individualization in this area. This is especially true of marital and family morality. This process is not linear; rather, many different directions of changes are seen (Mariański 2018, p. 245). Many sociological studies confirm that the sphere of marital and family morality has significantly emancipated itself from religious precepts. This process is noticeable in the younger generation, which increasingly bases its ethical evaluation on situational conditions. Sociologists of morality speak of a shift from objective to subjective morality, from the morality of precepts to the morality of individual judgments.

The analysis of the survey results begins with a general question about the respondents' views on the cohabitation of partners without legal or religious sanctioning of the relationship. For many young Poles, the final year of high school is a time of intense life choices, among which the decision of where to live is an important element. Many young people decide to share their living space with a person with whom they are in an emotional relationship as soon as they take up studies or professional work outside their current place of residence (Table 1).

In the entire surveyed group, 87.1% believe that cohabitation with a partner without marriage is acceptable, 7.3% think the opposite, and 5.6% of respondents have no clear opinion on this issue. In the teaching of the Catholic Church, cohabitation of young people without sacramental marriage constitutes a usurpation of a right reserved to spouses and is therefore viewed as persistence in mortal sin. However, for the majority of respondents, this way of life is entirely acceptable. Such strong support for living together without a sacramental union indicates the entry of young people into the stream of adult life in terms of worldview. Despite extended education time, young people are quicker to enter a

lifestyle that used to apply to more mature people. Cohabitation before marriage implies that responsibility is assumed only in part. It does not guarantee the stabilization time, consisting of, among other things, starting a family, but it is more about accepting the possibility of adult life “on a trial basis”, without the major consequences that come with a legalized union. The phenomenon of cohabitation is already becoming a custom that is gaining increasingly explicit public approval. This phenomenon is no longer stigmatized by the Catholic Church, also in terms of nomenclature (Potocki 2017, p. 216). This opinion is also confirmed by research. In 2021, within a nationwide, representative group of respondents, 20% were of the opinion that cohabitation is always wrong and unjustifiable, 14% were ambivalent, while 63% took the stance that the practice is not wrong and can be justified. Within the last category, 41% of the respondents took an emphatic approach, as evidenced by the highest point achieved on the rating scale (Boguszewski 2021, p. 3).

Table 1. Opinions on the acceptability of living together in cohabitation.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	206	88.0	150	85.2	182	87.1	110	90.2	65	82.3	355	87.1
Unacceptable	17	7.3	14	8.0	15	7.2	6	4.9	9	11.4	32	7.3
No opinion	11	4.7	12	6.8	12	5.7	6	4.9	5	6.3	23	5.6
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122		79	100	410	100
Chi-squared = 0.957; p = 0.620; Cramér’s V = 0.048						Chi-squared = 3.284; p = 0.511; Cramér’s V = 0.063						

The next issue considered is premarital sexual intercourse. This topic is often raised by young people during religion classes at school. The Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that consent to such behavior is impossible due to the absence of a sacramental union and lack of basis for accepting a new life that comes with responsible parenting. It reads “The Church fervently asks young people to abstain from an active sex life until they are married” (Polish Youcat 2011, p. 407). The age of respondents standing on the threshold of adulthood is in a time of many moral choices, including the decision to commence sexual activity. Sociological observations show that the sexual initiation of young people occurs during the period of their high school education or even at earlier points in their lives. The age limit is becoming blurred, though the circumstances of first sexual activities that the moral teaching of the Church are reserved for spouses. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage, the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion. Marriage bonds between baptized persons are sanctified by the sacrament” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992, No. 2360). In view of this, it was appropriate to ask adolescents about their views on sexual intercourse before marriage. The young people’s opinions on the acceptability of sexual intercourse before a church marriage are shown in Table 2.

Nearly three-quarters of the youth surveyed (72.9%) consider sexual intercourse before a church marriage perfectly permissible. The opposite view was expressed by 11.0% of respondents, and 16.1% had no opinion on this issue. Perhaps the latter present a relativizing attitude to the matter. However, the structure of the question makes it impossible to clarify this issue. It is worthwhile to compare the opinions of the youth surveyed to those of their peers from the nationwide population surveyed some years before by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) on a representative sample. There are obvious similarities. Although the question was framed somewhat differently, the answers given by the respondents point to their stance regarding sexual relations of a premarital nature. Of the respondents, 11% agreed with the opinion being evaluated at the time, which stated that “Young people should enter into sexual relations only after

marriage”; 70% disagreed, and 19% did not have an opinion on the subject. Among the persons surveyed, 9% of the males agreed with the statement in question, 73% disagreed, while 18% were indifferent. On the other hand, 14% of the females surveyed agreed with the statement, 68% disagreed, while 19% were indifferent. Within the same research, 77% of the youth surveyed were accepting of the opinion that “It is completely normal that people who love each other have sexual relations, and a wedding is not necessary”; 11% did not agree with this statement, and 12% admitted that they found it hard to take a stance on the matter. A worthy illustration of the issue might be the fact that 54% of the respondents admitted that they had already experienced sexual initiation: 61% of the boys and 45% of the girls fell into this category. The most frequently declared age of sexual initiation was 17. This age was given by 32% of the students who had already engaged in sexual activity (Gwiazda 2017, pp. 166–68). The views of the youth surveyed are similar to those of the general population. In 2021, when asked about the issue of having sex before marriage, people responded as follows: 16% acknowledged that it is always wrong and can never be justified; 63% recognized that there is nothing wrong with such behavior and it can always be justified; the remainder presented a middle approach or had no opinion on the issue (Boguszewski 2021, p. 3).

Table 2. Opinions on the acceptability of sexual intercourse before marriage.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	171	73.0	128	72.7	157	75.1	93	76.2	49	62.0	299	72.9
Unacceptable	28	12.0	17	9.7	19	9.1	10	8.2	16	20.3	45	11.0
No opinion	35	15.0	31	17.6	33	15.8	19	15.6	14	17.7	66	16.1
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122	100	79	100	410	100

Chi-squared = 0.929; $p = 0.628$; Cramér’s V = 0.048
 Chi-squared = 9.500; $p = 0.050$; Cramér’s V = 0.108

The data distributions in Table 2 show identical views in the male and female youth populations. More variation, reaching the adopted level of statistical significance, is introduced by the residential environment. It turns out that the greater moral rigorism in this regard is shown by residents of major urban agglomerations. This is somewhat surprising since, in light of other studies, residents of more pluralistic environments are simultaneously more permissive when evaluating moral rules or specific behaviors. Consultations with religion teachers provide some clarity here. Namely, young people living in large cities are covered by catechesis in school to a greater extent than students from rural areas or small towns commuting to high school. In general, however, it should be noted that young people distance themselves from moral norms promoted by the Catholic Church and stop treating premarital chastity as a value worth striving for.

Since the respondents mostly have nothing against sexual contact before sacramental marriage and cohabitation without marriage, it is interesting to analyze their attitudes toward marital fidelity. This is a norm strongly emphasized in the moral teaching of the Catholic Church and is also stressed in religion classes at school. According to *the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, by its very nature, conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of themselves that they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement “until further notice”. The “intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demands total fidelity from the spouses and requires an unbreakable union between them” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1646). Respondents’ answers to the question concerning the evaluation of marital infidelity are shown in Table 3. Inadmissibility or permission for such behavior will give an idea of how much young Poles value marital fidelity.

Table 3. Moral evaluation of marital infidelity.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	1	0.4	9	5.1	4	1.9	0	0.0	5	6.3	10	2.4
Unacceptable	213	91.0	149	84.7	189	90.4	111	91.0	63	79.7	362	88.3
No opinion	20	8.6	18	10.2	16	7.7	11	9.0	11	14.0	38	9.3
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122	100	79	100	410	100
Note *	Chi-squared = 9.812; $p = 0.007$; Cramér’s V = 0.155						Note * Chi-squared = 3.203; $p = 0.205$; Cramér’s V = 0.089					

* The first category of answers was excluded from the calculations due to low expected numbers.

Almost 9 out of 10 respondents found marital infidelity unacceptable, and almost 1 in 10 had no opinion on the issue. Perhaps this is a group that would be willing to justify such behavior with specific circumstances. Women were found to be stricter in the evaluation of the acceptability of marital infidelity than men. This difference is statistically significant. The results of other studies on Polish youth show that in recent years there has been a decrease in the percentage of young people who relativize their judgment depending on the circumstances. For example, when asked about the acceptability of marital infidelity, young Poles who chose the answer “it depends” in 1998 accounted for 22.2%; in 2005—12.1%; and in 2017—11.9% of the Polish population (Mariański 2018, p. 252). Other research projects point to the fact that marital fidelity is widely supported in the Polish society. Research carried out by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) showed a high degree of disapproval of marital infidelity. An overwhelming 86% of the respondents were unaccepting of such behavior, 66% of whom considered such behavior absolutely wrong, regardless of the circumstances. Only 3% of the persons surveyed expressed a contrary opinion (Boguszewski 2021, p. 3).

The fundamental issues of sexual ethics include contraception. The Catholic Church has a negative position on this matter. The separation of sexuality and procreation, which occurs when using contraceptives, leads to a situation in which sexuality becomes an absolutely arbitrary sphere of human life. Then, all types of sexuality have the same value (Pope Benedict XVI and Seewald 2011, p. 155). The position of the Church is often challenged, even by practicing Catholics. In the public space in which young people function, the catholic perspective on birth control often appears to be outdated or ridiculous. In public life, especially in the media, the promotion of various contraceptives prevails. The views of young Poles on the acceptability of the use of contraceptives are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Opinions on the use of contraceptives.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	185	79.1	122	69.3	156	74.6	93	76.2	58	73.4	307	74.9
Unacceptable	22	9.4	19	10.8	21	10.0	9	7.4	11	13.9	41	10.0
No opinion	27	11.5	35	19.9	32	15.3	20	16.4	10	12.7	62	15.1
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122	100	79	100	410	100
	Chi-squared = 6.097; $p = 0.047$; Cramér’s V = 0.122						Chi-squared = 2.563; $p = 0.634$; Cramér’s V = 0.056					

Nearly three-quarters of the surveyed students (74.9%) approved of contraception without reservation, 1 in 10 expressed the opposite opinion, and the remainder were unable to take a position on the issue. Statistical analysis confirms the significance of the difference in views between the group of women and men. The former proved to be more tolerant in evaluating contraception than their colleagues (a difference of 9.8%). Men were also more likely to be unable to take a position on the issue in question. This fact can be cautiously explained by the slightly lower maturity of males and less concern on their part in the event of conceiving a baby than in the case of women, who show a greater sense of responsibility for the consequences of sexual intercourse. The results obtained correspond to the results of nationwide research previously carried out on youth. This issue turned out to be quite sensitive for young Poles, as close to two-fifths of the respondents refused to take a stand on the matter. However, the responses given by those of the respondents who had already experienced sexual initiation and were willing to answer the question indicate that contraception is a common practice among young people, as confirmed by 79% of those respondents who were sexually active (Gwiazda 2017, p. 169). The students who completed the questionnaires for our survey did not differ in their views from the majority of adult Poles. The data obtained are in line with the views of Poles in general. A study published in 2021 shows that the use of contraceptives was met with almost four times more acceptance than condemnation. This is confirmed by the following indicators: 62% and 17%, respectively (Boguszewski 2021, p. 3).

The sphere of sexual morality also includes the issue of protecting human life. This area includes heated discussions on abortion. In Poland, for many years, these discussions were political in nature and concerned the legal permissibility of pregnancy termination. Recently, this issue experienced a revival, when on 22 October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled that Art. 4a sec. 1 point 2 of the Act on Family Planning, Protection of Human Fetuses, and the Conditions under Which Pregnancy Termination is Permissible, allowing abortion in situations where there is “a high probability of a severe and irreversible impairment of the fetus or an incurable illness threatening its life”, is inconsistent with the Basic Law, which contains legal guarantees of the protection of life. The Tribunal’s ruling triggered a wave of protests on the streets of Polish cities. Organized in 2020, the so-called Women’s Strike swept across Polish social life, exposing many attitudes that ranged from expressing one’s opinion to acts of vandalism and violence. According to some observers, these bottom-up processes are groundbreaking, perhaps revolutionary, and sooner or later will force changes in political life and institutional order (Bendyk 2021, p. 10).

In the research presented in this article, the basic question regarding abortion was very general and concerned its moral evaluation based on two categories: abortion as being acceptable or unacceptable. The results obtained are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Opinions on the acceptability of abortion.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	64	27.5	43	24.4	48	23.0	38	31.1	21	26.9	107	25.9
Unacceptable	100	42.9	82	46.6	102	48.8	46	37.8	34	43.0	182	44.5
No opinion	70	29.6	51	29.0	59	28.2	38	31.1	24	30.1	121	29.3
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122	100	79	100	410	100
Chi-squared = 0.818; <i>p</i> = 0.664; Cramér’s V = 0.055						Chi-squared = 4.410; <i>p</i> = 0.353; Cramér’s V = 0.073						

A smaller proportion of the surveyed youth took a strict stance on abortion. If the category of people who tolerate abortion is combined with those who are undecided, then this part outweighs strict opposing opinions by 11 percentage points. For the purpose

of comparative reference, it is worthwhile to call attention to the results of nationwide research carried out among students in their final year of secondary school (peers of the students surveyed by us). In research conducted in 2021, the respondents expressed the following opinions with regard to legally permissible abortion: in cases where there existed danger to the life of the mother, 86% were in favor of abortion, while 9% expressed a contrary opinion. Where the issue was danger to the health of the mother, 81% of the respondents felt abortion should be permissible, while 11% disagreed. With regard to pregnancy as a result of rape or incest, 81% agreed that abortion was permissible, while 10% thought otherwise. In cases where the child was bound to be born handicapped, 67% of the respondents supported abortion, while 20% were against it. In addition, 48% believed that abortion should be permitted in situations where the mother simply does not wish to have a child, while 38% expressed a contrary opinion; 47% considered abortion permissible in a case where the mother is in financial straits, while 40% thought otherwise; 46% of the respondents felt that a difficult personal situation in the life of the mother was sufficient grounds for abortion, while 41% disagreed. The views of secondary school students with regard to the issue of abortion had become more liberal than they were three years ago, when the same question was asked in a similar survey. There has been a significant increase in the number of persons who are in support of abortion, both in those cases permitted by law, as well as in those where it is legally prohibited (Kawalec 2022b, pp. 159, 161).

The scope of sexual morality also includes important bioethical issues. Among them, there is controversy around the issue of in vitro fertilization. Debates on this issue often put forward arguments such as longing for a child, the right to have a child, and the rights of the individual. In the modern mentality, there is the belief that anything possible is allowed. There is no doubt that infertility is a serious social problem. The World Health Organization classifies it as a “social diseases”, which affects between 8% and 18% of couples. In its teaching, the Catholic Church indicates the need for infertility treatment inter alia through NaProTechnology. However, the layman’s view of infertility involves couples considering in vitro fertilization, which the Church considers a wicked method (Pope John Paul II 1995, p. 14). Infertility affects many people around the world; it is a significant problem in Poland. In Poland, the discussion on in vitro fertilization has been overshadowed by many other social problems, but many people experience a moral dilemma because of it. Perhaps this topic is also present in the families of the youth surveyed. Therefore, the set of survey questions in the field of morality includes a question about in vitro fertilization. The results obtained are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Views on in vitro fertilization.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	153	65.4	91	51.7	121	57.9	81	66.4	42	53.2	244	59.5
Unacceptable	34	14.5	35	19.9	37	17.7	14	11.5	18	22.8	69	16.8
No opinion	47	20.1	50	28.4	51	24.4	27	22.1	19	24.1	97	23.7
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122	100	79	100	410	100

Chi-squared = 8.098; $p = 0.017$; Cramér’s V = 0.141
 Chi-squared = 5.609; $p = 0.230$; Cramér’s V = 0.083

In the context of the previously analyzed issues, the answers to the question about the acceptability of in vitro fertilization are not surprising. Puzzling, however, is the fact that nearly a quarter of the high school seniors had no opinion on the matter. For a large portion of adolescents, the topic of in vitro fertilization is not yet a subject of in-depth reflection. A much more important topic relating directly to their current existential situation is the issue of premarital intercourse or contraceptive use, which they expressed

in their responses. Ideological and religious conflicts concerning different forms of in vitro fertilization have subsided in the media recently, which is why the topic may be unfamiliar to many young people. From the perspective of independent variables, only sex brings statistically significant variation. Approval is expressed by far more women than men; the former are also less likely to declare indecision. Perhaps the inability to become pregnant is a more meaningful problem for women. It cannot be ruled out that in such a situation, doubt as to their own femininity may arise.

The final moral issue from the sphere of sexual life, about which young Poles were asked, is homosexuality. This phenomenon takes various forms. In modern Western culture, the following types of homosexuality are distinguished: casual homosexuality, personalized homosexuality, and homosexuality as a lifestyle (Giddens 2021, p. 584). The surveyed adolescents live amid growing political correctness and increasingly bold activities promoting homosexuality, including the LGBT movement, which is well-defined and keeps gaining momentum. This movement can be broadly described as “various types of collective actions taken by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual individuals and allies to initiate and sustain socio-cultural, political and economic changes consisting in the transition from a heteronormative model of society, i.e., a society of compulsory heterosexuality and belonging to one category of the binary gender model, to a society that respects the fact of diversity in psychosexual orientation and gender identity, gender expression and human gender characteristics, and thus to abolish all manifestations of socio-cultural, political and economic discrimination against non-heterosexual people or people with non-normative gender identification/expression (non-heteronormative)” (Bielska 2018, p. 16).

The surveyed group of young Poles was asked in general about their opinions on the acceptability of homosexual relationships. The results of the responses obtained are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Acceptance of homosexual relationships.

Opinion of Respondents	Women		Men		Rural Area		City of Up to 100,000		City of More Than 100,000		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Acceptable	125	53.6	49	27.8	75	36.2	61	50.0	38	48.1	174	42.5
Unacceptable	46	19.7	82	46.6	77	36.7	30	24.6	21	26.6	128	31.3
No opinion	63	26.7	45	25.6	57	27.1	31	25.4	20	25.3	108	26.2
Total	234	100	176	100	209	100	122	100	79	100	410	100
Chi-squared = 39.026; <i>p</i> < 0.001; Cramér’s V = 0.310						Chi-squared = 8.874; <i>p</i> = 0.064; Cramér’s V = 0.104						

The young respondents largely respect the possibility of homosexual relationships. Perhaps this opinion is influenced by the fact that many people, especially celebrities from the media sphere, “come out” and no longer conceal their sexual orientation. Such testimonies strongly permeate the consciousness of young people, who are increasingly impressed with the distinct sexual orientations of such individuals and thus build support for such attitudes among their peers. In the perspective of surveys representative of all adult Poles, the opinion that homosexuality is a normal orientation is especially true for the youngest respondents aged 18–24 (21%), residents of cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants (25%), self-employed people (21%), students (22%), and housewives (25%). In particular, those who describe their political views as leftist (31%) and those who do not participate in religious practices at all (26%) more often believe that homosexual orientation is normal (Bożewicz 2019, p. 4).

To a large extent, the approach of young Poles to LGBT+ persons could also be indicative of the extent to which homosexual relationships are accepted. The issue of

people's attitude to LGBT+ persons first came up in research carried out among youth by the Public Opinion Research Center in 2021. The premise for its inclusion in the scope of social research was the presence of groups of such people in the public space, as well as demands for the acknowledgment of their rights. This is a noticeable trend of cultural transformation in Poland and a frequent subject of public debate. The Catholic Church in Poland warns against its negative impact on society (the so-called gender ideology). When questioned about their attitude to gay, lesbian, and other LGBT+ persons, 20% of the respondents admitted that they felt aversion to such persons, though in varying degrees. Almost one-fifth of the respondents (19%) stated that they had mixed feelings on the subject—neither aversion nor acceptance; 61% of the youth surveyed admitted to being accepting of LGBT+ persons, 36% of whom expressed complete acceptance of the persons in question (Kawalec 2022a, p. 167).

6. Summary of Survey Results

Based on the results of the survey, one must conclude that young Poles show a high level of tolerance in their approach to the selected norms and behaviors in the sphere of sexual life. Moral consciousness about marriage and family, especially in terms of sexual behavior, undergoes processes of relativization and individualization. Morality in this area is becoming increasingly autonomous, built based on the judgments of one's own conscience and one's own authority. Thus, the leading hypothesis, which conjectured that the sexual morality of young people is gradually moving away from the model promoted by the Catholic Church and becoming increasingly selective, was largely confirmed. The detailed hypothesis that young Poles mostly condone sexual freedom in relation to specific behaviors was also positively verified. This is especially true for sexual intercourse before marriage, cohabitation before marriage, use of contraception, and significant acceptance of homosexual relationships. For the hypothesis that young people mostly respect norms relating to human life, it does not appear to be confirmed. In the assessment of abortion, respondents with approving and undecided attitudes totaled 55.2%, and in the assessment of in vitro fertilization—83.2%. However, the vast majority of the young Poles surveyed value marital fidelity. The hypothesis about the relationship between demographic and social characteristics was partially confirmed. Sex is the only variable that significantly determines differences when evaluating such behaviors as contraceptive use, in vitro fertilization, homosexuality, and marital infidelity. Young people from rural and urban environments do not differ in their views across the issues analyzed. This means that the moral universe of young Poles is becoming increasingly homogeneous. It should also be added that it is marked by "moral liberalism", which, in empirical dimension on a 1–7 point scale, in 2021 reached an average of 3.43 for the youngest group of respondents included in the nationwide survey (Boguszewski 2021, p. 6).

7. Discussion and Pastoral Conclusions

The systemic changes in Poland have strongly affected the spheres of marital and family life. Sociologists have long talked about structural and cultural changes in the family. The former concern increasing family instability, the spread of new forms of communal living, the reduction of the number of children in families, the transformation of social roles of spouses, and the position of a child in the family. They are the result of a complex transformation process of human consciousness; they are a function of the system of shared moral values. At the cultural level, it is possible to observe the privatization of human sexuality, consumerist and permissive attitudes in marital life, and changes in family formation patterns (Slany 2007, pp. 247–52).

These changes need to be viewed more broadly from the perspective of modernity, aptly defined by Z. Bauman: "The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less 'modern' than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way. What makes it as modern as it was a century or so ago is what sets modernity apart from all other historical forms of human cohabitation: the

compulsive and obsessive, continuous, unstoppable, forever incomplete modernization; the overwhelming and ineradicable, unquenchable thirst for creative destruction" (Bauman 2000, p. 28). The "creative destruction" also concerns the ethics of marital and family life, particularly in terms of norms governing sexual life. Today, not only in Poland, there are new phenomena that go beyond structural and demographic transformations of the family. Patterns far removed from the traditional family model based on Christian culture and its value system, are increasingly making themselves known. Postmodernism destabilized the concept of the family understood as a community based upon the covenant of a man and a woman within marriage and including children who are their offspring. The Christian model of marriage and family is confronted with secularized patterns of marital and family life, disseminated in the world. The concept of socio-cultural gender identity, promoted by the "gender ideology", is another component of postmodern ethics. Because of this, men and women are faced with many choices. At any point in life, an individual must be guaranteed a choice of their social role and sexual behavior (Świąś 2018, p. 158).

It must be acknowledged that the scope of the debate on human sexuality in Polish society is not as advanced as in, for example, British society, where attempts are being made to overcome the entrenched polarization between the position of conservatives and liberals in their approach to same-sex relationships or non-binary people. The "Living in Love and Faith" project (2018–2020) by the Church of England was aimed at sensitizing the public not only to the issues of people with fluid gender identity but also to issues such as fidelity, stability, and durability of relationships (Cornwall 2021, p. 10). It seems that in the debate on the sexual morality of young people, which in the future will keep emerging in Catholic circles in Poland, one should avoid reducing this debate solely to the problems of people reporting issues with their sense of gender identity, although this issue should not be underestimated. Instead, it is necessary to go beyond the slogans of liberal or conservative activists by conducting an in-depth analysis of theological arguments using biblical hermeneutics and convincing young people what results in their fulfillment in love.

In Polish historical and contemporary circumstances, the morality of the young generation should be considered in the context of religious attitudes. In fact, the classical works of sociology of religion, by Ch. Glock and R. Stark—authors of the multidimensional concept of religiosity—recognize morality as all religious principles that determine how people should act when acknowledging a given religion as their own. This is about the effects of an individual's religious beliefs, experience, and knowledge of the secular areas of their life (Glock and Stark 1998, p. 185). Studies in the US have provided some evidence of a positive correlation between religious attitudes and human sexuality, especially in helping young people reduce risky sexual behavior. Having a full family with two parents, who encouraged their children to avoid sexual relations, was also associated with a decline in sexual exposure. Finally, formally learning how to say no to sex was associated with less risky sexual behavior (Haglund and Fehring 2010, pp. 469–70). The sample group of adolescents predominantly demonstrates selective attitudes in the field of religious faith. Those who declared that "they believe in their own way" and those who "believe but deliberately do not follow all the instructions of the Church" amounted to as much as 63.7%. Those who chose the answer "I am a believer and follow the instructions of the Church" made up only 23.7%. Perhaps in the intergenerational transfer, the young respondents did not receive proper moral formation. When assessing their parents' faith, 39.2% of respondents believed that they try to live according to the principles of faith; 15.2% claimed that their parents, although they declare themselves as believers, consciously do not respect the principles of faith; and 19.9% stated that although their parents consider themselves practicing believers, it is not visible on a daily basis. It is not at all surprising that the parents' waning faith was reflected in an even weaker faith in their children.

According to the declaration "Gravissimum educationis" of the Second Vatican Council, "The Church is bound as a mother to give to these children of hers an education by which their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ and at the same time do all she can to promote for all peoples the complete perfection of the human person, the good

of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human" (No. 3). Especially from theological faculties, the community of the Church expects the transmission of the heritage of Christian wisdom as well as educational models that are adapted to modern requirements. Conclusions and postulates aimed at improving the currently used model of pastoral activity will be done from the Catholic point of view and will be addressed to Catholic educators for the reasons indicated above.

In general, it must be admitted that young Poles—at least as far as declarations are concerned—are close to the Catholic Church (Małkosa and Rozpędowski 2022). Those of the respondents who see it as a place to meet God and as the home where the merciful Father awaits represent a total of 68.1%. With higher or lower frequency, 90.1% of the respondents encountered the evangelization efforts of the Church. They also mostly agree with the basic dogmatic formulations that are part of the Catholic Creed. There was also a noticeably high level of knowledge about the teaching of the Church on important issues of sexual ethics. The surveyed youth correctly assessed its teaching on abortion, in vitro fertilization, divorce, and same-sex marriage. However, the personal views of those surveyed deviate from what the Church teaches. This is part of a wider phenomenon—the laicization of morality. Nowadays, it is important to realize that not only the Catholic Church but also other Churches no longer have exclusive rights to shape human behavior. They are in competition with other institutions: "The processes of secularization and desacralization make the Church and religion regulate the rhythm of life of many individuals and families as well as society as a whole to a lesser extent than before, lead to deconsecration of customs and the culture of experiencing Sundays and holidays, weaken and even remove the divine element from the consciousness of average people, the view is spread that anything is possible for man. Man's attitude toward the sacred is changing. [...] In place of religion, all types of cults are emerging. These processes together form the phenomenon of laicization" (Dyczewski 2011, pp. 55–56).

The cultural changes also manifest in the weakening of the links between the faith professed and moral beliefs and behaviors. Personal specific behaviors of individuals are increasingly less subject to moral rules of religious origin. Individualism, which emphasizes freedom and autonomy of one's own life choices, comes to the fore. This trend is sufficiently confirmed by current Polish sociological research on the sources of moral norms. It appears that morality is increasingly treated selectively or considered foreign. The consequence of this is a fairly widespread acceptance of phenomena and behavior patterns that are disapproved of from the point of view of Catholic morality, such as premarital sex, contraception, cohabitation, or divorce, as well as leaving it to one's own conscience to decide what is right and what is wrong (Boguszewski 2021, p. 9). This individualism in shaping personal moral convictions, particularly among Polish youth, was also confirmed by the presented study.

The reported results of the empirical study on the moral attitudes of young Poles regarding sex life, as well as data from other sociological surveys and opinion polls, indicate a crisis of institutional morality in the minds of youth, i.e., morality understood as a set of orders and prohibitions. The question remains, what can the Catholic Church improve in its pastoral offer to better prepare young people for responsible decisions in the sphere of sexual life? Based on surveys conducted among lecturers from 17 Catholic universities in the US who tried to introduce changes to student sex education, Mark A. Levand drew the following conclusions. First, it is necessary to overcome the fear of engaging in discussions about sexuality with youth. Second, the dialogue and studies with young people on human sexuality must be continued. In this dialogue, it is important that the emphasis be placed primarily on patiently listening to the youth and only secondarily on giving them advice. Third, the responsibility of Catholic higher education environments is to create resources of modern, holistic knowledge on human sexuality and its relation to the Christian faith (Levand 2021, pp. 6–8).

According to K. Pawlina, young people in Poland see themselves more as creators than addressees of moral norms. In their behavior, they often follow the rule "I do it

because I enjoy it” or “because it’s convenient for me”. Generally, in moral matters, young people do not accept any third-party interference: “No one can tell me what to do”—they emphasize in their opinions on morality (Pawlina 2019, p. 489). The Catholic Church cannot remain indifferent to such moral attitudes of young people. Therefore, the pastoral care of young people requires seeking new ways of shaping Catholic moral attitudes, building a Christian hierarchy of values from an early age, as well as preparing them well for marital and family life. This is not an easy task to accomplish in the current cultural context but is necessary to preserve any Church community for future generations. A circumstance conducive to the religious education of Polish youth is the fact that 75% of them still live in families with both parents (Roguska 2017, pp. 19–28). The research presented in this paper showed that most young people surveyed still see their mother and, in second place, father as authority figures. However, in order for this to have an impact on the moral formation of youth, including sex education, parishes should intensify pastoral care for families and help parents prepare for their role as sex educators of their children (Goleń 2018). This is not an easy task, which is why many parents deliberately leave this aspect of education to other entities, particularly the school and the media. Unfortunately, a trend has emerged among young people in Poland, especially those living in major cities, to opt out of religious education, which results in the Catholic Church slowly losing an important tool for influencing youth in schools (Małkosa et al. 2022). In such a situation, what remains are Catholic media and parish pastoral care, as measures for the sex education of young people.

The Catholic Church is obliged to accompany people on their path to salvation, in any environment and at any stage of their journey. It is especially important with regard to young people—to first find them and establish some form of communication, then rebuild the trust in the institution of the Catholic Church, recently weakened by cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergymen. Only then can an attempt be made to engage young people in a dialogue in which there will be room for a conversation about living a meaningful life and about fulfillment in love, which is possible in a well-arranged marital and family life, among other avenues. This lifestyle requires the adoption of and compliance with moral principles in the field of human sexuality. This is not an easy task, yet in Poland, it remains feasible. The Catholic Church has stable moral principles that set stringent requirements for people in terms of sexuality; however, in the pastoral care of youth, it is not enough to communicate these principles; it is necessary to show paths toward their implementation that guarantee lasting satisfaction and not just a temporary feeling of happiness.

According to D. Lipiec, “many problems of the modern youth have the source in a distance from God. A large group of young people have not met Him in their life and have not established a personal relationship with Him. As the primary objective of the youth ministry appears thus leading young people to a personal encounter with God, and then to deepen this relationship” (Lipiec 2016, p. 140). During World Youth Day in Krakow 2016, Pope Francis showed the young people that God is a merciful Father, who is close to a human being. This proximity means a deep involvement of God in human life. The involvement of God is of existential and emotional character. Many people today, especially young people, do not reciprocate God’s merciful love. According to Francis, the main reason for this is ignorance of God. It is caused primarily by the fact that no one preached to young people the truth about God and or explained it incompletely (Pope Francis 2016). For this reason, the proximity of priests means being introduced to the closeness of God, understood as guidance to Him, getting to know Him, and existentially adhering to Him. Due to the high dynamics of cultural changes in the generation of young people, it is necessary to constantly search for new effective methods in pastoral care dedicated to them. In the opinion of Pope Francis, “youth ministry needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God” (Pope Francis 2019, p. 204).

From the perspective of practical theology, the following are especially important for immediate application in the pastoral care of youth: the ability to listen to young people

patiently and sometimes for long periods of time, accompanying them in discovering the meaning of their lives in the world and God's calling in the Church, the effort to search for understandable language and visualizations in the evangelization of youth, as well as supporting the development of Christian life environments in the young generation (Fiałkowski and Sadlak 2021, pp. 87–103). Reaching the hearts of young people with the message of the Gospel requires immersing oneself in their life experience, their perception and understanding of reality, their highly individualized axiology, and complex decision-making processes. They want to be creative participants in the social, cultural, and religious changes taking place. Therefore, they must not be treated as passive recipients of pastoral programs or strategies developed without their involvement. If a priest or lay animator is able to enter the world of young people, they will also be able to set them high moral requirements essential for their development. Abandonment of these requirements, also in the sphere of human sexuality, leads to axiological nihilism, trivialization of personal and social life, and ultimately to depression and personal destruction. Hence, moral requirements should be set for young people, but this must always be done with perceptible love and from the position of a witness of a good, full, joyful, and happy life.

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