
ANALYSIS OF NUN MEMBERSHIP IN FEMALE ORDERS IN POLAND

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(Received 23 March 2022, revised 27 July 2022)

Abstract

Religious congregations in Poland date back to the Middle Ages. Poland currently has more than 106 religious congregations with an active membership of over 17,000 nuns. For some time, the number of religious vocations has recently been on a decline; hence, this article examines the number of nuns in female religious orders in Poland. This study consists of two parts: a literature review that discusses the history and the current state of female religious congregations in Poland and an analysis of statistical data on nun membership in these congregations. This research was based on secondary information and statistical data. It sought to answer the following research questions: (1) How did the number of nuns change in Poland in 2000-2020?; (2) What are the most popular women's jobs in Poland? The results provide important information about the number of nuns in Polish religious congregations and thus indicate that in the last four years, these congregations have witnessed a significant decrease in the number of sisters serving in them.

Keywords: women, monastic orders, religious, vocations, Catholic Church

1. Introduction

The history of female orders dates back to the Middle Ages. In Poland, such history is expansive and dynamic. The first order that arrived in Poland in the 11th century was the Benedictine order, which was from Italy; the main goal of the so-called black monks was to spread and strengthen the Catholic faith in the country [1, 2]. However, historical sources state that the oldest monastery in Poland was the Norbertine Convent, which was established in 1126 near Kalisz [3]. In those days, the main task of nuns, besides their daily work, was rewriting books manually. The 12th and 13th centuries saw an intensive flourishing of religious life, which lasted until the 15th century. Other orders were then established on Polish soil, such as the Carmelite Sisters, the Poor Clares and the Bernardine Sisters. In the succeeding centuries up to the 18th, female orders developed poorly, with the number of nuns reaching only 3,000 in 150 female monasteries. At the same time, the number of men in male monasteries was five

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times higher [2, 4]. During the partitions, most religious congregations were established in the Austrian partition. The activity of nuns consisted mainly of helping in hospitals as well as poor youth and children. The female orders were the least active in the Prussian and Russian partitions. Charity activities during the partitions were conducted by the Sisters of Saint Joseph; the Albertine Sisters; and the Seraphim, Oblate, and Benedictine sisters, while the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus were engaged in educational activities [2]. After Poland regained its independence in 1918, and especially in the years 1918-1939, the development of female religious life made significant progress in the regained Polish lands. In these years, a total of 26 new religious congregations were established, 17 of Polish origin and 9 of Western European origin. These orders mainly focused on addressing social needs. Most nuns at that time were in the dioceses of Lviv, Kraków, Warsaw, Gniezno-Poznań, Silesia, and Przemyśl [5]. After World War II, when the Polish People's Republic was formed, the authorities took over most of the female monasteries and liquidated the hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes managed by nuns [2, 6, 7]. The nuns themselves were often repressed by the authorities at that time. This state of affairs lasted until 1989, when communism was overthrown in Poland [8, 9]. After 1989, a law was passed regulating relations between Church and state. Based on this act, the nuns recovered their properties confiscated during the communist period [10]. In the 1990s, female and male monasteries regained their monasteries, and the activity of female orders was strengthened. In 2000-2004, the number of religious sisters increased significantly. Currently, all dioceses in Poland have nuns, but their distribution is uneven. Most nuns work in the dioceses of Kraków, Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, and Przemyśl, while the fewest nuns serve in the dioceses of Drohiczyn, Elbląg, Ełk, Zamość, and Sosnowiec. All these dioceses were established after World War II [2]. After 1989, more than 100 religious congregations were established and continue to function in Poland, with over 17,000 nuns. More than 2,000 nuns work abroad on various missions mainly in African countries. The largest female order at present is the Servant of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Charity, and Elizabeth. Currently, nuns perform a wide range of activities. Besides working in monasteries, they also work outside, mainly holding activities related to teaching and upbringing. Nuns are often catechists in schools and careers in nurseries and kindergartens as well as special schools. They also work in nursing homes and shelters for the homeless. As already mentioned, the distribution of female orders in Poland is disproportionate; most of the nuns are currently in the dioceses of Kraków (2,628), Warsaw (2,317), and Poznań (1,413). Elbląg (118) [2; *Zakony żeńskie w Polsce - niesamowita historia*, <https://kopalnia.pl/kopalnia-wiedzy/zakony-zenskie-w-polsce-niesamowita-historia>, accessed on 21.12.21]. In recent years, and especially since 2000, there has been a systematic decline in the number of religious vocations among women. As noted, this is a global trend that is also becoming more and more visible in Poland. In the literature, one can find studies that analyse the problem of the scarcity of religious vocations among women [11, 12]. Considering that this problem also

concerns religious vocations in Poland, this article examines statistical data on nun membership in Poland. Given the relatively large number of both religious congregations and nuns in Poland, it is interesting to analyse these figures and trends in this area in recent years.

The article presented data on the number of nuns and religious congregations for the period 2000-2020. To deepen its analysis for 2016-2019, this study also discussed data on the 20 largest religious congregations. The aim of this research was to analyse the indicators of nun membership in Poland. The following research questions were asked:

- How has the number of nuns changed in Poland in 2000-2020?
- What are the most popular female orders in Poland?

2. Research methodology

This paper uses data on female religious orders collected from the 'Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae' in Polonia published in 2015-2020 by the Polish Institute of Catholic Church Statistics [13-18]. These include data on the number of nuns per religious order. As of today, data on the number of Polish individual women's congregations in 2020 remains insufficient; only total data exists because of delays in the publication of data broken down by individual religious congregations. This publication presents data concerning the largest 20 of the existing 106 nun congregations in Poland.

Additionally, in terms of historical data, this study uses data from a website in which the operations of female religious orders in Poland are presented [Zakony żeńskie, 2021, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>, accessed on 23.11.2021]. This website contains on its subpages substantial data concerning various aspects of the functioning of these religious orders.

Only raw data were taken from these sources. They have been aggregated and elaborated by the authors of this study. To process the collected data, we used an Excel spreadsheet and calculated indicators such as differences in the size of the examined phenomena, percentage differences, and number of nuns per congregation.

3. Nun membership in Poland - analysis of statistical data

Table 1 summarizes data on nun membership in Poland in all religious orders in the period 2000-2020. It includes data on the number of nuns, the difference in nun membership from the previous year, and the percentage decrease in nun membership and the number of nuns leaving religious congregations in a given year.

Based on our analysis of the collected data, the number of religious sisters in Poland in the last 20 years has shown a downward trend. This is illustrated in Figure 1. In 2000, a total of 23,240 nuns served in Polish religious congregations, while in 2020, the total number of nuns was 16,764. Between 2000 and 2020, nun membership decreased by 6,476 (27.9%). Figure 2 shows the change in nun membership by year. Among the years studied, only 2002

showed an increase in the number of serving nuns. All other years showed a clear negative downward trend.

Table 1. Nun membership in Poland between 2000 and 2020. Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

Year	Number of nuns	Difference	Difference in percentage	Leaving the order
2020	16764	-425	-2.47	130
2019	17189	-364	-2.07	115
2018	17553	-305	-1.71	92
2017	17858	-339	-1.86	98
2016	18197	-350	-1.89	134
2015	18547	-378	-2.00	126
2014	18925	-321	-1.67	154
2013	19246	-112	-0.58	124
2012	19358	-510	-2.57	162
2011	19868	-340	-1.68	157
2010	20208	-318	-1.55	150
2009	20526	-370	-1.77	174
2008	20896	-323	-1.52	193
2007	21219	-433	-2.00	223
2006	21652	-357	-1.62	243
2005	22009	-246	-1.11	226
2004	22255	-342	-1.51	233
2003	22597	-395	-1.72	236
2002	22992	105	0.46	205
2001	22887	-353	-1.52	232
2000	23240	-	-	203

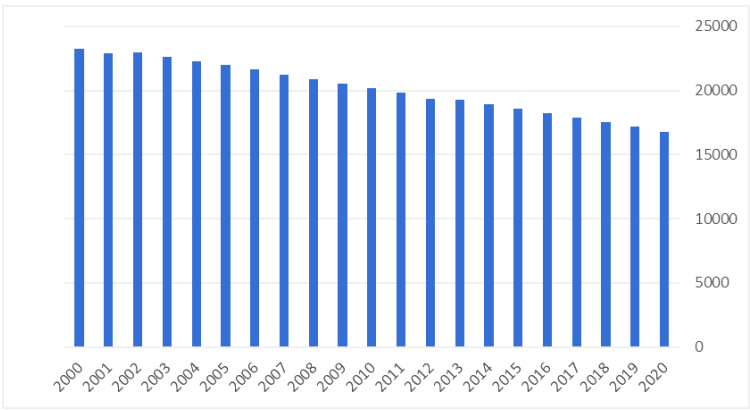


Figure 1. Nun membership in Poland between 2000 and 2020. Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

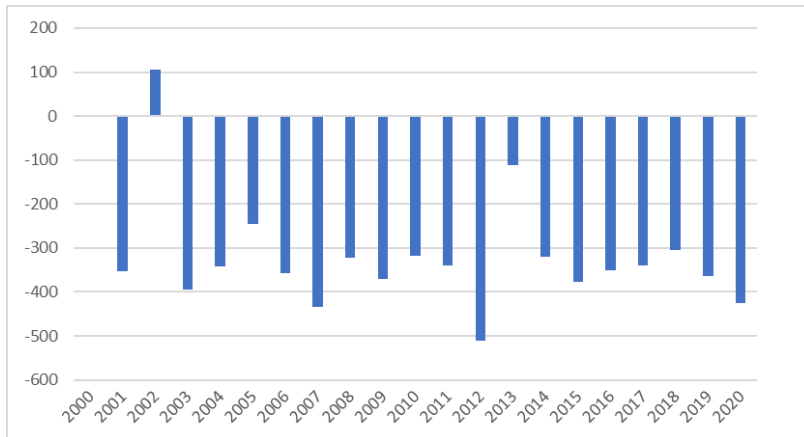


Figure 2. Changes in nun membership in Poland between 2000 and 2020. Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

The largest reductions in the number of nuns occurred in 2007 (433), 2012 (510) and 2020 (425). Particularly in the last three years, there has been an increasingly rapid rate of decline in the number of religious sisters year on year: 2018 (305), 2019 (364), and 2020 (425). Such a trend in nun membership clearly overlaps with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The percentage decrease in nun membership in Polish congregations has remained in the range of 1%-3% annually. In this case, the negative tendency of recent years is even more evident; regarding the percentage decrease in the number of nuns, 2020 was the second worst year in the examined period, only slightly below 2012. In 2020, nun membership in Polish congregations decreased by 2.47%.

The declining number of nuns is a direct result of the decrease in the number of vocations and is not due to departures from the order. Data concerning nuns who leave the order does not show a rising tendency. On the contrary, the period 2000-2007 saw the highest number of sisters leaving the order, exceeding 200 nuns yearly. Currently, 130 sisters left the order in 2020. Between 2015 and 2020, the rate of departures did not exceed 150.

If leaving the order is not the cause of the constant decrease in nun membership in Polish congregations, then the main reason must be the decrease in the number of vocations. The problem linked to the decline in vocations is clearly visible when we examine the number of novices in religious orders. Table 2 shows the number of novices in Polish female religious orders, expressed in percentages in comparison with the previous year.

The table shows that during the entire research period (2000-2020), there was a decrease in the number of novices. In 2000, there were 924 novices in Polish women's orders, while in 2020 there were only 147. In the examined period, the decrease in the number of novice sisters amounted to 777, which is 84.1%. It is worth noting that the decline in the number of novices was much greater compared with that in the number of nuns.

Table 2. Number of novices in Poland between 2000 and 2020. Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

Year	Number of novitiates	Difference	Difference in percentage
2020	147	-38	-25.85
2019	185	-17	-9.19
2018	202	-9	-4.46
2017	211	-9	-4.27
2016	220	-53	-24.09
2015	273	-3	-1.10
2014	276	14	5.07
2013	262	-13	-4.96
2012	275	-48	-17.45
2011	323	-32	-9.91
2010	355	-30	-8.45
2009	385	-52	-13.51
2008	437	-82	-18.76
2007	519	-81	-15.61
2006	600	27	4.50
2005	573	-105	-18.32
2004	678	-100	-14.75
2003	778	-58	-7.46
2002	836	-30	-3.59
2001	866	-58	-6.70
2000	924	-	-

This huge drop in the number of novices is the main reason for the decrease in nun membership in Polish women's orders. When we examine the data from Table 2 more closely, we can see that the greatest percentage decrease occurred in recent years, particularly 2020, which saw the greatest decrease in the number of novices (25.85%), followed by 2016 (24.09%).

This observed trend also indicates that the pandemic has affected the decrease in vocations in female convents. This is extremely precarious because the lack of an influx of novices means that, based on the data, the coming years will see the number of nuns continue to fall and the average age of nuns rise. Breaking this trend is possible only with an increase in the number of vocations, which will not be easy, especially because the problem is worsening.

The decline in the number of vocations is more and more clearly perceived and discussed in the Polish Church. It is influenced by many reasons, such as the progressive laicization of the young generation, which is worth mentioning. This phenomenon was already observed in the first decade of the 20th century. Since the mid-1980s, a decline in vocations in women's orders has been noted. According to the authors analysing the problem, contemporary culture is anti-vocational. The present sociological image of women is often determined by their beauty and body. In this kind of culture, it is extremely difficult to discern one's vocation, to hear the voice of God, and to devote oneself to it. Young people are programmed for success, which is difficult to

achieve in religious orders [19]. Another reason for the decline in vocations is also associated with misunderstandings of the essence of religious life in the modern world [20]. Another highlighted problem is the inability to utilize women's potential in the Church, which Pope Francis has pointed out [E. Gumulak, *Globalny spadek powołań: największy problem mają żeńskie zgromadzenia zakonne*, 2021, <https://opoka.news/globalny-spadek-powolan-najwiekszy-problem-maja-zenskie-zgromadzenia-zakonne>, accessed on 23.11.2021].

The downward trend in the number of vocations threatens the prospective functioning of female religious orders in Poland. This results in the weakening of many spheres of religious and secular activity in Church structures in which nuns were actively involved. This problem is not easy to solve because of the aforementioned waning interest in Church affairs among girls and young women in Poland for many years [21].

Table 3. Number of female religious houses in Poland in the years 2000-2020. Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

Year	Number of congregations	Nuns/congregation
2020	2071	8.09
2019	2113	8.13
2018	2150	8.16
2017	2188	8.16
2016	2218	8.20
2015	2233	8.31
2014	2268	8.34
2013	2289	8.41
2012	2315	8.36
2011	2358	8.43
2010	2397	8.43
2009	2368	8.67
2008	2422	8.63
2007	2450	8.66
2006	2479	8.73
2005	2491	8.84
2004	2566	8.67
2003	2591	8.72
2002	2588	8.88
2001	2536	9.02
2000	2555	9.10

The trend observed in the publication is consistent with what is happening in other countries. Against the background of many other countries in Western Europe, one can even say that Poland's situation is not bad. However, in particular, the drastic decrease in the number of novices suggests that it will get worse in the coming years. The decline in the number of vocations in women's religious orders was already observed in the United States in the 20th century [22]. The first 20 years of the 21st century have deepened this trend. The problem

of the twilight of religious life and the decline of vocations in the world were analysed by Linger and Vandewiele, who noted that the emancipation of women and the emergence of numerous opportunities for secular careers and self-realization have led to a significant decline in vocations among women, exceeding that among men [11].

Table 4. Nun membership in the largest Polish women's religious orders in 2016-2019.

Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

Order	2019	2018	2017	2016	Difference	Difference in percentage
Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Starovia	841	854	865	888	-47	-5.29
Sisters of St Elizabeth	769	802	833	858	-89	-10.37
Sisters of Mercy (Daughters of Charity)	706	733	748	762	-56	-7.35
Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth	679	693	702	705	-26	-3.69
Felician Sisters	615	637	646	654	-39	-5.96
Families of Mary	601	610	622	639	-38	-5.95
Servants of the Holy Virgin Mary of Silesia	533	543	554	565	-32	-5.66
Servants of the Holy Virgin Mary – Mariówka	522	534	550	554	-32	-5.78
Seraphim	480	503	514	533	-53	-9.94
Albertines	454	461	467	478	-24	-5.02
Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Mariówka	450	462	466	470	-20	-4.26
Orszulanki SJK	441	449	456	468	-27	-5.77
Salesian Sisters	367	369	379	387	-20	-5.17
Sercine Sisters	340	344	350	357	-17	-4.76
Carmelites of the Child Jesus	336	344	353	353	-17	-4.82
Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy	327	344	354	351	-24	-6.84
Josephites	321	326	325	329	-8	-2.43
Dominican Sisters	290	287	289	294	-4	-1.36
Ursuline Sisters UR	262	268	271	272	-10	-3.68
Divine Providence	247	249	253	257	-10	-3.89

Table 3 presents data on the number of female religious houses in Poland in 2000-2020 and the number of nuns per congregation. Similar to nun membership, a decrease in the number of religious houses can also be observed in the examined period. In 2000, there were 2,555 religious houses in Poland; by

2020, this number had decreased to 2,071 (18.9%). It is worth noting that the decrease in the number of religious houses is smaller than the decrease in nun membership. As a result, the average number of nuns per religious house has been falling since 2000. In 2000, an average of 9.1 nuns served a religious house, while in 2020, this number was 8.09. This phenomenon is also disadvantageous, as smaller religious houses may have problems associated with the increase in relative costs of maintenance and the difficulty of operating extremely small religious communities.

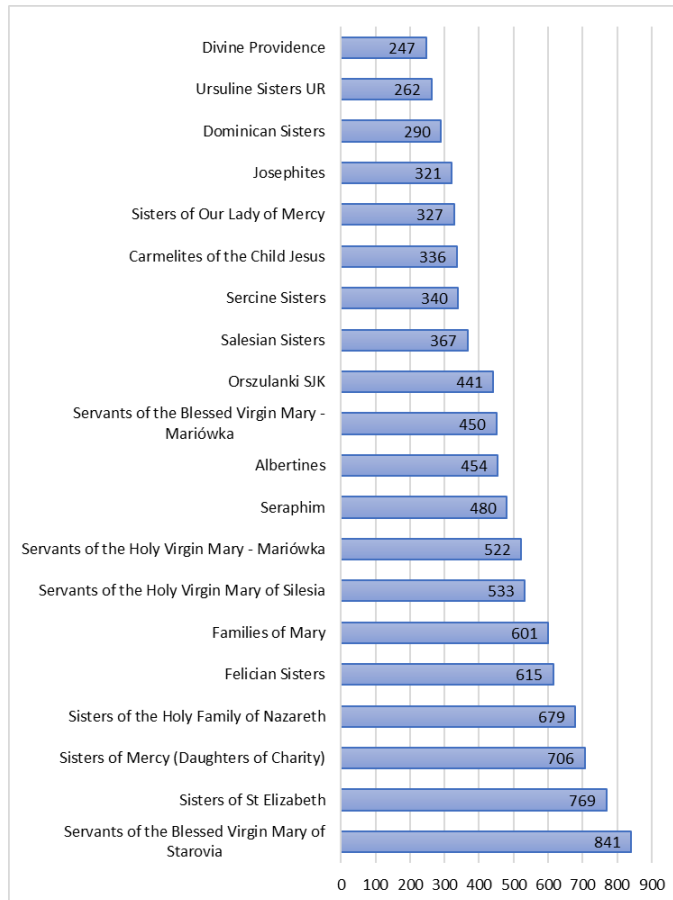


Figure 3. Number of sisters in major Polish women's religious orders in 2019.
Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

The final stage of the research is the analysis of data concerning the 20 largest female religious orders in Poland, which are the Poor Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Starowiejskie, the Elizabethan Sisters, the Daughters of Charity (Szarytki), the Nazareth Sisters, the Felician Sisters, the Family of Mary, the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Śląskie, the Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mariówka, the Seraphim Sisters, the Albertines, the Servants of

the Blessed Virgin Mary of Dębica, Ursulines SJK, the Salesian Sisters, the Sacred Heart Sisters, the Carmelites of the Child Jesus, Our Lady of Mercy, the Josephites, the Dominicans, Ursulines UR, and Divine Providence. Table 4 presents data on the number of religious sisters in the listed religious congregations for 2016-2019.

Figure 3 shows data on nun membership in the largest Polish religious orders for 2019. Currently, the largest Polish female religious order is the Servant Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Starowiejskie with 841 nuns followed by the Elizabethan Sisters with 769 and the Sisters of Charity (Szarytki) with 706. These are further followed by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth (679), the Felician Sisters (615), and the Sisters of the Family of Mary (533).

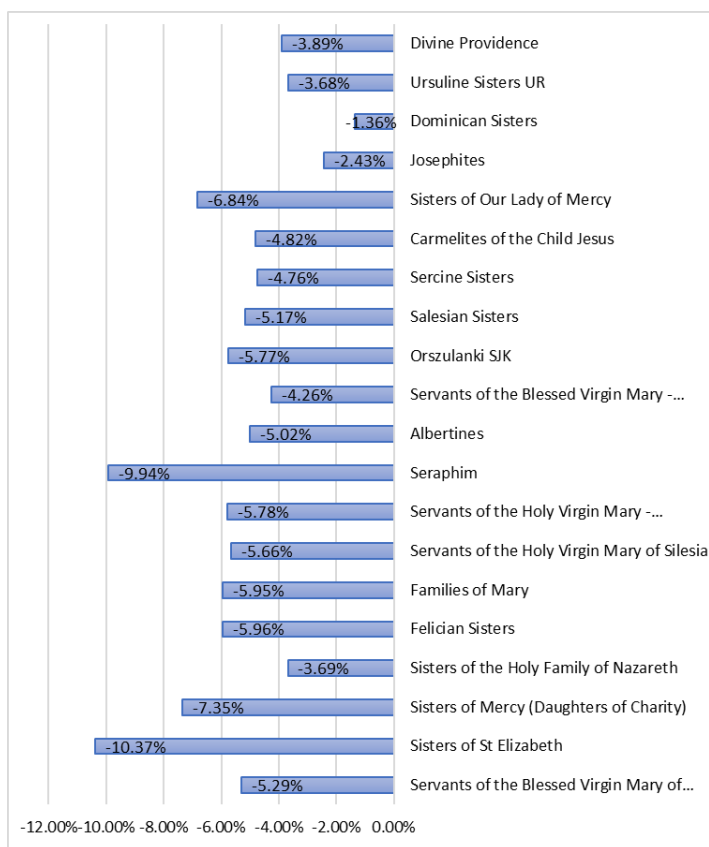


Figure 4. Percentage change in the number of sisters in Poland's largest women's congregations 2016-2019. Source: authors' own work based on data from [13-18, <https://zakony-zenskie.pl/statystyka/>].

In four examined years, all 20 of the largest Polish orders recorded a decrease in the number of nuns (Table 4), which, depending on the size of the order, ranged from 4 to 89 sisters in the case of the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth.

Regarding the analysis of the percentage reduction in the number of religious sisters in particular orders (Figure 4), the greatest decrease was recorded by the Elizabethan Sisters (10.37%), the Seraphim (9.94%), the Sisters of Mercy (Szarytki) (7.35%), and the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy (6.84%). In particular, it is worth noting the cases of the discussed orders with the largest decline. A 7%-10% decrease in the number of religious sisters over four years shows an extremely dangerous and negative trend. If this continues in 10-20 years, the number of serving sisters in Poland may drastically decrease. As stated earlier, this trend will not be easy to reverse, as it results from a deep crisis in the number of vocations indicated by a rapid decrease in the number of novices in religious orders.

4. Conclusions

The decline in the number of religious vocations among women in Poland, according to the authors dealing with issues of priestly and religious vocations, is not individual [19, 21, <https://opoka.news/globalny-spadek-powolan-najwiekszy-problem-maja-zenskie-zgromadzenia-zakonne>]. In the world, since the 1980s, a decline in vocations in female convents can be observed. The earliest such trend occurred in the United States and Western Europe [23, 24]. After an examination of statistics from these countries, it can be concluded that the situation of Polish female orders is good. However, careful analysis showed that most nuns lived in religious orders in Poland in the 1990s. Since 2000, the number of vocations has systematically fallen. The analysis of nun membership in religious orders in Poland found that the largest decrease in the number of nuns occurred in 2012 (510), 2007 (433), and 2020 (425). It can also be concluded that, especially in the last three years, nun membership has dropped year by year in 2018 (305), 2019 (364), and 2020 (425). Considering the percentage decline in the number of nuns in Polish congregations, they remain in the range of 1%-3% per year. The worst year for nun membership was 2020 (a 2.47% decrease) and 2019 (2.07%). However, the decline in the number of religious sisters in Poland resulted from the decrease in the number of vocations and not from departures from the order. Such departures were most visible in 2000-2007, which exceeded 200 sisters, while in 2020, only 130 nuns left the order. This research has shown that the biggest problem of female orders in Poland is the significant decline in religious vocations. From the analysis, it can be stated that there were 924 novices in 2000 but only 147 in 2020. In the examined period, from 2000 to 2020, novices accounted for 84.1%. As already mentioned, this problem concerns not only Poland but also the whole world. According to researchers who examined the problems of religious life, this may be associated with women's emancipation, the possibility of women embarking on secular careers, and secularization, which affects the whole world [11, 22, 25]. It can also be concluded that currently, the largest Polish female order is the Order of Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Starowiejski with 841 nuns. Second is the Elizabethan Sisters with 706, and third is the Sisters of Mercy (Charity) with 706. The largest percentage declines in nun membership in recent

years were recorded by the Elizabethan Sisters (10.37%), followed by Seraphim (9.94%) and the Sisters of Mercy (7.35%). It can also be unequivocally stated that the most significant problem in Poland today is the number of religious vocations in female orders. Hence, researchers must analyze this problem and identify the factors that directly affect such a decline in religious vocations.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Enago (www.enago.com) for the English language review.

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