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DOI: 10.15290/rtk.2025.24.06

Archaeological Research on Church Premises in Poland and Pastoral Ministry: Opinions of Priests, Church Life, and Best Practices

The article presents and analyzes how the results of archaeological research conducted in Poland on church premises can be utilized in pastoral work. Based on the qualitative research (IDIs) conducted among the Roman Catholic clergy, it demonstrates how archaeological studies can enrich pastoral ministry in terms of religious (theological) education, homilies, and building local identity in the communities of the faithful. Their findings pertain to the possibility of using archaeological research findings in pastoral work, strengthening community bonds, and fostering reflection on the transience of life. The article also addresses organizational challenges associated with conducting archaeological research on church premises, such as temporary restrictions on access to churches, and it provides best practices for collaboration between priests and archaeologists. The study's conclusions indicate that the results of archaeological work on church premises can serve as a valuable tool for supporting pastoral development and enhancing the sense of responsibility for the spiritual and material heritage of the Church.

Key words: archaeological research, Roman Catholic Church, pastoral ministry, parish/rectory operations, best practices.

The contemporary archaeological research conducted in Poland on church premises constitutes a unique intersection of pastoral ministry, local history, and culture. The Roman Catholic Church, for centuries connected with, among other things, the material cultural heritage, and at the same time co-creating this heritage, increasingly engages in dialogue with archaeology, which opens new perspectives on understanding the past and provides content that can be utilized in pastoral practice. The findings of these studies not only offer insights into the material remnants of past generations, but also inspire innovative forms of pastoral work, enhancing community bonds and strengthening the identity of local communities. This article contributes to the areas of theological, humanistic, and social sciences.

This article, based on qualitative research (IDIs) conducted among the clergy, explores how archaeological research impacts pastoral practices and the functioning of parishes and rectories. The aim is to reflect from the perspective of pastoral theology on how the results of archaeological research can be applied in pastoral ministry, taking into account organizational challenges, and identifying best practices that can serve as a foundation for fruitful collaboration between the clergy and archaeologists to the benefit of both religious communities and preservation of cultural heritage. To achieve this goal, we adopt the perspective that pastoral theology is a theological discipline examining the Church's practical efforts to fulfil its mission entrusted by Christ to the world; this endeavor requires dialogue between theology and the contemporary life context of both the individuals within the Church and the broader ecclesial community.

Methods

Why did we decide to study the relationship between archaeological research and pastoral ministry? The primary reason lies in the existence of academic bodies within the Roman Catholic Church associated with archaeological research, such as the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology¹, the Pontifical Roman Academy of

¹ Cf. B. Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska, *Papieska Komisja Archeologii Sakralnej. Sto pięćdziesiąt lat działalności (1852–2002)*, "Vox Patrum" 2002, 22, p. 516; see Pio XI, *Motu Proprio de Pontificia Commissione Sacrae Archaeologiae deque novo Pontificio Instituto Archaeologiae Christianae*, "Acta Apostolicae Sedis" 1925, 17, pp. 619–624; Pio XI, *Regolamento per la Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra*, "Acta Apostolicae Sedis" 1925, 17, pp. 625–629; The Holy See, *Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/archeo/index.htm.

Archaeology², the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology³, the Pontifical Biblical Institute⁴, the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum⁵, and the École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem⁶. We interpret the operations of these institutions as expressions of the Church's mission in the world. These are, of course, very specific expressions and they do not belong to the mainstream research in pastoral theology. Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church has Her own experience in conducting archaeological research on various continents, including sites like the Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahour⁷, Rome (the Papal Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls)⁸, Teleilat el Ghassul (settlements)⁹, el-Adeimah (cemetery)¹⁰, Nazaret (Judeo-Christian synagogue and pilgrim graffiti)¹¹, Mount Nebo (basilica and monastery)¹², Qumran (manuscripts, grottos and archaeological

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² See The Holy See, *Pontifical Roman Academy of Archaeology*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/pontificie-accademie/pontificia-accademia-archeologia.html>; Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <http://www.pont-ara.org/>.

³ See Pio XI, *Motu Peopeio de Pontificia Commissione Sacrae Archaeologiae deque novo Pontificio Instituto Archaeologiae Christianae*, "Acta Apostolicae Sedis" 1925, 17, pp. 619-624; Pio XI, *Regolamento per il Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana*, "Acta Apostolicae Sedis" 1925, 17, pp. 630-633; Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.piac.it/>.

⁴ See Pontifical Biblical Institute, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.biblico.it/>.

⁵ See Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://sbf.custodia.org/en>.

⁶ See École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.ebaf.edu/en/>.

⁷ See Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, *Progetto di ricerca e valorizzazione a Beit Sahour/Campo dei Pastori (Palestina)*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.piac.it/scavi-attivit%C3%A0#campo-dei-pastori-a-beit-sahour>.

⁸ See Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, *Scavo dell'area a Sud della Basilica Papale di San Paolo fuori le mura e allestimento dell'area archeologica*, (date of access: 18.10.2024), <https://www.piac.it/progetti-congressi/scavi-musei/scavo-a-san-paolo-e-allestimento/>.

⁹ See J.F. Briffa, *90° anniversario degli scavi del Pontificio Istituto Biblico a Teleilat Ghassu*, "Vinea Electa" 2020, 20, pp. 8-10.

¹⁰ See E. Braun, *Placing South Levantine Late Neolithic/Early Chalcolithic: Cist Burials within Cemeteries in their Proper Chrono-Cultural Context*, "Paléorient" 2024, 50, pp. 133-158.

¹¹ See Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, *Archeologi francescani nella storia*, (date of access: 18.10.2024), <https://sbf.custodia.org/en/node/39807>.

¹² Ibidem.

remains)¹³, and Samra (churches)¹⁴. In the Polish context, the Council for Culture and the Protection of Cultural Heritage operates under the Polish Bishops' Conference, with a consultant specifically responsible for the protection of sacred monuments. This Council collaborates with art restorers¹⁵ and issues documents related to the preservation of monuments managed by the Roman Catholic Church¹⁶. Additionally, at the diocesan level, experts or expert groups are often established to address issues related to archaeological research. Examples include the Archdiocesan Conservator of Historical Monuments of the Archdiocese of Warsaw, the Bishop of Elbląg's Delegates for Church Monument Conservation, and the Archdiocesan Commission for the Conservation of Church Heritage, Architecture, and Sacred Art of the Archdiocese of Krakow¹⁷. Furthermore, priests, who occasionally hold an archaeological degree, conduct archaeological research themselves, combining their pastoral ministry with academic work in this field¹⁸.

Another important reason for exploring the pastoral perspective on archaeological work conducted on church premises was the questions that arose during our review of various academic studies. Initially, it was the book *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*¹⁹ that prompted us to reflect

¹³ See École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem, *The Qumran Excavations*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.ebaf.edu/1035-2/qumran/>.

¹⁴ See École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem, *Samra*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://www.ebaf.edu/1035-2/samra/>.

¹⁵ See Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Gremia*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://episkopat.pl/Gremia>.

¹⁶ Fundacja Opoka, *Instrukcja Episkopatu Polski o ochronie zabytków i kierunkach rozwoju sztuki kościelnej* (1966), (date of access: 1.12.2025), https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/kkbids/sztuka1_16041966.html; Fundacja Opoka, *Konserwacja i zabezpieczenie zabytków sztuki kościelnej*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/kkbids/sztuka2_17061970.html; Fundacja Opoka, *Wskazania konserwatorskie*, (date of access: 1.12.2025), <https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/kkbids/sztuka3.html>.

¹⁷ See Z. Czernik, *Działania Kościoła Rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce w zakresie ochrony zabytków*, "Ochrona Dziedzictwa Kulturowego" 2016, 1, pp. 25-29.

¹⁸ See C. Dauphin, B. Hamarneh, *In Memoriam: Fr Michele Piccirillo, ofm* (1944-2008): *Celebrating His Life and Work*, Oxford 2013; J. Kałużyński, Święty Józef Bilczewski badacz starożytności chrześcijańskiej i jego interdyscyplinarna metoda w świetle nieznanych materiałów źródłowych z lat 1885-1900, Lwów, Kraków 2015; S. Heid, Anton de Waal, *das Deutsche Priesterkolleg am Campo Santo in Rom und die christliche Archäologie Dalmatiens*, "Kačić: zbornik Franjevačke provincije Presvetoga Otkupitelja" 2011, 41-43, pp. 1031-1070.

¹⁹ D.L. Carmichael, J. Hubert, B. Reeves and A. Schanche, *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*, London 2013.

on the collaboration between the clergy, local communities, and archaeologists conducting research on religiously significant sites – research within specific “sacrum” (sacred) environments, but also in the environment of pastoral ministry involving the local community. These questions gained further importance in light of additional readings, including *The Archaeology of Religious Places: Churches and Cemeteries in Britain*²⁰, *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity*²¹, *The Archaeology of Death in Post-medieval Europe*²², and *Catholic Religious Minorities in Times of Transformation: Comparative Studies of Religious Culture in Poland and Ukraine*²³. From these publications, we concluded that from the perspective of pastoral theology, the key considerations include: the relationships between historical sites of religious worship, pastoral ministry, and their socio-cultural environment; religious material heritage (churches, cemeteries, places of worship) serving both the Church’s mission and local culture; the significance of religious material remnants (e.g., cemeteries, churches) for contemporary studies on ecclesial memory and diachronic communion; and the pastoral implications of archaeological research conducted in or around specific “sacrum” (sacred) of church communities.

Given these considerations, our main research question at the beginning of our analysis was formulated as follows: How can archaeological research conducted on church premises be utilized in pastoral ministry while accounting for organizational challenges?

The empirical material for this study was collected through individual in-depth interviews (IDIs)²⁴ conducted in Poland between February 20 and May 29, 2024. The respondents included the Roman Catholic clergy from five voivodeships (the Lower Silesia, the Lesser Poland, the Masovia, the Subcarpathia, and the Podlaskie), so also from the Archdiocese of Białystok, the Archdiocese of Krakow, the Archdiocese of Warsaw, the Archdiocese of Wrocław, as well as the Diocese of Zamość-Lubaczów, all of which have managed church

²⁰ W. Rodwell, *The Archaeology of Religious Places: Churches and Cemeteries in Britain*, Philadelphia 1990.

²¹ C. Isnart, N. Cerezales, *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity*, London 2020.

²² S. Tarlow, *The Archaeology of Death in Post-medieval Europe*, Warsaw 2015.

²³ M. Zowczak, *Catholic Religious Minorities in the Times of Transformation: Comparative Studies of Religious Culture in Poland and Ukraine*, Berlin 2019.

²⁴ See S. Kvale, *Doing interviews*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2007; D. Silvermann, *Doing Qualitative Research*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore 2017; M. Hennink, I. Hutter, A. Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, London 2020.

properties. The study involved nine clergy members: six from urban areas and three from rural areas. Seven were parish priests, and two were church rectors. The interview structure was based on a pre-developed script, ensuring that all the respondents were asked the same questions. Before the interviews, each respondent was informed about the anonymization of their data. This approach noticeably fostered openness, resulting in responses that provided a more realistic depiction of the researched issue²⁵.

The research process comprised the following stages: designing the study, consulting theologians and archaeologists, developing the research tool (scripted IDI), purposeful selection of respondents, conducting interviews (IDIs), transcribing the recordings, codifying, categorizing, analyzing, synthesizing, consulting the results, and finalizing this article. The research tool was developed based on the insight from sociological research specialists²⁶, who also advised on codification and categorization²⁷. The respondent selection followed these steps: (1) conducting an online query to identify parishes and rectories within various dioceses where archaeological research had been conducted, (2) contacting parish and rectory office staff via phone to inform them about the study and invite participation (during these conversations, we additionally obtained contact data of other clergymen, some of whom agreed to participate). The interviews were conducted in parishes and rectories where archaeological research had previously taken place. This methodology proved effective and efficient, with the collected material forming the basis of this article.

Codification and categorization of the data facilitated identification of five categories²⁸: (1) pastoral ministry – education, promotion of local identity, eschatological perspective; (2) benefits – historical insight and rooting in diachronic communion; (3) community building – identity and integration; (4) parish/rectory operations – challenges and new ideas; and (5) best practices. Two of these categories were further

²⁵ See M. Drewicz, *The Social Archaeology of Sacred Heritage in Poland: The Significance of Archaeological Research for the Identity of Local Communities*, "Polish Journal of Political Science" 2025, 11 (2), pp. 65-83.

²⁶ S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2007; D. Silvermann, *Doing Qualitative Research*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore 2017.

²⁷ S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2007, pp. 33-66, 104-106.

²⁸ S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2007, pp. 104-106.

divided into subcategories. The empirical material structured in this manner was subjected to content analysis²⁹.

When citing clergymen's responses, we use the abbreviation *IDI* and the number assigned to the respondent, e.g., (IDI_1), (IDI_2). The terms *clergy*, *respondent*, *clergyman*, and *priest* are used synonymously. For analyses of specific topics, we provide two to six quotations from the respondents as examples to illustrate the varied approaches to the issue.

Pastoral ministry – education, promotion of local identity, eschatological perspective

During the interviews (IDIs), we asked the priests the following question: "In your opinion, can the results of archaeological research be used in pastoral work, and if so, to what extent?" The responses focused on three main areas: educating the congregation (homilies, catechesis), promoting local heritage, and eschatological reflections. Below there are selected excerpts from the responses:

We reference this in sermons or during meetings. And we do make use of it (IDI_1).

In our old church, multiple burials, coffins were discovered in the underground parts. This sparked a lot of interest and amazement. We also take pride in the fact that such discoveries were made here. There are graves here. This is very much a pastoral matter. It provokes interest in the discovery and, let's say, perhaps some reflection: "They are buried here..., we will also be buried someday..., though we don't know where." This kind of eschatological attitude tends to intensify with discoveries of this sort (IDI_4).

What is unearthed through archaeological research, should be showcased here, locally, to enrich and add character to the parish. Often these are small items, like in our case: ornaments, some 17th- or 18th-century pins, 13th-century ceramics, or fragments of pottery. For a small, local community, this has an educational aspect and elevates the community. Children observe these things. When shown here, locally, it looks better than in an archaeological museum (IDI_5).

In homilies, it is certainly worth presenting and discussing certain artifacts: "This is a tangible witness to events that took place in this very church, in our local community" (IDI_6).

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²⁹ S. Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2007, pp. 105-106.

I try to put the results of archaeological research to use during what we call “religious tourism” because we have pilgrims and tourists here. They visit our cathedral, explore the museums. When I meet with them and present these archaeological objects – both movable and immovable – I also refer to the research findings (IDI_8).

The interviews with the clergy clearly indicate that archaeological research conducted on church premises not only can, but should be utilized in pastoral work. All the respondents, though in different ways, expressed strong support for this perspective. They provided examples of how data from archaeologists were used in sermons, catechesis, meetings, and events organized by the church. These findings allowed the clergy to address theological topics (community building, religious identity, eschatology) as well as social, historical, and cultural themes. Priests see archaeological findings as opportunities to enhance the reputation of their locality, to attract pilgrims and tourists, and to promote the uniqueness of their church, cemetery, or historical landmarks. Some respondents described their own pastoral initiatives made possible by archaeological discoveries, such as open meetings with archaeologists or historians. Discoveries related to burials, in particular, prompted some of the clergymen to reflect with their congregations on mortality and eternal life, serving as a reminder of the eschatological dimension of human existence. In this way, archaeology becomes a tool for a deeper understanding of eschatological Christian truths, such as transience, death, and hope for eternal life, while also emphasizing the responsibility before God for the grace of faith and the testament handed down by believers from past generations.

Benefits – historical knowledge and rooting in diachronic communion

In conducting the research, we asked the respondents about the benefits of archaeological research on church premises. Specifically, we posed the following question during the interviews: “How can archaeological research benefit a parish/rectory?” The responses highlighted two main themes. Firstly, all the respondents pointed to cognitive benefits related to historical knowledge uncovered by archaeological research. Secondly, seven respondents mentioned (albeit in different ways) the value of perception and understanding of the contemporary community of believers under the pastoral care of the clergy in its communion with past generations of Christians. In some responses, both aspects were explicitly addressed, for example:

Archaeological research offers a lot. First and foremost, it fits into the broad scope of studies on the parish's history and tradition. Most of all, it concerns material cultural goods, sacred objects that used to serve the parish centuries ago – economic and residential. Moreover, it provides insight into the context in which the parish existed and carried out its pastoral activities, as well as its contribution to the community. Because through tangible material objects, one can discern higher, spiritual, immaterial values (IDI_8).

Below there are selected responses concerning the first issue – cognitive and historical knowledge:

Understanding what lies beneath the ground. Dating the artifact. The origins of the artifact. (...) We get to know the history associated with this particular place (IDI_1).

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It is a good opportunity to learn more about the history of the building. As for our church, when we installed new water, sewage, and gas connections, we discovered that the medieval shape of the building was a bit different – what we found was the foundation of the original hospital. This fascinating discovery added to our understanding of history. (...) If the opportunity arises, I think it's a good idea to deepen our historical knowledge (IDI_2).

For us as the Church, tradition – both with a capital "T" and a lowercase "t" – is something significant. Archaeological research can certainly clarify or illuminate some part of that tradition that is currently inaccessible to us (IDI_3).

Archaeological research is an essential step when undertaking the revitalization of historic, and in this case sacred, buildings. (...) It's important to rely on hard data, which archaeological research, among other tools, help to verify. (...) During the research, many human remains were found, as well as coins from the 17th century, known as *boratynki*, a Russian kopeck from the 18th century, elements of a candlestick, buckles, clothing remnants, and fragments of bottles or ceramics. Some of these items have already been preserved, and we are planning to exhibit them in our memorial room (IDI_6).

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that the clergy with experience in archaeological research on church premises under their management unanimously point to cognitive and historical benefits, including expanding knowledge about the past of a given site and deepening the understanding of its cultural significance. In their opinion, such research reveals hidden architectural structures, stages of construction and further development of buildings, which improves

the understanding of the history of sacred sites often associated with long-standing traditions. This knowledge enables the reconstruction of original condition and provides insight into the functions of structures identified by archaeologists. Furthermore, historical structures can be revitalized, and unearthed artifacts may be exhibited when preserved.

Let us now consider the second benefit: The potential for perceiving and understanding the contemporary community of believers in its communion with past generations of Christians, especially those who lived in the area covered by the archaeological research. Below there are selected responses from the participants on this matter:

Archaeological research can primarily bring us closer to the cultural context of worship that took place in a given sacred site. And that is invaluable. Archaeology is one of the sources for liturgical studies, which explore the worship of the Church. For us as a community, it's important to know how this worship was shaped and practiced in a specific location (IDI_3).

The pastoral benefit for the parish is that archaeological research shows that in this place, in this very area, there was a church, where people worked and believed. After all, they used to come here to gather and pray in this place. And this is very important for contemporary individuals to realize they are not the first to do it here... but that entire generations have passed through this sacred place before them (IDI_4).

A certain knowledge about the past, about the history, and about the people who created this parish community over centuries (IDI_5).

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that most of the clergy involved in the research perceive archaeological research as an important element that can be utilized in pastoral work because archaeological research allows for a deeper spiritual and cultural connection between present and past generations of Christians. The respondents see archaeological discoveries not only as the material heritage of the past but also a spiritual testimony to the enduring faith that transcends temporal boundaries. According to them, archaeological work reveals historical places of prayer and gatherings of the faithful, which, when used as a basis for catechesis, can contribute to raising awareness that contemporary pastoral efforts are part of a multi-generational tradition. Understanding the history of parishes and sacred sites strengthens the sense of responsibility for continuing this tradition. The benefit of archaeological research may therefore lie in fostering awareness among today's local community of believers about diachronic communion in the Church, which should translate

into a sense of identity and strengthen the capacity to pass on the faith to future generations. Diachronic communion should also be viewed in its potential to creatively influence the synchronous communion of a given community of believers – that is, the communion realized in the contemporary generation of the faithful within the “today” mission of the local Church in its parish and diocesan dimensions.

Community building – identity and integration

During the research conducted using IDIs, we asked priests the following question: “In your opinion, can the results of archaeological research be used in building the local community of the faithful, and if so, to what extent?” The responses revolved around two key themes: historical identity as the foundation of the community of believers and the integration of this community around shared material and immaterial heritage. Below there are selected excerpts from the responses:

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So, this is about showcasing that identity, that history which concerns us. It's not like everything began with us. Rather, this is our heritage, this is our history, this is our identity. And it's all here. This is the richness we draw upon (IDI_1).

There's no community without history. We won't understand ourselves without history. (...) Archaeological research can have a community-building dimension. Not directly, but indirectly, if the clergy knows how to use it wisely, to show the faithful: “It was your ancestors who ensured that this church looks like this today,” or if the building has lost its former splendor, “look at how it once appeared.” This can certainly be used as a community-building factor (IDI_3).

Archaeological research can reveal uniqueness and spark local patriotism, as well as commitment to material and immaterial heritage (IDI_6).

When we conduct work on some object, we inform people about it in church. This really integrates the parishioners. There's this shared responsibility for the church. We tell people about it. And that builds the parish community (IDI_8).

Based on all the interviews, it can be stated that clergymen see archaeological research conducted on church premises as an opportunity to link such efforts with their pastoral mission of building the community of believers. Building this community is related to historical identity and the integration of the community around its heritage. Historical identity is associated with enabling members of the community

of believers to root themselves more deeply in the history of the parish (the local Church) which leads to a sense of belonging and a mission of continuity. The faithful, aware of their ancestors' heritage, become more engaged in community life, building their identity based on collective experiences and traditions handed-down by generations. The second aspect concerns the integration of the community around the shared material and immaterial heritage. Archaeological discoveries and the preservation of historical monuments serve as tools for strengthening social bonds, fostering a sense of responsibility for heritage, and cultivating local patriotism. Through joint efforts to preserve material heritage, the faithful not only strengthen their ties, but also find meaning in cultivating communal values and traditions, which leads to the increased involvement in the life of the parish/rectory.

Parish/rectory operations – challenges and new ideas

During the interviews (IDIs), we asked the priests the following question: "How have archaeological research affected the functioning of the parish/rectory?" The responses centered on two main themes: challenges to pastoral ministry and the emergence of new ideas and pastoral initiatives. Below there are selected excerpts from the responses:

A large area of the church's floor is covered with glass, allowing the foundations of the church to be visible. Part of it is open for visitors, so people can come in and see it. The crypt has been studied, and the results have been presented. We now have this knowledge; we know what, who, how, where, and when (IDI_1).

Closing the sacred site for an extended period due to archaeological research is, from the pastoral perspective, a very harmful solution. That's why archaeological work needs to be divided into stages. People have religious needs. When this place is closed, they go elsewhere, putting down roots there. Some compromises must be sought. (...) The discovery made here led to the creation of our modern Stations of the Cross. It now hangs in the church. So, there's an interesting discussion, a nice one, between what's modern and what's historical (IDI_2).

Terrible difficulties. Terrible difficulties... Because, first and foremost, the church serves a sacred function. The matter is very, very difficult, very challenging. Closing the church for several years is simply not feasible. It has to be done in turns somehow. (...) I am, first and foremost, a priest, a clergyman, a parish priest. Only then am I the administrator of a building that, unfortunately for me, is a historical monument. My

life would be so much easier, simpler, if it was not a historic site. It would be easier for me. But I understand. It is a monument. It must be taken care of. It must be protected. It must be preserved. Yes. But that comes second. For me, the primary focus is on the parish and its community. The altar was moved outside, next to the church. Services were held here, outside, while work continued inside the church (IDI_7).

The best thing, and it's ideal, is when parishioners see the archaeological work being conducted. It's very engaging for people, drawing them into the life of the parish. But for them to engage, they also need to feel connected to this place (IDI_9).

The data collected from the IDI interviews with clergymen demonstrated that archaeological research conducted on church premises had diverse impacts on the functioning of religious communities, ranging from challenges to the introduction of new pastoral ideas. Archaeological research often necessitated temporary closures of churches or restrictions on access to sacred spaces, leading to justified concerns based on the respondents' experience about losing congregation and disrupting the community. At the same time, archaeological discoveries, such as historical elements of church architecture, enriched the spiritual and cultural life of the parish/rectory, inspired new forms of worship, such as the creation of a "modern Stations of the Cross", and fostered greater engagement of congregation in the life of the parish/rectory.

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Four best practices

During the research, we asked the priests about best practices for organizing collaboration with archaeologists working on church premises. The question posed was: "What advice would you give to priests regarding cooperation with archaeologists?" The responses allow us to identify four key pieces of advice for priests preparing for cooperation with archaeologists about to conduct research on church premises.

At first, the willingness to collaborate with archaeologists and maintaining clear communication with them is crucial on the part of the clergy. Below there are selected responses on this topic:

If both sides are willing to cooperate and approach the work responsibly, it always leads to very good results (IDI_1).

It's essential to establish the rules upfront, i.e. what my expectations are. Absolutely inviolable boundaries, and the framework for collaboration. Agree on the scope of work and clear timeframes for the planned

works. When will the archaeologists leave the site? This needs to be determined (IDI_3).

You simply need to talk, striving to understand the other side. After all, none of us has a monopoly on infallibility. And I think you can always reach an agreement. You can always reach an agreement. If there is goodwill and mutual respect, you can always reach an understanding. It's a matter of goodwill, mutual respect, a sense of responsibility (IDI_7).

There's no alternative. Cooperation with archaeologists, architects, and historians is a must. Together, we are called to save this church. Yes. And to keep it in good condition. A priest is a priest, not an archaeologist, architect, or art historian, etc. We have no expertise in these areas because we have a vocation for something else. Therefore, the help of archaeologists, architects, art historians, and so on is very important (IDI_9).

Willingness to collaborate as well as clear communication between priests and archaeologists emerge as key factors determining the success of joint efforts, especially in the context of conservation and archaeological work on sacred sites. The research highlights that openness to dialogue and mutual understanding of both sides' needs to facilitate smooth project management and help avoid unnecessary conflicts. Priests, aware of their limited expertise in archaeology, value professional collaboration, reinforcing their readiness to communicate with experts. The emphasis on this issue in the interviews suggests that the respondents view it as a potential weak spot in their cooperation with archaeologists. Clear communication from the priest's side is especially important in situations when a balance between liturgical needs and heritage preservation requirements must be found.

Secondly, transparency in project management and accountability for the heritage site are essential for the clergy. Below there are selected responses on this topic:

I would certainly advise acting in a professional and complex way. Create a detailed conservation work schedule, a solid schedule. And a realistic one. And also develop a comprehensive conservation work program. (...) Few people actually do this (IDI_2).

If it's just archaeological research without conservation, the original condition of the church structure must be restored after the work. Everything must be returned to its pre-excavation state. For me, this is of course the most obvious condition: There should be no trace of the work (IDI_3).

The interviews emphasize the importance of transparency in project management and accountability for the heritage site, including clear timeframes and organizational framework for archaeological and conservation works; this approach helps to prevent conflicts and damage to sacred objects. Priests, often acting under the supervision of their diocesan authorities and in collaboration with experts, have stressed the need for comprehensive and cohesive action plans that consider both legal and logistical aspects. Another crucial element is working with experienced specialists who can foresee potential issues and provide proper oversight. Accountability for the heritage site includes the necessity to restore the site to its original condition after completing the works, which further highlights the importance of solid organization and responsible handling at each stage of the project.

Thirdly, prudence and a responsible approach towards archaeologists and their work are vital on the part of the clergy. Below there are selected responses on this topic:

Organizationally, priests are really well-prepared for this. Mainly because the curia has appropriate departments that oversee these matters. We, priests, have someone to turn to for help. We're not left to handle this alone. We have Church guidelines, and we know what we can and cannot decide on our own. Before making any decisions, you have to check what the reality of the given project actually is, so you don't get carried away with your imagination. Someone might come and promise they'll do God knows what, and then it turns out to be one big failure (IDI_1).

The first thing one must acknowledge is: I don't know much about this stuff. That's very important. I might think I know something. I might come up with an idea and get attached to it. And that becomes a problem. So, it's better to invite an expert in this field. Someone who has worked on multiple sites. And ask them what it will look like, how it can be financed, and how the works can be carried out. You must rely on the experience of others. One must never ever do it all by themselves (IDI_2).

I often say in such circumstances that the Church is wise, but its people not always are. Even those in zucchetta. There is no shortage of fools in the Church, too. But the Church itself is wise. In the litany of cardinal virtues, the Church placed prudence first, and not by accident. Firstly, prudence. Only then justice, moderation, and fortitude. Without prudence, justice quickly turns into cruelty, into revenge. Without prudence, fortitude becomes pointless bravado. Prudence (IDI_7).

Prudence and a responsible approach by the clergy towards archaeologists and their work are indispensable elements of effective collaboration. The participating priests recognize their limitations in specialized archaeological and conservation works, which leads them to trust experts and make decisions based on professional knowledge. Prudence is also reflected in the readiness to refrain from emotional reactions to unexpected discoveries or challenges that might emerge during the works. Responsible approach is key – it means adhering to the established procedures, consulting actions with experienced specialists, and ensuring that archaeological work does not negatively impact historical structures. A prudent approach safeguards both heritage preservation and constructive relations between the clergy and professionals, promoting harmonious realization of shared goals.

Fourthly, exchanging experiences and collaborating with other priests who have previously worked with archaeologists are important practices. Below there are selected responses on this topic:

I would advise priests to contact another priest who has done something similar or renovated something. Such a priest has the most recent knowledge. The paths have already been paved after all. A priest becomes a parish priest, has a church to renovate, and faces this challenge, not knowing how to approach it. He calls me and says, “Listen, I have this issue. What should I do?” And I tell him, “These are the steps I took. If you want to follow the same path, I offer you my help.” It’s about sharing experiences and working together(IDI_2).

Priests should seek information from the curia. The curia has a department for these matters, and someone there oversees church architecture. We have a church construction commission. So, the first step is to establishing collaboration with the curial department. Without that, there’s no question of launching an archaeological research independently. That’s fundamental: collaboration with the curial department of church architecture. This also ensures that unqualified individuals do not conduct the work in the church (IDI_4).

My tip for priests would be: Before you start discussions with archaeologists, you should meet with fellow priests who have already undertaken similar activities. Consult it with them, learn about the benefits and challenges, and what the risks might be. Then, once the priest is prepared, he can start talking to the archaeologists (IDI_8).

Exchanging experiences and collaborating with other priests who have worked with archaeologists are very important for the effective management of projects related to the preservation of sacred heritage. The clergy emphasize the importance of a practical approach based

on mutual understanding and the expertise of more experienced colleagues, which helps avoid mistakes and enhances the quality of the conducted works. Information exchange, both formal and informal, facilitates identifying suitable specialists and firms while fostering solidarity and organizational efficiency in actions connected with archaeological research on church premises.

The findings from interviews with the clergy on collaboration with archaeologists on church premises highlight several key “best practices” that can ensure the success of such endeavors. Firstly, openness to dialogue and mutual understanding between priests and archaeologists are fundamental, as these aspects promote effective collaboration and minimize conflict. Secondly, on the part of the clergy, project management requires organizational transparency and accountability for heritage, with a clear focus on work schedules. The third vital element is prudence of the priests, who, recognizing their limitations in expertise, rely on professionals, which helps to anticipate challenges. Finally, sharing experiences with other priests who have participated in similar projects provides valuable insights and support, additionally solidifying the clerical community.

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Conclusion

The undertaken research on the use of archaeological findings from research conducted on church premises in Poland within the context of pastoral ministry brings significant conclusions for both ecclesial practice and the academic reflection characteristic of pastoral theology. Archaeological work on church premises can serve not only to deepen knowledge about the history of a given site, but also to contribute to the development of pastoral ministry, particularly in building the community of believers, strengthening local identity, and promoting educational and cultural activities within parishes and rectories. The in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with priests revealed that archaeological findings are a valuable tool in their ministry, enriching homilies, catechesis, and other pastoral activities, especially by directing the faithful toward reflection on transience and the community of believers. These findings, connecting the past with the present, have the potential to enhance a sense of responsibility for spiritual and material heritage while also deepening the eschatological perspective of individual lives and the broader Church community.

From the perspective of managing the material heritage of the Roman Catholic Church, fostering collaborative relationships between

the clergy and archaeologists proves to be crucial. This cooperation, rooted in mutual understanding and openness, leads to the creation of innovative pastoral and educational initiatives that can effectively engage communities of the faithful. At the same time, challenges associated with archaeological work, such as temporary restrictions on access to churches, require flexibility and skillful management to avoid disrupting the religious life of parishes and rectories.

In light of the findings, archaeological research on church premises constitutes a significant contribution to both heritage preservation and the development of modern pastoral practices. The gathered experiences can serve as a foundation for establishing best practices in collaboration between the Church and heritage preservation professionals. This, in turn, should facilitate even more effective use of archaeological research results in pastoral work in the future.

Funding: The article was written as part of the research project “Archaeological Research Conducted on Church Premises in the Opinions of Roman Catholic Clergy: A Qualitative Pilot Study,” funded by the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” program (119/39/UAM/0016).

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