

Polish priest faces possible jail time after controversial remarks

WARSAW, Poland (CNS) — A Redemptorist priest who runs Poland's largest Catholic broadcast agency faces possible jail time after describing Polish President Lech Kaczynski as "a crook subservient to the Jewish lobby."

Prosecutors in Torun, where Radio Maryja is based, said they would consider charges against Father Tadeusz Rydzyk under a criminal code clause calling for three years in jail for insulting the head of state.

The priest denied making the remarks and insisted he was the victim of "another provocation."

The Redemptorist province in Warsaw said July 9 it had set up a team to make a "proper analysis of the existing situation" after the Wprost weekly published a transcript of Father Rydzyk's alleged statement to a student meeting, during which he also called Poland's first lady, Maria, a "witch."

The British news agency Reuters reported July 10 that the priest is heard on a tape of the meeting criticizing the president, his brother and his wife for supporting limited abortion rights.

"The first lady with this euthanasia. ... You witch, I'll let you have it. If you want to kill people, do it to yourself first," Reuters reported the priest as saying on the tape.

Kaczynski urged the church July 10 to take action against Father Rydzyk, saying insults aimed at Poland's leaders were a matter of government-church relations, reported Reuters.

Stanislaw Janecki, editor and chief of Wprost, said he had handed a copy of the tape on which the transcript was based to Archbishop Jozef Kowalczyk, the Vatican nuncio to Poland. In April, Archbishop Kowalczyk urged Poland's Catholic bishops to reassert control "in a united action," after complaints about the radio's nationalist, anti-Semitic broadcasts.

Radio Maryja, which ranks fifth in national ratings, also has a satellite and cable TV station, a national daily newspaper, a media training school and Web site.

The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center, an international Jewish human rights organization, urged supporters worldwide to sign a petition denouncing Father Rydzyk as Nazi-propagandist “Josef Goebbels in a collar,” and accusing him of “leveraging Jew hatred to promote his extremist agenda in Poland.”

Rabbi Marvin Hier, head of the center, also demanded the priest’s dismissal in July 10 letters to Father Joseph Tobin, Redemptorist superior general, and Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemyśl, president of the Polish bishops’ conference.

“Father Tadeusz Rydzyk is not merely an individual — as a priest he speaks for the Catholic Church and it is the church that must discipline him,” Rabbi Hier said.

“Given the remarkable achievements of the last decades in Catholic-Jewish relations under the great leadership of Pope John Paul II and the similar direction followed by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI,” Rabbi Hier said, “it is inconceivable that Father Rydzyk be allowed to use his radio pulpit as a means of inciting people to bigotry and hatred; a bigotry and hatred that flies in the face and violates everything that Vatican II stands for.”