

CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AS BENEFICIARIES OF THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT

Motives: The use of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds is an interesting research topic. A good and relatively rare source of information on this subject is the list of CAP beneficiaries published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. An interesting group of entities receiving payments for the use of agricultural land are churches and religious organizations. The conducted research sheds light on the process of absorbing EU funds, particularly its spatial diversification.

Aim: The objective of this study is to identify and explain the spatial variation in CAP subsidies given to the agricultural land used by churches and religious organisations in Poland.

Results: Churches and religious organisations are one of many categories (types) of beneficiaries of EU CAP in Poland. Reference to the amount of subsidies obtained by churches and religious associations allows one to state that, on a national scale, it is a rather marginal phenomenon (approximately 0.8% of the total amount of CAP payments in 2022), while its geographical variation is derived from former historical and political processes.

Keywords: CAP beneficiaries, subsidies, churches and religious organisations, agriculture, farm, Poland

INTRODUCTION

Ownership and acquisition of land by churches and religious organisations is an interesting and socially sensitive topic. This is indicated by the numerous articles that have been published, in particular (but not exclusively) on agricultural portals, reporting about acquisitions and ownership by the churches (Borek, 2021; Pokora-Kalinowska, 2021; Prajsnar,

2016). Society's imagination goes wild upon hearing information stating that the Catholic Church is one of the greatest land tycoons worldwide (Doorn, 2021). Nevertheless, determining the exact area of land owned by the Church is a difficult task. Therefore, an attempt to determine their land holding and the spatial variation in the lands owned by churches and religious organisations is an interesting research problem.

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Poland's accession to the European Union introduced a system of area-related subsidies for agricultural land. The information on the amount of support within the framework of this system may form the basis for monitoring agrarian transformations, which has been confirmed by a number of studies (including Rudnicki & Wiśniewski, 2018). As indicated by Hałasiewicz (2020), although statistically there are about 1.3 million farms registered in the system of the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture, i.e. receiving direct payments, the number of actual, active farms is several times smaller (about 150–170 thousand). New possibilities for analysing the spatial diversity of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds in Poland are related to the publicly available list of CAP beneficiaries drawn up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The scope of the data contained in the list is determined by Regulation (EU) 2021/2116 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 on the financing, management and monitoring of the common agricultural policy and repealing Regulation (EU) No. 1306/2013 (OJ L 435, 6.12.2021), as well as the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/128 of 21 December 2021 laying down rules for the application of Regulation (EU) 2021/2116 of the European Parliament and of the Council on paying agencies and other bodies, financial management, clearance of accounts, checks, securities and transparency (OJ L 20, 31.1.2022). The list was first made available in 2008, which was subject to a pilot study by a team from the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, under the supervision of Professor Benicjusz Głębocki (Głębocki et al., 2010). It was also used by, among others, the co-authors of this article for a detailed analysis of the spatial variation of the CAP payments obtained by churches and religious organisations in Poland in 2022.

The objective of this study is to identify and explain the spatial variation in CAP subsidies given to the agricultural land used by churches and religious organisations in Poland. This objective was achieved by describing and recognising the variation within the system of individual municipal units: the number

of beneficiaries, the amount of subsidies obtained in 2022, the internal variation within the bodies surveyed – the beneficiaries, and the holding size distribution of the land used. Furthermore, in order to assess the rank of the subsidies investigated, selected elements have been presented against the background of the economic and population-related potential of the unit surveyed. In particular, the study will allow us to answer the following research questions:

1. Where are churches and religious organizations that actively use the CAP subsidy system for their agricultural land concentrated?
2. What determines the spatial differentiation of land ownership by churches and religious organizations?
3. How is the land ownership of the studied group of entities changing, and what factors condition the possibility of its further growth?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion and the Catholic Church in Poland

In the last census in Poland, almost 73% of residents declared that they belonged to a religious denomination. This group is dominated by the followers of the Roman Catholic Church, with over 27 million people declaring membership in 2020 (98% of people belonging to a denomination; Central Statistical Office, 2023). Nevertheless, there has been accelerated secularisation and a decline in religiosity in Poland in recent decades (Mąkosza & Adamczyk, 2024; Centre for Public Opinion Research, 2020), which is confirmed by the trend observed in many countries (Pew Research Center, 2018). The Catholic Church in Poland still enjoys a relatively high authority, much greater in the countryside than in the city. However, polls conducted by CBOS (Centre for Public Opinion Research) indicate that the net approval (difference between positive and negative assessments) of the Roman Catholic Church in the period 2015–2019 decreased in Poland from 34% to just 15% of the total population, from 53% to 37% among rural residents, whereas it remained at a high level of over 50% among farmers (decrease from 58%

to 53%) (Wilkin, 2020). Nonetheless, a 2024 CBOS survey indicates that almost nine out of ten adult residents of Poland still feel a sense of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church (88.8%). The second most frequently indicated answer is having no religious affiliation (7.3% of respondents). Other religions or denominations were chosen by less than 1% of those surveyed (Centre for Public Opinion Research, 2024). It is for these reasons, among others, that further considerations regarding the church have been focused on the Catholic Church.

In 2021, the Catholic Church in Poland conducted pastoral activities within 46 dioceses and 10,352 parishes in which there were over 20,000 priests in service. On top of this number, one should note that there are over 16,000 nuns and almost 11,000 monks belonging to 105 female and 59 male congregations respectively. The degree of religious practice among Catholics in Poland shows strong spatial variation. Dominantes indicator which notes the percentage of people present at Sunday mass (on a selected Sunday of the year) in relation to the number of Catholics obliged to attend a mass in a given area (e.g. parish) (Institute for Catholic Church Statistics, 2022).

The possession of temporal goods (including material resources, real estate) is the fundamental element – apart from the freedom to make decisions – which enables the Catholic Church and any other religious association or economic entity to carry out activity (Cienciala, 2019; Walencik, 2004). This results, inter alia, from the Canon Law To pursue its proper purposes, the Catholic Church by innate right is able to acquire, retain, administer, and alienate temporal goods independently from civil power (Can. 1254 – §1) (Code of Canon Law promulgated by Pope John Paul II on January 25, 1983, legal status as of April 26, 2022). Among temporal goods, land, including agricultural land, occupies a special place. Currently, many functions are associated with the use of agricultural land including: economic, environmental, social, cultural, and political (Wilkin, 2014). Land is perceived as one of the best investments, its ownership allows enjoyment of a broad range of benefits, including financial benefits, such as the possibility of obtaining area-based subsidies.

The origin of the variation in church property in Poland

Previous studies on the distribution and size of the resources owned by churches and religious groups indicate strong links with historical conditions (Gap-ski, 2024; Gędek, 2016; Głębocki, 2008). The property holding of the Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest forms of property tenure in Poland that appeared almost simultaneously with the adoption of Christianity.

During the partitions, the situation of churches in Poland varied. At that time, there was regional variation in the laws relating to depreciation as a result of their being subject to the legislation of the partitioning states. The regulations adopted with respect to church property varied – on the one hand, they were more restrictive in the Russian partition (the effect of the lack of acceptance of the property of the Roman Catholic Church and support for the Orthodox Church) compared to the lands in the Austrian and Prussian partitions. The changes introduced by the partitioning states in the field of church property turned out to be extremely persistent, despite the passage of time and the historical transformations.

After regaining independence in 1918, all legal regulations of the partitioning states directed against the Roman Catholic Church were repealed. At the same time, the Concordat with the Holy See, which, apart from the religious issues, was concluded in 1925, confirmed the possibility of the Church owning, acquiring and selling property in accordance with the provisions of Canon Law and the laws applicable in Poland.

Restrictions on the property rights of churches and religious organisations apparently took place after the end of World War II, which is confirmed by the decree of 6 September 1946 On the agricultural system and settlement in the western and northern lands under which post-German church properties were nationalised. In turn, in the areas forming part of the Polish state before and after World War II, real estate whose area exceeded the limits set in the decree of 6 September 1946 was nationalised by virtue

of the Act of 20 March 1950 On the seizure of dead hand goods by the state, guaranteeing parishioners ownership of agricultural farms and creating the Church Fund (Journal of Laws of 1950, No. 9, item 87) (“Dead hand goods” were established by way of donations to church hierarchs and religious congregations settled in Poland – Leskiewiczowa, 1981). Further restrictions to church ownership of land were imposed by virtue of the decree of 24 April 1952 On the abolition of foundations (Journal of Laws of 1952, No. 25, item 172), as a result of which real properties belonging to church foundations were nationalised (Krukowski, 2002).

As a result of the political changes in 1989, all restrictions imposed by the communist authorities in relation to the use of property rights by the church’s corporate bodies were lifted. At the same time, in the Act of 17 May 1989 On the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church (Journal of Laws of 1989, No. 29, item 154), it was guaranteed that lost property would be returned or that appropriate compensation would be provided. Furthermore, church corporate bodies were guaranteed the right to acquire, dispose of and manage their assets. Rules were established for returning lost property to church corporate bodies, granting replacement real properties, or appropriate compensation. The regulations of the abovementioned Act provide for the return of beneficial land up to 50 or 100 ha, depending on the region. These lands may be returned in kind, at their location if they were the property of the Church in the past, or by way of substitution – this applies to church land that is currently used by different users for other purposes. In such a situation, substitute land in a different location is proposed based on the resources of the State Treasury.

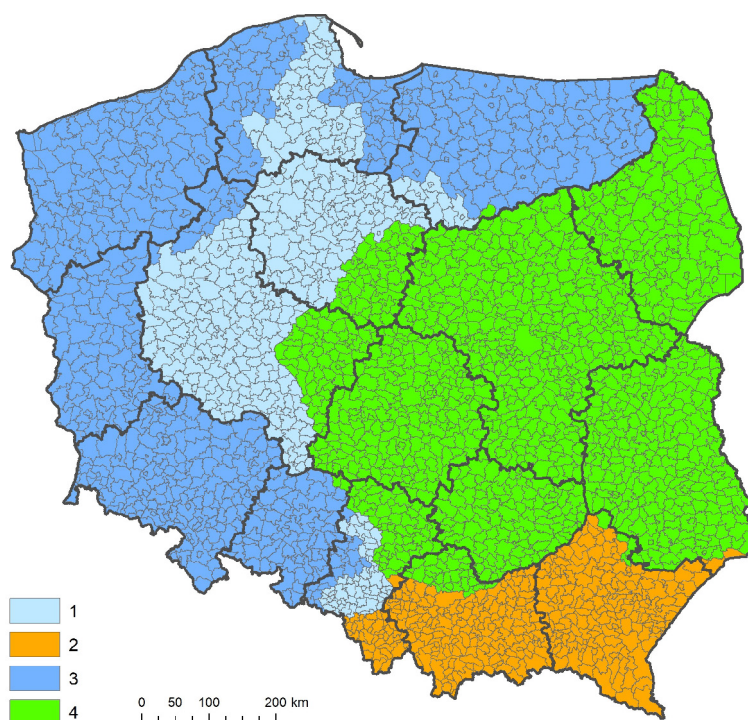
Pursuant to the above-mentioned Act, separate regulations covered the Western and Northern Territories (the “recovered territories” which had been located within the borders of the former Prussian Partition and the German Reich in the interwar period), where church corporate bodies who began their activities in these areas after 8 May 1945 may, at their request, be granted land from the Agricultural

Property Resources of the State Treasury free of charge. Pursuant to Article 70a, the size of the agricultural property transferred together with the land already owned may not exceed the established area limits. In the case of parish farms, this is 15 hectares, diocesan farms – 50 hectares, farms of diocesan and religious seminaries – 50 hectares, farms of religious congregation houses – 5 hectares, but if they engage in charity activities – 50 hectares.

The Catholic Church is mainly given back land classified as “dead hand goods” which was taken over by the state after World War II. In accordance with the applicable law on religious organisations, lands taken from the Church by the invaders and developed by other users are not subject to return.

It was assumed that the historical conditions, as well as the applicable legislation, and in particular its implementation, were reflected in the distribution of land used by churches and religious organisations accounting for the division into (see: Fig. 1):

1. The Prussian partition and Poland in the interwar period – the majority of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Pomorskie and Wielkopolskie Provinces – which had a large share of church beneficial goods before their nationalisation and at the same time owned significant resources of State Treasury property, therefore facilitating the return of former beneficial properties by way of substitution.
2. The Austrian partition (mainly Małopolskie and Podkarpackie Provinces), where a significant area of the land used by church bodies concerns areas located within the boundaries of the Archdiocese of Krakow and Przemyśl. These lands are very scattered due to the particular agrarian structure of these areas.
3. The Prussian partition and Germany in the interwar period – the largest resource of land that is church property in Poland. Primarily it is the result of returning alternative properties (mainly land) from the State Treasury to churches and religious associations. These are usually the amassed lands of many parishes placed under the collective jurisdiction of the dioceses assigned by law.



1. The Prussian partition and Poland in the interwar period, 2. The Austrian partition, 3. The Prussian partition and Germany in the interwar period, 4. The Russian partition.

*In cases where the border runs through the territory of a contemporary municipality, the principle of historical classification of that unit was adopted based on the predominant land area.

Fig. 1. The division into former Partitions of Poland

Source: own elaboration (Kozłowski & Rudnicki, 2003).

4. The Russian partition – the spatial distribution and size of church land resources in areas in the Russian partition in the past have a specific history. Under various pretexts, often of a repressive nature, the tsarist authorities confiscated land owned by the Catholic Church, and the current legislation does not provide for their return. In this area, church property is largely limited to land under sacral buildings and other areas of religious worship. On the other hand, the areas located along the eastern border of the state are distinguished by slightly larger resources of church property. In these areas, owing to significant resources of the State Treasury property, there is a greater possibility of returning church property by way of substitution. What must also be noted here is the coexistence

of properties owned by two Churches: Catholic and Orthodox (see: Fig. 1).

It should be emphasised that the issue of restitution of property that was expropriated by the Soviet authorities in the post-war period is currently a very live topic in many countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Minarik, 2017; Pukenis, 2011; Smorgunova et al., 2018; Voron & Voron, 2022).

DATA AND METHODS

Data

The basic source of data used in the study was the list of CAP beneficiaries drawn up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which

is available at: <https://beneficjenciwpr.minrol.gov.pl/>. The list includes the name and surname¹ or corporate name of the beneficiary, its place of residence or registered office (name of the municipality) and the amounts of individual CAP payments granted on the basis of applications submitted in a given year. In the case of the amounts obtained within the framework of the single area payment scheme, the farm area was also determined by the rate applicable in 2022: PLN 518.01 per hectare. Contrary to the restrictions applied by the Central Statistical Office, resulting from the legal regulations on the protection of personal data and maintaining statistical secrecy, this list is made public through its publishing on the Ministry's website. Such a procedure is compliant with the provisions of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1437/2007 of 26 November 2007 (OJ L 322, 7.12.2007) and is a consequence of the principle that information on the spending of public funds is available to the public.

Furthermore, apart from the database on CAP beneficiaries, the data used included information from the Central Statistical Office (GUS) on the population, the area of individual municipalities, the area of state-owned farms and legally protected areas, as well as data on the quality of land for agricultural production from the Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation State Research Institute (IUNG-PIB) in Puławy.

Research procedure

The basic method used in the study is the indicator method (Czyż, 2016). The indicators used in the study are commonly applied in research on the assessment of the spatial variation in the absorption of EU funds (Głębocki et al., 2010; Kraska & Pietrowski, 2023; Kutkowska & Struś, 2011; Rudnicki & Dubownik, 2019) and in the study on spatial structures in agriculture (Rudnicki, 2016).

The first stage of the research procedure (see: Fig. 2) was to filter out corporate bodies belonging to the category examined in the general database of beneficiaries (nearly 1.3 million beneficiaries and

covering payments of PLN 25.8 billion in 2022). This was done by verifying the names of the entities concerned. Then, thanks to the information about the location of the registered office of a given body, the data were aggregated into a division by municipality² (and region). In this way, 925 beneficiaries and PLN 21.3 million in payments (2022) were assigned to the category of churches and religious organisations. According to the list of CAP beneficiaries (2022), the area subsidised covers 11.3 thousand hectares and is much lower than the area of land owned by church units. According to data from the Geodetic Land Register, 138.8 thousand hectares were assigned to churches and religious organisations, including 102 thousand hectares of land (as of 1.01.2022), i.e. more than nine times more. This difference results from the fact that, while being owners of agricultural land, churches do not use it to a major extent and usually lease it. The grants awarded are received by the land users – i.e. the tenants.

With the use of cartographic methods (circular and bar cartodiagrams), a visualisation was made of the spatial variation in the number of beneficiaries and the amount of subsidy received in individual municipalities.

In the next phase of the study (see: Fig. 2), the payments obtained by the church and religious organisations were assessed. For this purpose, the sum paid was compared to the total sum of the subsidies obtained by beneficiaries in a given unit (indicator: payments made to a religious organisation in PLN per PLN 1000 of the total received from the CAP) and to the total population (indicator: payments made in PLN per resident).

The results were compared to those for the group of beneficiaries under the single area payment scheme (SAPS) (this group constituted 92.3% of the total number of beneficiaries and 78.4% of the total payments to churches and religious associations).

² Due to the specificity and limitations of the data used – it is not possible to distinguish between urban and rural municipalities with the same name, these municipalities were thus merged. Hence, the analysis was carried out in a system of 2321 spatial units (the term municipality is used in the text).

¹ In the case of the small farm category, no personal data are provided.

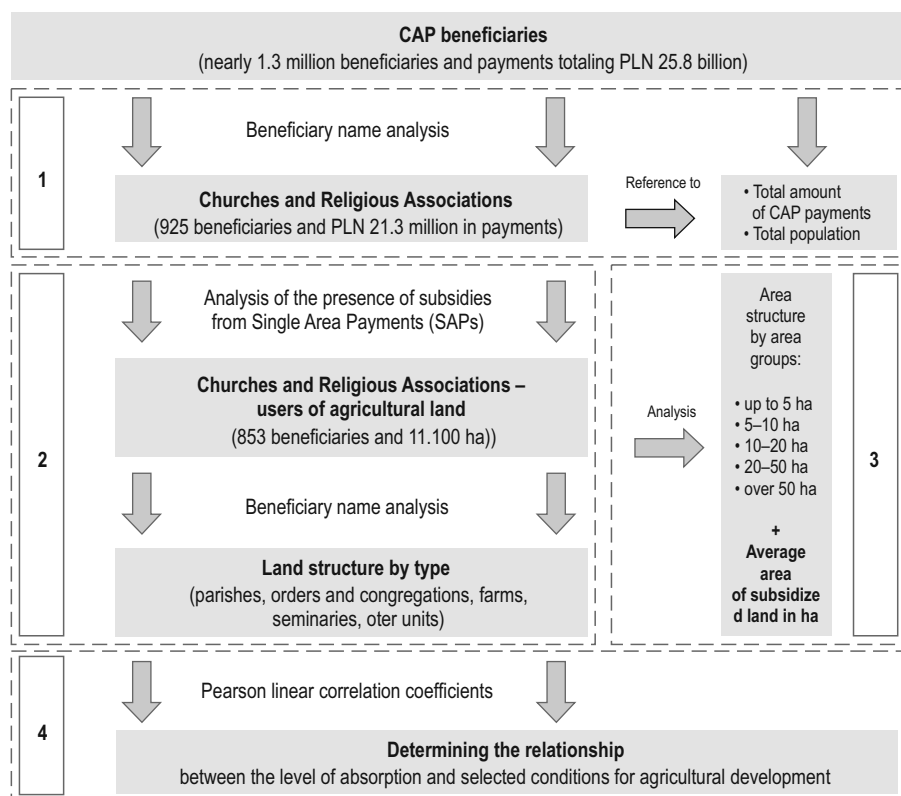


Fig. 2. Research procedure
Source: own elaboration.

First, the generic structure of the beneficiaries was identified. This was made possible through analysis of the name of the corporate body, which allowed the subsidised area of the group of beneficiaries examined to be divided into the following categories: parishes, church farms, congregation houses, seminaries, other units.

Since the area of land is of fundamental importance from the point of view of production capacity and management efficiency (Rudnicki & Wiśniewski, 2018), the next phase of the study involved the analysis of the group of beneficiaries investigated by area of holding. The issue has been presented through aggregation of the number and area of beneficiaries according to five groups of holding area, i.e.: up to 5 ha, between 5.1 and 10 ha, between 10.1 and 20 ha, between 20.1 and 50 ha, and over 50 ha, as well as by the indicator of the average land area subsidised (in ha of agricultural land) per beneficiary (see: Fig. 2).

The last phase of the study consisted in determining the relationship between the absorption level and selected conditions for agricultural development (Falkowski & Kostrowicki, 2001). For this purpose, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the ratio of the area of land subsidised under SAPS belonging to churches and religious associations/1000 ha of subsidised land (dependent variable) and selected features (independent variables) describing the:

- quality of land for agricultural production (based on data from the Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation – State Research Institute in Puławy),
- share of protected areas in the total area of a given spatial unit (based on data from BDL GUS – Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office),
- share of the collectivised sector (State Agricultural Farms) in the total area of a given spatial unit (as of 1996).

The results of the analyses have been presented in three forms: tabular (for provinces), cartographic (using the simple cartogram method), and graphic (using various types of charts).

RESULTS

Number of beneficiaries and payments made

According to the online list of CAP beneficiaries in Poland, in 2022 there were 925 holdings in the “Churches and religious organisations” category, which obtained the sum of PLN 21.3M. Looking at the regional differences, the number of above-mentioned payments ranged from 20 in the Pomorskie and Śląskie provinces to 174 in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie province (see: Table 1). Churches and religious organisations were found in 636 municipalities,

constituting 27.4% of the total number of spatial units identified. In these municipalities, units with a single church beneficiary prevailed (457 municipalities – 71.9%) with the highest number being found in the Ełk municipality in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie region (urban and rural municipality combined) – 18 beneficiaries (see: Fig. 3), including: The Ełk Diocesan Curia, the Higher Theological Seminary of the Diocese of Ełk, 13 Roman Catholic parishes and the Orthodox Parish, the Evangelical Methodist Church Parish and the Baptist Church House.

The CAP payments made also showed great spatial variation, both by province – from PLN 0.2M in Świętokrzyskie to PLN 3.7M in Warmińsko-Mazurskie (see: Table 1), and principally by municipality – from the absence of payments in 1686 units or small amounts (up to PLN 1000 in three municipalities: Krzynowłoga Mała in Mazowieckie – PLN 800, Kwilcz in Wielkopolskie – PLN 600, and Nowogrodziec

Table 1. Churches and religious organisations as beneficiaries of the CAP in Poland – selected elements of the spatial analysis (2022)

Specification	Total number of beneficiaries	Payments made				Incl. beneficiaries with farms			
		M PLN	per 1000 of CAP payments	PLN per capita	% payment	subsidised area of farmland in ha			
						ha	per 1000 ha of subsidised area	avg. ha / capita	% ha of parish
Poland total	925	21.3	0.8	0.6	79.0	11266	0.9	13.2	66.3
Dolnośląskie	22	0.7	0.5	0.2	83.5	305	0.4	16.9	63.7
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	23	1.3	0.7	0.6	79.5	899	1.0	45.0	8.9
Lubelskie	76	1.1	0.4	0.6	96.9	797	0.6	10.8	89.9
Lubuskie	26	0.5	0.7	0.5	100.0	326	0.9	12.5	96.4
Łódzkie	31	0.6	0.3	0.2	38.0	151	0.2	5.8	95.9
Małopolskie	88	2.1	2.1	0.6	72.0	824	1.9	10.8	55.1
Mazowieckie	93	1.8	0.5	0.3	47.1	561	0.3	7.0	78.5
Opolskie	15	0.5	0.7	0.5	20.1	79	0.2	8.7	66.3
Podkarpackie	117	2.4	2.4	1.1	75.9	1098	2.3	9.9	80.8
Podlaskie	87	1.8	0.9	1.6	90.7	916	1.0	10.6	94.7
Pomorskie	20	0.5	0.4	0.2	78.5	224	0.3	12.4	73.4
Śląskie	20	0.3	0.5	0.1	47.6	148	0.5	9.2	54.0
Świętokrzyskie	22	0.2	0.2	0.2	70.7	116	0.3	5.5	51.6
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	174	3.7	2.1	2.7	99.6	2250	2.5	13.0	86.2
Wielkopolskie	55	1.9	0.6	0.5	85.4	1455	0.9	29.7	32.1
Zachodniopomorskie	56	2.0	1.5	1.2	80.1	1118	1.4	21.9	54.5

Source: own elaboration.

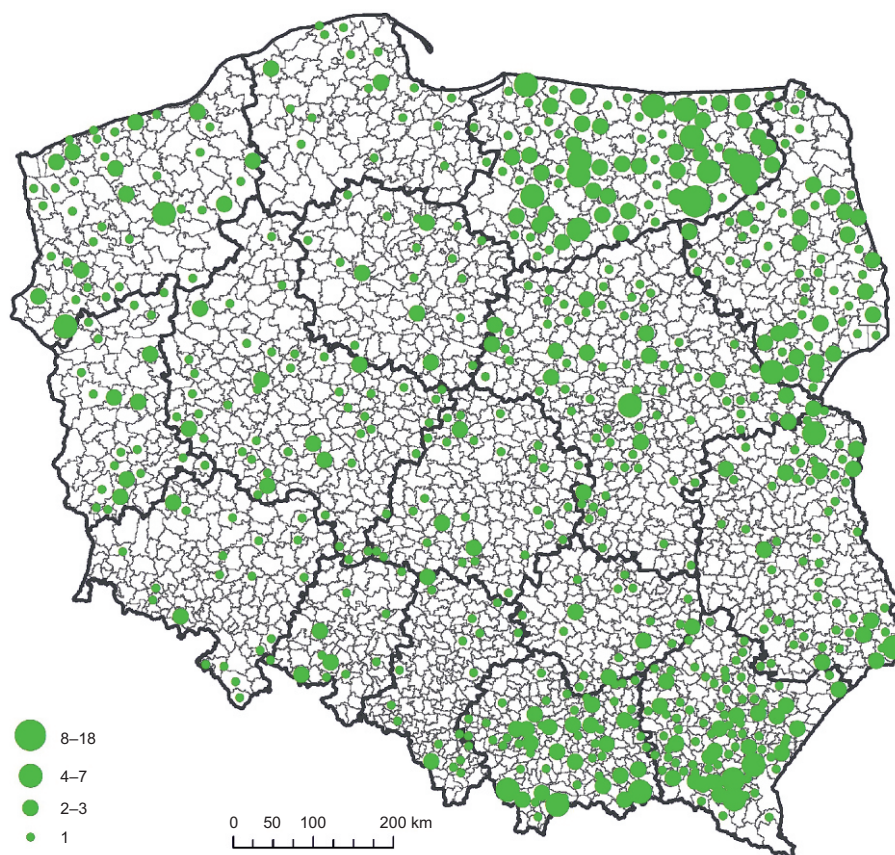


Fig. 3. Churches and religious organisations as CAP beneficiaries in Poland – number
Source: own elaboration.

in Dolnośląskie – PLN 400) to over PLN 500,000 in four municipalities: Ełk in Warmińsko-Mazurskie (PLN 540.2k), Gniezno in Wielkopolskie (PLN 770.3k), Mogilno in Kujawsko-Pomorskie (PLN 569.4k), and Pyrzyce in Zachodniopomorskie (PLN 699.7k; see: Fig. 4).

The analysis of payments obtained classified into six size groups indicated that almost half (47.1%) of the total sum of payments went to beneficiaries (9.2%) with a value exceeding PLN 50k. On the other hand, most beneficiaries (43.7%) received support not exceeding PLN 10k (these accounted for 11.3% of the total amount of subsidies for churches; see: Fig. 5).

In order to determine the rank of CAP payments to churches and religious organisations, two indicators were used, where the sums identified referred to:

1. The total amount of CAP payments made – indicator per PLN 1000 – PLN 0.8 on average in Poland, ranging from PLN 0.2 in Świętokrzyskie to over PLN 2.0 in Warmińsko-Mazurskie (PLN 2.1) and Podkarpackie (PLN 2.4); by municipality, the highest payments, exceeding PLN 50, were made in three units: Kleszczów in the Łódzkie (PLN 58.3), Horyniec-Zdrój in the Podkarpackie (PLN 64.2) and Mogilany in Małopolskie (PLN 80.9) (see: Fig. 6).
2. The total number of residents – the ratio of PLN per capita – PLN 0.5 on average in Poland, ranging from PLN 0.1 in Śląskie to PLN 2.7 in Warmińsko-Mazurskie (see: Table 1); by municipality, the highest payments, exceeding PLN 50, took place in four units: Sidra in Podlaskie (PLN 60.5),

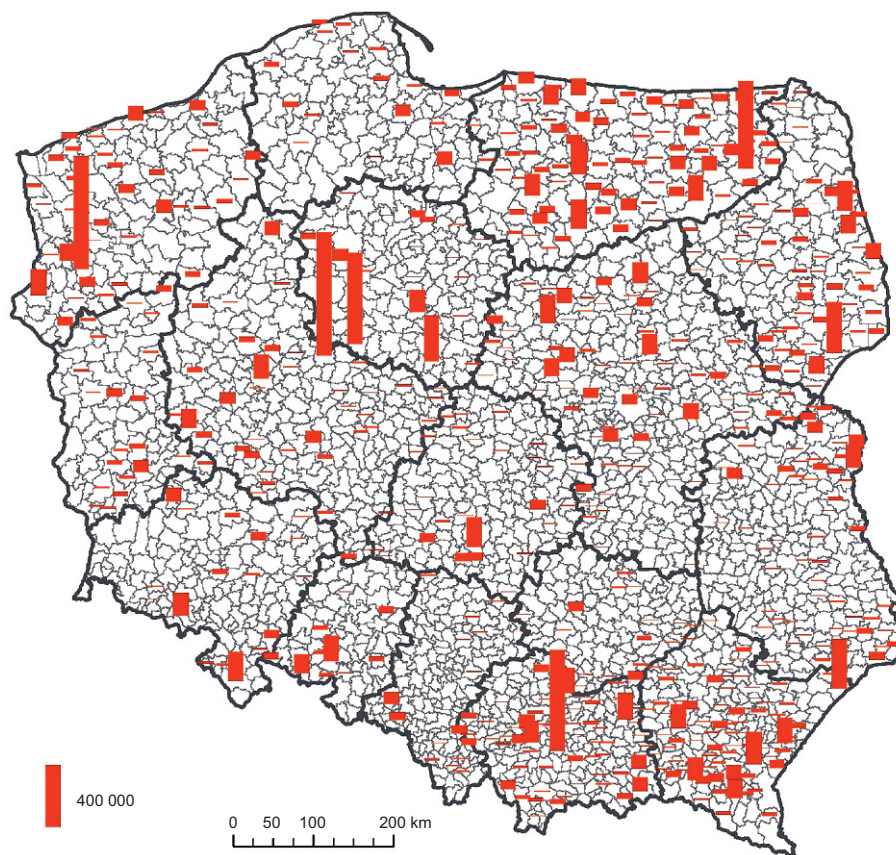


Fig. 4. Churches and religious organisations as CAP beneficiaries in Poland – payment amount in PLN
Source: own elaboration.

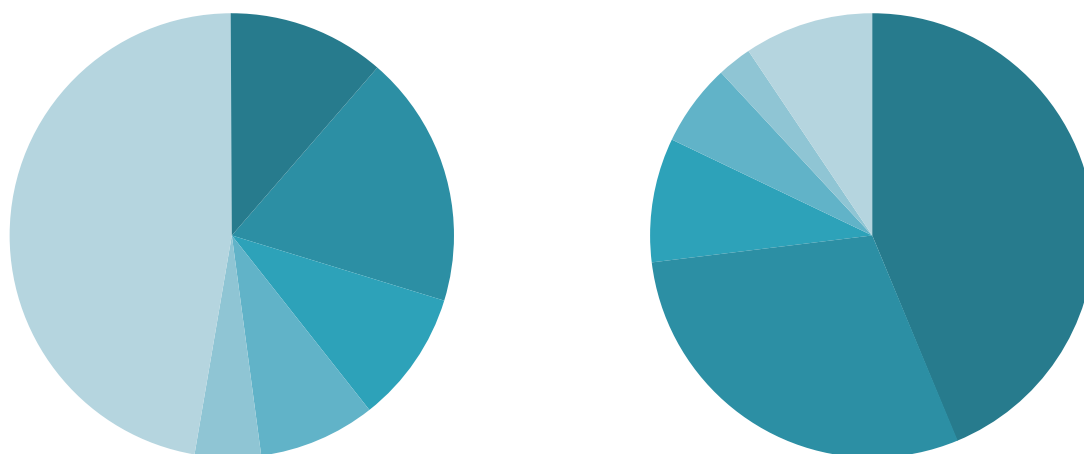


Fig. 5. Churches and religious organisations – structure of the total amount of payments (left) and the total number of beneficiaries (right) by payment size groups
Source: own elaboration.

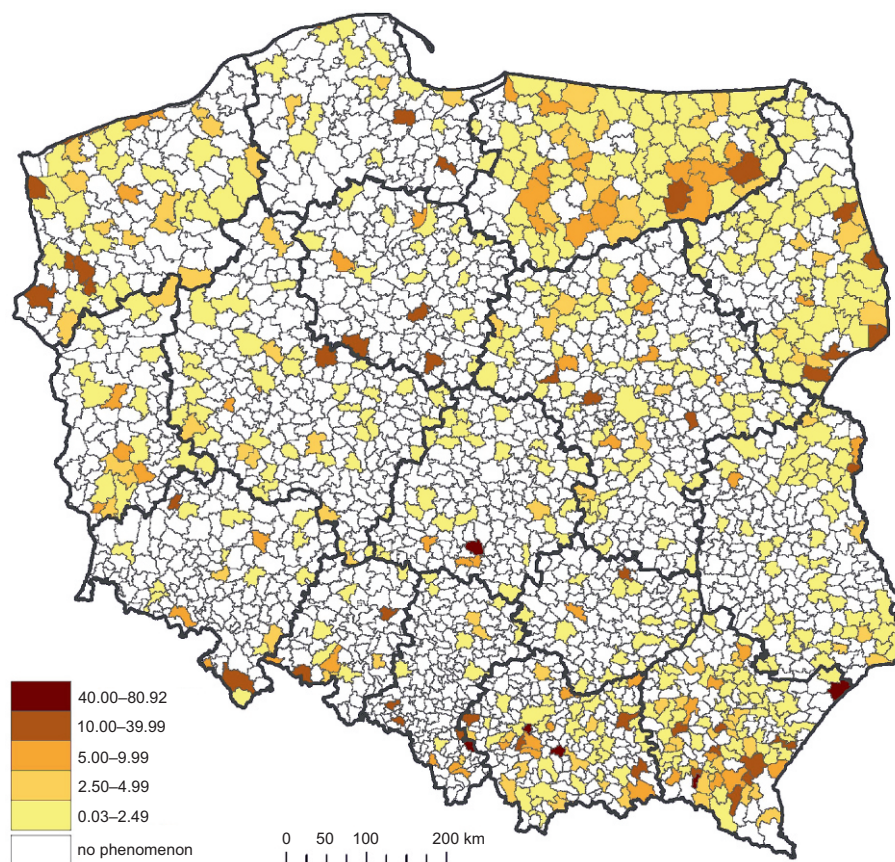


Fig. 6. Payments made to churches and religious organisations per PLN 1000 of total CAP payments

Source: own elaboration.

Sławatycze in Lubelskie (PLN 64.5), Horyniec-Zdrój in Podkarpackie (PLN 70.2), and the highest amount of PLN 147.5 in Kleszczele (Podlaskie) (see: Fig. 7).

Church beneficiaries structure by type

Within the framework of payments made to churches and religious units, a special position is held by beneficiaries under the single area payments scheme (SAPS), based on subsidies for the agricultural land used. They constitute 92.3% of the total number of beneficiaries, which gives 78.4% of the total church-related payments. These percentages, varying by province, range from 60.0% of the number and 20.1%

of payments in Opolskie to 100% of the number and payments in Lubuskie (see: Table 1; Fig. 8).

The research showed that the category of area payments analysed concerned 853 beneficiaries and 11.1k hectares (2022; 11,124 hectares). These measures showed great regional variation – from the lowest values in Opolskie (9 beneficiaries, 79 ha) to the highest in Warmińsko-Mazurskie (173 beneficiaries, 2250 ha; see: Table 2). By municipality, the largest areas – of over 500 ha – were recorded in Pырzyce in Zachodniopomorskie (522 ha), Mogilno (557 ha) and Gniezno in Wielkopolskie (762 ha).

The research indicated that, by type, the most important role of beneficiaries in the structure of land and religious organisations covered by SAPS payments

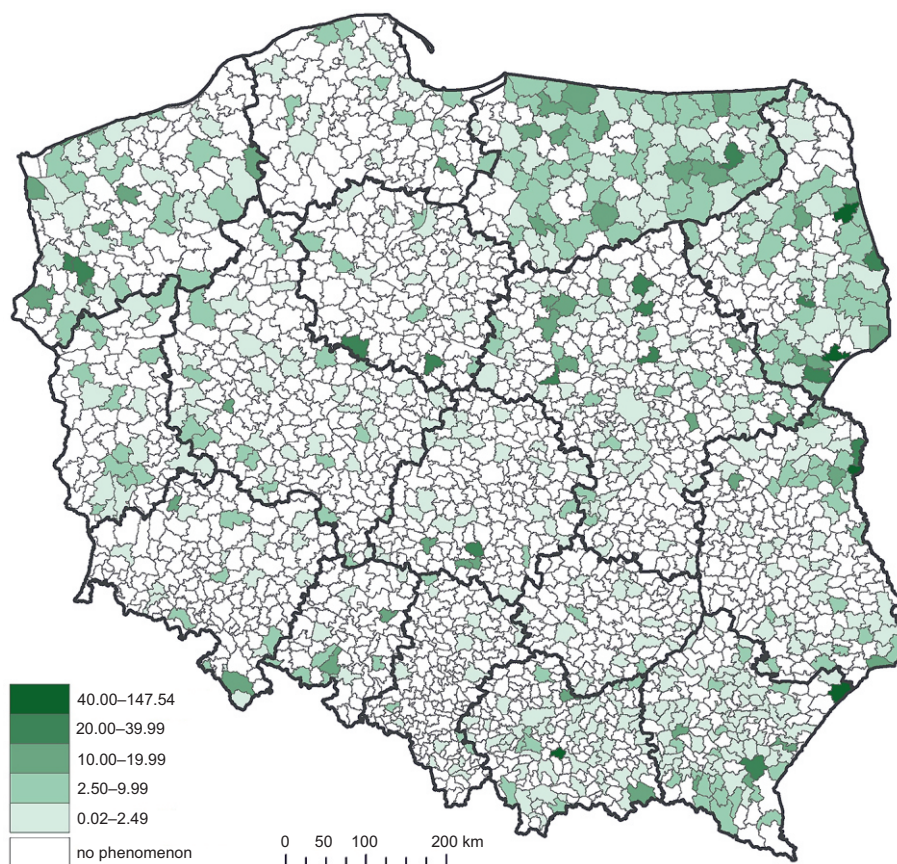


Fig. 7. Payments made to churches and religious organisations per capita
Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. The structure of land belonging to churches and religious organisations by type according to SAPS and area of subsidised land (2022)

Specification	Total		Including									
	number (L)	farm area in ha (P)	parishes				other church beneficiaries by area subsidised					
			number of benefi- ciaries		area		total ha	incl. %				
			total	total %	total ha	total %		orders and congre- gations (49 benef.)	farms (6 benef.)	semi- naries (9 benef.)	other units (24 benef.)	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Poland total	853	11,124	765	89.7	7469	67.1	3655	15.3	58.3	13.5	12.9	
Dolnośląskie	18	305	14	77.8	194	63.7	110	27.0	0.0	0.0	73.0	
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	20	899	14	70.0	80	8.9	820	6.8	92.3	0.0	1.0	
Lubelskie	74	797	69	93.2	717	89.9	80	89.8	-	-	10.2	
Lubuskie	26	326	25	96.2	314	96.4	12	0.0	-	-	100.0	

cont. Table 2

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Łódzkie	26	151	25	96.2	145	95.9	6	0.0	-	-	100.0
Małopolskie	75	681	65	86.7	454	66.6	228	19.5	-	67.3	13.2
Mazowieckie	80	561	67	83.8	440	78.5	121	73.6	-	3.5	22.9
Opolskie	9	79	7	77.8	52	66.3	27	100.0	-	-	0.0
Podkarpackie	111	1098	101	91.0	887	80.8	211	45.1	37.0	-	18.0
Podlaskie	86	916	81	94.2	867	94.7	49	40.0	-	12.4	47.6
Pomorskie	18	224	15	83.3	164	73.4	60	71.9	-	-	28.1
Śląskie	16	148	13	81.3	80	54.0	68	11.5	76.4	-	12.1
Świętokrzyskie	21	116	14	66.7	60	51.6	56	62.9	-	8.9	28.3
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	173	2250	164	94.8	1939	86.2	311	5.3	-	74.7	20.0
Wielkopolskie	49	1455	43	87.8	467	32.1	988	2.7	77.1	7.1	13.2
Zachodniopomorskie	51	1118	48	94.1	609	54.5	509	-	95.0	4.2	0.9

Source: own elaboration.

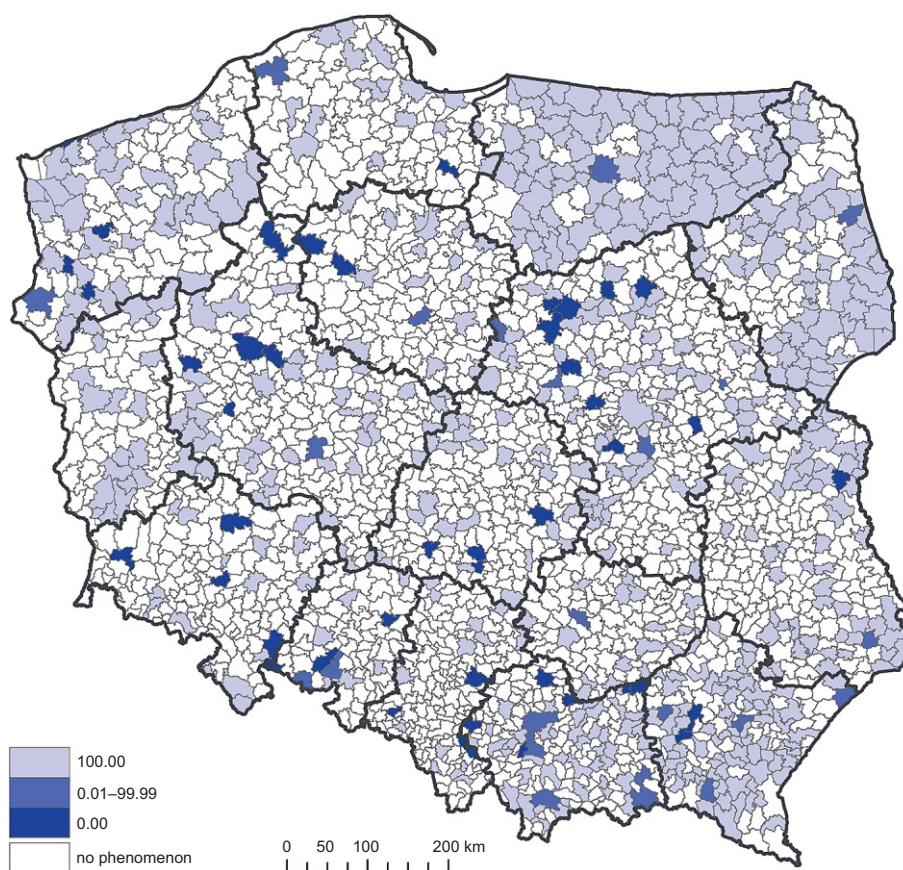


Fig. 8. Share of farm beneficiaries (SAPS payments) in the total amount of payments obtained by churches and religious organisations

Source: own elaboration.

in Poland is taken by 765 parishes (with the largest number in Warmińsko-Mazurskie – 164), providing 89.7% of the total number of church beneficiaries (from 66.7% in Świętokrzyskie to 96.2% in Lubuskie and Łódzkie), and 11.1 thousand hectares – 67.1% of the total area of land subsidised (from 8.9% in Kujawsko-Pomorskie to 96.4% in Lubuskie; see: Table 2, Fig. 9). Considering the total number of parishes (10,352, cf. section 2.1), in total 7.4% of parishes received CAP subsidies.

The remaining beneficiaries (other than parishes) obtained area payments for the use of 3,655 ha of agricultural land (see: Fig. 9). The area stood out again due to the great regional variation – from 6 ha in Łódzkie and 12 ha in Lubuskie to over 500 ha in Kujawsko-Pomorskie (820 ha), Wielkopolskie

(988 ha), and Zachodniopomorskie (509 ha). This was mainly the result of the location of six church farms, namely: Archdiocese of Gniezno: in Kwieciszewo – 557 ha (Mogilno municipality, Kujawsko-Pomorskie) and Braciszewo – 762 ha (Gniezno municipality, Wielkopolskie), Archdiocese of Katowice in Kokoszyce – 52 ha (Wodzisław Śląski municipality, Śląskie), Archdiocese of Szczecin-Kamień – 483 ha (as a limited liability company, Pyrzyce municipality, Zachodniopomorskie), Żydowo Farm at the Higher Seminary in Włocławek – 199 ha (Kujawsko-Pomorskie) and the farms of the Congregation of St. Michael the Archangel – 78 ha (Miejsce Piastowe municipality, Podkarpackie).

The “church farms” category was recorded in five provinces (Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Podkarpackie,

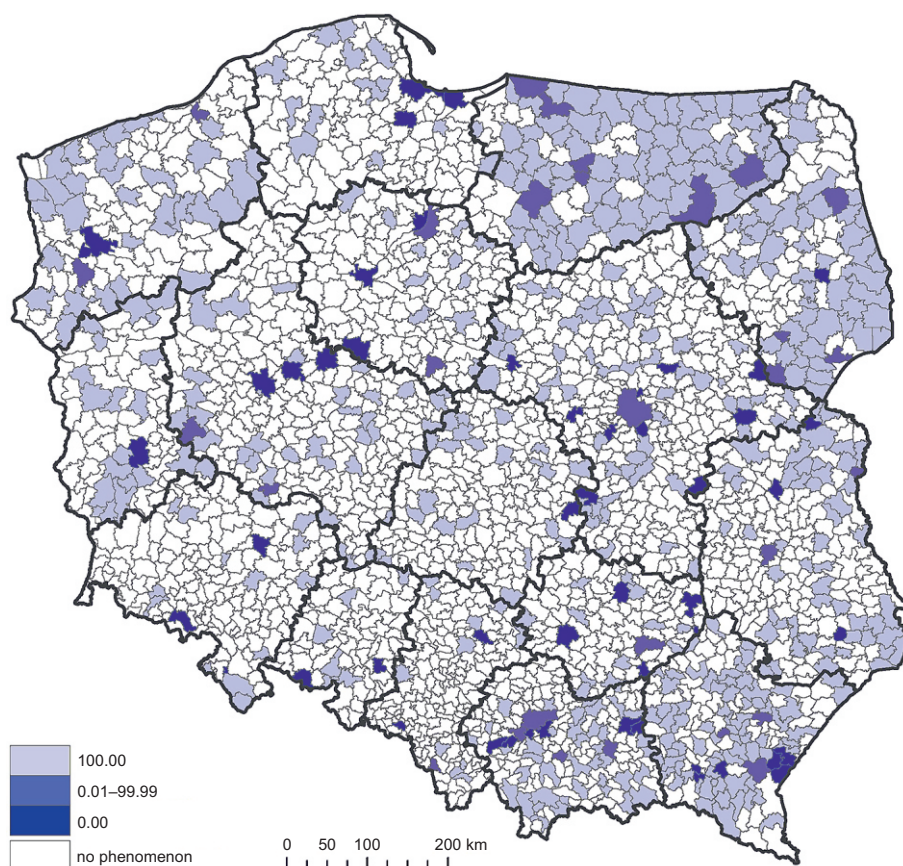


Fig. 9. Share of parishes in the total amount of SAPS payments obtained by churches and religious organisations

Source: own elaboration.

Śląskie, Wielkopolskie, and Zachodniopomorskie). In total, it occupies 58.3% of the land of the other church beneficiaries (i.e. apart from parishes), and this share was only dominant (over 75%) in Podkarpackie (37.0%).

Furthermore, the analysis of other church beneficiaries indicated the existence of land subsidised from the CAP that is used by:

- religious orders and congregations (49 beneficiaries), the largest area being the 44 hectares held by the Congregation House of the Societas Verbi Divini in Górna Grupa (Dragacz municipality, Kujawsko-Pomorskie);
- seminaries (9 beneficiaries), the largest area being the 153 ha held by the Higher Theological Seminary in Tarnów (Małopolskie);

- other units (24 beneficiaries, land held by dioceses, archdioceses, Caritas, and others), the largest area being the 130 hectares held by the Archdiocese of Poznań (Poznań, Wielkopolskie) (Fig. 10).

Holding size distribution of church land covered by direct CAP payments

The analysis also covered the holding size distribution of the land owned by churches and religious organisations that is covered by area payments, with a specification of the share in the total number and the area classified into five holding size groups, i.e. up to 5 ha, between 5.1 and 10 ha, between 10.1 and 20 ha, between 20.1 and 50 ha, and over 50 ha (see: Table 3).



Fig. 10. Structure of church land by type according to the area covered by CAP area payments
 Source: own elaboration.

Table 3. Holding size distribution of land held by churches and religious organisations by number of SAPS applications and area of subsidised land as well as average holding size of subsidised land (2022)

Specification	Of which % of holding size groups										Average area of subsidised land in ha
	up to 5 ha		5–10 ha		10–20 ha		20–50 ha		over 50 ha		
	N*	A**	N	A	N	A	N	A	N	A	
Poland total	19.9	4.7	38.0	21.8	34.2	34.1	6.3	13.8	1.5	25.5	13.0
Dolnośląskie	22.2	3.3	33.3	13.3	16.7	12.4	22.2	42.8	5.6	28.2	16.9
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	35.0	1.9	35.0	5.33	15	3.7	5.0	4.9	10.0	84.1	45.0
Lubelskie	17.6	5.4	44.6	30.7	27	33.6	10.8	30.3	-	-	10.8
Lubuskie	3.8	0.9	11.5	7.63	80.8	83.1	3.8	8.4	-	-	12.5
Łódzkie	38.5	22.0	53.8	64.1	7.69	13.9	-	-	-	-	5.8
Małopolskie	21.3	6.9	62.7	50.4	14.7	20.3	-	-	1.3	22.5	9.1
Mazowieckie	43.8	20.5	38.8	39.1	12.5	22.3	5.0	18.1	-	-	7.0
Opolskie	44.4	11.8	11.1	10.9	33.3	49.2	11.1	28.2	-	-	8.7
Podkarpackie	25.2	8.5	50.5	38.3	16.2	22.5	6.3	16.4	1.8	14.3	9.9
Podlaskie	14.0	3.9	43.0	29.2	34.9	46.7	8.1	20.2	-	-	10.6
Pomorskie	5.6	0.5	16.7	9.67	72.2	76.5	5.6	13.4	-	-	12.4
Śląskie	18.8	3.9	62.5	47	12.5	14.0	-	-	6.3	35.1	9.2
Świętokrzyskie	66.7	42.5	23.8	31.6	9.52	25.9	-	-	-	-	5.5
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	4.6	1.0	25.4	16.7	63.6	62.3	5.2	11.7	1.2	8.4	13.0
Wielkopolskie	24.5	2.5	34.7	9.06	22.4	10.0	12.2	12.4	6.1	66.1	29.7
Zachodniopomorskie	3.9	0.5	19.6	7.01	64.7	37.4	9.8	11.8	2.0	43.2	21.9

*N – number, **A – area.

Source: own elaboration.

A special position in the above-mentioned holding size distribution is occupied by 13 subsidies for the largest areas (over 50 ha; 1.5% of the total number), covering 2838 ha (25.5% of the total). Such payments were not recorded in six provinces, whereas in the remaining provinces, the greatest number were observed in Wielkopolskie (three payments).

When considering SAPS payments, the largest church units exceeded the threshold of 500 ha and concerned two farms of the Archdiocese of Gniezno: in Kwieciszewo – 557 ha (Mogilno municipality, Kujawsko-Pomorskie) and Braciszewo – 762 ha (Gniezno municipality, Wielkopolskie).

The above-mentioned farm of the Archdiocese of Gniezno, in addition to cultivating field crops (mainly wheat, rapeseed, corn), breeds fattening cattle (about 300 animals). It features modern agricultural equipment and a crew of 20 people. The farm transfers part of the profits to cover the needs of the curia (Kula, 2024). Even more complex in terms

of organisational structure is the Agricultural Farm of the Archdiocese of Szczecin-Kamień, operating since 2006 in the form of a limited liability company. The cases described illustrate that farms belonging to churches and religious organisations can be large entities oriented at professional production for the agricultural market.

The spatial distribution of the above-mentioned holding size structure is reflected in the average area per beneficiary. The average area in Poland was 13 ha. By province, it varied from 5.5 ha in Świętokrzyskie to 45 ha in Kujawsko-Pomorskie, which was due to the variability in the holding size distribution of the aforementioned subsidies, with classification into five area groups, i.e. up to 5 ha, between 5.1 and 10 ha, between 10.1 and 20 ha, between 20.1 and 50 ha, and over 50 ha. This is evidenced by the fact that, on the one hand, the largest shares of the number and areas of subsidised land are found in – in the case of the smallest farms (area group up to 5 ha)

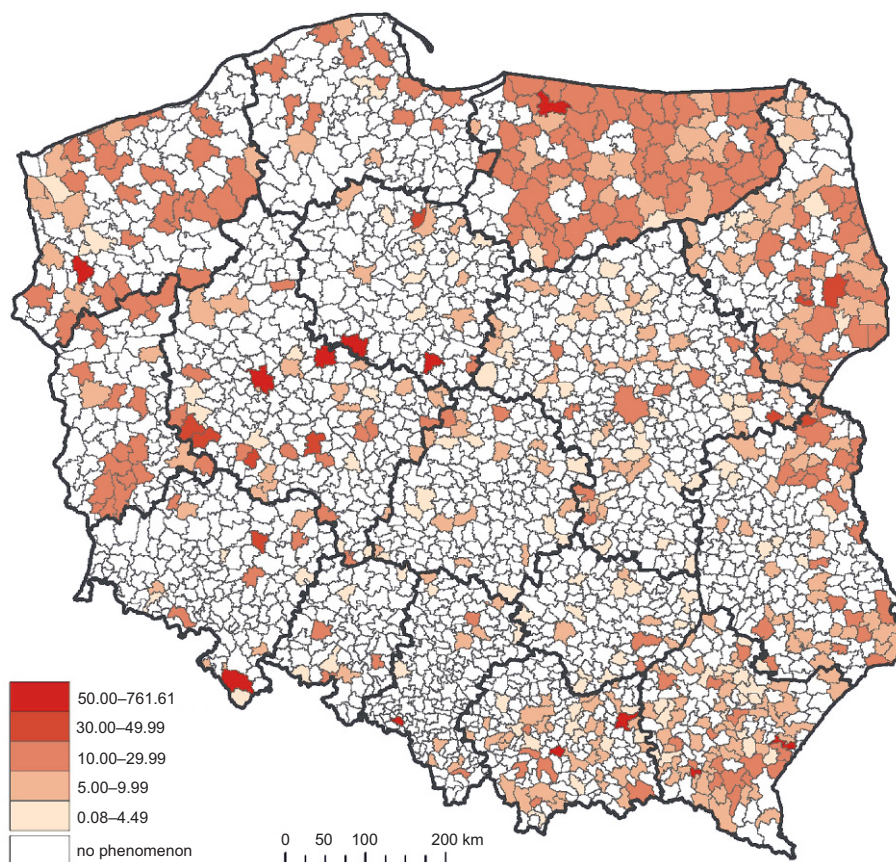


Fig. 11. Average area of subsidised church land per beneficiary
Source: own elaboration.

– Świętokrzyskie (66.7% and 42.5%, respectively), while on the other hand – within the group of units with the largest area (over 50 ha) – these are found in Kujawsko-Pomorskie (10.0% and 84.1%, respectively, see: Table 3, Fig. 11).

Analysis of the relationship between the absorption rate and selected conditions

The analysis of the relationship between the area of subsidised church land and selected conditions for the development of agriculture did not reveal any connections. In most cases, the values of the correlation

coefficient were extremely low (usually not exceeding the absolute value of 0.1) and statistically insignificant, which may mean only trace relationships, but much weaker than expected. The absence of a relationship between the level of subsidies to church land and independent variables may be explained to some extent by the low representativeness of the phenomenon studied (it applies to just 27.5% of isolated spatial units). The fact that the largest number of church beneficiaries of the CAP were located in two provinces: Podkarpackie (111 beneficiaries) and Warmińsko-Mazurskie (173 beneficiaries), significantly differing in terms of natural, historical and socio-economic conditions, points to a need for further spatial studies of the lands of churches and religious organisations in Poland.

DISCUSSION

The Church – real estate and agricultural land – subsidies

The Catholic Church and religious organisations are beneficiaries of the EU CAP, mainly through direct subsidies to the agricultural properties that they own. The ownership of agricultural land and the resulting obtaining of financial benefits by the group that has been investigated is neither a new phenomenon (the Church has been accumulating property to assist in achieving its goals since its inception) related only to the Catholic Church (it also applies to other religions), nor is it only seen in Poland. The use of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds by the church was also observed in the United Kingdom (Horton, 2020), Ireland (O'Reilly, 2019), and Germany (Wielgus, 2021).

For example, on the basis of archival data, it can be stated that the Orthodox Church in Russia owned four million hectares of land with an ownership title. Real material support for monasteries, manifested by the assignment of land for churches, was a sign of respect for millions of believers on the part of the state structures (Ashmarov, 2011). The expansion of church lands was also a result of the growing number of dioceses because every new church received a plot of land (Anatolievich et al., 2018).

In Germany, on the other hand, churches and religious associations currently own over 380,000 hectares, which constitutes 2.3% of the total area of agricultural land. Catholic and Protestant Church ownership clearly prevails here (Tietz & Hubertus, 2024).

One More Hectare, a Belgian company that sells large plots of land, estimated that the property of the Roman Catholic Church includes 70 million hectares of land around the world. These are not only agricultural lands, but also plots at the centres of the largest cities such as New York, London, or Paris (Doorn, 2021).

The ownership situation obviously shows spatial variation, hence there are various ways that society

sees property being held by the church. For example, in some less wealthy regions of the world, church property and access to land is an issue. Kabango (2021) highlights the central role of the Church in the current discussion on access to land in sub-Saharan Africa. This author points out that the Church is a privileged institution with many assets acquired through partnerships with colonisers and existing African governments. He emphasised that the Church should take steps towards self-reflection and democratisation of access to the land they own which is treated as an asset to contribute to the development of the entire community (Kabango, 2021; Resane, 2019).

On the other hand, in the countries of the rich West, progressive secularisation poses questions about the need for many properties to perform a religious function. In France,³ there are as many as 5,000 abandoned and ruined churches which, in the coming years, may either be demolished (out of 100,000 buildings in total) (Bronk, 2022), or adapted for other purposes, including sale to private owners. Religious communities in the United States started developing interesting solutions. They began to create affordable housing on church grounds. These are both micro-houses, as well as units for seniors and low-income families created from larger residences formerly used by the clergy (parsonages, abbeys and monasteries). Yet others are reusing their empty schools, church parking lots, and undeveloped plots of land for denser multi-family housing, from terraced houses to apartment buildings (Reidy, 2024). Kulesza (2024) points out that the very surroundings of sacred buildings in Poland have a large and untapped potential for recreational functions for the general population.

The variety of activities undertaken by churches and religious associations shows that they should be financed from various sources depending on the purpose (Cichorska et al., 2024). This also applies to

³ The Catholic Church in France has for centuries been a very well-organized institution influencing the politics of the country. Wood (2013) reports that, in the early Middle Ages, probably over 30 percent of the Frankish kingdom was donated to ecclesiastical institutions.

EU funds, especially in the context of implementing larger projects related to, for example, the renovation of historical monuments (Dziurkowski, 2018; Szymańska, 2017).

Spatial differentiation of subsidies for the church and religious organisations

Głębocki et al. (2010) provided evidence that, in 2008, as many as 1705 beneficiaries obtained PLN 11.3 million in subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy. The above sum constituted 0.1% of the total amount of subsidies (PLN 12.1 billion). By far the largest number of church beneficiaries were located in the south-eastern part of Poland (Podkarpackie, Lubelskie, and Małopolskie – together containing one third of the total number), but in terms of the amount of money, the beneficiaries from the Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Zachodniopomorskie obtained the most (together almost one quarter of the total amount) (Głębocki et al., 2010). Almost 15 years later (2022), the number of beneficiaries had decreased by 46%, and the total sum received had increased by 46%. The spatial distribution looks similar, i.e. greater absorption is recorded in the eastern part of Poland (except for the central part), but Warmińsko-Mazurskie has become a clear leader in terms of both the number of beneficiaries and the total sum paid. This is probably related to the possibility of transferring land free of charge to the corporate entities of the Catholic Church from the resources of the State Land Fund or the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury, pursuant Article 70a of the Act of 17 May 1989 on the relations between the State and the Catholic Church in the Republic of Poland.

The above comparison points to several conclusions. First, there is a visible process for the concentration of payments, synchronised with the process of concentration of land in both Polish agriculture (Balawejder et al., 2021; Berbeka, 2017; Zegar, 2009) and, more broadly, in European agriculture (Majchrzak, 2018). Second, the spatial distribution of the absorption of the payments examined has not undergone fundamental change.

Historical conditions continue to be the main determinant of the phenomenon examined, while the growth of church beneficiaries in selected areas results primarily from state land resources and the possibility of land recovery (e.g. in Warmińsko-Mazurskie). Therefore, the study phenomena reveal that the relict boundaries are “present” (Churski et al., 2020; Więckowski, 2023), and their impact on the level of absorption of CAP funds in agriculture was already visible in the period 2002–2010 (Rudnicki, 2016). History is also of importance with respect to the diversity of church property in Germany. In this case, the highest shares of church property were recorded in the federal states of eastern Germany, i.e. Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg and Thuringia (Tietz & Hubertus, 2024). Like in Poland, there are municipalities where the Church is a major landowner (in a record-breaking municipality located in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, the share of church land was 21.3%) (Tietz & Hubertus, 2024).

It should be noted that the geography of CAP subsidies for churches and religious associations is polarised. On the one hand, the core of the system is formed by areas of traditional, fragmented agriculture in the south-eastern part of Poland (Podkarpackie, Małopolskie, Lubelskie), while on the other hand, recovered territories (Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Zachodniopomorskie) feature a much more favourable agricultural structure. These areas also differ radically in terms of the universally understood religiosity of Poles, illustrated, for example, by the *dominantes* indicator. This fact may also affect the general public’s perception of the Church as a beneficiary of the EU CAP.

Considering the state land privatisation process (57.5% of the Agricultural Property Stock of the State Treasury has been sold) and the fact that every fifth hectare was purchased by corporate bodies (purchasing 19.2% of the land, the remaining 80.9% was purchased by private individuals) (National Support Centre for Agriculture, 2024, p. 27), it should be noted that further changes in the structure of agricultural land ownership in Poland may become visible later, including the strengthening of the role

of the Catholic Church as an owner of agricultural land and, consequently, as a beneficiary of the EU CAP. This is confirmed by an analysis of the literature on the subject (Głębocki, 2010; 2014; Głębocki & Kacprzak, 2020). In the period 2002–2007, the area of land owned by churches and religious organisations increased by over 9 thousand hectares (from 123.0 thousand hectares to 132.4 thousand hectares) (Głębocki, 2010), while in the period 2002–2020, the agricultural land of this group of owners was had an almost equally dynamic growth rate. In 2020, the area of agricultural land totalled almost 140,000 ha (Głębocki & Kacprzak, 2020). To conclude, from 1992 to 30 June 2022, as many as 90,378 ha of land were transferred to ecclesiastical corporate bodies, including 82,656 ha for the benefit of the Catholic Church (most recently – from January 2021 to 30 June 2022: 208 ha) (Ćwiklińska, 2022).

The comparison of spatial layouts presenting church property (cf. e.g. Głębocki, 2010, p. 44) with the level of subsidies recognised in this study (cf. Figs. 1 and 2) allows one to distinguish areas with large land resources and a relatively low level of subsidies. These are the Wielkopolskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie regions. This may explain the “craving” for land in those areas with the most highly-developed agriculture in Poland (Wiśniewski et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Churches and religious organisations are one of many categories (types) of beneficiaries of EU CAP in Poland. Reference to the amount of subsidies obtained by churches and religious associations allows one to state that, on a national scale, it is a rather marginal phenomenon (approximately 0.8% of the total amount of CAP payments in 2022). Geographical differentiation is a derivative of past historical and political processes, while the increase in church beneficiaries in selected areas is primarily due to state land resources and the possibility of restitution. Subsidies are concentrated in the eastern part of the country (with the exception of the central part), but the Warmińsko-Mazurskie region is the clear leader in terms of both the number of beneficiaries and the amount of payments.

The literature review conducted indicates a lack of extensive, pan-European scientific literature that systematically analyzes the absorption of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds directly by churches and religious associations. This topic is rarely addressed in research on rural geography, agricultural policy, rural sociology, or religious studies. Therefore, this study fills a research gap in this area and may contribute to further studies.

It must be remembered that the area of agricultural land estimated on the basis of the SAPS forms a small part of the land owned by the group of beneficiaries studied, because most of its resources include land leased externally or managed by other users. Nevertheless, the study pointed to the great usefulness of the Internet database of CAP beneficiaries as a tool for spatial surveys of agriculture – it provided information about the spatial distribution of land used by corporate bodies associated with the Church, and thus revealed the wide range of economic activity (in relation to agriculture) of the category of beneficiaries examined. The agrarian structure, including the ownership structure of agricultural land and its variability in terms of time and space, is the basic determinant of the variation found in Polish agriculture and rural areas.

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