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Polish Father Michal Olszewski, of the Priests of the Sacred Heart order, is seen in screenshot from a video of him walking to a police van from a court building in Warsaw Poland, on Sept. 6, 2024, the day he testified on his claims of being tortured in prison. A well-known retreat master, the priest was arrested March 26 as Internal Security Agency officials raided Sacred Heart houses in an investigation of the order's receipt of grants from the previous government to use in part for a center for abuse victims. (OSV News/courtesy wPolsce24 TV)



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Warsaw, Poland â?? September 13, 2024

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As the superior general of the Sacred Heart order appealed to Polish authorities to ensure an arrested Polish priest's "dignity" is "respected," defenders have accused the country's government of using Father Michal Olszewski as a political prisoner and urged the Catholic Church to speak up on his behalf.

Father Carlos Luis Suarez CodorniÃº, superior general of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, or Dehonians, said in a Sept. 11 interview with OSV News that while the news of the Polish Sacred Heart priest's detention "obviously saddened us enormously," he was "especially saddened by the way we heard that (Olszewski) was treated or experienced these first moments" under arrest.

"In no case is this about going against justice, but certainly we are very concerned about respecting the rights of our confrere as well as any other persons detained in this (case)," Suarez said.

"As we understand it, he's being held in extractive custody, a practice used under communist rule to force prisoners to confess as a condition for release," explained the priest's lawyer, Krzysztof Wasowski.

"Although no court has judged him," Wasowski said, the case is being used "to attack political rivals â?? something which hasn't happened before in democratic Poland. As his defense team, we believe this classifies him a political prisoner."

On the day of Olszewski's arrest — the same day that former Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro's house was searched — Prime Minister Donald Tusk wrote on X, formerly Twitter, "Let the law always mean the law, and justice mean justice," referencing to the name of the former ruling party, Law and Justice, known as PiS for the Polish abbreviation.

Wasowski, a Warsaw-based lawyer, spoke as Olszewski entered his sixth month of pre-trial detention on contested accusations of financial misappropriation and belonging to a "criminal gang," with a prosecutor's office spokesman confirming to the Polish Press Agency, or PAP, Aug. 14, that an "allegation of participation in an organized crime group aimed at committing crimes against property" has been presented by the prosecutor.

In an OSV News interview, Wasowski said the priest had lost over 33 pounds in detention, a fifth of his body weight, and had not been treated for a bowel illness and dietary disorders, despite repeated requests.

In a letter published early July, Olszewski said he had been humiliated, denied water and toilet access during his arrest.

"It turned out that I was under 'special surveillance.' Hence the camera, handcuffs, even when going to the walkway, isolation from others ... waking up with a light all night, every hour! That's how it was for the first two weeks," he said in the letter published by the Polish weekly Sieci.

The priest's allegations he suffered "torture" were later rejected as a "political narrative" by Poland's deputy justice minister, Maria Ejchart.

Tusk rebuffed torture claims as "absurd" but said July 1 he wanted the claim to be investigated. "It seems reasonable to take the case to court," Tusk said, later adding that "this is so absurd that I don't even want to comment on it."

Olszewski testified Sept. 6 regarding the alleged torture, with a video of him walking to a police van from the Warsaw's Mokotów court building going viral on X. It showed the priest exceptionally thin and handcuffed, while still blessing supporters who arrived to greet him.

Wasowski said that his defense team had appealed unsuccessfully to Poland's Supreme Court against a recent extension of the arrest, but said Olszewski was

"feeling reasonably well" and "praying a great deal."

In an Aug. 28 ruling, Warsaw's District Court said it was extending detention of the priest and two Justice Ministry officials held in the case, identified in media reports as Urszula D. and Karolina K., both mothers of young children, for a further three months, pending a court hearing on Oct. 18. The District Court defied the July 31 ruling of an appeals court that that the arrest should be shortened.

Meanwhile, a lay Catholic journalist working with Olszewski said his order's charitable foundation, Profeto, was attempting to continue "helping the needy" after Polish court officials blocked its bank accounts, adding that the priest was only allowed occasional visits from a family member.

"These conditions are simply inhuman â?? we must do everything to ensure others aren't treated this way," Ewelina Zamojska told OSV News. "We want Father Michal and his co-detainees to be allowed to defend themselves as free people, as happens in the civilized world."

Olszewski, a well known retreat master, author from southern Poland and former exorcist, was arrested March 26 simultaneously as Internal Security Agency officials raided Sacred Heart houses in an investigation of the order's receipt of grants from the previous government.

In a Feb. 8 OSV News interview before his detention, the priest said his Profeto foundation had won a bid for \$10 million in 2020 from Poland's Justice Fund to build Archipelago, a center for abuse victims, and had put a further \$2.5 million of the order's own money into purchasing the land in Warsaw's WilanÃ³w suburb.

He added that accusations the foundation lacked experience in helping victims were "completely unfounded," and denied claims that his Archipelago ministry would also house studios for his order's radio station, founded in 2012.

The so-called Justice Fund of the Polish Ministry of Justice was established in 1997, but in 2017 its tasks were decisively expanded by Justice Minister Ziobro of the Law and Justice Party's conservative government, which lost power to the Civic Coalition government after elections on Oct. 15, 2023. The Civic Coalition had campaigned on a more liberal agenda.

The Justice Fund aimed to assist crime victims and those closest to them, especially in the medical, psychological, legal and material spheres.

"The Justice Fund disposes of money that courts order from offenders. These funds are supposed to do good. They are supposed to assist victims of crimes and accidents. They are supposed to prevent them. They are supposed to save people. And this is already happening!" says the fund's official government website.

Tusk, sworn in as prime minister on Dec. 13, 2023, and his government specifically the new Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar questioned the way Ziobro granted the funds and asked the prosecutor's office to check whether the money was handled legitimately.

Prosecutors conducting the investigation were checking "what were these foundations" that got the funds, "when were they established, how did they work," Przemyslaw Nowak, spokesman for the National Prosecutor's Office, told the "19:30" newscast of Polish public television TVP Jan. 31.

Since Feb. 19, prosecutors have been investigating whether "we were dealing with a situation where it was mainly about extracting money."

The allegation that the money from the Justice Fund could be spent in ways contrary to the fund's mission was raised as early as 2021, when the Law and Justice Party, or PiS, was still in power and when the state-run Supreme Audit Office said that \$69 million from the Justice Fund was "spent unintentionally."

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Prayer requests for the arrested priest have been published on his Facebook page, which has 23,000 followers. In a June 28 statement, the Profeto foundation said his arrest had caused "huge pain and anxiety" and urged supporters to "show solidarity" through protests and petitions.

Reacting Sept. 7, the Polish branch of the Sacred Heart order said its superior, Father Slawomir Knopik, was still being refused access to Olszewski, adding that it had been shocked, "along with public opinion," by a new video showing the handcuffed priest in a poor state of health, wearing his rosary.

The order said it still hoped for a "fair and lawful conduct" of Olszewski's case, but was deeply concerned about his continued "isolation from the outside world" and the "prolonged investigation procedures, altered charges and change of judges."

In his phone interview with OSV News, the superior general, speaking from the Rome headquarters of the Sacred Heart order, said that he remains in "constant coordination," with the order's superiors in Poland. For him, the treatment of Olszewski "clearly indicates his dignity was not respected."

"He is not a terrorist, he is not a criminal," Suarez said, questioning the solitary confinement of the priest: "Where is the dangerousness of this person?"

In his OSV News interview, Wasowski said the priest's defense team regarded the charges as "fictional," lacking "supporting facts or documentation."

No evidence had been produced to support accusations of money laundering against the priest, Wasowski said, while claims that he had submitted an "incorrect funding application" had been "invalidated" when Justice Minister Bodnar organized a similar funding competition after taking office.

"The third charge of organizing a criminal gang, filed to justify Father Olszewski's continued detention, is also clearly absurd, since Polish law requires such a band to have a leader, and the leader was not named," the lawyer told OSV News.

"We've questioned the political neutrality of the judges and prosecutors, whose only apparent aim is to reduce the prisoner to such a psychological state that he will give in and sign the confession protocol. This is absolutely illegal and unimaginable in present-day Poland," he said.

In her OSV News interview, Zamojska confirmed that Olszewski had been "treated very harshly" after his March arrest, adding that she and other "friends and supporters" of his Profeto foundation were certain he and his two co-detainees were being "used as political scapegoats."

Polish bishops have not spoken up regarding the case of Olszewski since his arrest.

Bishop Artur Wazny, who heads the Polish church's New Evangelization Team, for which Father Olszewski also served as spokesman, said in February — prior to the arrest, when media scrutiny mounted against the Archipelago ministry — that the

priest's accusers had "grossly misjudged" the Profeto foundation's activities, adding that the planned Archipelago center was "thoroughly modern and innovative, unique and original on a national scale."

The defense attorney Wasowski said that at least a hundred Polish priests had contacted his office, offering to stand surety for Olszewski, but said the bishops' conference had "put aside" a statement in defense of the priest, proposed by his Sacred Heart order.

The bishops' conference spokesman, Father Leszek Gesiak, was not available to discuss the priest's plight Sept. 11 with OSV News.

Meanwhile, Sacred Heart order's Rome general said that he personally knows Olszewski and his ministries, and that he personally "visited this structure made there in Warsaw and I could follow the origin of this project and it seemed to be all clear for us," he told OSV News.

Suarez also expressed his "greatest regret" for how his brother is allegedly being treated under arrest. "How is it possible for a European justice system to have these things happen?" he said in a conversation with OSV News. He demanded "more clarity on the argumentation" of the Polish justice system, as well as explanation for "the time spent without eating, the time spent with handcuffs and these nights where his sleep was interrupted by the lights â?? in short â?? it all this seems to me we were talking about times in another era," he said.

"The pastoral interest of Michal was to really approach these people who are victims of violence," Suarez said.

Asked what he would say to the priest if he was allowed access to the detainee, Suarez said "I would just like to say thank you."

"Thank you for all the good he has done to the church, to the congregation, to so many people in Poland and Europe, in the States, in different countries where he's well known, he has been always very well considered," the superior general said, adding that he would like to urge Olszewski: "Keep your faith, keep the joy, keep your trust in the Lord and rest in him."

"I'm sure that Michal, even in jail, is doing a job of evangelization," his superior said.

The spokesman for Poland's Prosecutor General's Office, Anna Adamiak, did not respond to a request from OSV News for information on Olszewski's case.