

John Paul II in Poland: Pilgrim of the Holy Spirit

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On Saturday, 2 June, the former Cardinal Wojtyła returned to his native country as the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church. He began his historic journey through Poland by kissing the ground. It was a journey of great significance not only for the Poles and for the Catholic Church, but also for the future of the Church in the Soviet Union and possibly for the future of western culture.

The short pontificate of John Paul II has already filled the world with new hope. His intellectual and moral integrity combined with his humility and ability to communicate with others on almost any level, his courage in expressing views which may not be popular, have made him a natural leader in a world where people yearn for great men. In the world of today, confidence in the ability of science to solve human problems by reliance on reason alone has been weakened to the point of despair. Squabbles between Eurocrats and Socialists in a Europe overshadowed by the cruel poverty of the Third World, on the one hand, and the totalitarian threat, on the other, seem pathetically irrelevant to the spiritual yearnings of man. Popular attitudes towards the Catholic Church have also changed. The Second Vatican Council may not have strengthened the Church internally, but it has ended the isolation of Catholics, often portrayed as concerned exclusively with their own culture rather than with sharing in the tribulations of the rest of the world. The "aggiornamento" of John XXIII has certainly weakened the age-old secular anti-clericalism of Europe.

The sudden elevation of the Cardinal from Krakow to the papacy brought into focus the inadequacies of western political life, based on materialism and political expediency and absorbed in its own affairs. A new spirit seemed to have entered the Vatican with John Paul II. He brought to the papacy not only a strong and gentle personality, but also some of the chivalry and romance of the past.

World-wide interest in the Pope's journey to Poland began the day after his election when he announced his wish to return home for the anniversary of St Stanislaus. "It is very rare that a communist govern-

ment has no option," said Olgierd Stepan of Catholic Action (LBC, 3 June, 8.15 p.m.) when talking about the Polish authorities who were giving way to mounting pressure from the bishops, the people and the Pope himself. Indeed, the episcopate themselves thanked the Pope in their special communiqué of 8 February for "his unyielding resolve to come to Poland". It was never a question, however, of whether the Pope would be allowed to come but when he would come. His election has shaken the official structure in Poland. Although the Church in Poland is the strongest spiritual force in the country, it has been a Church deprived of a place in public life and of access to the mass media. The election was an instant break-through: the inauguration in the Vatican and the Papal mass were not only attended by the government, but also had to be shown on the state-controlled television network. Since then the Pope and the Church have remained in the news, however brief and selective the reports may have been.

Psychologically, there could be no immediate return to the official disregard for the Church. The Party, however, was adamant in its refusal to countenance a Papal visit which coincided with the feast-day of St Stanislaus, the bishop martyr who was described in the Party weekly, *Polityka*, as "a very controversial person who undermined the lawful authority of the State". It was thought that the issue of human rights would figure prominently on his agenda had he come for the saint's anniversary. The authorities had in fact censored the Pope's letter to his former diocese of Krakow, in which he referred to the saint as "a defender of human rights who did not hesitate, if it were for the common good, to risk conflict with the powers that be", and even urged the faithful "not to be deterred by their daily preoccupations, faint-heartedness and self-interest from following the martyr's great example of concern for public morality". Eventually, on 2 March, the government announced laconically that the Pope's visit "had been fixed" for 2-10 June, almost a whole month after the anniversary. They could hardly have realized what that decision was to mean. In the meantime the tension subsided.

For the bishops, however, the struggle only began at this moment. They had to fight for virtually every item on the Pope's itinerary as the authorities were determined to limit the impact of his visit. He was not to travel widely in Poland; instead he was to visit only a few places, and the number of people that could come to see him would be controlled by "tickets only". He was prevented from going to the shrine at Piekary Slaskie in the heartland of industrial Silesia, for fear large crowds of workers would demonstrate their faith and thus show the failure of official atheism even among the proletariat. No one was allowed days off work to organize trips to visit the Pope. People were urged to stay at home and watch television; even complete live coverage of the Papal journey was promised in order to keep the numbers down.

On an international level, similar attempts were made to minimize the significance of the event and to lower the number of foreign journalists and church dignitaries. The visit was said to be a "local affair", a "family reunion", the sentimental journey of a Pole who had reached the top of an international institution and was simply longing to see his homeland again. A special tax of \$350 was imposed on journalists to limit their numbers, but this had to be withdrawn after world-wide protests. A few weeks before the visit, tension in Poland started to rise again. There were some sporadic protests organized by the dissidents and, as so often in the past when the government mishandled the situation, the Church was asked to restore calm. The Sunday before the visit, Cardinal Wyszyński expressed his "hopes for a peaceful celebration of the great event" and urged people to show each other brotherly love. In Rome, after consecrating 26 new bishops Pope John Paul II, almost out of context, asked all those present to pray that his apostolic pilgrimage to Poland would pass under the guidance of the Holy Spirit "for the good of my countrymen, Christians and all people of good will".

When after his triumphant journey through the thronged Warsaw streets the Pope appeared under the huge cross erected for the occasion at Victory Square, the symbolism of the occasion could not be missed by his compatriots. At that moment all the troubles of the past seemed forgotten. It was no mere upsurge of emotion. This was something more. It seemed as if the old dream of Poland – to be at the centre of Christendom – was beginning to be fulfilled. It was a victory of the spiritual – a vindication of more than 30 years of hardship. If the harassed Church in Poland is the only Church in Eastern Europe completely free in its internal life, it is because a sufficient number of believers chose between their careers, their children's education or simply a relatively untroubled existence, and the need to speak out and act in accordance with their consciences.

That this man of the Church in Poland should stand in the square as Pope was a victory for Polish Catholicism, so often regarded as primitive, obscurantist, traditionalist or even reactionary. That the hopes of the world should focus on him was a recognition of the Catholic subconscious of the Polish people, that fusion of faith and patriotism which has given rise to a national spirit dedicated to the service of the Church.

The West, represented by almost 1,000 journalists, watched in amazement the Pope's nine-day tour. Some journalists expected hysterical outbursts and even violence, reminiscent of football crowd behaviour. Others expected a clash between religious and national fanaticism and the totalitarian regime. It was not to be. Although vast crowds greeted the Pope wherever he went, they did not come to show the scorn they feel for their "masters". Most of them came to renew their faith, to give thanks to God for choosing this "son of Polish soil" and to enjoy his presence.

Almost immediately it was recognized that Pope John Paul II has a way with his people that not only surpasses the popularity he enjoys with the crowds in Italy, but reveals an almost mystic quality of communication. When he said, faced by hundreds of thousands, "I would like to speak to each one of you individually" it seemed almost superfluous. Somehow he did. Ever ready to sing or joke with them, he moved freely in his speeches on the invisible level of common understanding perfected through years of oppression. He seemed to listen to the people as attentively as the people listened to him. After the extraordinary chanting at Victory Square:

We want God in the family circle . . . We want God in parents' concerns . . . We want God in books, in schools, at work and in leisure time. . . . We want God in government orders, in books of law . . .

he said to students in front of St Anne's Church: "I have realized that all this applause, the interruptions, come from the Holy Spirit. People are preaching with me. Yesterday when I used the word 'Christ' they applauded for 15 minutes. This society has become some kind of theological society." The main purpose of his pilgrimage was becoming clear. It was to be a national celebration of faith, a dialogue with the people about man and God, and, as his arrival coincided with Pentecost, an invocation of the Holy Spirit to transform Poland into a community of faith. The journalists were amazed by the spectacle of spontaneous faith and tried to resist it for a while. By the third day most of them had given in, and from mere observers became participants. By then it was becoming clearer what the Pope meant when he insisted to Party leader Gierek that his visit had a purely religious significance. For centuries religious thought has replaced politics and even philosophy in the Polish Catholic mind. The journalists were surprised at what the Pope was saying because they concentrated on the political aspects of his speeches. Yet he was putting aside the particular grievances of the Church in Poland and even his own. Not once did he complain about the restrictions placed on his journey, and he even once praised the police for doing their duty. By concentrating on the spiritual liberation of men, irrespective of political constraints, he transcended the inhibitions of political realism. Even the last war is seen in religious terms. Introducing the Pope, Cardinal Wyszyński referred to the significance of the martyrdom of Warsaw during the uprising in 1944: "A fiery place of executions? No, rather a melting pot in which gold is refined to the highest purity. Feeling a profound compassion at the sight of this immense suffering, we sense an even greater feeling of admiration. These victims and these fighters have shown the world to what heights heroism, borne and sustained by so noble a sense of human honour and by the strong convictions of Christian belief, can rise." Referring to the Soviet allies who

abandoned the uprising to its own fate, Pope John Paul II continued the theme: "If we do not remember that under these ruins lies Christ the Redeemer, then it is impossible to understand the history of Poland." Going beyond the Polish boundaries he said: "In how many places in Europe and the world has the death of the Polish soldier testified that there could be no just Europe without an independent Poland?"

At Gniezno, the ancient capital of Polish Christianity, he set the tone of his pilgrimage. He insisted that the tradition of Polish heroism and Christianity should become the avenue of the Holy Spirit: "Dear brothers and sisters, we find ourselves on the main path of our spiritual history. This is, at the same time, one of the main spiritual paths of the history of Slavs, and also one of the main spiritual paths of Europe." Straying from his sermon when he saw a banner raised by some Czechs, who had defied the closure of the Czech-Polish border, he read out (quoting the text on the banner) "Father, remember all your Czech children!" And he comforted them by saying how aware he was of the "far greater difficulties that Christians face in Czechoslovakia". His main theme, however, was to be an invocation of the Holy Spirit through "this Polish Pope, this Slav Pope, in revealing the spiritual unity of Christian Europe". Aware of great cultural differences "between the two great traditions of European Christianity, that of the West and that of the East", and the almost insignificant theological differences between the Catholics and the Orthodox, he reminded Christians of their underlying unity of faith. He regretted that in spite of open declarations concerning the right to exchange information, Poles in other countries (an obvious reference to Poles in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union) and other Slavs would not be able to hear him.

While Warsaw radio and television were cutting down on live relays of the Papal sermons, President Jablonski and Party leader Gierek were striking an almost religious note in talking about "peace as the greatest value of the people and all humanity" and "our most sacred duty to socialist Poland". The Pope travelled through Poland encouraging people to "remain strong" and urging them not to be defeated: "Never lose your spiritual freedom". While the mass media commentaries talked about the suffering under the Nazis and the achievements of the present, Pope John Paul II concentrated on the future, avoiding argument with the official propaganda. In his address to priests at the Shrine of the Holy Virgin in Czestochowa, he urged them to continue relentlessly the dialogue between Church and State, "aware of our diametrically opposed concepts of the world", ensuring that "fundamental human rights and the free activity of the Church be respected". He implored them to stand in the forefront of this struggle, reminding the bishops of the great example of their predecessor, the martyr Bishop St Stanislaus, who did not hesitate to risk his life.

In Krakow, his home diocese, the crowds were among the largest, and the welcome given to him was the most tumultuous. Speaking in the cathedral, he made "nonconformism" one of his themes and in a clear reference to dissidents said that "the future of Poland will depend on how many people are mature enough to be nonconformists". His emotional speech at Auschwitz, the monument to hatred, where four million people were slaughtered, emphasized how he envisages the transformation of Poland – through love and peaceful resistance.

Throughout his journey as a pilgrim in Poland, Pope John Paul II stressed several times that man cannot be measured by work, social progress or even his own humanity. "Man must be measured by the dimension of his heart, his inner dimensions of conscience and a spirit open to God. Only the Holy Spirit can lead man to the fulfilment of his humanity, through wisdom and love."

Malraux once said that the 21st century would be a metaphysical century, the century of the Holy Spirit. If it is true, Pope John Paul II has become the harbinger of the spiritual transformation, not only of Poland and of Eastern Europe, but possibly of the whole world. Many Poles have returned to their faith, and there were scenes of priests hearing confessions in the midst of large crowds. The triumphant journey of the Pope was no mere triumphalism; the emphasis was laid heavily on the future, which will depend on the readiness of many to sacrifice their comforts. The mission of the Church in Poland to struggle for the freedom of Christians in the rest of Eastern Europe will divert the attention of the Polish people from the purely national aim of regaining independence. The Church in Poland is to become a servant Church. Opposition from the totalitarian State is, no doubt, to be expected, and there are signs already that the Soviet government is stepping up its atheist campaign and trying to make sure that the Polish "disease" does not spread.

The tensions in Poland will surely increase. For the last three years the growing dissident movement has been undermining the authorities' hold on the country. Now the movement is bound to grow even faster. We may expect many nominal Catholics in the Party to return to the Church and to resist carrying out the policies demanded of them by the Party. Imperceptibly the balance of power between Church and State has shifted. For the sake of peace, it may be that the Church will even keep the government in power. Poland, however, will never be the same.