

Profile of the New Pope

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The new Pope, elected on 16 October 1978, is the first non-Italian Pope for 455 years and the first Slav to be elected to this office. He comes from a country where two generations have had to suffer under the pressures of a uniform, ideocratic system, which tries to relegate all human activity to the material realm, and leaves the spiritual realm in the hands of self-appointed masters of human destiny, to the exclusion of God. Yet despite these pressures, Poland continues to be the most dynamic Catholic community in the world. The survival and missionary zeal of the Polish Church today are in great measure due to the integrity and courage of the Polish hierarchy, of which the Cardinal-elect was a prominent member.

Karol Wojtyła was born into a working class family on 18 May 1920 near Cracow. He lost his parents early in life. He studied Polish literature at the Jagiellonian University and was intending to become a writer and probably an actor. The war, however, intervened, and during the German occupation he was forced to become a labourer in a chemical plant. He managed to find his way into a secret study circle, and here, in opposition to the racial and collectivist theories of national socialism, he developed his "personalist" view of man and his preoccupation with the moral order. During this period he provided cultural activities for workers and organized entertainment for them in an improvised recreation centre.

In 1942 he started to attend a clandestine seminary and was ordained priest in 1946 when Poland, liberated from the Germans, found herself under yet another occupation. After completing a degree course in philosophy in Rome he obtained another degree, this time in theology, from the state university in Poland. He started his pastoral work in the early '50s at the height of the Stalinist persecution, but escaped the notice of the authorities and in 1954 became a professor of ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin. In 1958 when only 38 he became the auxiliary bishop of Cracow.

In the difficult post-war years this young theologian and philosopher

was exclusively concerned with education and man's spiritual formation. Only later in a somewhat easier period, when elevated to the ranks of the hierarchy, did he become known as a writer. In 1960 the first of his published works appeared under the title of *Love and Responsibility*. In this comprehensive exposition of Catholic ethics, applied in this case to love between the sexes, we can gain insight into Wojtyła's philosophical position which strongly underlies his later fight for human rights. He sees man in an objective perspective, in which the individual transcends the community, society and the State because he is fundamentally (in his nature) directed towards God. Therefore, the greatest problem is not social or political disorder (detrimental as this may be to personal growth) but the moral order, discipline and the responsibility of personal commitment to love. The author is enthusiastic about the thomist synthesis between love, as a theological virtue, and the moral order, where prudence is the dominant factor. While Wojtyła reveals an enthusiasm based on the integrity of Catholic orthodoxy, he also possesses the humility of a philosopher who realizes how difficult it is to establish correct answers. This makes his work apologetic in the best sense of the word. In his introduction we read that the "book is written with those people in mind who see in the Gospel great goodness for all men".

In the '60s, Bishop Wojtyła became involved in the many difficulties which stemmed from the undeclared war between Church and State in Poland. In the controversy over the *Znak* movement (Sign) which was attacked by the government-sponsored Pax organization, he defended the editors of the monthly journal *Znak* although their social Catholicism was influenced more by the left-wing Christianity of Mournier than by papal encyclicals. The very fact that the *Znak* movement was under attack meant that it was alive and open to truth. Its existence was therefore more important to the Bishop than the risk of confrontation with the more conservative elements in the Church.

In 1964 he became the Archbishop of the Cracow diocese, the most important diocese after Warsaw. As a pastor he helped revivify the two theological seminaries, of which one is the largest national institute of its kind in the world (294 students). In 1965 a national controversy arose over the episcopate's attempt to bring about a *rapprochement* with the German hierarchy. Such a development, it was hoped, would eventually lead to national reconciliation between Poland and Germany. The government rallied the forces of Polish chauvinism on its side, and it took the Archbishop years of painstaking work to explain the real meaning of Christian forgiveness, and so avert this major crisis of confidence.

The closing years of Gomulka's leadership, while still outwardly liberal, were years of increasing tension between the nation and the State as the hopes raised in 1956 were frustrated. The conflict between Church and State came to a head during the celebration of a thousand years of

Christianity in Poland – the millennium – which the government countered by putting forward the slogan of one thousand years of Polish statehood. Restrictions were placed on the Church's plans for celebrating the anniversary, and culminated in the government's refusal to give a visa to Pope Paul VI who wished to visit Poland. The Polish government could hardly go to that length again and refuse entry to the present Pope, should he wish to visit his own country.

During the last years of Gomulka's leadership rumours were spread from official circles in an attempt to divide the episcopate. The newly nominated Cardinal Wojtyła (1967) deliberately underplayed his role in order to emphasize the leadership of Cardinal Wyszynski and the unity of the Polish hierarchy. Refraining from public pronouncements, he restricted himself to discussions at internal episcopal conferences and to sermons which echoed the stand taken by the hierarchy as a whole. This shows not only his personal humility but also the importance which he attaches to the unity of the church leadership. It is not surprising, therefore, that the experience of unity among Polish Catholics, which brought about not only a remarkable revival of faith but was also chiefly responsible for wresting political concessions from the State, should lie behind the Pope's attitude to the Church as a whole. In his first address to the cardinals, Pope John Paul II emphasized "the common purpose and common mind in the imitation of Christ", stressing papal authority and the discipline of the Church. Nevertheless, because of his own involvement in the struggle for greater freedom in Poland, his insistence on the spiritual and doctrinal unity of the faithful does not exclude respect towards those who are searching for the truth.

In the tense atmosphere of recent years Cardinal Wojtyła made clear on numerous occasions that the Church defends the freedom of all men, although the Church's struggle is not political but spiritual. On the feast of Corpus Christi last year, after the police had murdered the student leader Stanislaw Pyjas, who was involved in organizing the independent student union, the Cardinal said: "Human problems cannot be solved by manipulation, with the aid of the secret police and army, by trying to control every aspect of life. There is only one road towards peace and unity – respect for human rights without any limitation whatsoever." And on the same feast this year, in the presence of Archbishop Poggi, as if adding to his previous statement, he declared: "Of course human rights include the right to work, the right to a just wage. But there are also rights of the human spirit: the right to believe, the right to possess the truth, the right to love." It is this strong awareness of the primacy of the spiritual which will make this new Pope a fearsome opponent not only of any totalitarian power, but also of any attempt to limit the growth of the human spirit towards God.