

The Pope's Pilgrimage to Poland*

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Two themes emerged as the guiding issues for Pope John Paul II's visit to Poland from 16 to 23 June 1983: one was religious, focussing on a forceful affirmation of the traditional and universal Christian values of freedom, truth, justice and love for one's fellow-man and developed in the spiritual teachings of the Church. The other was social, centering on the message that obstacles and difficulties in public life could and would be overcome only by persistent efforts by the population as a whole to apply those moral principles to all aspects of public activity.

These themes were systematically presented by the Pope in all his sermons and statements delivered during his eight-day stay in Poland. They were received with avid attention by millions of Poles who responded to the Pope's message with a massive show of devotion and spontaneous enthusiasm.

The Pope went to Poland to take part in ceremonies commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Black Madonna's shrine at the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa. He had been invited by representatives of the government and the Church's episcopate; but he also went to see and be with ordinary people, to visit Poland as a whole. The main purpose of his trip was pastoral: to bring guidance for the nation at a particularly "difficult moment in its history" and to bring solace to a country that "has suffered much and suffers ever anew". The pastoral aspects of the visit determined the character of the trip itself.

At the same time, the Pope's pronouncements and the visit itself immediately and inevitably acquired a political meaning. This was an obvious consequence of the current Polish situation in which public life is suffering from political constraints upon the country by the communist authorities and relations between the authorities and the population are characterised by mutual distrust and latent hostility. Both the authorities and the public expected that the papal visit would contribute to a change in that situation.

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Meetings with the Authorities

There is little doubt that the authorities had specific expectations about the encounter with the Pope. Poland's communist leaders have considerable power, but they lack authority, i.e. recognition — both in the country and abroad — of their right to govern. They had, therefore, hoped that the Pope, by meeting and conferring with the highest officials of the government, would bestow upon this government some semblance of respectability. This, in turn, would make it easier for the authorities to rule over the still rebellious population and to acquire a modicum of acceptance in the eyes of the world.

The Pope had two meetings with the country's political leaders: a formal encounter with several representatives of the government on 17 June, which featured an exchange of official statements on conditions in the country and was followed by a two-hour discussion between the Pope and General Jaruzelski — and a previously unscheduled meeting with Jaruzelski on 22 June.

During the first meeting, General Jaruzelski declared in a televised address that the authorities had been forced to impose martial law in December 1981 to “avoid the enormity of public suffering and tears” that might have resulted from presumed confrontations between the defenders and the opponents of the communist government. Jaruzelski asserted the “moral character” of the socialist state and said that the authorities were determined to continue in their efforts to introduce “reforms” and “improvements” in the working of the system so as to strengthen its “socialist” nature.

The Pope did not reject the official claims, nor did he question their plausibility; he seemed simply to have disregarded them. Responding to Jaruzelski's speech, he remarked only that he hoped “that social reforms, announced many times, corresponding to the principles worked out at the price of such pain during the critical days of August 1980 and contained in the accords reached at the time between the government and the striking workers, would be gradually put into effect.” Furthermore, as if to suggest to the government leaders that he had come to Poland to visit its people rather than to negotiate with anyone on any particular subject, the Pope thanked “the authorities for having contributed to the preparation of my meeting with the nation and with the Church in my homeland”.

No communiqué about the Pope's talks with Jaruzelski was issued, but the government spokesman subsequently indicated during a press conference for foreign correspondents that the two men had found little or no agreement on their respective views. “The issues were viewed differently,” the spokesman frankly acknowledged.

Neither was a communiqué issued at the conclusion of the other round of talks between the two men, held in Kraków on 22 June. Instead, the official press agency merely issued an announcement noting that the

meeting had been "proposed by the Church" and had provided an opportunity for "the continuation of the talks held on 17 June" in Warsaw. It added that during the meeting "hope was expressed that the papal visit would contribute to a peaceful and favourable development of social life in Poland and the strengthening of peace in Europe and in the world."

The Kraków meeting, taking place at the end of the "official part" of the Pope's visit to Poland, was completely unexpected. This alone served to raise questions about its purpose as well as speculations about its sponsorship. Was it requested by the Church, as the authorities claimed, perhaps because the Pope might have thought it necessary, as a result of his travels through central and southern Poland and his visits to major urban and industrial centres, to communicate again with Jaruzelski and share with him some of his immediate impressions? Did he seek further clarification of the motivations and designs behind official policies? Or did the initiative for the meeting come from regime circles?

No clarification of any of those questions has been provided. Even so, it is difficult to conceive that the Pope could have failed to be impressed by both the magnitude of the crowds that attended all his religious services and the solemn and enthusiastic response of those crowds to his spiritual and moral message. The Pope must have noticed that most of the people who braved considerable distances and major transportation and lodging problems to take part in those services, not only preserved a strong feeling of their own identity, but also repeatedly showed themselves determined to defend their right to make this identity obvious and recognised. This determination was demonstrated during and after religious services through displays of signs, flags, and expressive gesture: it was made obvious through songs, chants, and prayers; it was also evident in the particularly pointed reaction to those passages in the Pope's sermons that were perceived by his listeners to affirm the right to popular self-identification.

Furthermore, during the visit itself, several politicians, most notably Deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski and Foreign Minister Stefan Olszowski, mounted direct attacks on some of the Pope's pronouncements. This particularly related to Rakowski's attempt to discredit the Pope's appeal to young people to strengthen their resolve to uphold moral principles under difficult conditions, as well as his criticism of the Pope's argument that all public groups should have a recognised right to free association.

Moreover, it certainly did not escape the Pope's attention that the authorities continued to show themselves to be determined as ever to eradicate the remaining vestiges of public autonomy. Their decisions to outlaw the artists' union and to dissolve a Catholic Intellectuals' Club (KIK) in Częstochowa, both taken during the papal visit, confirmed this.

Meeting with the Public

It is clear that the central element of the Pope's visit was his "meetings" with the public rather than with the authorities. These meetings took various forms. The Pope usually met the public at religious services, Masses, common prayers and ceremonies of beatification. He also came into direct contact with them during his travels. Every pontifical Mass celebrated by the Pope during his stay attracted estimated crowds of a million or more while the number of bystanders watching the Pope pass along the streets ran into hundreds of thousands.

These meetings were not without social and political nuances, reflecting the complex character of Polish society itself. This society has undergone a process of profound transformation during recent years. This was linked with the movement of self-assertion by various social groups that started with the conclusion of the social accords in August 1980 and produced the emergence of numerous autonomous public organisations, most notably the Solidarity trade union. Most of these groups have been outlawed by the authorities during the martial law period, but the spirit of self-identity and self-importance has remained very much alive in society as a whole. The existence of this spirit was repeatedly demonstrated during the papal visit through the persistent display of posters and slogans related to the labour movement and other public groups, through periodic marches of Solidarity supporters, and through the "V" for victory signs that were made by the public at each gathering.

The Pope did not ignore this spirit of public self-identity. Although guarded in his public pronouncements, he repeatedly acknowledged the principle of society's self-assertion and paid tribute to the public's recent efforts to gain some direct participation in the country's official public life. As if to confirm this, the Pope prevailed upon the communist authorities to make it possible for him to meet with the Solidarity leader, Lech Wałęsa.

It was not easy to win official acquiescence to this meeting. The authorities had long rejected any possibility of such an encounter. For them, Wałęsa is no more than a "private person" and a "former leader of a former labour union". For the public, however, Wałęsa is certainly more than that. Having personified during 1980 and 1981 the only successful workers' movement of self-organisation and public autonomy from state control, Wałęsa has emerged as a living symbol of society's wish for self-determination. His meeting with the Pope served the public as an indication that the latter recognised the importance of that wish.

The Pope eventually met Wałęsa on 23 June, following the conclusion of the official part of his visit to Poland. The meeting took place in a secluded part of the country; it was strictly "private" and no verifiable information about the talks between the two men has been made public.

The Pope's Defence of Society's Rights

Society has an innate and inalienable right to maintain its own identity. This was the principal message presented by the Pope in three sermons in Poznań and Katowice on 20 June and in Wrocław on 21 June. Expanding on this theme, the Pope told vast audiences in all three cities that society's right to self-determination both corresponded to, and derived from, the fundamental moral rights of love for one's fellow man, of justice for all, and of truth as the foundation of all relations among people. In this context, he introduced a concept of social solidarity as the platform of relations among different groups and individuals based on those values which are recognised by all as beneficial and good.

The Pope developed his arguments gradually, emphasising specific aspects of the issue in each of the sermons. In Poznań, he focused on the right of the peasants to "maintain and develop, through their work, their own identity, and to preserve it in the future." In Katowice, he concentrated on the right of the workers to a proper recognition of their social importance in general and, more specifically, on their rights to "a just remuneration for work [. . .] to job security [. . .] to rest from work [. . .] and to free association in trade unions." In Wrocław, the Pope appealed for a recognition by society as a whole of the principle of truth as a basis for relations among all groups.

The Pope's arguments were presented against the background of religious themes. Their impact was, however, profoundly political in view of the country's current circumstances. These circumstances are characterised by the authorities' incessant and deliberate efforts to eradicate all aspects of public self-determination and autonomy from official control. Such efforts have been particularly obvious in the openly proclaimed policy of suppressing all forms of public self-organisation, notably in the case of trade unions and organisations of the peasants, the students, and the intellectuals.

The Pope's arguments run counter to those policies. At the same time, he did not limit his remarks to the mere upholding of general principles of society's right to self-assertion. Instead, even while being relatively cautious and restrained in presenting his thoughts, the Pope strongly defended some of the groups that had recently served as representatives of various social elements in the population. In Poznań, he recalled the words of the late primate, Cardinal Wyszyński, in relation to the "great spiritual, moral, and social importance of the peasants", and drew the attention of his listeners to the fact that those words had been addressed by the late cardinal to a delegation representing Rural Solidarity, outlawed by the authorities in October 1982.

Even more explicit was the Pope's defence of the workers' right to self-organisation. Quoting from his own encyclical dealing with labour prob-

lems and statements by Cardinal Wyszyński, the Pope told a mass audience in Katowice that “labour and other professional unions are the means of struggle for social justice and for the proper rights” of all employees. In this context, he reminded his listeners of a meeting he had held with representatives of Solidarity in 1981. Solidarity was banned in October 1982.

Continuing the same reasoning, the Pope quoted from a speech delivered by Cardinal Wyszyński in 1981, in which the late primate had said that “the people have an innate right to free association, this right is inalienable and cannot be given to anyone by someone else.” The Pope went on to recall Wyszyński’s statement that the “government is not in a position to grant that right of association; it merely has an obligation to protect it and to ensure that it will not be interfered with.”

The Pope was careful to avoid accusing the authorities of any specific acts of wrong-doing. Neither was he mounting a direct challenge to their power. He did, however, also pay homage to the many ordinary citizens who had died during “the recent tragic events”, while defending the principle of self-determination. He did so in Poznań where many workers and others were killed by police and military units in June 1956; he did so in Katowice where at least seven miners were shot by police in December 1981; and he did so in Wrocław where several people died during repeated public demonstrations against the martial law regime during 1982.

The Pope’s sermons were not bitter; they were, in fact, almost optimistic. The sermons provided a message of hope that, through faith and love for one’s fellow man, a final moral victory for the whole society could be attained and its own identity preserved.

The Pope’s Call for a Moral Victory

The Pope particularly emphasised this message of the need to persevere in the hope of an eventual moral victory in his sermon to an enormous audience of about two million who gathered in Kraków on 22 June to take part in the last Mass celebrated by the Pope during his visit to Poland.

The sermon was, in many respects, the culmination of the papal pilgrimage. It brought into single focus many of the themes that the Pope expanded upon in his earlier statements, and included an explanation of how these themes should be understood by the Poles at this “particularly difficult moment in the country’s history”. The sermon was profoundly religious. Absent from it were remarks on the current problems and difficulties which had appeared in his previous sermons and which invariably provoked enthusiastic responses from his listeners. The sermon was sombre. Its main theme was the need for the “moral victory” of good over evil, and the Pope made it clear that such a victory would be

difficult and would require considerable time and effort.

The Pope illustrated his arguments by recalling the experiences of the recently beatified Polish monks and nun. During the visit the Pope beatified an Ursuline nun, Urszula Ledóchowska, and two monks, Adam Chmielowski and Rafał Kalinowski. All three had suffered from political persecution from the Russians, as well as considerable privation during the last decades of the 19th century, when Poland was partitioned by Austria, Prussia and Russia.

Speaking about their experiences and their sufferings, the Pope drew the attention of his listeners to what he described as the "plain" and "ordinary" character of their activities. None of them had wielded power, commanded widespread prestige, or enjoyed wealth; they were, in fact, simple people. Their "sanctity", the Pope said, reflected not so much the heroism of acts as the "heroism of their entire lives". This "heroism", the Pope went on, centred on their "perseverance" in efforts to apply Christian values and principles to all aspects of their work. This is why, the Pope reminded his audience, they could be regarded as "symbols of moral victory"; the Pope put special emphasis on the continuing aspect of this "perseverance" and the continuing adherence to fundamental values provided by the Christian faith and culture.

The Pope called upon all people to preserve the moral heritage in their private lives, by strengthening the family and by developing a line of proper conduct with respect to others. He also stressed that the fate of the Polish nation as a whole would depend on the extent to which those moral values were preserved in public life.

An Assessment

Pope John Paul II's second visit to Poland was an immensely important development for the country, touching on the relations between the authorities and society and likely to influence the evolution of these relations in the future. Although the full cultural, religious, and social consequences of this event will emerge only in the years to come, some of its immediate effects are already apparent.

First of all, the visit both confirmed and dramatised the gap between the political system and the population. This, of course, is well known; but it was underscored in most of the papal pronouncements, and, above all, by the public reactions to those pronouncements. This gap was repeatedly emphasised by the spontaneous actions of many people who, by displaying signs and posters and by singing hymns and making gestures associated with Solidarity and what it stands for, openly asserted their dissociation from the officially prescribed principles of political and social order.

These actions obviously demonstrated disdain for the system. They did not, however, imply either willingness or readiness to rebel against the

authorities. At no time and in no place was there any attempt to demonstrate against either the system's institutions or its leaders, or even its policies. No group and no opposition leader has called on the public to display its opposition to the authorities. On the contrary, the Solidarity leaders, both those in the underground and those who operate openly, had repeatedly appealed for peace and order during the Pope's visit. The uniformly peaceful character of the public reactions was impressive.

In this context, it is also necessary to note that the authorities themselves displayed considerable caution. There was no attempt to interfere in any aspects of the religious ceremonies. It is true that major efforts were mounted to "protect" the Pope himself from any direct contact with his enthusiastic audiences and that the authorities did employ great numbers of security forces which were certainly prepared to go into action if the need arose. It is true that the police prevented the public on several occasions from organising explicitly political demonstrations against the government; such preventive actions were taken in Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, and Kraków. In general, however, the display of official force was kept to a minimum.

This mutual restraint on the part of both the public and the ruling establishment, was significant and important. It was significant because it implied the possibility of, at least, a degree of mutual toleration between the two sides. It was important because it suggested that both sides recognised and appreciated the value of the Pope's visit for both the public and the system itself.

The visit is not likely to produce any dramatic change in the political situation. The gap between the system and society is not likely to disappear, since the strains between the two sides are so profound that no single development or event can mitigate them or neutralise their nature. Neither is the visit likely to prompt any spectacular change in official policy. Indeed, various spokesmen for the authorities have repeatedly stressed, before as well as during and after the visit itself, that the government intended to carry on with its programme of building and strengthening the "socialist" character of the country's public life.

There has been no official statement from the church authorities on the visit. The episcopate has refrained from any formal comment on either the Pope's two encounters with General Jaruzelski or his meeting with Lech Wałęsa. While there is no doubt that some movement will take place in the country's politics, its direction and scope will depend on what the population and the authorities do. If anything has been clear during recent years it has been that no decision or policy can be effectively implemented without a modicum of acceptance by the population as a whole.