

The Polish Test: Roman Catholic Views of 20th Century Polish History

NEAL PEASE

Scholars of Polish affairs are fond of debating the significance of that country's modern history for the wider world. Does the Polish sojourn through the 20th century illustrate general lessons applicable beyond the national frontiers, or has it been unique and atypical? Has Poland functioned as the quintessence of our time, a 'laboratory of history'¹ for the great themes of the contemporary age, or has that same intensity of its experience rendered it incomparable, even eccentric?

While no group exerts a monopoly over the idea that Central Europe, and Poland in particular, has acted as a sort of testing ground of history, throughout the years commentators from the Roman Catholic world have accorded special attention to this questions, and with good reason: the Poles are a vital part of their flock, and the affairs of that nation often have raised issues of urgency to the entire Church. As a result, spokesmen for the Roman faith have made more than their share of observations on the Polish condition of recent years and its paradigmatic or exceptional nature.

The demanding and dramatic history of Poland in the past nine decades needs no lengthy recounting. The country has played a role of unwanted prominence in many of the most dismal and momentous chapters of our times — the world wars, totalitarian terror and genocide, the ravages of Nazism and Communism — interwoven with tenacious efforts toward national survival and emancipation, and punctuated by alternating disasters and triumphs. Of course, the Catholic Church too has passed through a century of unusual change and turmoil. In that time it has become a less European, more genuinely global institution; undergone doctrinal challenge and transformation, from the 'Modernist' dispute to the innovations and repercussions of the Second Vatican Council; absorbed the buffets of

¹The phrase is borrowed from Piotr Wandycz, 'Laboratorium historii: Polska, Czechostowacja, Węgry', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 22 September 1985. A Cracow weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, ranks as the leading Polish Catholic journal.

a host of trends and ideologies overtly or subtly hostile to religion; and seen venerably Catholic lands ruined by war and subjected to rule by dictators of right and left. Much of this catalogue coincides with the cardinal events of the recent Polish past, helping to account for its popularity as a topic of Catholic publicists. How, then, has 20th century Catholic opinion tended to interpret the role of Poland and its Church?

Examination of the subject yields several general conclusions. Almost unanimously, foreign onlookers have treated Polish Catholicism as an unmistakably distinctive ecclesiastical culture: devout, loyal, traditionalist, tempered by adversity. These traits are normally cited with approval, but by no means always. The fact that this image of a monolithic *Polonia semper fideles* can be contested as simplistic is not as important for present purposes as its very ubiquity. In addition, Poland has been sufficiently potent a subject to attract the attention of pundits from abroad possessing at best a superficial knowledge of the country, reinforcing the tendency to deal in stereotypes and conventions. Taken together, these points have led Catholic polemicists persistently to adopt Poland as a favourite symbol or point of reference, a standard of judgment on matters sacred and profane, a prototype to imitate or avoid: in sum, as a token of things bigger than itself.

For instance, in 1919 the French journalist Charles Loiseau confidently spoke for coreligionists in proclaiming the recovery of Polish independence after more than a century of foreign domination a 'political miracle', notable not merely for its own sake but also as a sign of the resilience of Catholicism as a secular force following the shocks of turn-of-the-century anticlericalism, the First World War, and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire.² In fact, as the same writer admitted ruefully nearly two decades later, the Holy See greeted the Second Republic with a touch of reserve owing to various conflicts between Polish sovereign interests and established papal policies,³ but Catholics continued to regard interwar Poland benevolently even after fashionable Western opinion rejected it as an international undesirable: dictatorial, militaristic, intolerant of minorities. By and large, Romanists endorsed the ancient theory of Poland as the *antemurale*, the easternmost stronghold of Latin, 'European' civilisation, a counterweight against Germanic Protestantism, a missionary to the Orthodox, and above all a rampart against oriental threats. Especially

² Charles Loiseau, 'The Vatican and the new States of Central Europe', *The Living Age*, 8 November 1919, pp. 323-24. See also Hilaire Belloc, 'The Two Cultures of the West', in *Essays of a Catholic* (Freeport, N.Y., 1967), pp. 318-19.

³ Charles Loiseau, 'La politique du Saint-Siège en Europe centrale (1919-1936) — II', *Le Monde Slave* Vol. 14 No. 1, (1937), p. 108.

after the Poles repulsed the westward advance of the Red Army in 1920, many Catholics gratefully recognised that nation as the shield of Christendom in the face of Russian Bolshevism.

This argument carried most weight in England, where religious kinship, anti-communism, and recusant cliquishness fused to create a small but dedicated circle of Catholic literary enthusiasts for Poland as the vanguard and defender of divine and human values. The most celebrated of these, G. K. Chesterton, went so far as to assert that Poland was one of a select number of things 'that are at once intensely loved and intensely hated', precisely because it provided a litmus test indicative of fundamental moral choices; conversely, one's opinions on Polish questions, important enough in their own right, revealed much about the soundness of a person's judgment and rectitude of his character.⁴ For Chesterton, Poland was incalculably worthy as the champion of civilisation against its most dangerous foes, no more, no less than 'the Catholic culture thrust like a sort of long sword-blade between the Byzantine tradition of Muscovy and the materialism of Prussia'.⁵ Chesterton implored Europe to understand that Poland was valiant but vulnerable, deserving of support and, if need be, protection. He found this mixture of admiration and dread expressed in the sounding of the *hejnal* the ceremonial trumpet call from a Cracow churchtower in everyday commemoration of a 13th century Tatar invasion, fancying that he heard in the clarion not only 'the defiance of civilisation besieged', but 'the bolt of the barbarian singing by'.⁶ Variations on these motifs, less eloquent perhaps but equally ardent, appeared regularly in the essays of Hilaire Belloc and in the columns of such Catholic periodicals as the *Month* and the *Tablet*⁷

When war returned to Europe and Poland in 1939, these triumphalist, militant metaphors necessarily gave way to more sombre imagery. In Catholic eyes, devastated Poland became the blameless, broken victim, assured of eventual delivery by the power of redemptive suffering. Sometimes these consolations wittingly echoed the blasphemous 19th century Romantic conceit of Poland as the 'Christ of nations', while in other cases they sprang spontaneously

⁴G. K. Chesterton, 'Two Words from Poland', in *Generally Speaking* (Freeport, N.Y., 1968), p. 49; Przemysław Mroczkowski, 'Don Kiszot zdrowego rozsądku: w 50 rocznicę śmierci G. K. Chestersona', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 29 June 1986.

⁵G. K. Chesterton, 'The Modern Hypocrisy', in *The End of the Armistice* (London, 1940), p. 122.

⁶G. K. Chesterton, 'On New Captials', in *Generally Speaking*, p. 62. In addition, see Chesterton's 'Where Poland Stands', in *End of the Armistice*, p. 137, and Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (New York, 1943), p. 428.

⁷Hilaire Belloc, *Return to the Baltic* (London, 1938), pp. 146-47, 152, 175; Robert Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* (New York, 1957), pp. 461-63; 'Poland and Christendom', *Month*, December 1931, pp. 544-47.

and naturally from the language of Christian mythology. Pessimists glimpsed doom: Evelyn Waugh darkly juxtaposed complacent Britain with 'the frontier of Christendom where the great battle had been fought and lost'.⁸

Others took the Polish plight as a summons to a new crusade. Not a month after the end of the September campaign, Hilaire Belloc published an influential article defining the fate of that nation as 'the test of Europe', the issue that meant the survival or collapse of Western, Christian heritage. Poland represented the historic, cultural and spiritual values of Europe, and the failure to shield her from the Nazi and Soviet onslaughts suggested the decadence of this tradition. If the Poles could not be rescued, he warned, 'it will mean that the forces destructive of all by which and for which we have lived have triumphed. Our descendants will no longer be able to call themselves civilised men.'⁹

Repetition held no terrors for Hilaire Belloc, and even sympathisers conceded that he ran this argument into the ground during the next five years, yet his proclamation of the restoration of a free Poland as a holy duty, the highest of war aims, plainly struck a chord in Catholic circles.¹⁰ Following Belloc's lead, others took up his cry that Poland was 'the test', the criterion of victory and of a peace worthy of the name. Always alert to the Soviet menace, Catholics easily adapted this idea to the changed circumstances of the mid-to-later 1940s as Stalin increasingly threw his shadow over Central Europe: now, they insisted, Poland had become 'the test' of a just and acceptable postwar order, and as communism strengthened its grip on the country their answers became grim and reproachful.¹¹

As the Cold War thawed and the *aggiornamento* of John XXIII preoccupied the church, the device of Poland-as-touchstone languished only to revive spectacularly the instant Cardinal Wojtyła, the archbishop of Cracow, assumed the papacy in 1978. As the most arresting characteristic of the new Pope was his very Polishness, natural curiosity focused on his nationality and its obvious significance as a clue to this pontificate. John Paul II encouraged this conjecture by asking aloud 'why, precisely in 1978 . . . a son of the

⁸Evelyn Waugh, *Men at Arms* (London, 1952), pp. 87-88.

⁹Hilaire Belloc, 'Poland, the Bastion of Our Civilisation', *America*, 28 October, 1939, pp. 63-64. See also Speaight, *Life*, p. 461, and *Letters from Hilaire Belloc*, edited by Robert Speaight (London, 1958), p. 282.

¹⁰Hilaire Belloc, 'The Test is Poland', *Catholic World* February 1944, pp. 424-26; J. L. Benvenisti, 'Small Nations Matter: The Test is Poland', *Commonweal* 4 February, 1944, pp. 390-93.

¹¹'Polish Test', *Tablet*, 7 April 1945, pp. 158-59; Eugène Lyons, 'Poland: Test that Failed', *Catholic Digest*, April 1946, pp. 75-79; 'After Ten Years: Poland is the Test of the History since 1939', *Tablet*, 3 September 1949, pp. 147-49.

Polish nation . . . [was] called to the chair of St. Peter?'¹² Observers hastened to scrutinise the papal homeland and announce that 'To understand [the] Pope, [the] key is understanding Poland.'¹³ Many carried this indisputable proposition a step farther and turned it into a species of geographic reductionism: to understand the Pope required no more than understanding Poland and its idiomatic brand of Catholicism.

While hazardous at best, the temptation to simplify the multifaceted John Paul into little more than an inevitable product of his native country endured after the novelty of a non-Italian Pope wore off. This resulted in part from the pontiff's abiding interest in the protracted Polish crisis, and possibly even more from his ringing assertion that Poland occupied a crucial role in the divine plan. In fact, a recent biographer of Hilaire Belloc has declared happily that Wojtyła has restored the idea of the 'Polish test', indeed, that his 'entire European policy proclaims the Bellocian point of view'.¹⁴ This claim somehow manages to combine hyperbole and understatement. To Belloc, Poland's duty was largely political and military, while the Pope stresses the country's spiritual and cultural mission. John Paul had no doubt of the answer to his own question: God had chosen him Pope as a sign that Poland had become 'the land of a particularly responsible witness'. More than any place on earth, the Polish territories had borne the assaults of war, totalitarian cruelty, and official atheism, so that 'one must come . . . to this land . . . to read again the witness of His cross and His resurrection'. The final three words are paramount, for the Poles had suffered but prevailed. The blast furnace of Polish history had renewed the baptism of that people by fire, forging a stronger, more mature faith symbolic of the ability of the church to surmount the challenges of the 20th century.¹⁵ The Pope took up the theme of Poland's task on the perimeter of Catholicism, now casting his homeland not as the sentinel of the occident but as the meeting point of western and eastern Christian tradition, the ideal agent of religious and cultural integration and reconciliation. 'Is it not Christ's will', he asked, 'that this Polish Pope, this Slav Pope, should at this precise moment manifest the spiritual unity of

¹² 'No One Can Exclude Christ from the History of Mankind', Homily, Victory Square, Warsaw, 2 June 1979.

¹³ The title of an article by D. O'Grady, *Our Sunday Visitor*, 16 December 1979.

¹⁴ A. N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc* (London, 1984), pp. 228-29.

¹⁵ Victory Square Homily, Warsaw, 2 June 1979. See also John Paul's speech to the Conference of the Polish Episcopate, 'Nielatwa jest ta polska ziemia', Warsaw, 14 June 1987; Fr Józef Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, (Paris, 1981), p. 195.

Christian Europe?'¹⁶ In short, John Paul described Poland's historical purpose in modern times as a holy paradox: the country was unique, but that very uniqueness endowed it with universal and representative meaning in the scheme of divine providence. On numerous occasions, most fully in the encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli* (1985), the Pope emphasised his Polish and Slavic roots and gave notice that his policy would proceed from a conviction of the importance of middle Europe to the past, present, and future of Catholicism.¹⁷

The inclination to view Wojtyła through a Polish prism carried over into interpretation of his determination to use his papacy to consolidate and clarify church doctrine and practice in the wake of Vatican II. This program inspired vigorous reactions, generally pleasing conservative Catholics and disappointing those who urged amplification of the Johannine reforms. Partisans on both sides treated Poland as both explanation and emblem of the papal agenda, a factor for good or ill, depending on taste.

John Paul's admirers took heart from his origins and welcomed an infusion of the Polish Catholic virtues of toughness, discipline, and piety into a church beset by confusion and turned soft by material wealth. Paul Johnson contrasted the disarray of North American and West European Catholicism to the solidity and confidence of the Polish Church, an achievement secured

not by offering concessions to prevailing fashions but, on the contrary, by the steadfast reassertion of traditional Catholic teaching . . . in the most uncompromising manner . . . Wojtyła is a religious conservative . . . because he has seen conservatism work.¹⁸

In essence, Johnson and others seconded the Pope's treatment of his native country as a metaphor of the modern experience and as a model for the postconciliar church; in other words, Poland did teach general lessons and embody universal values.¹⁹

¹⁶'Plea for Spiritual Unity of Christian Europe', Homily, Gniezno Cathedral, 3 June 1979. See also 'List Pastorski Episkopatu Polski na Tydzień Powszechnej Modlitwy o Jedność Chrześcijań, 16 December 1988, in *Tygodnik Powszechny* 22 January 1989, and Peter Hebbelthwaite, 'In Pope's view, Poland holds key to bringing East, West together,' *National Catholic Reporter*, 27 April 1984.

¹⁷Patrick Michel, *La Société retrouvée, politique et religion dans l'Europe soviétisée* (Paris, 1988), pp. 182-83. The Pope explored these themes as well during his sojourn in Czechoslovakia in March 1990.

¹⁸Paul Johnson, *Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Restoration* (New York, 1981), pp. 18-19.

¹⁹Gerard Noel, *The Anatomy of the Catholic Church: Roman Catholicism in an Age of Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y., 1980), p. 212 and *passim*; Wilton Wynn, *Keepers of the Keys: John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II, Three Who Changed the Church* (New York, 1988), p. 250.

On the other hand, numerous critics of Wojtyła openly or implicitly stated their case by denying the truth of the Polish lessons and rejecting Polish values. In their eyes, the example of Poland is aberrant, misleading, and ultimately to blame for a deplorable papal policy. In rueful acknowledgement, one prominent Polish Catholic philosopher has noted that

in so called 'liberal' Catholic circles in the West the Polish Church, and even the current Pope, do not enjoy such esteem as in Poland. There it is even said that the [Polish] Church is the last 'totalitarian system of power in Europe'.²⁰

While the lament shows the exaggeration of hurt pride, clearly numerous Western Catholics worry that John Paul is imposing an unwelcome and unenlightened species of Polish rigidity on the worldwide church. Thus the late Penny Lernoux, a passionate advocate of the Latin American poor, ascribes the Pope's 'belief in absolute obedience and absolute power' to backward, parochial Poland,

the 'perfect society' of the Eurocentric church that had existed before World War II [where] everyone knew his or her place . . . In trying to mould Catholicism to an authoritarian Polish model, the Pope has unleashed a counter-reformation just when the church of Vatican II is poised for a leap ahead to a faith commitment equal to the challenge of the third millennium.²¹

At bottom, this argument pities John Paul, less a villain than the 'tragic victim' of his own upbringing in the garrison atmosphere of Poland, an abnormal, anachronistic, and vaguely sinister environment that has deformed and blinkered the outlook of this otherwise intelligent and attractive man, blinding him to the need for further renovation of the church.²²

Lernoux's distaste for Poland as the wellspring of doctrinal reaction is unusually palpable and strident, but even in subtler hands the condescending depiction of Wojtyła as a narrow provincial falls short

²⁰Fr Józef Tischner, 'Rekolekcje po czasach przemocy', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 February 1990.

²¹Penny Lernoux, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York, 1989), pp. 31, 33. On p. 14, the author approvingly cites Giancarlo Zizola's judgment that 'the pretension to reduce . . . the whole church to a "Polish model" suggests . . . that the church is determined at any cost to make one of the worst mistakes in its history'.

²²Dennis P. McCann, 'All Strings Lead to Rome', *New York Times Book Review*, 23 July 1989, p. 33. See also Giancarlo Zizola, 'The Pope's 1,800 Days', *World Press Review*, December 1983, reprinted from *Panorama* (Milan), 26 September 1983; Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'The Liberal Pope', *New York Review of Books*, 10 October 1985, pp. 13-15.

of plausibility; indeed, one might well contend that no pope in centuries has had broader preparation for the papacy, with the possible exception of Pius XII. All the same, the point remains that by no means all Catholics comfortably accept Poland as an instructive symbol or a desirable model for the contemporary church. While convincing to many, the argument for Polish representativeness is not self evident. From the beginning, sceptics asserted that Catholics in the West would regard the papal agenda as alien and irrelevant to their concerns.²³ In East Europe itself, the natural and special target of attention from the 'Slav Pope', historical animosities and national divisions persist; given that fact, more than one sympathetic observer has concluded that the 'uniqueness' — again the word crops up — of the Polish situation limits its pertinence to the matters concerning foreign coreligionists and may, in fact, hinder the growth and acceptance of the church in lands traditionally wary and resentful of Polish influence.²⁴

In the end, willingness among Catholics to acknowledge Poland as a reliable sign of the times appears to vary according to one's fundamental definition of the supreme issues of our era. If the encounter with war and totalitarianism constitutes the ultimate religious challenge of the 20th century, the centrality of Poland in that drama can scarcely be denied. If to the contrary the essence of the age lies elsewhere — in the emergence of the Third World, perhaps, or in a redefinition of traditional churchly observance and practice — then the Polish instance may seem marginal. Diverse as never before, the world Catholic community differs on these questions. No doubt the debate will continue, and if recent patterns furnish a guide, changing perceptions of Poland and its significance will remain in the future, as in the past, a vital part of the dialogue.

Indeed, the theme has resurfaced in the midst of the most recent of the century's upheavals. Poland's church and the Pope himself lately have received much credit as catalytic elements in the extraordinary transformation of Central Europe in 1989-90, sources of inspiration to neighbouring peoples of largely Catholic persuasion.²⁵ Far from crowing over the collapse of communism, however, Polish Catholics already have begun to grapple with the quandaries of triumph, for the restoration of pluralism may well require the church to adapt to the new conditions to sustain its hold on the nation. One journalist has

²³ Patrick Michel, *L'Église de Pologne et l'avenir de la nation* (Paris, 1981), p. 154.

²⁴ Jonathan Luxmoore, 'For Church, Polish Terrain is Changing', *National Catholic Register*, 26 February 1989. See also 'The Catholic Church in Lithuania', *RCL* Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 169-76; 'Zeschla siemia: rozmowa o sytuacji Kościoła na Ukrainie', *Tygodnik Powszechny* 4 February 1990; Michel, *Society*, p. 184.

²⁵ For instance, 'Europe de l'Est: la victoire du pape,' *L'Express*, 23 March 1990, pp. 54-61.

worried aloud that 'we in Poland possess a theology of defeat, but we have not yet developed a theology of victory. In other words, we do not know how to live in normal times'.²⁶ The statement suggests another question: if Poland becomes more 'normal' — that is to say, more democratic, less one of history's unfortunates, less obvious an example of faithful, gallant struggle against adversity — will the country lose its status as a handy symbol for a troubled, suffering world? No doubt the Poles themselves would happily relinquish that accolade.

²⁶ Jan Andrzej Kloczowski, 'Zamiast laurki', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 25 March 1990. Also note Patrick Michel, 'Pologne: la fin d'une vocation à dire l'universel', *Le Monde diplomatique*, March 1990.