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Benedict sets about reawakening Europe's Christian roots

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 30, 2006 All Things Catholic

Poland trip motto is 'Stand firm in your faith!'

Warsaw, Poland

Editor's Note: *Read* **NCRonline.org** *daily for John Allen's reports on Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Poland May 25-28.*

Pope Benedict XVI launched what might be dubbed his "Take Back Europe" 2006 summer tour today, opening a four-day swing through a traditional Catholic stronghold that he hopes will build momentum for reawakening the Christian roots of the Old Continent.

The motto of the visit to Poland is a pointed reminder of the message: "Stand firm in your faith!"

"I have come to Poland, the beloved homeland of my great predecessor Pope John Paul II, in order to inhale, as he used to do, this atmosphere of faith in which you live," Benedict said in a meeting with Polish clergy in the Warsaw cathedral.

Recalling Poland's tragic history, Benedict urged Poles to "remember with appreciation and gratitude those who did not let themselves be overwhelmed by the forces of darkness, and let us learn from them the courage to be consistent and constant in our adherence to the Gospel of Christ."

After Poland, which last fall elected a church-friendly, center-right government led by the Law and Order Party, Benedict will head in July to Spain, where the Socialist government led by Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero has challenged the church on almost every conceivable issue, from abortion to gay rights to money for Catholic schools.

Symbolically, Poland represents Benedict's hope for a European future rooted in Christian values; Spain illustrates instead a runaway version of the "dictatorship of relativism."

Local media noted that the "European vocation" of Poland is almost literally written in Polish DNA. American scientist Spencer Wells, head of the International Geographic Project, a project to map the genetic heritage of Europeans, said that Poles are a remarkable genetic mix of both East and West. Lech Walesa, for example, the founder of the Solidarity movement, has ancestors from Croatia, Lithuania and Latvia, but also Portugal and Great Britain.

Benedict's vision, like that of John Paul, is that the Christian nations of the East will bring that heritage into the construction of the new Europe.

While there is undeniably a sentimental dimension to Benedict's Polish visit as a final tribute to Pope John Paul

II, the stakes for political and cultural debate throughout Europe are also high.

To grasp the depth of the challenge facing him, all Benedict had to do was to pick up a copy of Corriere della Sera, Italy's main daily, on his Alitalia flight to Warsaw this morning. The paper noted that three ministers of the country's new center-left government have indicated "openness" on civil registration of de facto couples, as well as RU-486 the so-called "morning after" abortion pill, both social experiments bitterly opposed by John Paul II and now Benedict XVI as assaults on a "culture of life."

One disgruntled member of the new government was quoted by *Corriere della Sera* as saying, "All we're missing now is a declaration of war on the Vatican."

If Benedict is to enjoy any European momentum heading into his July 8-9 trip to Spain, many observers believe it needs to happen here and now.

At the same time, however, Benedict along with the Polish bishops is also concerned that the Polish church not be seen as a lobby on behalf of the country's new government.

"The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction or politics," the pope said to the Polish clergy. "He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life."

It was an especially pointed remark in light of continuing controversy over Radio Maria, a popular Catholic radio service seen by some as tightly linked to the new Polish ruling coalition.

On the plane to Warsaw, Benedict also looked ahead to his Sunday visit to Auschwitz.

"I am above all Catholic, and I would say that this point is important," he said. "We must always learn that we are Catholic, and thus that one's nationality is inserted, relativized, and also carefully located in the great unity of the Catholic communion."

Benedict said he anticipated the visit "thinking of so many dead, also learning how man can really fall from his dignity, trampling upon others. From here, we hope, will be born a new sense of humanism and of humanity, and also a vision of man as the image of God, so as to prevent similar things in the future."

Another subtext to the trip may be emerging on day one, which is promoting spiritual recovery from several decades of Soviet rule.

"Living under the influence of totalitarianism may have given rise to an unconscious tendency to hide under an external mask," Benedict warned the priests in Warsaw, "and in consequence to become somewhat hypocritical."

One roiling controversy in Poland concerns assigning blame for collaboration during the Soviet era. The church has not been untouched; recently a priest of the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, for example, was accused by Solidarity activists of having collaborated with the Communist authorities, including providing information on John Paul's visits in 1979 and 1987. He has denied the charges.

Other priests face similar charges, including a priest of the Fatima Sanctuary accused of having provided information on Walensa.

Benedict warned against a cycle of recrimination.

"We must guard against the arrogant claim of setting ourselves up to judge earlier generations, who lived in different times and different circumstances," he said. "Humble sincerity is needed in order not to deny the sins of the past, and at the same time not to indulge in facile accusations in the absence of real evidence or without

regard for the different preconceptions of the time."

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