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Faith is a gift but also a task, pope tells Poles

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 31, 2006 All Things Catholic

Christians cannot yield to selective interpretations of the gospel, he said
Warsaw/Czestochowa, Poland

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

When John Paul II celebrated Mass in Warsaw's Victory Square during his first trip to Poland in 1979, he called Poles to struggle against the Soviet dictatorship by praying that the Holy Spirit would "renew the face of the land," then pointedly adding, "*this* land."

On Friday, standing in the same place, Benedict XVI called Poles to arms once again, this time against a much more nebulous foe -- what he termed last year a "dictatorship of relativism," meaning a collapse of confidence in objective truths such as those presented by the Catholic church.

"As in past centuries, so also today there are people or groups who obscure this centuries-old tradition, seeking to falsify the Word of Christ and to remove from the gospel those truths which in their view are too uncomfortable for modern man," Benedict said.

"They try to give the impression that everything is relative: even the truths of faith would depend on the historical situation and on human evaluation. Yet the church cannot silence the Spirit of Truth."

In that light, Benedict said, all Christians are obligated to accept the "authoritative indications" of the gospel.

Benedict spoke to a large crowd of Poles in central Warsaw on Friday, despite strong rain and temperatures in the low 50s. Concelebrating priests and bishops were issued umbrellas in white, the papal color.

Polish and papal flags, along with the banners of a number of church groups and movements, dotted the crowd. One hand-lettered banner read plaintively in English: "Stay with us."

Attendance was estimated at more than 300,000. A handful of hardy pilgrims slept overnight in the square in order to occupy prize spots closest to the pope.

At least at the level of public policy, the pope faced a largely friendly audience. Poland is one of only three European countries (along with Latvia and Lithuania) to have formally defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and the Polish delegation to the European Parliament recently ran afoul of security personnel by erecting an anti-abortion display in the hallways in Strasbourg.

With the election last October of a church-friendly center-right coalition, Poles are talking about a resurgence of

Catholicism in public life. No longer content with religion as a private affair, Polish laity seem newly interested in flexing their political and cultural muscle.

Some Poles point to the role of religion in American politics as a model, consistent with the general tendency of many Poles to identify more with the United States than with traditional European powerhouses such as France or Germany.

"I like what I see happening in the United States -- the emphasis on the family, the emergence of so many pro-life groups," said Piotr Slusarczyk, a spokesperson for the League of Polish Families, one of the center-right parties which make up the governing coalition.

"I feel much closer to the United States than to Europe. I'm very concerned about France, Germany, even Italy. They have lost their way in terms of moral development," he told the *Chicago Tribune*.

As a footnote, the head of the League of Polish Families, Roman Giertych, is an Opus Dei member and a strong Euro-skeptic who says he wants to defend a "Christian Poland." In 1989, Giertych relaunched a youth organization called the "All-Polish Youth," dedicated to Catholic and patriotic values, but accused by critics of fermenting nationalism and xenophobia, including anti-Semitism.

Giertych, now the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, was part of a group of Polish authorities who met Benedict on Friday at the presidential palace in Warsaw.

Despite an enduring Catholic identity that bucks secularizing European trends, there are nevertheless storm clouds for the church in Poland.

The results of sociological surveys indicate that although 99 percent of Poles identify themselves as Catholic, on some moral questions, such as pre-martial sex or euthanasia, they are actually closer to more secularized European nations than to official Catholic teachings, or for that matter to relatively more conservative American attitudes. (See Poles are staunchly Catholic but also independent [1].).

Faith is a gift, Benedict told the crowd in Victory Square, "but it is also a task."

"We must not yield to the temptation of relativism or of a subjectivist and selective interpretation of Sacred Scripture," he said.

In the struggle against relativism, Benedict appealed repeatedly to the Catholic heritage of Poland, especially the memory of Pope John Paul II.

"How can we not thank God for all that was accomplished in your native land and in the whole world during the pontificate of John Paul II?" he said.

"Cultivate this rich heritage of faith transmitted to you by earlier generations, the heritage of the thought and the service of that great Pole who was John Paul II," Benedict urged in Warsaw.

Later, speaking in a session with seminarians, members of religious orders and of lay movements at the Jasna Góra Shrine in Czestochowa, Benedict repeatedly invoked Mary as a model of Christian faithfulness and "feminine tact."

"Remember the attitude of wonder and adoration which characterized Mary's faith," he said.

Jasna Góra, which means "bright mountain," is the home of the famed icon of the "Black Madonna." The

fortified shrine is among the few spots that 17th century Swedish invaders failed to conquer in Poland, and the Madonna has become a symbol of Polish nationalism.

As a young man, Karol Wojtyla visited Jasna Góra with his father. Later, he returned several times as pope. As a university student, Wojtyla joined clandestine groups who came to Jasna Góra when such pilgrimages were forbidden. During a 1999 visit, John Paul II described the shrine as "so dear to my heart."

Benedict XVI also used his visit to Jasna Góra to praise the "new movements," a vast array of Catholic groups born in the 20th century, which include Communion and Liberation, the Focolari, the Neocatechumenate, Regnum Christi, the Charismatic Renewal, Schoenstatt, L'Arche and Sant'Egidio.

Although some bishops and priests have at times been critical of the movements for building a "parallel church" alongside traditional diocesan and parochial structures, both John Paul and Benedict have supported the new groups, especially in light of their success with young people and in generating vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

The pope called the movements "a sign of the Holy Spirit's active presence."

"It is from the faith of the church and from the richness of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that your mission has been born," he said. "My prayer is that you will grow ever more numerous so as to serve the cause of the Kingdom of God in today's world."

The pope urged the movements to bring the Christian gospel "to the world of culture and work, to the world of the media and politics, to the world of family and social life," though "in a mature way, not childishly or aggressively."

A massive gathering of members of the movements is planned in Rome June 3-4, and Benedict is to speak to them on the eve of Pentecost. The event recalls a similar gathering of the movements with John Paul II in 1998.

The June gathering of the movements is among the first mass events that Benedict XVI called for himself, rather than having inherited from John Paul.

So far over the pope's two days in Poland, the crowds that have lined the streets and greeted Benedict at his various appearances have been small by the standards of John Paul II, but still high by secular European standards.

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