

## ‘Our Pope’: What John Paul II means to Poles

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The election to the papacy of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła in 1978 was a moment of great joy for Poland and the first Polish Pope continued to have a great influence on the people of his homeland over the next quarter of a century. Polish Jesuit, Rafal Huzarski, describes how Blessed John Paul II, beatified last Sunday 1 May, was for the Poles ‘a kind of reflection of themselves’. Even without direct political intervention, how did the Pope shape the course of recent Polish history?

There are many stereotypes about the Polish people. One in particular, however, characterises us accurately: there is one thing that no Pole will put up with – whether they be a Catholic or an atheist, a conservative or a liberal, a plumber or a scientist – and that is disrespect for Pope John Paul II. Even though many Poles have never been interested in the Pope’s teachings, even though they were not to be seen in crowds that flocked around him on his visits to his homeland, even though they may be critical of all the publicity surrounding the Pope, any antipathy or indifference they feel seems to get directed at the Polish Church, and not at John Paul II.

Why does Blessed John Paul II, beatified on Sunday 1 May 2011, have such significance for the Polish people in terms of the way they see themselves, the Church and the whole world? What effect has the person and papacy of John Paul II had on the Polish people, their history and cultural identity?

As a Pole, I do not find it easy to detach myself from my own, natural and obvious sentiments and look critically at why John Paul II is ‘Our Pope’. For instance, there is a strong conviction that John Paul II played a key role in the collapse of communism in



Poland and the political changes in central and eastern Europe from 1989 to 1991. Nevertheless, the way in which the Pope’s involvement and contribution influenced our history is difficult to assess when compared with such historical factors as the policy of Ronald Reagan and the rejection of the Brezhnev doctrine<sup>1</sup> in the Soviet Union.

*Without John Paul II – Polish ‘homo sovieticus’?*

Poland and its people have changed since the 1970s, and one cannot understand the impact of the Pope upon the lives of Poles without understanding the context of Poland under the Communist regime.

The Communist system, which lasted until 1989, was corrupt and schizophrenic, especially in terms of the relationship between the individual and society. As in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, a system based on theoretical yet noble assumptions about social justice became a huge lie that served only the needs of the people controlling it. After World War II, democratically elected politicians, businessmen and qualified officials in all institutions were replaced by members of the Communist Party (*apparatchiks*). The overwhelming majority of the people did not believe in the Communist ideals, nor did they trust the people who worked

in local administration, the police, school teachers or even butcher's shop assistants, whose power over endless queues in front of the shops was immense. The effect of this was a mentality described by sociologist, Aleksandr Zinoviev (and in the Polish context by Jozef Tischner) as *homo sovieticus*<sup>2</sup>: the person deprived and consequently devoid of civic engagement, social trust, active solidarity and responsibility for the quality of his/her own life, indifferent to common property and inclined to steal from the workplace. For *homo sovieticus*, there were no real norms and values, just rules for survival which trumped any other considerations.

Moreover, those forty years of communism were the period during which the state – despite some gestures of courtesy and the occasional, short-lived period of restraint in its attacks on religion – aimed at the total secularisation of Polish society. Marxist sociologists played an important role in these efforts to secularise society by portraying Polish Catholicism as 'archaic, non-intellectual, contradictory and irrelevant to modern society ... and the Church as enemies of the Polish nations'.<sup>3</sup> Aside from jails and truncheons, the Communists' basic weapon was propaganda, in which disdain and mockery as well as a disregard for the opposition and the Church played an important role. A person who lived in the Communist times could not help but succumb to the temptation to absorb this disdain, the sense of pretence and 'unbearable lightness of being', as Milan Kundera described it. As a result, in 1971 only 27% of Poles said they were guided by religious values in moral dilemmas.<sup>4</sup>

Despite recurrent strikes and protests there were no indications that Polish society had enough potential to 'break the chains of slavery', let alone to reverse the process of internal decline. The Church was able to gather crowds of people – not only believers but also artists, intellectuals and community workers acting for freedom. However, even the Polish bishops had little hope that there was any prospect of change. This was no doubt influenced by the analogies being drawn between our submission to the Soviet Union and the period of more than one hundred years in which we were occupied by Russia, Austria-Hungary and Prussia.

## Tuesday and Saturday

'It was Tuesday evening. My father shouted suddenly that they were announcing on the radio that Wojtyła had been elected Pope. Mother and grandma began to cry with joy. I went outside to play football with my brother, but we didn't play because many people came out, rejoicing and talking about the Pope. A police patrol went past. They were not rejoicing, just observing and talking to each other' – such fragments of memories are characteristic of the mood in Poland on 16 October 1978.<sup>5</sup>

27 years later, on 2 April 2005, it was the lights. Millions of candles burned in front of the churches and in town squares on a Saturday evening, miles of them placed densely along John Paul II Avenue in Warsaw. There were rivers of light and crowds of people looking at the candles in silence, in towns and cities all over Poland. And on display in the streets were completely different cars from those of communist times, neon lights, advertisements, billboards and shop displays full of goods. The similarity between the public displays of emotion on the occasion of the Pope's election and that of his death was striking.

A common feature of these two events was that such emotions, for the majority of Polish society, were not connected with the implications these events might have had for Poland or the Church. In 1978, the most important thing for the majority of the Poles was simply that the Pope was from Poland. Karol Wojtyła was not widely recognised. Unlike Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, not everyone knew who he was. The people's joy and enthusiasm came from the fact that, for the majority of Poles, John Paul II was a kind of reflection of themselves – they felt they had been forgotten, given away to Stalin's successors by Western Europe, unwanted by the world and impoverished. And suddenly they identified themselves with that man dressed in white, who had a great contribution to make to the Church and the whole world, *Urbi et Orbi*. 'Hard feelings and complexes gave way to a feeling of satisfaction and pride', wrote historian, Wojciech Roszkowski, about this event.<sup>6</sup>

In 2005 everyone knew who John Paul II was: after 25 years of his pontificate it was difficult to imagine the papal office without him. But again his death had an emotional dimension for most Poles. The media broadcasts about 'Our Pope's' death and funeral were not based on a summary of his accomplishments, nor quotations of papal teachings, but mainly on pictures and music: close-ups of his face; shots of a man in white waving to crowds of people surrounding him; fragments of recordings in which his distinctive tone of voice said it all; and recollections of people who had come to know John Paul II.

From my point of view, these two events reveal an important dimension of the collective Polish attitude towards the Pope. The Poles often reproach themselves, saying that they 'loved him, but did not listen to him'.<sup>7</sup> There is much truth in that, but there is also some stereotyped and false thinking. It is true that the media coverage in Poland of John Paul II's pontificate tended to focus not on his teachings, but on emotive portraits or words like those spoken in Warsaw during his first official visit to his homeland: 'Let your Spirit descend! And renew the face of the earth. The face of this land!' However, the great value of those emotions is often not appreciated: the advent of new hope and the regaining of a sense of dignity did not, for most people, come from reading encyclicals. The Pope's words could often galvanise those who did not really 'listen' to him in all senses – that is, they never read ecclesiastical documents, nor analysed his homilies or speeches and would not have been able to give even an outline of his teachings nor those of his predecessors. The Polish always understood and accepted John Paul II's teachings inasmuch as they could understand and accept the teachings of the Church in general.

With all due respect to Karol Wojtyła's individuality, his continuing importance for Poles is based not only on his personal influence or on his particular accomplishments but mostly on the fact that many Poles – political and social activists, priests and ordinary citizens, even unbelievers – saw the Pope as an archetype of a strength much greater than himself. That strength lay in the enormous, unconquerable support of the Church, of people of good will and finally of God himself. His person and his teachings were not irrelevant to this strength, but not everyone saw that connection.

## Two parts of the pontificate

The year 1989 can be seen as a *caesura* not only in the history of Poland but also in John Paul II's pontificate. In the period before this, the lines of conflict and division in Polish society were clear and related to the political situation. It was the time in which the concept of 'solidarity' was formed, paving the way for the movement for independence in the eighties and a tide of political change, the culmination of which was the (semi-free) elections of 1989.

In the early part of John Paul II's pontificate, apart from the event of his election itself, the most significant moments for Poles were his three homeland visits in 1979, 1983 and 1987.

The first visit of June 1979 was a turning-point. Polish society experienced power and unity for the first time in decades, not only on a local scale in cities, towns or places of work, where such unity had taken place during strike action, but on the national scale. The reaction of the crowds revealed a lack of support for the Communists in comparison to the Poles' spontaneous reaction to the Pope's gestures and words. That was the point when the concept of 'solidarity', previously just in the realm of the intellectuals, became something real and almost tangible. Over time, the idea became increasingly affiliated with the political context, and the name *Solidarity* was adopted by the Independent Self-governing Trade Union. After years of general disintegration of social ties, lack of mutual trust and a failure to assume any responsibility for the common good, this first papal visit, as well as the subsequent ones, was an opportunity for the Polish to experience solidarity in the most intense and positive way. This experience had another dimension – papal visits and teachings provided the stimulus for a gradual move away from defiance, negation and the fight against communism to a more positive attitude, a shared responsibility for the country, culture and faith. The word 'solidarity' began to be pronounced in the name of the future of the individual and of humankind. Nowadays this much-used word signifies an understanding that we cannot live according to the principle of 'one against another', but according to the principle of 'one *with* another' and 'one *for* another'. The Pope's advocacy of the option of 'solidarity' rather than 'fighting the foe' somehow legitimised the desire for transformation – but without violence.

After the first visit, the Communists' tactics of ignoring or mocking Catholicism were becoming less and less effective. Catholic Social Teaching was proclaimed in churches and struck a chord with wider society, not as something connected with religiosity, but as a clear, mature and viable way of thinking, ignorance of which could only be a sign of intellectual helplessness. People started to speak more openly and courageously, expressing alternative visions of the country, economy, culture and civil society to those based on a Marxist model. Church buildings and institutions started to become places of open debate on those subjects. During such meetings there were also critical discussions about John Paul II's teachings, for instance on the encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* of 1987. The process of rapprochement between the Church and independent scientific and cultural movements, as well as a shift in public opinion, which began to acknowledge that such groups had been setting the agenda for social commentary in Poland, would not have been possible without a personality who united those spheres. For the Polish such a personality was John Paul II. He was also becoming an icon of freedom and hope, the sign of another reality being much closer than it had previously seemed to be. Obviously, not every Pole saw it this way; however, at that time there was no other narrative of comparable influence to that which the Pope gave to Poland.

This newfound spirit became extremely important when martial law was imposed in December 1981 and numerous restrictions and arrests suppressed social action. After a period of high hopes connected with the establishment of the *Solidarity* movement, Polish society plunged into crisis and stagnation. In those years (1981-1988) the suicide rate in Poland increased from 2,900 to 3,900 a year. Over half of the Polish fans who travelled to Spain for the World Cup in 1982 did not return. The political opposition was getting weaker, so greater responsibility fell on the Church as the main pillar supporting the renewal of society. John Paul II was attributed a special kind of 'patronage' of emerging religious groups and youth organisations (e.g. Oasis, academic chaplaincies, Charismatic Renewal) which resulted in a growing number of vocations to religious life and the priesthood. As Barbara Strassberg has noted, 'Instead of having undergone 'functional separation' or 'privatisation', it has become a broad 'socio-cultural Catholicism'.<sup>8</sup>

In the latter period of his pontificate, after June 1989, that section of society which had come to acknowledge John Paul II as their spiritual leader started to wane and gradually splintered into various factions. Fault lines appeared over answers to the question, 'justice or mercy?' – what attitude to have towards people who collaborated with the former authorities or were overly accommodating to them, and so contributed to the continuation of the old system in which the Communists kept control and even grew richer. Political divisions deeply affected the Polish Church: questions like, 'how should a Catholic vote?' and 'should a priest be involved in politics?' were prickly issues which distracted the Church from questions about morality, tradition, etc. Interestingly, almost all of the different groups, either in politics or in the Church, referred to John Paul II as an authority: even the post-communist circles spoke of our 'great compatriot'. A strange situation occurred in which it was easy to manifest allegiance to the not-very-clearly-understood 'spirit of John Paul II's teachings', but the fear of being charged with 'unorthodoxy' meant that those who invoked his support did not engage in critical reflection about the Pope's teachings nor discussion about the interpretation of his words.

The Pope's message and mission, which he had shown to the Poles, were not as clear as in the first period of his pontificate, therefore the emotive image of the Pope as a man came to the fore. Despite growing antipathy towards the Church (according to sociological research at the beginning of the third millennium, France was the only European country with a higher level of anticlericalism<sup>9</sup>) and criticism of John Paul II's engagement in the public sphere, this image was still popular in Poland. However, the continual references to John Paul II at that time sometimes masked inaction and a lack of creativity in the Church and in other public spheres.

Notwithstanding this fact, there are some areas in which John Paul II's teachings had a particularly strong influence. The first is that of the family and bioethics, most significantly the issue of abortion. In 1993 a new law concerning the protection of the human foetus came into force that limited access to abortion. From the beginning of his pontificate this issue was a strong theme in John Paul II's teachings. Moreover, the introduction of the law itself was partly an effect of a campaign around the issue of abortion

led by the Church in the eighties. Since then, there have been attempts to change this law, but after John Paul II's death in 2005, a significant growth in public support for his teaching was recorded, and Poles have continued to advocate the protection of the unborn more openly than other countries.<sup>10</sup> According to the *European Values* survey of 2005, out of ten countries polled, Poland had the highest rate of opponents of abortion.<sup>11</sup>

John Paul II's personality was paradoxically at its most vivid and powerful when he was at his weakest: his death was an extremely hard and sorrowful experience for the Poles. When, on television coverage, it was easy to notice his shaking hands or hear his voice becoming fainter, broadcasters expressed a sense of kinship and solidarity with the Pope. The progress of his illness and ageing was visible during his later visits to Poland in 1991 (twice), 1995, 1997, 1999 and 2002, which further strengthened the Poles' allegiance to him.

His uncomplaining and assiduous fulfilling of the mission entrusted to him was cited as an example of fortitude and an illustration of his teaching on devoting one's life to others. An instance of the effect of his example may be the case in 2007 of Janusz Świtaj who – paralysed and begging for his respirator to be switched off – initiated Poland's first discussion on the right to euthanasia. John Paul II's suffering and death was frequently cited in debates, as were the virtues associated with it – solidarity with the ailing person, keeping vigil together, being united in the face of a person's illness. It was one of the factors which initiated among the public reflection and discussion more profound than just a simple exchange of arguments for and against euthanasia. Świtaj received great support and help, whilst public advocacy for euthanasia decreased significantly. The legacy of the Pope's suffering and death also made the Polish more aware that there was still potential for concerted action and agreement. It was emphasised in the media that in some moments the Poles behave as if they were 'of one heart and of one soul' – perhaps this sums up the importance of John Paul II for the Polish people and their history and cultural identity.

### *With the eye of a Pole of today*

Today, as many as 91 % of Poles regard John Paul II as a figure of great importance.<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of belief or social status, a positive evaluation of the Pope's influence on Poland prevails, and a strong association with the liberation of Poland from Communism and its moral renewal. Only 3% of Poles state that nothing that Pope John Paul did was really important. These figures have changed little since John Paul II's death. The Polish recognise the Pope as a moral authority and as many as 71% of people who do not practise any religion still admit that the Pope was a guiding light.

In spite of all the declarations of the Pope's importance for Poles, it is the visual images for which many of those polled (64%) have the greatest affection: the Pope kissing the ground, blessing the crowds, falling down during an attempt on his life in 1981, the gospel on John Paul II's coffin during his funeral. 23% of Poles claim they are familiar with the essential strands of papal teaching; however, the number of people who admit they actually know nothing of this teaching (apart from the most general articles of Christian faith) is increasing. A comparison of the research of 2005 and 2010 reveals that fewer people now recall any distinguishing traits of John Paul II or his teaching.

Intriguingly, the average Pole would say that half of his or her friends do not follow John Paul II's teaching at all: 25% claim that they know at most one or two people who do follow the Pope's teachings, and only 20% say they know many such people. So there is a striking rift between what the Poles declare about themselves and what they think about the values professed by their fellow citizens.

### *What next?*

In the Poles' consciousness, the image of the Pope is becoming more and more generic and remembrance of him is mainly based on personal experiences (as many as 41% of Poles claim to have seen John Paul II). However, although his beatification is widely regarded as a very important event for us, many Catholics – priests, leaders of religious fellowships, intellectuals – are reflecting deeply on how we should best preserve John Paul II's legacy.

In Poland, patriotism and Catholicism can easily become just rhetoric, rejected by successive generations. Sentimentality is also a great temptation for those who feel compelled to show their reverence to the Pope but do not know how to pass his message on to others in a creative, moving way. We experience often how easily remembrance of the Pope can take the form of sometimes tawdry monuments, boring services, publications which do not say anything new, or naming yet another school after John Paul II. Those for whom John Paul II was an important figure would certainly not like him to become someone commemorated in the same way as the Communist leaders were not so long ago.

Soon after John Paul II's death, people started to talk about the so-called 'JP2 generation' – young people who had grown up during John Paul II's pontificate. They were identified as those who were able to preserve and pass on John Paul II's legacy anew. However, the sociologist, Professor Krzysztof Koseła writes about this group, 'For the time being there is no partnership of action, those people have no concept of self-presentation and existing in the world.'<sup>13</sup>

In fact, we lack an interpretation of this Pope's teachings in language that is easy to understand. The media created a strong and expressive image of John Paul II, but there is still no cohesive vision of his ideas which would be lucid and inspiring for a wider audience.

We also lack an intelligent discussion of the Pope's legacy. The opinions of a few critics of John Paul II (e.g. Tadeusz Bartoś or Stanisław Obirek) are formulated – and received – very emotionally. This has created a situation in which most Poles do not really know to what extent papal teaching stands up to criticism, which is necessary for any discussion to take place.

One of the initiatives commemorating John Paul II was the Work of the New Millennium Foundation. The idea arose after the Holy Father's visit to Poland in 1999. The Foundation organises the Papal Day and the TOTUS awards, runs a scholarship program for young people, and promotes the academic study of journalism and social policy. This year a scholarship programme admitted as many as 2,500 young people, who additionally organise different events promoting

the Pope's memory and teaching. An initiative like this on such a large scale is still something exceptional in Poland.

It seems that the memory of John Paul II and his teaching is undoubtedly valuable for the Polish people. Around his legacy we can unite and build our identity, and in it we can find a driving force which can help us to adjust to the challenges of today. His mission and challenge to us lives on.

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<sup>1</sup> The doctrine announced that no country would be allowed to leave the Warsaw Pact or disturb any nation's Communist Party's power, under threat of military intervention by the other members of the Pact.

<sup>2</sup> Zinoviev, Aleksandr, *Homo Sovieticus* (London: Gollancz, 1985); Józef Tischner, *Etyka solidarności, oraz, Homo sovieticus* (Kraków, Znak, 1992)

<sup>3</sup> Karol H. Borowski *The Sociology of Religion in Modern Poland: A Critical Review, Sociological Analysis, Vol. 46, No. 4* (Winter, 1985), p. 394

<sup>4</sup> W. Piwowarski: *Problemy duszpasterskie w strefie urbanizacji*. 'Przegląd Powszechny' R. 99: 1982 nr 3 (732) p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Lots of such memories can be found on websites, e.g. <http://www.nowiny24.pl/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081017/WEEKEND/400188994>.

<sup>6</sup> W. Roszkowski, *Najnowsza historia Polski* (Warszawa, 2003), p. 355.

<sup>7</sup> see e.g. <http://krystyna-kofta.blog.onet.pl/BIEDNY-PAPIEZ.2.ID420022419.n>

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Strassberg, 'Changes in Religious Culture in Post War II Poland', in *Sociological Analysis* 48 (1988), 349

<sup>9</sup> W. Zdaniewicz, T. Zembrzuski (ed.), *Kościół i religijność Polaków, 1945-1999* (Warszawa 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The research in the scope of this problem conducted in years 1991 - 2007 by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) is available on the website

[http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty\\_pdf/badania/Aborcja\\_cbos2007.pdf](http://www.federa.org.pl/dokumenty_pdf/badania/Aborcja_cbos2007.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The results of the poll are available on the website <http://www.thebrusselsconnection.be/tbc/upload/attachments/European%20Values%20Overall%20EN.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> All percentages are taken from the opinion poll held in 2010 by Public Opinion Research Centre: [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K\\_047\\_10.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K_047_10.PDF)

<sup>13</sup> <http://pokolenie-jp2.pl/info.php?dzial=01>.