

Nationalism, Human Rights and John Paul II:  
*The First Papal Pilgrimage to Poland, June 1979*

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Peace and the drawing together of peoples can be achieved only on the principle of respect for the objective rights of the nation, such as: the right to existence, to freedom, to be a social and political subject, and also to the formation of its own culture and civilization.

*Pope John Paul II  
June 2, 1979*

In October 1978, Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II and made a pilgrimage home that strengthened Polish nationalism and the outlined the need for social justice in Poland. Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to Poland in 1979 served as a unifying platform for the Polish nation. Through his speeches Pope John Paul II bolstered Polish unity against Soviet occupation by emphasizing the themes of nationalism and social justice. The Pope drew on the deep roots of Polish Catholicism and linked national identity with Polish religious heritage. Arguably one of the most influential figures of Central Europe, John Paul II came to Poland in June 1979 as the first Polish Pope in history. The fact that he was the first Polish Pope and gave speeches that united citizens with their religion and with their nation certainly ripened the atmosphere for unified dissent. John Paul II's pilgrimage brought out a vital truth, Poland was not a communist country; Poland was a Catholic nation saddled with a communist state.<sup>1</sup> The Pope's addresses clearly supported this interpretation; he repeatedly recalled his nation's long history of Catholicism in addition to Poland's long history of occupation.

The role of the Catholic Church in Polish national identity and culture was an essential foundation for John Paul II's 1979 pilgrimage. The birth of the Polish nation is traced to the baptism of Mieszko in CE 966: the first Catholic ruler of Poland. From these origins the course of Polish history has been marked by the extension and protection of Catholicism as a national identity. Catholicism has deep roots in Polish culture with ninety percent of the population

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<sup>1</sup> George Wiegel, *Witness to Hope: Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999), 295.

adhering to the faith.<sup>2</sup> In conjunction with a rich Catholic heritage, Polish history has been marked by occupation of foreign countries. The partition of Poland among Austria, Russia, and Prussia, from 1772 and 1795, served as a catalyst for the present strength of the Polish Catholic Church. The long-term occupation of Poland caused Polish national identity to be grounded in religion rather than statehood. During this time the Church was vital to sustaining a Polish national heritage and became a significant representation of Polish identity and opposition to foreign rule through religion.<sup>3</sup>

The oppositional stance that the Polish Church donned in the twentieth century was a direct response to the liberties the state had seized following World War II. With the implementation of Soviet-style communism was the growth of ecclesiastical advocacy for dissent and nationalism. In March 1950 the state abducted the majority of church's holdings in land and livestock; an action that ensured that the church would not be seen as somehow part of the states authoritarian establishment. Civil unrest with the status quo of state-communism led protesting workers to march on party headquarters in Poznan in June 1956, they shouted, "We want God and bread."<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Church was the only link the authoritarian government had to the social atmosphere of the nation. Not forgotten by either entity was the position the Church took in 1956, when it accepted privileges from State Secretary Gomułka and defended him against the criticism of the revisionists. This compromise gave the Church in Poland a certain amount of autonomy unprecedented in the Soviet Bloc; not unlike the emergence of civil society within the Lutheran Church in the GDR.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence in East Central Europe*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Cross and the Commissar*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 132.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

For some historians, John Paul II's emphasis on national identity aided in the renewal of civil society in Poland and ultimately aided in the emergence of Solidarity. Civil society is the social existence of an intermediate sphere between society and public spheres in which citizens can participate in discourse and dissent.<sup>5</sup> Several historians assert that John Paul II aided in the Polish organization of civil society—the space in society for opposition to the Polish Party State. Civil Society is the social existence of an alternative social sphere creating; in this case, the foundational structure in which citizens could dissent.<sup>6</sup>

Into the late 1970s, the Church became the primary vehicle for social opposition in Poland. The Church defended the “flying university”, an underground education opportunity that skirted governmental control. Locations of the university's lectures would be rescheduled at a moment's notice to avoid the authorities. The lectures were led by sixty-two Polish scholars for students and intellectuals alike. In an atmosphere free of censorship, the “flying university” was able to provide an academic sphere where perspectives that were disapproved by the state could be debated and shared openly.<sup>7</sup> The Church also maintained contacts with the Workers Defense Committee (KOR) that had been set up by a group of intellectuals who sought to voice the needs and concerns of the working class. KOR was intimately involved in representing working men and women's needs and grievances to the party state. In their appeal to government in 1976 KOR essentially offered a warning to the authorities against continuing their policy of deliberate disregard for genuine social problems and against their evasion of the responsibility for solving these problems.<sup>8</sup> KOR served as a legitimate section of Polish civil society because it provided a voice to the everyday concerns of the worker. Their admonition of the government and address

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<sup>5</sup> Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence in East Central Europe*, 315.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Lipski, “KOR: A History of the Worker's Defense Committee in Poland” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 474.

of specific wrongs in society, such as the scarcity of food and the denial of workers right to strike, were adhered to in the Gdansk Agreement two years later in 1980. The Church in Poland also launched a sequence of “Days of Christian Culture,” which was a yearly event where citizens could grapple with historical and cultural questions. This Church sponsored event included lectures, concerts, poetry readings, films, art exhibits, and informal discussion groups.<sup>9</sup>

In the years preceding John Paul II’s 1979 visit the role of the Catholic Church in Polish society had been steadily increasing. Not only was there a broadening of the public reached by the Clubs of Catholic Intellectuals (KIK), the periodical *Wież* and the Krakow monthly *Tygodnik Powszechny*; now, the Catholic Church had elected a Polish Pope.<sup>10</sup> Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was well known for his advocacy of human dignity and his association with the Polish workers’ movement. Indeed, after the arrest of KOR activists in 1977, both Primate Wyszynski and then-Archbishop Karol Wojtyla addressed the issue openly in sermons criticizing the repression of those defending human rights and privately intervened with authorities on behalf of KOR. The question lingered in October 1978, would this guardian of human rights carry these ideals into the highest office of the Church? The Catholic Church in Poland had a traditional role in defending truth, standing up for human freedom and dignity, by encouraging independent thought and nonconformity. Assuredly, these were the kinds of sentiments marked in John Paul II’s speeches in June of 1979. His remarks were calculated as he linked the pivotal role of the Church in Polish national identity to the social atmosphere of the nation.

The context of his nine day jubilee tour included some of the most historic figures and symbols of his homeland. The Polish Party State, the one-party system implemented by the Soviet Union, was opposed to Pope John Paul’s journey and postponed his arrival to Poland

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<sup>9</sup> Ramet, *Cross and Commissar*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Touraine, *Solidarity: The Analysis of a Social Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983),36.

which was to coincide with the celebration of the martyrdom of St. Stanislaus on May 8, 1979. Edward Gierek, Poland's Head of State foresaw the symbolic impact his visit would have. The Pope had intentionally planned his visit during the celebration of Saint Stanislaus' martyrdom. This celebration commemorated the nine-hundredth anniversary of St. Stanislaus the historic bishop and martyr of Poland.

Not only did John Paul II's speeches include an incredible amount of symbolic imagery; the locations of his speeches augmented the purpose and meaning of his words. John Paul II gave forty-seven public presentations and twenty-one speeches over the course of his nine day tour.<sup>11</sup> The audience of his speeches varied. He addressed the Ecclesiastical Community in Warsaw, which was comprised of the primate, cardinals and bishops of the Polish Catholic Church; the Public Authorities, such as Edward Gierek, the Secretary of the Polish Party State and other high ranking party officials; the general Polish citizenry and much of the western world were his audience through radio and television broadcasts. By analyzing the content of the Pope's speeches his focus on nationalism and human rights is plain. When speaking in front of state officials, lay people or high ranking members of the Church his purpose remained constant: to promote peace, human rights and a strong Polish national identity.

John Paul's influence went beyond the obvious; he was of course the first Polish Pope, yet, more than this was the precedent that his 1979 visit set and the power it afforded those who would become the leaders of the Solidarity movement. The emergence of Polish Solidarity began as a wave of strikes in the summer of 1980 that grew to become a mass movement of over ten million members; this constituted the largest and longest challenge to authoritarian communism since the Russian Revolution in 1917. The union of Solidarity had several features; a labor union

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<sup>11</sup> The Pope's speeches were transcribed and translated into English by the Vatican and are archived in the Holy See Library database online.

defending the rights of the working class; the prosecutors of lawbreakers in the high ranks of government; a defender of political prisoners, law and order, and an independent culture as the true representation of citizens to the authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1980, scholars have analyzed this complex and unique movement evaluating its origins and the factors that propelled it. Scholarly analyses link Pope John Paul's 1979 visit with the emergence of Solidarity in 1980. The Pope influenced Polish civil society and Solidarity through his contributions in bolstering human rights and nationalism in his homeland before and after his election to the papal office. In addition, the role of the Catholic Church in civil society and Solidarity was closely linked to the role of its leader. Scholars have viewed John Paul II as playing a role in promoting nationalism and social justice during his historic visit to Poland.

One of the earliest interpretations of Pope John Paul II's 1979 visit is given by historian Alain Touraine in 1983. Touraine in *Solidarity: the Analysis of a Social Movement* does not give exhaustive attention to Pope John Paul II; he feels the 1979 tour had a strong impact in the Solidarity movement. Touraine's work focuses on the origins of Solidarity in Poland tracing the evolution to the movement from 1956 to its first legitimate emergence in 1980. He does provide a constructive commentary on the historic election of Pope John Paul II and his subsequent influence on civil society and Solidarity. He views John Paul II and the Catholic Church as integral factors that bridged the gap between Polish citizens and the party-state. Touraine states, "[t]he dominant factor in Polish life was the gap between society and the regime, which they saw simply as an unavoidable reality held in place by the international balance of power."<sup>13</sup> His analysis of the social and economic situation from 1956-1978 in Poland helps clarify why John Paul made such an impact and why civil society emerged so seamlessly. He asserts that,

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<sup>12</sup> Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 45

<sup>13</sup> Touraine, *Solidarity*, 36.

the peasants felt tolerated but excluded, held back by archaic methods of production the workers were crushed by the weight of a pyramid of bosses all acting according to a logic which had nothing to do with producing goods; and the intellectuals were above all indifferent towards an official ideology in which even the representatives of the Party hardly believed any more.<sup>14</sup>

The various branches of society distanced themselves from the authoritarian regime; and began to construct a social public life counter to it. Ideally this meant avoiding conflict with the government and if possible using it as their ‘most powerful ally’.<sup>15</sup> Many Poles were dissatisfied with the regime and the nationwide support of John Paul II in 1979 exemplified how frustrated individual citizens were actually a collective movement backed by the head of their Church.

Historian Gales Stokes in his 1993 work, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down* asserts that prior to 1980 civil society in Poland was not yet mobilized by either the working class of the intellectuals. He views the papal visit as the catalyst for the creation of civil society in Poland. In Stokes’ view progress towards an awakening of Polish resolve was building and culminated in October 1978 with the election of Pope John Paul II. Stokes describes the Pope’s election as the “thunderbolt from abroad that galvanized the entire Polish population, young and old, rural and urban.”<sup>16</sup> He emphasizes the unifying effect, on a local and national scale, that the election of a Polish Pope prompted in a nation with a strong Catholic heritage. Stokes affirms that the election of John Paul meant everything to the citizens of Poland: a citizenry who were inundated with what Stokes calls, “political double-talk and empty promises”. Stokes describes how Pope John Paul II brought his energetic politically charged speeches, “a stylish literary Polish that contrasted sharply with the stereotyped and hackneyed Communist idiom and flew like an arrow

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<sup>14</sup> Touraine, *Solidarity*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.



to the emotional and spiritual heart of millions of Poles.”<sup>17</sup> Stokes describes how intellectuals elsewhere in Eastern Europe like György Konrad and Vaclav Havel had assumed an ethic of anti-politics. These anti-politicians had advocated the creation of civil society where only ethical change had occurred, however John Paul II’s pilgrimage pushed millions of Poles to consciousness that their environment was fertile ground for organized dissent.<sup>18</sup>

Barbara Falk in, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* published in 2003, focuses on the dissident intellectuals in oppositional movements during the years leading up to the Polish Revolution. The scope of her book does not include analysis of the labor activists and anti-communists involved in opposition during the late twentieth century. She asserts, “It was largely the intellectuals who self-reflexively wrote and theorized about their political practice.”<sup>19</sup> Many of these writers were aggressively involved in constructing non party-state organizations. In the case of Poland, her analysis is useful in recognizing those organizer and activists who were also involved in writing analytically about their experiences. In Falk’s view Pope John Paul II is a key catalyst for civil society not only in Poland but in Central Europe. She argues that John Paul II’s visit had a, “catalytic effect on the downfall of authoritarian communism.” Falk states that at the minimum the Pope’s visit was the dress rehearsal for the eruption of the national workers movement—Solidarity. She views John Paul II visit in 1979 much in the same way Stokes does; his election and journey was a turning point towards unification of the Polish people against authoritarian rule. She states, “the rebirth of civil society was complete: the Pope’s visit demonstrated that a vibrant, unified, and self conscious public sphere existed as an alternative to the party-state.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, xxxvi.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 43.

Falk describes the Pope's pilgrimage as a "spiritual shot in the arm" for those already engaged in opposition as well as a logistical success. Falk asserts much like Stokes that the papal tour caused the realization that Polish organization was certainly achievable. The evidence she provides for this assertion is a comment on the impact of the papal tour by a Catholic intellectual who helped plan John Paul's pilgrimage. This intellectual, although anonymous in her account, stated that John Paul's pilgrimage had a great impact on Polish unity partly because the state declined to help arrange the logistics of the Pope's tour leaving the establishment of networking and communication to be organized by Poles apart from the state. This Catholic intellectual recalled how Poles discovered their ability to operate without the states' involvement, "[W]e didn't need the authorities. We developed communications networks, planning procedures—all kinds of skills that would become tremendously useful a year later."<sup>21</sup>

Falk's treatment of John Paul II is not as extensive as her analysis of other intellectuals and she does not attempt an in depth analysis of the Pope's speeches. Her treatment of John Paul II synthesizes his historic visit with the mobilization of those who would lead the Solidarity movement. An ambiguity of time and place characterize the treatment that Stokes and Falk give John Paul II; they do not address the details of his trip and speeches. Instead the theoretical and ideological implications of his pilgrimage are analyzed. Although attributing John Paul II with credit for a "rebirth of civil society", these historians' analyses of the papal tour are brief.

Padraic Kenney's *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* is an account of the revolutions that swept Europe in the late twentieth century written in 2002. Specifically he focuses on the dissidents who propelled opposition and provides contrasting views between the origins of dissidents throughout Central Europe during the late 1970s and 1980s. His treatment

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<sup>21</sup> Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 45.

of this period extends behind the scenes of authoritarian communism to the “grassroots” movement of artists and intellectuals. Kenney treats John Paul II as an intellectual because of his role in boosting civil society and national unity even before his election to the papacy. In this context Kenney treats John Paul II as key player in the Polish revolution but does not give his role overwhelming attention. In the case of Poland, Kenney compares the underground emergence of counterculture, the response of society to authoritarian communism, to the Catholic Church in Poland, “it was not a form of opposition in itself but was a milieu where some people would discover opposition and a resource (of contacts, and strategies) for that opposition.”<sup>22</sup> Kenney argues that Pope John Paul II’s journey gave Poles a platform—the Church—from which they could oppose the ruling regime. Kenney points out that Poland inspired many minorities elsewhere in the Soviet bloc who were struggling with their resistance movement. He says, “...Slovaks were closely attuned to the Polish Church, especially after Pope John Paul II’s election in 1978.”<sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul’s influence extended beyond Polish borders into neighboring countries.

James Felak provides an analysis of John Paul’s visit in his conference paper entitled, “Nation, Church, History: John Paul II’s First Pilgrimage to Poland, June 1979”, written for the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies Conference in 2007. In his thesis, Felak asserts that the Polish Catholic Church’s view on nationalism can be seen by analyzing the visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland in 1979. Felak asserts that the Pope’s speeches empowered the Polish sense of nationalism. This empowerment came from the Pope publicly advocating the rights of nations and human dignity throughout his tour. Pope John Paul asserted that people are partly defined by the role they play in their national community; that people’s thoughts and

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<sup>22</sup> Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

choices are deeply allied to the traditions of their country and that an intrinsic nationalistic sentiment is a right and obligation for every citizen. In Pope John Paul II's view, the state exists for the advancement of the nation not the other way around.

Interestingly, Felak shows how John Paul II defined himself not just as a Polish Pope but as a Slavic one. In his speech at Gniezno the Pope asserted that as the first Slavic Pope he "carries in his soul an emphatic record of his own nation from its very beginning, but also of the history of fraternal neighboring peoples and nations."<sup>24</sup> Along with Stokes and Falk, Felak shows the Pope's dual purpose of renewing faith and building a sense of nationalism. For an interval of time, the authenticity of the party state's rule in everyday life retreated to the backdrop as thousands of Poles gathered to hear truth in the public sphere. There was undoubtedly a renewed faith mixed with a renewed sense of nationalism.

Jan Kubik's 1994 work, *The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power*, analyzes the use of symbols in the rise of Solidarity and the fall of State Socialism in Poland. More than other analyses of this era, Kubik offers a spotlight on the symbolism surrounding John Paul II and the Catholic Church. More specifically, his focus lies on the symbolic nature of the disparity between the Polish Party State and the Polish people and how this polarization was reflected in public demonstrations and ceremonies. His analysis provides a wealth of information on the underlying factors that boosted reform in Poland and the Catholic Churches' unique involvement in Solidarity. John Paul II is integral to Kubik's book because of the symbolic and unifying nature of his tour. His analysis is in agreement with Falk and Stokes: that civil organization against communism was strengthened after Pope John Paul II's visit. When discussing his

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<sup>24</sup> James Ramon Felak, "Nation, Church, History: John Paul II's First Pilgrimage to Poland, June 1979" (New Orleans: AAASS Conference, 2007),10.

perspective he writes, “The visit also had an impact on the configuration of the alliances within the ranks of the organized opposition. The oppositional groups evoked in their public statements the same set of civil and national values as the pope; hence their alliance with the Church grew stronger after the papal visit.”<sup>25</sup> Kubik asserts that Pope John Paul helped Poles realize they had a place to participate in society that was not, to a certain degree, dictated by the state.

Through Pope John Paul’s emphasis on a strong Polish national identity and his advocacy for human rights came the emergence of Solidarity and civil society. Historians such as Stokes, Touraine and others have produced influential scholarship linking the emergence the Solidarity movement with Pope John Paul II. In addition, scholars such as Felak and Kubik have delved deeper into the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Solidarity movement. Polish church history served as the causation of John Paul II’s emphasis on nationalism and social justice; which Barbara Falk asserts was the “dress rehearsal” for the emergence of Solidarity. At minimum, most historians agree, the Pope’s visit laid a foundation for the national worker’s movement of Solidarity rooted in nationalistic renewal and the defense of human rights. Whether treated as a mere footnote or as the protagonist of the Polish revolution, Pope John Paul’s visit to Poland in 1979 was a catalyst for unification and the advent of organized dissent and opposition in Poland.

Several factors contributed to the success of Pope John Paul II’s 1979 journey: his powerful position, the content of his speeches, the timing of his visit and the locations in Poland that he chose to speak. Every aspect of Pope John Paul II’s journey to Poland was carefully calculated for symbolic impact. The newly elected Pope left Italy from the Fiumicino Airport in Italy and landed in the Okecie Airport in Warsaw, Poland on June 2, 1979. As he set foot in his

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<sup>25</sup> Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 145-46.

homeland the Pope fell to his knees and kissed the ground. During his nine day pilgrimage the Pope would visit the most significant landmarks in Poland drawing incredible crowds rallying for their spiritual leader and compatriot. As John Paul made his way from the Okecie Airport to Victory Square in an open air vehicle millions of Poles lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the Pope. Almost 300,000 people were present in Victory Square when John Paul II spoke; almost the whole country was listening to the Pope on radios or watching him on television sets throughout his historic tour. The whole of Central Europe and the rest of the world also paid close attention to the Pope's journey to Poland and his unwavering advocacy for peace. The Pope's speeches were transcribed and translated into English by the Vatican and are archived in the Holy See Library database.

The following are analyses of five speeches that Pope John Paul's gave on June, 2 1979, the first day of his pilgrimage. The speeches included are: Address at Departure Ceremony for Poland at Fiumicino Airport, Italy; Welcoming Ceremony in Warsaw at Okecie Airport; Address to the Ecclesiastical Community of Warsaw at St. John the Baptist Cathedral; Meeting with the Civil Authorities in Warsaw at Belvedere Palace; and Pontifical Mass at Victory Square in Warsaw. These particular speeches exemplify the pontiff's advocacy for national autonomy and human dignity. The Pope stated very clearly in these first speeches that his purpose in visiting Poland was to promote peace in Poland and in Eastern Europe.

### ***Departure Ceremony for Poland—Fiumicino Airport June 2, 1979***

Before John Paul II even set foot in Poland he outlined three motivations behind his pilgrimage in a speech at his departure from Fiumicino Airport on June 2, 1979. The first motivation he stated was to commemorate the 900th anniversary of St. Stanislaus the historic

bishop and martyr of Poland. John Paul II commented on the importance of St. Stanislaus saying, “His sacrifice for the faith, nine centuries ago, is one of the most important historico-religious events of my native land, so it was decided some time ago to commemorate it with appropriate and solemn celebrations.” The correlation between the importance of John Paul II and St. Stanislaus remains too poignant to be coincidental. St. Stanislaus was known as an advocate for justice and a challenger of tyranny. Stanislaus was killed by royal henchmen of King Boleslaw the Bold on April 11, 1079 after speaking out against the many indiscretions of the King. Cardinal Wysynski, the Primate of Poland and social activist comments on what St. Stanislaus represents to Poles in an address on May 21, 1978:

The conflict between Boleslaw and Stanislaw revolved around the issues of justice and human rights. It proves that already nine hundred years ago the Church struggled for human rights and already nine hundred years ago there was in Poland a man of the Church who fought for human rights. The cult of Saint Stanislaw is the symbol of the unity in our nation; this is not only a religious, but also a national symbol.<sup>26</sup>

Pope John Paul II propelled this symbolism of national unity by staging his return in conjunction with the celebration of St. Stanislaus; a historic legacy that resonated strongly with the purpose of John Paul II’s visit. John Paul figuratively carried the torch of St. Stanislaus into the context of twentieth century Poland by taking a stance against tyranny and being an advocate for human dignity. Pope John Paul would celebrate the legacy of St. Stanislaus’ courage to challenge political oppression at the end of his pilgrimage in Krakow.

In addition, John Paul II stated that his “personal motive” for visiting Poland was going to Krakow and reconnecting with the church that he came from. Krakow is Wadowce, the city where John Paul grew up and the place where he served as a bishop for twenty-one years. Along

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<sup>26</sup> Kubik, *Power of Symbols*, 133.

with John Paul II's desire to return home he stated his "international motive" before departing for Poland that June. His "international motive" was the promotion of peaceful coexistence between nations. Indeed, the Pope referred to his visit as a confirmation of his "attachment to the cause of peace, coexistence, and cooperation among nations; the hope that my visit will consolidate internal unity among my beloved fellow country-men and also serve the further development of the relations between State and Church."<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul clearly stated what he hoped his presence in Poland would accomplish: the promotion of peace and unity among his people. Perhaps an ironic reality of this period was the atheistic standpoint of state communism and the strong Christian heritage of Poland. This religious incongruity between the party state and the Polish people had always existed and was exemplified in the Pope's visit.

### ***Welcoming Ceremony in Warsaw at Airport--June 2, 1979***

When John Paul II addressed the Council of State upon his arrival at the airport in Warsaw he made sure to comment that his visit was motivated by purely religious motives. In this address the Pope again emphasized his hope for peace, understanding and reconciliation with his homeland and the world. This message of peace resounded with a nation whose recent decades had been wrought with social upheaval and foreign occupation. Interestingly, John Paul II stated his desire for a favorable relationship between the Catholic Church and Polish Party State: two entities that were in completely opposite in terms of ideology. Jan Kubik comments on this truth, "The situation of religion had become especially precarious in the Communist countries, where the dominant Marxist ideology was presented as the ultimate cognitive, ethical

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<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, "Apostolic Journey to Poland: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.", [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii\\_speeches/1979/june](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii_speeches/1979/june), (November, 2009).



and social solution. Consequently, religion was declared obsolete.”<sup>28</sup> With the presence of Pope John Paul in Poland came a resurgence of religious fever and an embracing of the distinctly Catholic heritage of Poland. The intertwining of national identity and religion had been a feature of Polish history. Through his speeches Pope John Paul encouraged Poles to let their heritage define their identities apart from any state dictated definition. Jan Litynski, a Polish dissident and later member of the Solidarity government commented on the unifying impact of John Paul II’s pilgrimage,

Short are the moments in the history of the nations when awareness of unity is stronger than all the divisions and differences. Very seldom can one man speak in the name of the whole nation, expressing the thoughts and desires of all. And unhappy are the people who are standing on the sideline of such events. Such moments constitute the basis of national life, are the source of its strength.<sup>29</sup>

Litynski attests to the harmony that Pope John Paul brought about through his deeply religious addresses. For this Polish dissident the content of John Paul’s speeches was expressive of what the whole population desired.

In this same presentation the pontiff addressed his ‘Brothers and Sisters’ as well as his fellow-compatriots. The national anthem was played before the Pope began his speech and he commented on the words of their anthem. John Paul II remarked,

I wish my stay in Poland to help to strengthen this unflagging will to live on the part of my fellow-countrymen in the land that is our common mother and homeland. May it be for the good of all the Poles, of all the Polish families, of the nation and of the State. May my stay—I wish to repeat it once again—help the great cause of peace, friendship in relations between nations, and social justice.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Kubik, *Power of Symbols*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, Appendix 3.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, "Apostolic Journey to Poland".

The Pope affirmed his solidarity with the Polish nation as well as stated his case for promoting social justice. Clearly he meant for his pilgrimage to establish a foundation of peace between the nations and of social justice for all peoples. When KOR outlined the drastic need for economic reform and highlighted the social reforms that were promised by the state every Polish citizen was aware that they had not been fulfilled. The Polish citizenry were also keenly aware that Pope John Paul stood before them as an advocate for the social justice they sought.

*Ecclesiastical Community of Warsaw at St. John the Baptist Cathedral—June 2, 1979*

Throughout John Paul II's speeches the themes of strengthening of Polish nationalism and need for social justice remained constant. When he addressed the Ecclesiastical Community in Warsaw his terminology was more pointedly religious. In this speech he made strong parallels between the role of the Church and the role of the people who are the "body of Christ". John Paul II stated that the Church is present in the world through the laity. He affirmed the role of all peoples in the mission of the Church and acknowledged the lonely, the old and the workers—the groups of society marginalized by the communist regime. John Paul II attributed these people as the ones forming the foundation of the nation. He stated,

All of you who work on the land, in industry, in offices, in schools, in universities, in hospitals, in cultural institutes, in the ministries, everywhere. Members of all the professions who by your work are building Poland of today, the heritage of so many generations, a well-beloved heritage, a difficult heritage, a great commitment, our 'great common duty' as Poles, the Motherland.<sup>31</sup>

With these words the Pope reminded those on the fringes of Polish society of their important contribution to the establishment and cultivation of national heritage. The power of the Pope's words lay in the voice it afforded the working class. Under the Polish party-state, working

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<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, "Apostolic Journey to Poland".

conditions across the nation were oppressive and the right for citizens to express their discontent was not permitted. In the course of his journey, Pope John Paul advocated for the rights of citizens as well as encouraged his compatriots to cling to their heritage. The Pope's public encouragement of Polish nationalism was perhaps the final push towards organized dissent in Poland.

Following those poignant remarks the Pope drew an analogy between the history of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, where they were meeting, and the identity of the Church in Poland. John Paul II commented on how the Cathedral was completely destroyed in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944<sup>32</sup> and then asserted that just as the Cathedral was restored so would the Polish church. To emphasize this concept of renewal John Paul quoted John 2:19; the passage of scripture when Christ spoke about his imminent death and resurrection. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Pope John Paul applied the strongest biblical instance of death and resurrection to the national and religious experience of Poland. The concept of renewal in this analogy is about hope of a national and religious resurrection that creates unification.

### ***Meeting with the Civil Authorities in Warsaw at Belvedere Palace—June 2, 1979***

The Polish Party State viewed the return of Pope John Paul II to Poland with trepidation. Throughout the regime's existence the Church had maintained autonomy and now, the most powerful church leader was journeying to Poland. Attempts were made by the party state to postpone the Pope's visit but his entrance into Poland was inevitable. The Pope met with the Civil Authorities of Poland in Warsaw on June 2, 1979. The Communist Party General Secretary

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<sup>32</sup> The Cathedral was destroyed in the Warsaw Uprising from August-October of 1944 by the Germans and was rebuilt after the war.

Edward Gierek gave a short address and was accompanied by other important Polish leaders. The party state attempted to downplay the impact of Pope John Paul's tour by controlling the media coverage of his visit. However, their attempts seemed only to highlight their thin hold of absolute power in Polish society. As the Pope met with the Civil Authorities that day the dichotomy of Church and State seemed clear. The Pope spoke of God and peace, Gierek spoke of Brezhnev. Pope John Paul, in this speech particularly, stressed the ideals of national sovereignty and human rights. John Paul II was careful not to directly criticize the authorities; however his pointed words declaring that respect for the objective rights of nations was the only way to achieve peace was certainly a criticism of the social injustice that Poland and the other nations in the Soviet Bloc knew too well. Pope John Paul made the assertion that the sole purpose of government was to respect the autonomy of the nation.

After laying this ideological framework the Pope went on to describe instances in Polish history where sovereignty of the nation was curbed. The examples he used were WORLD WAR II and the time of the Partitions.<sup>33</sup> In the Pope's view the time of the Partitions during the late eighteenth century aided in forging and renewing Polish patriotism and the meaning of the word 'motherland'. He asserts that the Polish history of injustice and wrongs had given them a deeper bond with their homeland "both for the mind and for the heart". The occupation during WORLD WAR II also served as an example of how Polish peoples had to sacrifice the sovereignty of their nation. Pope John Paul remarked that they would never forget that period of occupation and would always honor those Polish men and women who sacrificed their lives for the sake of freedom. The Pope then remarked, "We have respect for and we are grateful for every help that we received from others at that time, while we think with sadness of the disappointments that we

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<sup>33</sup> The Partitions were (1772, 1793, 1795) three territorial divisions of Poland, perpetrated by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, by which Poland's size was progressively reduced until, after the final partition, the state of Poland ceased to exist.

were not spared.”<sup>34</sup> In this understated fashion, Pope John Paul undermined the legitimacy of the authorities in this speech by highlighting the instances in Polish history where Poles had felt betrayed by the Western world and the Soviet Union. John Paul II retained a deep personal remembrance of these instances that occurred during and after WORLD WAR II. James Felak provides a complimentary analysis of this portion of the Pope’s address. He states:

John Paul names none of the players in this bitter Polish experience—neither Germany, nor the Western Powers, nor the Soviet Union. But surely he meant the Yalta Agreement, seen by most Poles as a Western abandonment of Poland and its wartime London Government, the subsequent Western treatment of that government-in-exile, and the takeover of his country by Soviet-sponsored Communists as constituting these ‘disappointments’.<sup>35</sup>

### *Pontifical Mass at Victory Square in Warsaw—June 2, 1979*

It is estimated that three million people poured into the city limits of Warsaw on June 2, 1979 to see the Pope and participate in the Pontifical Mass. About 300,000 people pressed into Victory Square, the largest public square in Warsaw located in the downtown section of the city, for Mass. The square was brimming and the streets were lined with the millions of people who had come to welcome the Pope’s motorcade. Pope John Paul would also be addressing millions more through radio and television broadcasts. Warsaw, like many other cities around the country, went to great lengths to prepare for the Pope’s visit. George Weigel in his biography of Pope John Paul II, *Witness to Hope*, describes the scene of the June 2 Mass:

Victory Square, scene of many of the Polish communist regime’s great public displays, had been transformed by government workers into an enormous liturgical stage for the papal Mass... The centerpiece of the alter platform was a fifty-foot-tall cross, draped with an enormous replica of a priest’s stole, reminding all present that they were witnessing a sacramental representation of Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> John Paul II, “Apostolic Journey to Poland”.

<sup>35</sup> Felak, “Nation”, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Weigel, *Witness*, 293.

The Pope led the crowd in a hymn before beginning his address. In this speech Pope John Paul again linked his visit with the nine-hundredth anniversary of St. Stanislaw. He spoke of a symbolic parallel between his pilgrimage and, “our Polish pilgrimage through the history of the church.”<sup>37</sup> He also challenged his countrymen to continue their pilgrimage with, “humility and conviction” while renewing their understanding of, “Christ’s cross and resurrection.” The Pope stated that their continued pilgrimage would require great duties and obligations and asked the question, “[a]re we able to accept them?” The crowd responded with a resounding reply, “We want God, we want God...”<sup>38</sup>



Pope John Paul addresses the crowd in Victory Square. Warsaw June 2, 1979  
<http://www.corbisimages.com/Enlargement/U1966974.html>

The Mass in Victory Square confirmed for much of the Polish nation that their identity did not lay within the confines of the Polish Party state. This was encouraged by the stirring sermon of Pope John Paul and evidenced by the enthusiastic response of the crowd. Even with the resounding symbolic impact of that day and the incredible gathering of Polish people in public, the authorities acted as though it had not taken place. Jan Litynski recalls the impact of John Paul’s speech in Victory Square and the state’s denial of his impact. He stated:

When after the first day of the visit the front pages of the newspapers...passed over in short notices one of the most important facts in our history—the sermon of John Paul II—what else could we do but laugh? They tried to hide millions of people participating in huge celebrations. From whom? From these millions, from themselves, from the whole world, or from the comrades from the East?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> John Paul II, “Apostolic Journey to Poland”.

<sup>38</sup> Weigel, *Witness*, 293.

<sup>39</sup> Kubik, *Power of Symbols*, Appendix 3.

The location, audience, and message of the Pope's speech that day all bore significance. Victory Square, a place usually only open to state demonstrations, held a Pontifical Mass that was unregulated and uncensored. The Pope's audience was a record three million on site and millions more watching and listening through radio and television broadcasts. Indeed, no amount of state denial could refute what the Polish nation heard and felt when Pope John Paul said, "Christ will not cease to be for us an open book of life for the future, for our Polish future."<sup>40</sup>

The themes of nationalism and social justice that Pope John Paul II emphasized were complimentary and incredibly vital to the organization of Polish dissent. The concept of nationhood meant a great deal to a people whose national sovereignty had been repeatedly violated throughout their history. John Paul II, through his authority as the pope and his solidarity as a Polish national had an incredible platform to assert the importance of preserving national culture and freedoms. His advocacy of human dignity and social justice was extremely unifying in light of the social unrest and the Polish inability to publicly criticize the state for fear of retaliation. Pope John Paul took full advantage of his position as the leader of the Catholic Church to promote peace in the public sphere. Under any other circumstances the incredible impact of his visit may have been weakened. But the situation was ideal; he was a Polish Pope, an advocate for human rights and the rights of nations. With the world watching and his country holding their breath Pope John Paul II challenged oppression and offered hope, peace and reconciliation.

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<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, "Apostolic Journey to Poland".

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