

Extreme nationalism was not John Paul II's vision for Poland, historian says



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Warsaw, Poland, Nov 16, 2017

- St. John Paul II's teachings propose a different, better vision for Poland than that of a massive Warsaw march led by extreme nationalist elements on Saturday, one historian says.

"His vision of Poland was absolutely contrary to all forms of extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism or hatred for Muslims," Arpad von Klimo, a history professor at The Catholic University of America, told CNA Nov. 14.

"John Paul II suffered a lot during the Nazi occupation of Poland. He was active in the underground seminary. As Pope, he severely condemned all forms of racism. During his first visit to Poland in 1979, he prayed in Auschwitz," von Klimo continued.

Poland's Remembrance Day, observed Nov. 11, celebrates the restoration of Polish sovereignty in 1918. The day drew at least 10 separate marches in Warsaw alone, but the nationalist group was by far the largest.

The march, drawing 60,000 people, was organized by the National Radical Camp. The group depicts itself as the heir to a 1930s fascist movement that had the same name, the Wall Street Journal reports. That movement's goals had included the expulsion of Jews from Poland.

Many at the Saturday march waved Polish flags, singing the Polish national anthem and the phrase "God, Honor, Country." Many also carried anti-Semitic flags and banners with phrases reading "White Europe of brotherly nations" and "Clean Blood." The flags included the white Celtic cross symbol used by the far right, as well as "Falanga" flags from the 1930s.

According to the British newspaper The Times, "speakers pledg(ed) their support for a single-faith, Catholic Poland."

However, von Klimo stressed that Catholicism is "absolutely not" compatible with white supremacy.

"The major error of racism is that it is based on a biological determinism of human beings which contradicts the sacrament of baptism. Racism sets humans in the place of God. It is, basically, a materialist ideology," he said.

He cited John Paul II's encyclical "Redemptor Hominis," which said every human being is "entrusted to the solidarity of the Church."

Many marchers told reporters they were not part of neo-fascist or racist groups but had no objection to the overall tone of the event.

The march attendees included activists from other parts of Europe, like English Defense League co-founder Tommy Robinson. The American "alt-right" commentator Richard Spencer had been invited to attend by organizers, but he was not present. The Polish government had asked him not to attend. Self-described fascist Roberto Fiore, an anti-immigration politician from Italy, had been scheduled to appear, The Times reports.

Some sympathizers from Hungary, Slovakia and Spain were at the march, waving their flags and symbols that have been associated with collaboration with Nazi Germany.

A co-organizer of the march was the group All Polish Youth, which also takes its name from an anti-Jewish movement from the same period.

Von Kilmo emphasized that the march's sentiments contradicted those of the sainted Pope who is widely venerated in Poland. He cited John Paul II's April 6, 1993 remarks on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: "As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another."

In John Paul II's May 5, 1999 general audience, von Kilmo added, the Pope "emphasized the high regard Christians have for Muslims, pleading for dialogue."

The Polish marches organized by the Radical Camp have been taking place since 2009. Initially gathering crowds of only a few hundred, in the last three years march participation has boomed. It is one of the largest nationalist marches in Europe.

The Radical Camp opposes the migration of Syrian refugees into Europe and claims Jewish financiers are driving the phenomenon. It claims these financiers are working with communists in the European Union to bring Muslims to Europe and also to bring Shariah law and homosexuality.

Among the group's activities is a commemoration of a 1936 anti-Jewish pogrom. One of the march banners that bore its symbols read "Pray for Islamic Holocaust."

The group has also adopted the slogan "We want God," used by President Donald Trump in his July speech in Poland. The slogan was also used by crowds of Poles during visits of Pope John Paul II, when the country was under an officially atheist communist government.

The Radical Camp recruits from soccer clubs and youth hangouts. It opposes both the European Union and Russia as threats to Polish sovereignty and advocates the nationalization of foreign corporations' assets and their distribution across an ethnically homogeneous country.

Many marchers were families with young children, as well as young men ranging in age from their teens to early thirties. Some demonstrators dressed in black, wearing combat boots and masking their faces with scarves or balaclavas.

Some city government officials were not friendly towards the march, but said the event had to be approved because it fulfilled a legal requirement of celebrating Polish history. Polish state television, however, described the demonstration as a "great march of patriots."

Rafal Pankowski, a political science professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, told the Wall Street Journal that Polish parents and grandparents of the marchers are "paradoxically more liberal than their young."

"This march is just an expression of a bigger social phenomenon, which is definitely very troubling, and is the growing acceptance of extreme nationalism and xenophobia among young people in Poland," he said.

At least 45 people were detained at the march, which in previous years had devolved into clashes with police. However, the Washington Post said only anti-fascist demonstrators were arrested this year.

Von Kilmo said there have been various right-wing groups operating in Poland since the 1980s, similar to those of other East European states as well as then-East Germany and Austria.

"These groups have mostly been marginal and at the fringe of the political system, counting a few thousand supporters," he said, noting that in Poland they have no more than 30-40 seats out of 460 in the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament.

"The march has become a very contested issue between the Polish government, led by the national-conservative Law and Justice Party, and the liberal opposition," he said. While members of the

government, like the Minister of the Interior, said the march was a “beautiful” event, Law and Justice Party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski voiced regret about some “unfortunate events.”

The Law and Justice party, in general, “seems to have targeted so far only liberal and left-wing elements,” according to von Kilmo. It is using nationalist language to denounce these elements, as well as EU president Donald Tusk, the former Polish prime minister, as “traitors.”

“Right-wing youth groups and symbols that show extreme nationalism have become wide-spread, and the government tolerates many extreme right-wing expressions in the public media,” said the professor.

He described the relationship between Poland’s ruling government and the EU as “complicated.” Polish officials complain that the EU is taking a liberal, secular direction, and its support for the hundreds of thousands of refugees that came to Europe in 2015. The Law and Justice party and similar parties have used fear of refugees “for political purposes, warning of an Islamic take-over of Europe.”

However, he said, the country is “only rhetorically distancing itself,” and mostly votes in favor of decisions of other EU member states.

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