News



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Poland's leading Jewish philosopher urged the Catholic Church to condemn a wave of anti-Jewish feeling, sparked by a new law on responsibility for Holocaust crimes.

"We have not witnessed such anti-Jewish outbursts for a long time; people are afraid, and our youngsters are talking about emigrating," said Stanislaw Krajewski, a Warsaw University professor who co-chairs the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

"It would help the Jewish community if the church said something, and if those now seeking to join Catholicism with anti-Semitism are properly rebuked," he told Catholic News Service.

The law, which took effect March 1, imposes fines or up to three years' jail time for anyone who "publicly and against the facts attributes to the Polish nation or Polish state responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes perpetrated by the German

Third Reich," or other "crimes against peace, humanity or war crimes," and who "flagrantly reduces the responsibility in any way of the real perpetrators."

Krajewski, a founder of the Polish-Israeli Friendship Society, told CNS March 6: "The way the law is formulated makes it a blunt instrument for paralyzing and punishing anyone you don't like -- but the government's harsh, dismissive reaction to critics has encouraged many people to think they can now attack Jews.

"The government is ruining relations with other countries, while strengthening its electorate at home: This is what threatens and alarms us. It would be useful if Poland's bishops made clear this anti-Jewish wave has gone too far," he said.

Although a few individual bishops have commented on a law, a senior church source told CNS March 6 the Polish bishops' conference would not make any statement about the new law and anti-Jewish reactions, since it viewed them as "purely political issues."

"This is a matter for parliament -- the church has played no part in it," said the source, who asked not to be identified. "As far as the moral dimensions are concerned, the church's position is well known when it comes to historical truth. It has also condemned anti-Semitism in previous pastoral letters."

But Krajewski, a former consultant to the American Jewish Committee, told CNS that "the anti-Jewish genie is out of the bottle again."

"Certain extremist groups seem to think they now have permission, thanks to recent signals, to say and do what they like. The church could help defuse this atmosphere -- not by reiterating its formal position but by speaking out."

More than 6 million Polish citizens, half of them Jews, were killed during the country's 1939-45 occupation by Nazi Germany, which built many of its death camps on Polish territory.

Polish officials have long objected to accusations of Polish complicity in the Holocaust and protested when then-U.S. President Barack Obama used the phrase "Polish death camp" during a 2012 Medal of Freedom ceremony.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has criticized the new law, and the Jerusalem-based Yad Vashem Memorial Institute warned it would impede debate and research on the Holocaust.

The Polish Association of Righteous Among Nations -- representing more than 6,000 Poles honored by Israel for saving Jews during World War II -- took out full-page ads Feb. 27 in U.S., European and Israeli newspapers. The ads said hundreds of Poles had paid with their lives for showing "kindness and responsibility" to persecuted Jews, while other "ignoble Poles" had also "acted on their own behalf" against Holocaust victims.

It urged Jews and Poles to continue building "an alliance and a future" based on "friendship, solidarity and truth," and called for "empathy, judiciousness and thoughtfulness when creating laws, for responsible media coverage, and for honest and independent historical research."

Commenting on the controversy at a Feb. 25 meeting with Jewish representatives, Archbishop Grzegorz Rys of Lodz said Christians "very much needed dialogue with Israel," adding that church members engaged in Catholic-Jewish contacts would be saddened by recent events.

Rys did not respond to a CNS request to comment on reactions to the law, which also covers the upkeep of war memorials and cemeteries.

On March 2, Archbishop Andrzej Dziega of Szczecin-Kamien told a cathedral congregation that Polish historians should not be afraid to "go deeply into the truth about Poland and Polish history," adding that a "full panorama of facts" was needed to calm "pretensions and emotions."

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Up to 80 percent of the world's 13.5 million Jews are believed to have historic family connections with Poland, whose 3.5 million Jews made up a tenth of the pre-war population.

Only 100,000 escaped death during the Holocaust; many later emigrated, although numerous Jewish sites have now been restored, and religious and cultural festivals revived.

Poland's Gazeta Wyborcza daily reported March 2 the first action under the new law was being taken against an Argentine newspaper over its December report on a 1941 anti-Jewish pogrom at Jedwabne.