News



People in Warsaw, Poland, gather outside the apostolic nunciature Aug. 7, to demand the resignation of Archbishop Marek Jedraszewski of Krakow. The protesters were upset that the archbishop had likened the LGBTQ community and the rainbow flag to a "communist plague." The placard reads "Love of a neighbor? What's this?" (CNS/Dawid Zuchowicz, Agencja Gazeta via Reuters)



by Jonathan Luxmoore

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Krakow, Poland — August 19, 2019

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On this city's fabled Market Square, the Assumption Basilica, known as Kosciol Mariacki, towers over a maze of cobbled streets and alleyways. Founded in the 13th Century, the gothic edifice has long been a symbol of national defense, and a famous fanfare, or Hejnal, is still broadcast daily from its 260-foot tower, commemorating the moment a Polish trumpeter was shot by a Tatar arrow while rousing inhabitants against an attack.

So when Krakow's Catholic archbishop, Marek Jedraszewski, chose the basilica for a televised denunciation of LGBTQ campaigners on Aug. 1, the 75th anniversary of Poland's uprising against the Nazis, he would have been aware of the likely impact on audiences across the country.

"The red pestilence no longer marches across our land, but a new, neo-Marxist one has appeared, which seeks to conquer spirits, hearts and minds — not red, but rainbow," Jedraszewski told his massed congregation.

"The greatest tolerance becomes the height of intolerance when violence, humiliation and sneers against sacred symbols issue from mouths proclaiming fairness. … We are called to stand against this and defend authentic freedom."

Jedraszewski's words were aimed at people of same-sex orientations and transgender identities, who've been staging controversial equality marches across the country. As such, they marked a new stage in the Polish church's confrontational stance.



Archbishop Marek Jedraszewski, in a 2013 photo (CNS/Paul Haring)

Protesters gathered outside his Krakow residence on Aug. 2 and the Vatican's Warsaw nunciature on Aug. 7 to demand the archbishop's resignation, and the leader of Poland's liberal Wiosna opposition party, Robert Biedron, wrote to the pope, condemning his "diabolical language."

Meanwhile, Poland's conservative Radio Maryja was ordered by Google to take down a YouTube film of Jedraszewski's homily on grounds it qualified as "hate speech,"

although the order was later rescinded.

"Such words are simply a nod of assent to further attacks on people, even to a pogrom," Julia Maciocha, 25-year-old chairman of Poland's Equality Volunteers Foundation.

"Our movement will carry on trying to educate religious believers, explaining we're human beings and providing examples from abroad of how churches live in accord with LGBT people. But for now, our hands are tied, since homophobia isn't illegal in Poland — they can say anything they like about us and we've no means to defend ourselves," she said.

But Jedraszewski has found supporters too, who show no signs of backing down.

Catholics across Poland have praised his "courage in speaking out" and pledged solidarity, while Archbishop Andrzej Dziega of Szczecin-Kamien told Catholics in a pastoral letter they should defend church teaching more assertively in the face of "forceful leftist propaganda" and "a common pagan godlessness."

"This sick LGBT ideology strikes at the traditional family," Bishop Miroslaw Milewski, an auxiliary from Plock, concurred in an early August homily.

"May Mary preserve young people in search of their identity, so they're not seduced by fashionable slogans of freedom and tolerance which lead in reality to captivity and depravation."

LGBTQ groups have long complained of discrimination in Poland, where the Catholic Church opposed clauses in a 1997 constitution barring discrimination on grounds of ''sexual orientation" and has rejected past requests for a pastoral ministry for homosexuals, as well as backing the exclusion of LGBTQ staffers from Catholic schools.

Related: Polish bishops oppose Catholic group's support of gay rights campaign

In 2013, the Polish bishops' conference became Europe's first to denounce "gender ideology" in a pastoral letter, while in 2014 it attacked state broadcasting directors for allowing a half-minute program defending gays and lesbians.

Undeterred by church pressure, an LGBTQ coalition, "Love Does Not Exclude," is pressing for legal changes to allow same-sex marriage and child adoption by 2025,

as well as tighter protections against discrimination.

Demands have also increased for LGBTQ awareness, based on World Health Organization guidelines, to be taught at Polish schools, with several local education boards, such as Warsaw's, agreeing to include it, starting this September.

Such moves have triggered a backlash.

In July, Poland's main media chain, Empik, refused to stock a national newspaper, Gazeta Polska, after it issued "LGBT-free zone" stickers.

However, the country's Campaign Against Homophobia said at least 30 city councils had issued new regulations against LGBTQ groups.

"Homophobic venom ... has been pouring from the mouths of politicians and church representatives for months," added the petition, co-signed by 152 equality and human rights organizations.



Participants take part in the city's first "equality march" rally in support of the LGBTQ community July 20 in Bialystok, Poland. (CNS/Agnieszka Sadowska, Agencja Gazeta

via Reuters)

LGBTQ campaigners have planned 23 equality marches up to October. During some of these marches, held earlier this year in Czestochowa, Gdansk, Krakow and other cities, protesters have parodied images of the Virgin Mary and other Christian symbols.

This has incensed Poland's bishops. Recent months have also seen a spike in physical attacks on Catholic places of worship, and tensions have mounted.

In the last week of July alone, the rector of St John the Baptist Basilica in the northern port of Szczecin was beaten by a group of men demanding vestments to stage a same-sex wedding, while a priest at Turek's Sacred Heart parish was assaulted by a group wishing, according to reports, to "sign an act of apostasy."

Masses of expiation were staged in parishes nationwide this June in response to the attacks. But Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska, a senior Catholic presenter with Polish Radio, thinks calmer church reactions could prove more effective.

The profanations and parodies are the work of small groups, she points out, who are using blunt, distasteful methods to provoke the church.

By reacting so forcefully, Poland's bishops are merely giving them publicity and fueling their militancy.

"If the church attaches such weight to them, portraying their demands as a threat to civilization, many could well conclude they're reaching their target," Glabisz-Pniewska told NCR.

"At present, they certainly have the potential to cause commotion. But while society is ready to protect LGBTQ rights, it isn't supporting their calls for a wider change in mentalities and attitudes."

Such advice hasn't been heeded.

In July, Archbishop Tadeusz Wojda of Bialystok was accused by media commentators of inciting violence, when an equality march in his eastern city was disrupted by aggressive counter-protesters, who claimed to be protecting their local cathedral.

In a pastoral message dated July 5, a fortnight earlier, the archbishop had branded the march a "discriminatory act against Catholics," and warned that LGBTQ campaigners had "profaned sacred symbols and uttered blasphemies against God" during previous marches.

"The Gospel teaches respect and love for every person, and we try to follow this — but we cannot accept the deriding of our faith and depraving of our youth," the archbishop added.

"The Church, Christian families and groups have a right to defend their children and express opposition to this dangerous demoralization."

Wojda later condemned the violence and adamantly denied sanctioning it.

But an LGBTQ campaigner, Anna Dryjanska, told NCR there had been a "pogrom atmosphere in Bialystok," adding that she feared equality marchers could have been killed without a "forcible police intervention."

Related: Polish prelate criticizes attacks, but LGBT supporters aren't happy

In a bid to calm the atmosphere, the bishops' conference president, Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, reiterated to Poland's Catholic Niedziela weekly July 21 that the church would "fail in its duty to proclaim the truth" if it stopped calling homosexuality a "deadly sin."

But LGBTQ citizens were "not in the first place gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals, but above all our brothers and sisters," Gadecki added, and the church would "unequivocally disapprove" if any violence was used against them.

Such reassurances aside, the church's stance could place it in serious conflict with equality regulations now in force across the European Union.

Since 2001, when the Netherlands became the first to take the step, same-sex marriage has been legalized in over a dozen with of the EU's 28 member-countries. All of these, however, are in Western Europe, and no Eastern European countries have followed suit, although same-sex partnerships can be registered in Hungary and Croatia.

Poland rated at the bottom in LGBTQ protections last year by ILGA-Europe, the Belgian-based European region International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and

Intersex Association.

There've been signs of division over LGBTQ issues within the church itself.

In 2016, a joint campaign, "Let's exchange a sign of peace," was launched by Poland's Campaign Against Homophobia and a Christian group, "Faith and Rainbow," with nationwide billboards depicting clasped hands — one with a rainbow bracelet and the other a Catholic rosary.

Several Catholic magazines and newspapers pitched it with expressions of support; and it's from these quarters that some of harshest criticisms have now come.

Staffers at Krakow's Tygodnik Powszechny (Universal Weekly) Catholic weekly condemned Jedraszewski's homily as "contrary to Jesus's teachings," while a former rector of Poland's Catholic University of Lublin, Msgr. Andrzej Szostek, condemned his remarks as "not just deeply anti-humanist, but deeply anti-Christian."

In a fresh attempt to calm the atmosphere, Gadecki, the bishops' conference president, reiterated that "people belonging to so-called sexual minority circles" should been seen as "brothers and sisters."

But the attacks on Jedraszewski indicated a "totalitarianism of outlook," Gadecki added, which sought to "banish people thinking differently from the sphere of freedom."

Some Poles have accused the bishops of playing to the gallery in the run-up to crucial October parliamentary elections, in which the nationalist Law and Justice Party, PiS, widely seen as close to the church, looks set to retain power.

They think the latest flare-up could be giving them an opportunity to rally public support after the damaging publicity suffered by recent scandals over clerical sex abuse.



Polish bishops attend a news conference to release the church's first clerical sex abuse report March 14. From left: Bishop Artur Mizinski, secretary-general of the Polish bishops' conference; Archbishops Marek Jedraszewski of Krakow; Stanislaw Gadecki, bishops' conference president; and Wojciech Polak of Gniezno. (CNS/Adam Stepien, Agencja Gazeta via Reuters)

Opinion data suggest there's little popular backing for LGBTQ demands, especially when such demands are portrayed as tantamount to an attack on the Catholic faith.

In a May survey by Poland's CBOS agency, two-thirds of citizens thought legal changes were not necessary to help LGBTQ citizens, while in July only 29% backed same-sex marriages and just nine percent the right of child adoption.

Julia Maciocha, the LGBTQ campaigner, remains unfazed.

She insists most LGBTQ citizens come from Catholic families and have the sympathy of most "true religious believers," even if many have been fearful about confronting the church.

"Let's please have a sense of scale: a few people on one side, and the top hierarchy of the church on the other, with its money and its media," the Equality Volunteers Foundation chairman told NCR.

"Let's also remember that Catholicism isn't the only true faith. At present, we can do little other than educate society, while hoping the church desists from its hostile campaign and the Vatican intervenes," she said. "LGBT people live everywhere in Europe alongside religious believers, and only here does the senior hierarchy use the language of contempt, hatred and domination. I hope the rest of our Catholic society rebukes them."

For now, the tensions look set to escalate.

In two separate, early August commentaries, the Polish church's Catholic Information Agency, KAI, insisted Pope Francis had followed "the same approach as his predecessors" on LGBTQ issues, despite claims to the contrary, and accused LGBTQ campaigners of waging a "classic ideological offensive."

LGBTQ groups were using foreign funding to expand their campaign to areas with no gay and lesbian presence, the Catholic agency added, when in reality their members were already protected from discrimination and enjoyed "full civic and personal human rights."

Meanwhile, Jedraszewski has demanded retractions and apologies from his Catholic critics. He's also received messages of support from church leaders at home and abroad, including the Polish Cardinals Stanislaw Dziwisz and Zenon Grocholewski, the Slovak and Hungarian bishops' conferences, and the Czech Cardinal Dominik Duka, who said in a letter he believed "LGBT ideology" included "an atheistic and satanic agenda."

Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska, the Catholic radio presenter, thinks efforts must be made to calm things down.

"The church insists certain truths are non-negotiable and is highly adept at engaging and mobilizing support when the issues become polarized," the presenter told NCR.

"Although it can't be expected to change its teaching, it could afford to speak in a friendlier, more tolerant way, recognizing there are people in our society today who simply don't share its values and beliefs. Yet those wishing to introduce changes and

reforms here should also realize they're unlikely to succeed if this entails a conflict with the church."

[Jonathan Luxmoore covers church news from Oxford, England, and Warsaw, Poland. *The God of the Gulag* is his two-volume study of communist-era martyrs, published by Gracewing in 2016.]

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