Opinion
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Presidential candidate Karol Nawrocki, center left, arrives at a polling station with his wife Marta Nawrocka, center right, during the presidential election runoff in Warsaw, Poland, June 1, 2025. (AP/Czarek Sokolowski)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

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Poles went to the polls last weekend and elected Karol Nawrocki as their country's president by the narrowest of margins, 50.89% to 49.11%. Nawrocki was the candidate of the conservative, populist Law and Justice Party. The presidency is a largely ceremonial post but the election results nonetheless are a bellwether for populism.

Nawrocki defeated the more liberal mayor of Warsaw, Rafal Trzaskowski, who was the candidate of the Civic Reform Party, which currently controls the country's parliament. Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who led the more liberal party to victory in 2023's parliamentary elections, announced he will call for a vote of confidence, which he is likely to win.

A Washington Post headline referred to "MAGA-style populism" and looked at other countries where the dynamics are similar to those in Poland. "Voters are presented with a really stark choice: either rules-based liberal democracies or MAGA-esque ethno-nationalist types of leaders," the Chatham House's Armida van Rij told the Post.

Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem had urged Polish voters to support Nawrocki at a Conservative Political Action conference in Poland a few days before the election. "I just had the opportunity to meet with Karol and listen: He needs to be the next president of Poland. Do you understand me?" Noem told the crowd.

The political crisis created by neoliberalism extends throughout the nations of the West. After the collapse of communism, the promises of markets, democracy and globalization seemed assured. Francis Fukuyama famously published "The End of History?" to celebrate the end of the Cold War and the triumph of Western, liberal democracy. Leonard Bernstein led the Berlin Philharmonic in a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, changing the word in the chorus from "Freude" or "joy" to "Freiheit" or "freedom."

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Alas, history did not end, the working classes were left out of the prosperity globalization ushered in, and freedom proved a more complicated gift than expected. These dynamics were virtually universal and affected people from Pennsylvania to Poland.

As well, the migration crisis has played out in Europe in ways that are similar to here in the United States, although in Europe the migrants come across the Mediterranean and are mostly Africans and Arabs.

There are differences, however, among all the different countries. In Poland, working class Catholics are largely the backbone of the Law and Justice Party. One of the things they despised about communism was its liberal abortion laws. They also reject any libertarian reading of civil obligations and rights. They strongly support unions and are suspicious of dot-com billionaires. So far, so good.

These working-class Catholics have adopted the anti-immigrant stance we saw with Brexit and in other elections in Western Europe, at least when the migrants are Muslim. The fact that the church teaches otherwise has made very little impression.

Twice I have asked theologians to discuss church teaching on migration issues at an annual Catholic social teaching seminar I organize in Warsaw, and twice the participants in the seminar greeted the church's teaching with scorn. Even when we cited the teachings of St. Pope John Paul II, who is usually a winning card to play, we met with resistance.

The Catholic Church in Poland, as in the United States, must find ways to convince all of her children that our obligation to migrants is an integral part of our Catholic teaching.

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In other countries, the Catholic Church does not have the stature, or the numbers, it has in Poland. But throughout the continent, as here in the U.S., many religious believers are hostile to liberalism and sympathetic to populist authoritarianism.

At its deepest level, contemporary liberalism's extreme commitment to individualism, to volition as normative, without any reference to moral norms, is deeply — and rightly — problematic for believers. We recognize that this libertarian way of thinking is not Christian and yearn for community. Robert Christian just published a fine essay on this need to find ways to rebuild community based on his experience as a high school teacher.

Believers also recognize we need a better alternative than populist authoritarians in the MAGA mold. In the absence of such a better alternative, however, many believers will choose the authoritarian over the libertarian. Especially for working-class believers, for whom neoliberalism not only enshrined libertarianism but produced an economy that sold them down the river, this choice is not as repugnant as it seems to those lucky enough to have flourished under neoliberalism.

The Catholic Church could and should play a role in navigating the challenges posed by the post-neoliberal order. Catholicism is allergic to both the libertarian impulses of contemporary liberalism and to the authoritarian impulses of contemporary conservative populism. Both those alternatives represent what is worst about the modern world's intellectual decline and both pave the way for totalitarianism.

On the other hand, Catholic social teaching celebrates what is best in liberalism and conservatism. How we spread that good word to a hungry world is the question.