



People walk inside an enormous statue of the Virgin Mary that is believed to be Europe's tallest during the inauguration in the village Konotopie, Poland, Aug. 15, 2026. (AP/Claudia Ciobanu)

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Konotopie, Poland — August 16, 2026

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An enormous statue of the Virgin Mary that is believed to be Europe's tallest was inaugurated Aug. 15 in a small Polish village, in the presence of legendary anti-communist leader Lech Walesa.

Hundreds of people took part in the consecration of the monument, which towers 55.6 meters (182 feet) over Konotopie in central Poland, the home of fewer than 150 people.

While helicopters scattered miniature red roses over the crowd, priests in white robes celebrated Mass and the popular Mazowsze folk ensemble sang and danced to traditional Polish music.

The Polish statue is taller — if less dramatically located — than the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which measures some 38 meters (125 feet) including its pedestal. Its height includes a crown-shaped 15-meter (49-foot) pedestal.

It also surpasses another recent large-scale religious monument in Poland, the Christ the King statue in the western town of Swiebodzin, which was unveiled in 2010 and — complete with the mound it stands on — rises some 52 meters (170 feet) above the ground.

There is a taller statue of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines, which measures some 98 meters (322 feet). But the new one in Poland is believed to be the largest of its kind in Europe.

### **An anti-communist legend celebrates Catholic Poland**

Walesa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership of the Polish anti-communist resistance as the head of the Solidarity trade union, and was later Polish president, had a front row seat during the inauguration ceremony.

"This is the end of my path," the 82-year-old Walesa told the AP, suggesting that the causes he has long championed, including democracy and Catholic faith, are now completed. "I started with the Virgin Mary and I end with the Virgin Mary."

During his Solidarity days, Walesa famously wore a Black Madonna pin and has often credited his faith in God with giving him the strength to fight against communism.

The vast majority of Poles identify as Catholic, and the Catholic Church played a powerful role in public life after the fall of communism in 1989, benefiting from the prestige it earned through its support for the anti-communist opposition.

The country is the homeland of St. John Paul II, who reigned as pope from 1978 until his death in 2005. A huge statue of him — but much smaller than the one of Mary — was unveiled over a decade ago in the city of Czestochowa.

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The influence of religion in public life has gradually declined in recent years, particularly among younger people and in urban areas. However, the Catholic Church remains influential, especially in rural communities and among older generations.

"I cannot help but notice the weakening of the institution of the church, a withdrawal of specific social categories from Catholicism, and this hurts me," Bishop Wiesław Mering, a Polish Roman Catholic prelate who attended the ceremony, told the AP.

"The history of Christianity has ups and downs but this place is a reminder that Mary won't give up on Poland," the bishop said.

## **Local millionaires financed massive statue to give thanks to God**

The statue was commissioned by local millionaires Roman and Grażyna Karkosik. The couple live in a small palace a few kilometers (miles) from Konotopie.

Roman Karkosik, an entrepreneur whose ventures included plastic-bottle manufacturing in the 1990s, amassed a fortune through investments on the Warsaw Stock Exchange to become one of Poland's wealthiest individuals.

The couple have said the monument is an expression of their gratitude to God.

"The statue will be for all people," Grażyna Karkosik told AP. "Each of us coming to see it will think more deeply about their own lives, not only about God."

Local authorities hope the monument will become both a major pilgrimage site and a tourist destination. The statue features a viewing platform built inside its pedestal.