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Despite reputation as staunch Catholics, Poles show independence

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 31, 2006 All Things Catholic

The faith on which Poles stand firm is not always consistent with Vatican precepts

Warsaw, Poland

Editor's Note: *Read* **NCRonline.org** *daily for John Allen's reports on Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Poland May 25-28.*

The motto of Benedict XVI's May 25-28 visit to Poland is "Stand firm in your faith," and the good news, according to Warsaw sociologist Bogdan Cichomski, is that Poles are indeed firm. National surveys from 1992 to 2005, he said, have found little significant change in attitudes on faith and morals from the collapse of Communism to the present.

The bad news for Benedict, however, is that the faith on which Poles stand firm is not always consistent with Vatican precepts.

Yet there is also something of a silver lining for the pope -- on one issue, abortion, the percentage of Poles who agree with church teaching has been going up, even if it is not a majority under all circumstances.

Editor's Note: *Check back with* **NCRonline.org** *for another story from Poland later today.*

Cichomski, a professor of the Institute for Social Studies at Warsaw University, is the director of the Polish General Social Survey, the country's most rigorous annual general interest survey. He spoke to *NCR* in an exclusive interview May 25.

Despite Poland's reputation as a Catholic stronghold, Cichomski's results show some significant variances with official church positions.

A whopping 80 percent of Poles, for example, believe a woman should be able to get a legal abortion if her health is at risk, and 74 percent support legal abortion if there is a serious chance of a birth defect.

A solid majority of Poles, 52 percent, also favor physician-assisted suicide.

Asked about sex before marriage, 64 percent of Poles said it is "not wrong at all," and an additional 11 percent said it is only "sometimes wrong," meaning that three-quarters of Poles do not subscribe to church teaching on the question.

Twice as many Poles believe divorce should be easier to obtain than more difficult, 40 to 20 percent, while the

rest believe it should stay as it is or have no opinion. Under Polish law, couples must show "irretrievable and complete disintegration of matrimonial life" in order to justify divorce. Divorce is not to be granted if it is contrary to the interests of the couple's children, or if it is requested solely by the party primarily responsible for the disintegration.

While 98.5 percent of Poles consider themselves Catholic, the percentage who describe themselves as "believers" is lower, 82 percent, and just 38.4 percent go to Mass at least once a week. ((When the question is if they go ?nearly once a week,? the percentage rises to 53 percent, with 63 percent of rural Poles saying they attend Mass at that frequency and 40 percent of city-dwellers).

A majority of Poles, 52 percent, also believe the church has too much power in the country, while only 1.7 percent say it has too little. (The rest said "about right" or didn't know).

Those percentages have shown only minor variations from 1992 to 2005, Cichomski said, suggesting a basically stable consensus.

In general, Cichomski said, Poland's sociological profile is similar to that of Ireland on most matters of faith and values, which means that Poles are closer to church teaching than much of Western Europe.

Yet on some issues regarding sexuality and marriage, Poles are actually considerably more liberal than the United States.

For example, only 37 percent of Americans believe sex before marriage is "not wrong at all," as opposed to 64 percent of Poles, and 15 percent more Americans believe a spouse cheating on his or her partner is "always wrong" (63 percent of Poles agreed, as opposed to 78 percent of Americans).

All this raises some doubt, Cichomski said, about whether Poland is really likely to inject the Catholic "booster shot" into the rest of Europe for which John Paul II and now Benedict have longed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the surveys show strong correlations between place of residence (urban versus rural) and levels of education with religious faith and practice. In general, urban dwellers with high education levels are less likely to go to Mass regularly or to pray.

Yet all is not bad news for the church.

While majorities of Poles support abortion for medical reasons, the extent of that support is the one notable exception, Cichomski said, to the basic stability of Polish attitudes. In general, the percentage of Poles who take a "pro-choice" view under at least some circumstances is declining, while the "pro-life" stance is growing.

In 1992, for example, 81.7 percent of Poles supported abortion if there is a serious risk of birth defect; in 2005, that number was 74 percent. In 1992, 45 percent said a woman should be able to have an abortion if she doesn't want to have more children, while only 35 percent held the same view in 2005.

In 1992, 58 percent of Poles said abortion should be legal if a woman feels she cannot afford more children, while only 41 percent agreed in 2005. Similarly, in 1992, 38 percent of Poles supported a woman's right to an abortion for any reason, while only 26 percent agreed in 2005.

Both questions reflect a 12 percent drop in support for the "pro-choice" position.

Cichomski said his research shows increasing correlations over this 13-year period between the extent of someone's religious practice (especially Mass attendance and prayer) and their attitudes on abortion. In other

words, he said, church leaders have been successful in consolidating their base.

On abortion, Cichomski said, "Catholics have become more Catholic."

The same trend does not hold true, he cautioned, on matters such as euthanasia, pre-marital sex or homosexuality.

On homosexuality, 63 percent of Poles in 2005 said that sexual relations between people of the same sex are "always wrong," essentially the same figure as in previous years.

On the whole, Cichomski's work suggests a mixed bag for the church in Poland. On the one hand, there is clearly a bedrock of Catholic identity upon which to build, and at least on the abortion issue, there's evidence the church is gaining ground.

On the other hand, across a range of other issues, one finds the same tendency towards independent-mindedness for which Catholics in Western Europe and North America have long been infamous.

In that sense, if Polish Catholics do eventually re-evangelize Europe, as the last two popes have dreamt, Cichomski's work cautions that the gospel they spread may not coincide exactly with the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

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