

In Poland, äa feeling of a new beginning'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 11, 2007 All Things Catholic

In most quarters, when something goes wrong with a bishop's appointment, there's a natural tendency to blame the pope. After all, since the 19th century, the appointment of bishops in the Western church has been the near-universal prerogative of the Roman pontiff, so the buck stops on his desk. (The fact that the pope did *not* directly appoint most bishops prior to the 19th century is, alas, a subject for another time).

Thus following the resignation of Archbishop Stanislaw Wielgus of Warsaw last Sunday in the wake of revelations that he had collaborated with the Communist-era secret police, tracing the fiasco back to the pope was immediately the angle of much foreign press coverage. The first question I was asked on National Public Radio Sunday afternoon, for example, was: 'How embarrassing is this for Pope Benedict?'

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, this is not generally how things look from Poland. On Monday, one of the country's leading dailies instead splashed the following four-word banner headline across its front page: 'The Pope Saved Us!'

What gives?

To begin, Poles are overwhelmingly Catholic, and therefore savvier about church politics than most. They grasp that while Polish appointments were very much the pope's personal concern under John Paul II, with a German pope the process is more dependent upon what their local heavyweights, along with the nuncio, or papal ambassador, have to say. (Poland's nuncio, Archbishop Jozef Kowalczyk, is a rare bird among church diplomats in that he's a native son of the country in which he serves.)

The Polish hierarchy has long been divided between a nationalistic, traditionalist wing, and a more moderate, pastoral faction. In many controversies that arise in Polish Catholicism, the drama thus comes down to, 'Which side will Rome back?'

In the Wielgus case, the hardliners, led by Cardinal Jozef Glemp of Warsaw, the primate of Poland, thundered that pressures for resignation were built on lies from the files of the secret police, who had sought to undercut the heroism of Polish Catholicism by creating the appearance of collaboration, and amplified by a hostile media campaign.

In the abstract, there was every reason to suppose Rome would play along. As is well known, the Vatican never likes a bishop to resign under fire. The general principle is protecting the independence of the church, while the specific concern is that such resignations simply invite campaigns of defamation against other senior officials. Thus when a bishop submits his resignation for any reason other than age or ill health, there's often reluctance to accept; Americans will recall, for example, that Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston first submitted his resignation in April 2002, was told to stay on, and only stepped down 10 months later on Dec. 13.

Many Poles presumed a similar trajectory would be followed in the Wielgus case. Even after documents unearthed from the archives of the Institute for National Memory showed conclusively that Wielgus had collaborated, including signing a document in 1978 promising to do so in clear violation of church policy at the time, he still planned to stay the course. On Friday evening, Jan. 5, Wielgus took his canonical vows and formally became the archbishop of Warsaw.

Hence when Benedict XVI accepted his resignation Saturday evening, just hours after Wielgus tendered it, the result came as a thunderclap. Poles took it as a clear repudiation of Glemp, and a victory for the 60-70 percent of Polish Catholics who, according to national surveys, felt Wielgus had to go.

For outsiders, that may seem like letting the pope off the hook a bit easily, since the affair obviously raises questions about how the nomination could have been made in the first place. It's a matter of public record that senior officials in the Institute for National Memory, the body created in 1998 by the Polish government to study the Communist-era archives, many of whose researchers are active Catholics, went to Glemp in the early fall to alert him that there were damaging files about Wielgus. Those warnings were apparently ignored. (To what extent they were ever communicated to the pope is another question.)

Both Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and Kowalczyk have said that Wielgus was asked about his past and denied wrongdoing. But if so, that simply begs the question of why his disavowals were considered sufficient, without a real investigation. As one senior Vatican official said to me this week, it's as if a nominee to become secretary of the treasury in the United States were asked if he had any conflicts of interest, said no, and the White House conducted no further review of his financial records.

It's an open secret in Rome that Benedict came into office harboring reservations about Vatican diplomacy, and the performance of Re (himself a product of the Secretariat of State) and Kowalczyk in the Wielgus case will undoubtedly exacerbate those concerns.

Setting all that aside for the moment, however, observers suggest that Benedict's action in swiftly removing Wielgus may have two implications.

For the church, it suggests the Vatican under Benedict XVI is learning something about crisis management. When the sexual abuse crisis first broke in late 2001 and early 2002, senior Vatican officials were quoted as claiming that less than one percent of priests were tainted (at least in the United States, the eventual number turned out to be 4 percent), blaming the media and other forces for an anti-church campaign, and generally projecting an appearance of denial.

This time around, while it's true that Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, did point to a "strange alliance" of former Communists and nationalists who were pursuing a "vendetta," he nevertheless unambiguously acknowledged that Wielgus' actions, and his lack of candor about them, "gravely compromised his authority," and called his resignation "the right choice." No Vatican official went on television to blame the press, or to dismiss the affair as an insignificant "Polish problem."

Taken in tandem with the decision last May to impose restrictions on the ministry of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, following a lengthy Vatican investigation of sex-abuse accusations against him, some read the Wielgus decision as another sign that under Benedict XVI, there will be greater accountability for misconduct.

As for Poland, local observers are saying that Benedict may have triggered (granted, perhaps inadvertently) a social shift which, in the long run, will be seen as "chapter two" of the anti-Communist Solidarity movement galvanized by John Paul II.

Poland's transition away from Communism was not marked by a "Velvet Revolution"-style uprising as in the old Czechoslovakia, and certainly not by the bloodbath of Romania. Instead, the Communists relinquished power in Poland as part of roundtable negotiations with the Solidarity movement, the Catholic church, and other civic groups, which led to democratic elections. There was no sharp break between "before" and "after," and hence no dramatic moment of reckoning for those who had collaborated with the old regime.

Genevieve Zubrzycki, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan and an expert on Polish nationalism, has observed that the process of "lustration," the technical term for limiting the participation of former Communists -- and especially informants of the secret police -- in successor governments or other social roles, was not as far-reaching in Poland as in many other post-Soviet states. (The term "lustration" comes from an ancient Greek term for a purification ritual).

Thus Aleksander Kwasniewski, an ex-Communist who served two terms as president of Poland from 1995 to 2005, even managed to be tipped just months ago as a candidate to succeed Kofi Annan as Secretary General of the United Nations, despite the fact that there are files indicating that Kwasniewski was registered as an agent of the secret police. Poland may have knocked over the first domino that eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet system, but many Poles cynically concluded that those who collaborated rather than resisted would never be held accountable, reflecting a basic corruption in the country's post-Soviet social contract.

With Wielgus, many Poles believed that moral flabbiness had reached a new low, with a former collaborator now poised to sit on the throne once occupied by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, known as the "Primate of the Millennium" for his unyielding resistance to the Communists. The Catholic church, it seemed, was in effect canonizing the country's historical amnesia.

That's why the Wielgus resignation was such a jolt. It's not just, or even primarily, that this lone figure was held to account; frankly, Wielgus by all accounts is a gracious man with few real enemies, and many regard his collaboration as a matter of opportunism rather than genuine villainy.

Instead, the outcome has been taken to mark a symbolic willingness to confront the ghosts of the past.

"There is now a feeling of a new beginning," said Tomasz Pompowski, an editor with *Dziennik*, an influential Polish newspaper. "I know it's difficult for the foreign press to understand, but this is important."

In this regard it's worth recalling Benedict's comments during his May 2006 trip to Poland, made in a meeting with priests in Warsaw, on this very subject:

"On the occasion of the Great Jubilee, Pope John Paul II frequently exhorted Christians to do penance for infidelities of the past," Benedict said. "We believe that the church is holy, but that there are sinners among her members. We must therefore learn to live Christian penance with sincerity. By practicing it, we confess individual sins in union with others, before them and before God."

"Yet we must guard against the arrogant claim of setting ourselves up to judge earlier generations, who lived in different times and different circumstances," the pope said. "Humble sincerity is needed in order not to deny the sins of the past, and at the same time not to indulge in facile accusations in the absence of real evidence or without regard for the different preconceptions of the time. Moreover, the *confessio peccati*, to use an expression of St. Augustine, must always be accompanied by the *confessio laudis* -- the confession of praise. As we ask pardon for the wrong that was done in the past, we must also remember the good accomplished with the help of divine grace which, even if contained in earthenware vessels, has borne fruit that is often excellent."

What that suggests is a pope wary about the dangers of recrimination and purges, but also conscious of the need

for a reckoning with history. Even if it's difficult to say what that might mean in practice, for many Poles, it's a start.

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