

Pope's Election Draws Eyes of Communist World Leaders

By LAURENCE MULLIN
News Staff Writer

The election of Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II was seen as an event of immense political and religious significance for all Communist Eastern Europe.

The selection of a man because of history, inevitably be seen as a symbol of church allegiance to Communist Russia," said Father John A. O'Hare, SJ, rector of the Jesuit St. Ignace Church in America. "The election almost certainly has serious political implications for the church."

Dr. Thorwald Lorenzen, professor of systematic theology at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Switzerland, said the election of the former bishop of Krakow was "prophetic," a "public acknowledgement of the church's struggle for unity and relevance in an atheistic setting."

The ascendancy of a Polish prelate, the first in history to the papacy had an immediate impact on Poland's Communist leadership.

The top leadership of the Polish Catholics in hailing the election of a "son of the Polish nation" as the new pope and said it looked forward to improvements in relations with the Vatican.

Snapping an iron-bound censorship law against the broadcasting over radio or television of any Mass or other form of worship, the Polish authorities allowed the Pope's first Mass (Oct. 16) to be broadcast from the Sistine Chapel at the close of the day. The Mass, to be aired for about 20 minutes on national, state-run television.

Polish President Henryk Jablonski headed a state delegation to the new pope's investiture ceremonies in St. Peter's Square five days later.

And again, the Warsaw government permitted live television coverage of the inaugural event over the national network.

But, in an action indicative of the regime's ambivalence, it eliminated the Polish translation of the pope's sermon in which he made a forceful plea for religious freedom.

Open wide the doors to Christ," the Pope urged. "Open to His saving power the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization, and development. Do not be afraid."

Viewers in Poland heard the rest of the pontiff's address, but not that part

The Soviet Union, the power behind Poland, took special notice of the new Pope, in contrast to the way it handled the news of the election of his predecessor, Pope John Paul I.

Soviet television gave full coverage to the newly-elected Polish Pope's first public appearance — on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, shortly after his election on Oct. 16, smiling and waving to a welcoming crowd of some 100,000 people.

When his predecessor, John Paul I, was elected, Soviet television confined itself to a terse announcement.

Several newspapers in the Soviet Union also published stories about the selection of John Paul II, again, in contrast to the way they handled the election of John Paul I, either ignoring it or simply mentioning the bare fact.

In similar fashion elsewhere in Eastern Europe, newspapers carried front-page reports of the news of John Paul II's election.

Patriarch Pimen of the Russian Orthodox Church, not unexpectedly, sent a warm message of congratulations to John Paul II, wishing the new pontiff "a long and happy pontificate."

Significantly, Soviet Communist Party Chief, Leonid I. Brezhnev, who took no official notice of the election of John Paul I, sent a congratulatory message to John Paul II, expressing wishes "for fruitful activity in the interest of the relaxation of international tensions and of friendship and peace among peoples."

East Germany's Communist Party leader Erich Honecker also sent a congratulatory message to the Vatican on the election of John Paul II, voicing a hope for world peace.

The first reactions of some of Eastern Europe's Communist leadership to Pope John Paul II highlight the differences between the plight of Catholics, and other believers, under the first decade of Communist rule and the measure of tolerance that has increasingly replaced bitter confrontation of the past.

Today's delicate balance of church-state relations in some of the Eastern European nations is primarily due, according to some observers, to the Communists' grudging acknowledgement that the church cannot be destroyed by decree.

"By the mid-50s, it was perfectly clear to the Communists that their hard-line policy was failing," says the Rev. Michael Bourdeaux, a British Anglican priest-expert on religion behind

the Iron Curtain. "Where the persecution was greatest, there you had the greatest faith."

Official policies toward the church vary widely from country to country in Eastern Europe, and in some, like Albania, which declared itself to be the world's first totally atheist state in 1961, the jackboot remains firmly planted.

Nevertheless, thanks in part, some observers believe, to the Vatican's "ostpolitik," or rapprochement with countries in the Soviet block, church-state relations have entered a period of wary accommodation.

This is seen to be especially true of Pope John Paul II's homeland, where the Catholic Church can claim the respect and allegiance of well over 90 per cent of the 34.5 million population.

While the Warsaw government has yet to respond to the Catholic Church hierarchy's repeated demands for an easing of state censorship, access by the Church to the mass media, and for permission for more churches, the government is well aware that it needs the cooperation of the Church.

The Church is deeply rooted among Poland's working and farming people. The government knows this and realizes that it needs all the responsible support it can get amid accumulating economic problems.

deepseated public unrest, and demands for more freedom.

Despite its power, the Church has used it moderately, accepting some cooperation with the regime in the interest of the nation. For example, after the worker riots of 1976 over proposed higher food prices, the Catholic bishops played a key conciliatory role and helped to restore calm in the country where twice in two decades worker uprisings have overturned governments.

Yugoslavia under Marshal Tito, who was received at the Vatican by Pope Paul VI, is the only Eastern Communist nation to maintain full diplomatic relations with the Vatican — although Roman Catholics are outnumbered by members of the Serbian-Orthodox Church, the nation's largest religious body.

While there are no official restraints in Yugoslavia on individual worship, it is taken for granted that practicing believers stand far less chance of getting a good job, or of being promoted, or of getting admitted to universities than non-churchgoers.

In Hungary, every Catholic diocese now has a bishop for the first time since 1948. Two years ago, a Hungarian cardinal (Laszlo Lekai) was installed as Primate of Hungary with full government recognition.

Today, both the Hungarian regime and Rome acknowledge a remarkably harmonious relationship. And last year, even so fervent an anti-Communist as evangelist Billy Graham was able to make an extensive preaching tour of Hungary's Baptist churches.

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