

# Pope exhorts caution in former Soviet Union

By Agostino Bono  
Catholic News Service

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Pope John Paul II offered advice to the Cold War's winners and losers during his first trip to the former Soviet Union.

The pope asked the winners to be forgiving and warned them that the end of one set of problems brings the start of new ones. He appealed to the losers to adapt to the changed social reality through "sincere conversion and, if necessary, expiation."

The pope expressed joy at being able to make the Sept. 4-10 trip to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, at "an epoch-making turning point" as the three nations undergo transition to democracy.

He said he had wanted to make the trip since the start of his papacy 15 years ago, when the three Baltic countries were firmly gripped by communist rulers.

The pope repeatedly warned that the switch to democracy is not easy and needs Christian moral principles and social values to smooth the way.

Although the church's social doctrine is crucial in this rebuilding, priests must avoid involvement in party politics and in direct governance, he said.

The pope said that decades of atheistic education will make the church's role difficult, since people "may have lost — at least temporarily — their appreciation of religion."

The framework of the pope's advice was quickly established during his Sept. 4-8 stay in the heavily Catholic Lithuania. It is the only republic of the former Soviet Union where Catholicism is the historically predominant religion.

"There must be neither winners nor losers, but rather men and women who need to be helped to leave error behind," he told Lithuanian priests and

religious Sept. 4.

"After every significant social upheaval, man bears scars both in patterns of behavior and in his soul," the pope added.

The Baltic countries separately declared independence during the 1990-91 period when the communist hold on Soviet power was weakening.

The pope punctuated his calls with symbolic visits to sites associated with religious and political persecution during the decades of communist rule.

On Sept. 5 he visited Antakalnis Cemetery in the capital of Vilnius to pray at the tombs of 18 people killed by Soviet troops in 1991 during the independence fight.

While praising them as "martyrs of Lithuania," the pope said he was also praying, as a sign of forgiveness, for the dead under the "tombstones without crosses," a reference to the communist leaders buried in another section of the cemetery.

The pope also celebrated a Sept. 7 Mass on the Hill of Crosses, a centuries-old pilgrimage site where Catholics put up crosses at night to replace the ones torn down by communists during the day.

During a Sept. 5 Mass at Vingis Park in Vilnius, a site of major rallies during the pro-independence days, the pope appealed for peace between Lithuania and Russia, the largest and most dominant republic to emerge from the Soviet Union's splintering.

Post-independence relations have become tense over political and economic issues tied to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Speaking in Russian after the Mass, the pope sent "special greetings to neighboring Russia" and offered prayers to "help Russia to find peace both inside and outside her borders."

Joaquin Navarro-Valls, Vatican spokesman, interpreted as a positive sign the clapping that emerged from among the 80,000 people after the pope's Russian remarks.

This signals that "Lithuanians are open to being at peace with their neighbor," Navarro-Valls said.

Also on Sept. 5, the pope dealt with the thorny issue of the sizable ethnic



A Lithuanian woman holds her rosary while praying in front of an image of the Madonna at the Gates of Dawn in Vilnius, Lithuania, Sept. 3. AP/Wide World Photos

Russian population still living in the Baltic countries. Controversies have arisen as to whether they should be granted citizenship, especially the civilians who came as support people for the Soviet military and now wish to stay.

The pope noted the problem and the bad feelings tied to the Lithuanian definition of Soviet troops as an occupation force.

The Vatican "recognizes the aspirations of citizens of Russian origin who ask to be able to enjoy their human rights in their country of residence," the pope told foreign diplomats.

He asked for a "friendly understanding" among all parties and a rejection of the "spirit of revenge" and the "temptation to obtain by force that which can only be established in a lasting manner through good sense and negotiations."

Diplomats from democratic countries were encouraged to provide economic and political aid to the Baltics to ease the transition. This aid must be based on the needs of the Bal-

tic countries and not on the self-interests of the donor, the pope said.

"The exercise of democracy requires maturity and a long and patient internship," the pope said.

In a talk to academics immediately after the diplomatic encounter, the pope strongly warned against the defects of democracy.

"Totalitarianisms of opposite tendencies and unsound democracies have plagued the history of our century," the pope said.

Democracies "exhibit enormous contradictions between the formal recognition of freedom and human rights and the many social injustices and discriminations they tolerate," he added.

"The risk in democratic regimes is to become a system of rules insufficiently rooted" in human values and "ethical responsibility," said the pope.

The church "continues to oppose those models of society which, in the name of supposed rights to freedom, do not adequately protect unborn human life and the dignity of the most vulnerable social classes," he said.

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