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NATIONALISTIC SMOG OVER POLAND¹

By Alfred Marek Wierzbicki

Rev. Alfred Marek Wierzbicki (born in 1957), philosopher, poet, essayist, publisher. Faculty at KUL (Catholic University of Lublin) since 1992, currently the Chair of its Ethics Department. During 2006-2014, the Director of KUL's John Paul II Institute and Editor in Chief of quarterly "Ethos." During 2002-2012, served as Vice-President of the Metropolitan Seminary in Lublin. Since 2004, diocesan vicar for culture in the Lublin Archdiocese. Member of the Committee of Polish Episcopate for dialogue with Judaism. He belongs to Academic Council of Laboratorium Wiezi, Program Council of Sluzba Rzeczypospolitej Foundation, among others. He is active in the Polish Writers Association. In his academic and editorial publications, he has focused on fight without violence, philosophical roots of totalitarianism, anthropological bases of ethics, philosophy of democracy, contemporary condition of Christianity, relationships of philosophy and belles-lettres. He published books on Mahatma Gandhi, John Paul II, and Archbishop Józef Życinski.

The Polish Independence Day, celebrated on November 11, 2017, became once again an opportunity to overshadow its patriotic and pro-state character with nationalistic and xenophobic slogans associated with fascism.

An elusion, if not a straight forward hypocrisy, is insisting on a negligible scale of this phenomenon during the Warsaw Independence March organized by the nationalists. Mahatma Gandhi, an experienced participant of social life, supporter and propagator of fight without violence, used to say that even a drop of poison can contaminate a jug of water. Indeed, hostile feelings born from hate are always dangerous regardless of their current social scale.

Instead of taking offense that from abroad, people saw sixty thousand fascists marching on the streets of Warsaw with flares, one could consider why the Independence

¹ This article is a translation from the Polish original by Alfred Marek Wierzbicki, *Kruche dziedzictwo (Fragile Legacy: John Paul II anew)*. (Warsaw: "Wież" Library. 2008?) with the permission of the author. Translated from Polish by Renata Evan.

March raises fear. Either its organizers are failures who are unable to separate themselves from fascist elements, or they want to, without taking a direct responsibility for it, propagate national chauvinism. Similar questions can be directed at the government authorities, especially the department of internal affairs, in a situation with no prevention or reaction to the slogans spreading racial and religious hatred.

Passivity, and undoubtedly also acquiescence, for this type of watchword in Poland led to alarming publications in the foreign media. Wouldn't it be better to look—with intellectual and moral courage—into this mirror, regardless of the distorted picture, to see a serious problem with the comprehension of both Polishness and Christianity? It is not the western media that deforms Poland's image, but the nationalistic deformation, reeling wide circles that are sometimes not even connected with each other, done by Poles themselves undergoing xenophobic suffocation as if nationalistic smog covered our country.

An ecological metaphor helps to understand that in thinking about our problems with defining Polishness, not only the incidents matter, but most of all, we need to take into account the ideological climate in which we live and take seriously its high level of pollution.

There are many indications that the deterioration of the democratic system in Poland, based on the state of law and tri-separation of power, leads to a national revolution. Words of “worse sort” of Poles or “treacherous muzzles” of the opposition are not only a manifestation of political arrogance, but these types of invectives usually breeds on the ground of revolutionary rhetoric. Each revolution leads to a reconstruction of a society around a selected and idealized group in the name of order, justice, the nation's strength, or the defense of civilization. Revolution lives on its ideals and their enemies; creating antagonism, belongs to its tactic.

The outcome of an encounter with liberal democracy is supposed to be an exchange of elites. Unexpectedly, we see a return of the anachronistic in the contemporary world, open

and going through globalization processes, a Sarmatian vision of national self-sufficiency. The paradox is that on one hand, the renewed elites are to derive all possible benefits from international cooperation, and on the other, the good of the national community is being isolated from the good of the broader community. It is acceptable to take money from the European Union, but there is no need to follow common cultural and political values.

The elites that carried out the system transformation and modernization and were strengthening Poland's place and role in the western world, who were reorganizing after the collapse of communism, are now being accused of cosmopolitanism and oikophobia, or phobia of home surroundings. This dualistic mentality not only falsifies the image of the recent past, but most of all it falsely sets national interest against participation in supranational structures. The dualistic scheme impinges on the accusations of national treason, so often used in the recent years.

Referencing the real and honest patriotic feelings, but also national complexes, the pedagogy of getting off the knees is propagated. At its core also lays a dualistic and antagonistic vision of Poland and the rest of the world. It leads to manipulation of collective memory. Contrasting "pedagogy of pride" with "pedagogy of shame" does not account for the truth that both, the good and the ill, exist in the life of a nation. Rejecting critical thinking about the past that implicates ethical assessments, serves as a nationalistic drum. Humility and pride in lives of either individuals or the community do not exclude but rather complement each other.

There is no need for the outright promotion of nationalism, but one can just appeal to the subconscious for the national resentments to intensify, especially towards the neighbors with whom we share a tragic history. Raising the issue of war reparation towards Germany, regardless of an apt sense of grievance, might undo the Polish-German reconciliation process initiated by the Polish bishops during the time of the (Polish) millennium and continued after

1989 along with regaining Polish political sovereignty. Using severe measures towards the representatives of the Ukrainian government that refer to the Bandera-ess² ideas and symbolism will surely not help with more meaningful reconciliation of Poles and Ukrainians. When both sides are guided exclusively by national reasons, the perspective of a common road recedes, or worse—it can be completely squandered. It doesn't mean that national righteousness is irrelevant, but it must be seen and used in the right proportions, and with empathy for the members of other nations.

Nationalism poisons Christianity. It strips its universalism and humanism. Using a slogan from a church hymn “We want God” on nationalists’ banners should rouse objection. God cannot be appropriated by one nation. Besides that, what is the reason for elevating this slogan in a setting conducive to religious freedom? If this supposed to be a response to secularization of modern culture, then combining it with racial slogans of white civilization and clearly anti-Islamic slogans, is a primitive action grown out from a fear of what is different and foreign. Religion assimilating social and national fears is a pathological phenomenon that destroys it from within, and in the case of Christianity, it is in conflict with its evangelizing mission directed to every human being, without exception. Treating Christianity as a civilization fighting other civilizations is all about ideologization of faith, reducing it to a cultural and political stature.

In the early 1990s, Rev. Józef Tischner was identifying, in reference to Norwid, the formation of a land of ailing religious imagination. He was observing then a renunciation of a religious model that integrates around people of different ideological and confessional pedigrees for a religious model that treats Christian values as a weapon against others, becoming a tool of political power. This transformation of the religiousness of Poles, related significantly to the activity of Radio Mariya, resulted in the rise of a confrontational character

² Stepan Bandera was the leader of a militant wing of Ukrainian independence movement who is controversial as some view him as a heroic defender of Ukrainian freedom while others consider him a right-wing terrorist.

of the Polish Catholicism, taking on a fight against liberalism and pluralism. After a quarter of a century, Tischner's diagnosis seems even more relevant. Nationalistic smog that is increasingly more apparent over Poland, appears on one hand as a product of ailing religious imagination, and on the other hand, due to its activity, it contributes to further deepening of the disease.

Ailing religious imagination can manifest itself in forms of increased, and even exuberant, activity, drawing its strength from authentic religious inspirations. I'm far from the enthusiasm with which most Polish clerics received the "Rosary to the borders" (*"Różaniec do granic"*) campaign. I have no doubts that its roots are sterling, in its origin and essence, a truly Catholic Marian piety. While listening on the radio to an interview with the secular founders of this campaign, I was astonished by how the power of rosary is seen as some magical panacea for all evil. This is far from worshiping God and gratitude for redemption. The mere act of prayer experienced as a mass *event* absorbs all spiritual energy. It is worth wondering if connecting the intense emotionality of a religious event with attributing almost automatic power to the rosary is not an indication of hidden Pelagianism that reduces the supernatural to natural factors. This type of religiousness willingly utilizes baroque forms of expression, with its rich staffage of external means. There is a concern that this is not religiousness of affirmation, but rather of fear.

The Bishops-supported campaign "Rosary to the borders," triggering huge involvement of the parish structures, gives the impression of a dynamic character of the Polish Catholicism in the cultural context of secularization. It is hard not to notice this impressive dynamic, but it's also hard not to ask about its actual spiritual foundation. In case of this *event*, it strikes the ambiguity of the term border: undoubtedly, it refers to the border of humanity, where a human meets God, but also of real borders of the Polish Republic, treated as an "island" of God's Kingdom that should be spectacularly shown to the world.

Those traditional Messianic threads easily attract anti-refugee slogans received on the wave that unites the fear of foreigners and national megalomania.

The teaching of the bishops clearly resounds with the Christian obligation of accepting refugees. This is not an element of a social or political strategy, but rather it comes from the core of Christian morality. Bishop Krzysztof Zadarko emphasizes that the refugee has the face of Christ. The voice of Pope Francis and some Polish bishops meets however with a strong resistance from many clergymen, who have the most influence in their parishes on shaping the attitudes of the faithful. Today, the attitude towards refugees is becoming in fact the criterium for our humanity, and in the case of clergy, also the criteria for pastoral conversion. Weakening sensitivity on solidarity with refugees is becoming a symptom of Christian defeat against slogans inspired by a natural fear of strangers who are depicted as potential terrorists and disease carriers.

The arguments used by the current politicians and the right-wing media have greater influence on beliefs and attitudes of the faithful than the teaching of the Church. Even worse is that the hate-wave towards Pope Francis is spilling out. Research by Dr. Rafał Cekiera of Silesia University regarding 59 comments published between June 9 and October 9, 2017, on the portal wPolityce.pl under the texts, in which the word “Pope” or “Francis” appeared, shows that over three quarters of them were negative comments, and only 1.39% sounded positive. The findings of this research, as presented during the twenty-second edition of the Silesian Seminary that took place that year on the theme *Our Folks? Multiculturalism in contemporary Europe*, is being published by “Gość Opolski” (# 45/217, November 12, 2017).

This manuscript also contains an overview of research results conducted last year by Dr. Konrad Pędziwiatr among students of four seminaries: in Kraków, Katowice, Gdańsk, and Pelplin. The survey was about the image of strangers in the eyes of Polish seminarians. Pędziwiatr’s research shows a shocking discrepancy between the teaching of Francis and the

Polish Episcopate, and the beliefs of the 162 surveyed seminarians. 70 percent of the survey responders declare general agreement with the teaching of the pope and the bishops, but when more specific issues are concerned, the answers are truly alarming. Only 30 percent of the responders agree with Pope Francis's request for each parish to take in one family. 72 percent think that refugees are a danger to safety, and 50 percent argue that they are also danger to health. About 13 percent of surveyed seminarians do not mind clergy participation in anti-Islamic demonstrations, while 44 percent think that Islam in Poland should be a forbidden religion.

The results of this survey allow one to understand to a certain extent the behavior of a group of Krakow Seminary students during a debate on refugees during the John Paul II Days held at Jagiellonian University at the beginning of November 2017. They were rejecting the pastoral attitude towards refugees. By taking up a polemic with the panelists presenting the view of St. John Paul II and Francis, they didn't even try to understand both popes, but spoke instead with the language of Kaczyński, Błaszczak, and Gowin. If not for their clerical collars, I would think that they are activists of some juvenile political organization.

The Pędziwiatr research shows that for 85 percent seminarians, the source of information is social media. It would also be worthwhile to enhance this research through analysis of the ideological character of the media, which appears to deeply influence the thinking of future priests. The results of this research already show that it is about the increasingly aggressive right-wing media trend that accompanies and promotes current national politics.

Clustering of Catholicism and national ideology shows undoubtedly the permanence of the "endecki" (of *National Democracy*) syndrome in the Polish church. It is not, however, a simple revitalization of the deeply-rooted cultural and political tradition, but it has its own new context and new sources. Its growing intensity could doom the cultural regress of our

Catholicism. Secularization can enter from the side that is naively expected by clergy to be an effective barrier from it, such as political instrumentalization of faith.

The bishops have a deep awareness of the need to shape a Christian character of patriotism as evidenced by the document *Christian Form of Patriotism*, prepared and published by the KEP's (*Polish Episcopate Conference*) Council for Social Affairs. It contains a theologically-grounded vision of patriotism that refers to the personalistic legacy of John Paul II. Theological considerations were complemented with pedagogical-type guidelines because after all, it is about forming proper attitudes, compatible with Christian ethics, and overcoming their deformation by nationalistic thinking. It is important to distinguish between patriotism and national chauvinism. The document, following John Paul II, refers to the idea of the Jagiellonian-era Polishness that affirms ethnic, cultural, and religious multiplicity. It's a pity that this thread was not deepened and updated with reference to European patriotism. We owe to John Paul II the sentence uttered before Poland's accession to the (European) Union: "From the Lublin Union to the European Union."

Publication of a document available on the Internet is insufficient because its contents reach the faithful to a very limited degree. A pastoral letter to be read in churches, also pointing out xenophobic aggression, could be useful. Silence in the face of blatant situations, in which the victims are strangers, often foreign students, besmirches the level of Christian responsibility for a human being and for a Christian in a Pole.

Translated from Polish by Renata Evan