

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<u>06VATICAN83</u>	<u>2006-05-23 11:11</u>	<u>2010-12-10 21:09</u>	<u>CONFIDENTIAL</u>	<u>Embassy Vatican</u>

VZCZCXRO1190

PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHSR

DE RUEHROV #0083/01 1431153

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P 231153Z MAY 06 ZDK

FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0331

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0359

Tuesday, 23 May 2006, 11:53

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 VATICAN 000083

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DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA, EUR/NCE

EO 12958 DECL: 5/23/2031

TAGS PL, SOCI, PREL, VT

SUBJECT: POPE TRAVELS TO POLAND: PART ONE

REF: A) 05 VATICAN 475 ET AL.; WARSAW 799 ET AL.; MARTIN - CURTIN, VAN CLEVE  
TELCONS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State. REASON: 1.4 (b), (d) 1. (U) This cable is the first of two messages previewing Pope Benedict's May 25-28 visit to Poland. The first details Poland's continuing importance to the Holy See and touches on several on-going issues in the Polish Church from the perspective of the Vatican. The second focuses in more detail on the specifics of the upcoming visit.

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Summary

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¶2. (C) Even without Pope John Paul II at the helm of the Catholic Church, the Holy See's attention to Poland and the influence of Poles here remains an important dynamic in the workings of the Vatican. Recent months have offered much evidence of this, and numerous opportunities to assess the Poland - Holy See relationship. Most high-ranking and mid-level Poles have stayed on in their positions in the Vatican bureaucracy since the death of John Paul, maintaining the Vatican's Polish flavor. Pope Benedict has consistently made gestures to acknowledge the importance of the Polish Catholic Church in the context of European and world Catholicism - an importance embodied most immediately by the crowds of Polish pilgrims that still flock to Rome. Pope Benedict and other Vatican officials maintain Pope John Paul's hope that Poland will serve as a counter-weight to Western European secularism, but are wary of nationalistic or

divisive forces with a Catholic label, such as media outlets under the control of Polish station Radio Maryja. With Pope Benedict XVI's May 25-28 visit to Poland looming, many in and around the Vatican are addressing these subjects. End Summary.

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Poland: Still a Presence  
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¶3. (C) The papacy of John Paul II is slowly fading into history, but Poland remains an important part of the conversation at the Vatican. Recent months have offered much evidence of this, and numerous opportunities to assess Holy See - Poland relations. Late last year, several groups of Polish bishops came to Rome for their quinquennial "ad limina" visit to the pope and Vatican officials. In December, then-President Aleksander Kwasniewski made his swan song visit to the Vatican and met with Benedict XVI. In January, his successor, President Lech Kaczynski, made his first trip abroad as president and met Pope Benedict XVI. The first anniversary of the death of the Polish pope in April saw waves of Polish pilgrims visiting Rome, but the sound of Polish on the streets of Rome hardly abated for the Easter celebrations two weeks later. Add periodic events commemorating various dates in the life of John Paul II or initiatives that he began, and there remains an inevitable Polish flavor to life at the Vatican.

¶4. (C) In the aftermath of the death of the Polish pope, Pole-weary Italian journalists heralded the impending exodus of Poles from Rome and the Vatican Curia (bureaucracy) (ref a). Their hope was that an Italian would regain the papacy and add to the already imposing number of Italians in the Curia. Many predicted that the papacy would inevitably turn its attention from the homeland of the deceased pontiff. In the end, Joseph Ratzinger of Germany was elected pope, and the Poles, by and large, stayed. And although it was inevitable that the death of John Paul would signal a change in the relationship between Poland and the Holy See, the bond remains strong. The Vatican has continued to play close attention to Poland and Poles continue to wield great influence in Vatican City.

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Polish Personnel, Influence Remain  
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¶5. (C) Benedict moved his own German secretary, Monsignor Georg Ganswein, into the Apostolic Palace, but he kept on Pope John Paul's Polish aide, Mieczyslaw Mokrzycki (an ethnic Pole from Ukraine) in a very visible position in the papal household. Other prominent Poles at the Vatican, such as Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski (Congregation for Education), Monsignor Antoni Stankiewicz (Roman Rota - the Vatican's high court), Archbishop Edward Nowak (Congregation for the Causes of Saints), Monsignor Krzysztof Nitkiewicz (Congregation for Oriental Churches), Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko (Council for Laity), and others are continuing in high-profile positions. [Note: Rylko was passed over for an expected elevation to the College of Cardinals at the most recent consistory, but still heads an important Vatican department.]

¶6. (C) Benedict also named London-born Polish priest Wojciech Giertych as theologian of the Papal Household, another prestigious position. Giertych is the son of well-known Polish

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nationalist Jędrzej Giertych (1903-92), and brother of Maciej Giertych of the League of Polish Families party in Poland. Maciej's son, Roman, is the newly-named Education Minister (as reported by Embassy Warsaw) and a member of the Catholic organization, Opus Dei. Though Fr. Giertych was selected for his erudition and preaching rather than his nationality (we also doubt his family connections played a role in the appointment), his presence presents another

opportunity for Polish visibility and influence. A host of lower-level Polish functionaries continue as well, doing a lot of the heavy lifting in and around the Vatican. The only major name to leave Rome in the wake of the death of John Paul was Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz, John Paul's longtime secretary, whom Benedict sent to follow in his mentor's footsteps as Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow.

¶7. (C) "Even after the death of the Holy Father, we have a strong presence here," Grzegorz Kaszak, rector of the Polish College (residential seminary) in Rome and a former Vatican bureaucrat, told us. Kaszak pointed out that Poles had been making inroads at the Vatican for over twenty years. Their influence was unlikely to diminish overnight. Even when Benedict XVI makes the major changes in the Curia that Vatican-watchers have been predicting for some time, most Poles here do not predict that Polish influence in the Vatican will drop precipitously. "We are now part of the culture here," and a crucial element of the Church in Europe and in the world, Kaszak insisted.

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Vatican Publicizes Stats on Polish Church  
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¶8. (C) The statistics bear Kaszak out. We defer to Embassy Warsaw on the strength of the Polish Catholic Church domestically, but the Vatican was touting its numbers in advance of the pope's trip. The Holy See released statistics noting the country's 36.6 million Catholics at some 10,114 parishes and 800 pastoral centers. There are some 28 thousand priests and almost 25 thousand other religious personnel (nuns and other male religious) with 6,400 students studying to become priests. Vatican-based sources have remarked to us that Poland's Catholic muscle is felt far beyond the country's borders. In parishes in Italy, other European countries, the U.S., and elsewhere, it is not uncommon to come upon Polish clergy, either on loan, or having taken up residence in a foreign diocese. What's most important to the Holy See is the "formation of the youth," according to Dariusz Giers, a Polish priest working at the Vatican's Health Ministry. "The Vatican knows we have excellent programs to educate young people [in religious matters]" he said, emphasizing the importance of this factor for the continuing strength of the religion. What's more, many at the Vatican consider Polish Catholicism to be dependably orthodox, compared to more liberal strains of the faith found in some parts of Western Europe. "The Poles are grounded in the faith," one contact opined. "You wouldn't have to worry about the Da Vinci Code confusing people in Poland."

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Ubiquitous Presence  
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¶9. (C) As if to emphasize the ubiquitous presence of Poles in and around the Vatican, Kaszak exchanged several greetings in Polish with passing nuns as he spoke to us not far from St. Peter's Square. In fact, whether one's in the Vatican grocery store or post office, St. Peter's Basilica, or walking any of the streets around Vatican City, it's hard to go twenty minutes without hearing some Polish. And this is not just from the Vatican functionaries from Poland and the many Polish nuns who staff several Vatican offices and residences. The flow of Polish pilgrims to Rome has waned little even a year after the death of Pope John Paul. Of course, massive crowds of Poles came to Rome to observe the first anniversary of the pope's death on April 2. A mass said by Pope Benedict and other events packed an overflowing St. Peter's Square. But it seemed to onlookers that the Polish influx was just as great - or greater - for the Easter celebrations not long afterwards. As is typical for the outdoor audiences and public masses, banners from Polish parishes and towns highlighted Polish participation. "I think there were even more Poles here for Easter," Vatican bureaucrat Giers told us. "This has been nearly constant since the death of the Holy Father. I don't see signs of it slowing down."

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Pope Reaches Out to Poles  
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¶10. (C) The Holy See clearly recognizes who its audience is. At his weekly public gathering (a mixture of prayer and pep rally), Pope Benedict speaks every week to the crowd in Polish,

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in addition to Italian, French, English, Spanish, and German. Polish is typically one of the languages used for prayers at Vatican masses. The pope often makes special emphasis on the Polish contingent at the audiences and other events, as on May 3, when he noted the anniversary of the 1791 ratification of the Polish Constitution and heralded the anniversary a noteworthy event in Polish Catholic history. Benedict XVI has also devoted some of his rare private audiences to Polish or Polish-affiliated groups such as an April visit with representatives of the Krakow-based publishing house, Znak, publisher of Pope John Paul's last book and other Church-related works. That Pope Benedict, who travels much less than his predecessor, chose Poland as his second trip abroad (his first was a visit to World Youth Day in Germany that had been scheduled before his election) is perhaps the strongest sign of this recognition (septel).

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A Counter-Weight to Secular Europe?  
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¶11. (C) The Holy See's attention to Poland is not simply customer service or "taking care of the troops". As was clear under Pope John Paul II, the Vatican has high hopes that Poland will serve as a counter-weight to Western European secularism as the nation makes itself more at home in an integrated Europe. Pope Benedict's preoccupation with what he sees as Europe's increasing psychological distance from its Christian roots is clear (ref a). He has continued to focus on Poland's potential in combating this trend. This was one of the themes of the visit of several groups of Polish bishops to the Vatican at the end of last year. "It's a topic that always comes up," explained Monsignor Michael Banach, the Holy See MFA's country director for Poland. He told us that the two sides recognized that the Polish bishops needed to exert leadership in the face of Western European secularism. Certainly the Holy See hopes that Poland will hold the line at the EU on "life and family" issues that arise. But the necessity of maintaining and fortifying the faith internally in Polish society is perhaps an equally important - if not unrelated - focus. Several sources have told us that both sides are keenly aware of the danger that European secularism will dilute Polish faith and identity.

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Trojan Horse  
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¶12. (C) Looking at Poland's position in Europe and the EU, several Polish interlocutors told us that Western European suspicion of Poland as a "Trojan horse" for the U.S. in the EU was not just a phenomenon among the laity - it had also infected the Vatican. "We definitely get that feeling" from a few of the French, German and other Western European prelates at the Vatican, said Giers. The war in Iraq, unpopular among many Vatican officials, has certainly played a role here. Traditional Polish affection for the U.S., on the other hand, seems as strong as ever among the Polish clergy stationed or studying in Rome. In conversations at a dinner not long ago at the Polish College, several seminarians and priests made a point of praising the U.S. and lauding USG foreign policy.

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Radio Maryja  
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¶13. (C) Although the Vatican is on guard against encroaching secularism, it shares with many Polish bishops a wariness of Radio Maryja, the Catholic radio station accused of xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Banach and Piotr Samerek, DCM at the Polish Embassy to the Holy See, told us that during their ad limina visits, several of the bishops appealed to Vatican Foreign Minister Giovanni Lajolo and others to clamp down on excesses of Radio Maryja and its sister media outlets. The complaints included Radio Maryja's meddling in Polish politics. According to Banach, Lajolo was sympathetic, and expressed his reservations about the network. But Lajolo took a typical Vatican line in judging the matter to be an Polish internal affair. Banach told us that Lajolo told more than one group of bishops that they had to deal with Radio Maryja themselves as part of their "pastoral responsibilities". Though media attributed some comments critical of Radio Maryja to Pope Benedict, the Holy See clearly did not want to get involved.

¶14. (C) When Papal Nuncio Jozef Kowalczyk made an April statement chastising Radio Maryja, many assumed that the Vatican had finally decided to clamp down on the network. Our contacts tell us that wasn't the case, saying that while the Holy See agreed with the spirit of Kowalczyk's intervention, the nuncio had spoken out on his own. Some following the issue at the Vatican have told us that Kowalczyk went too far, given the Vatican's view of the matter as an internal Polish question. In

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any case, as Banach told us, things seem to be improving, as the proposed programming board set up to monitor the content of the station's broadcasts looks like a step in the right direction.

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Other Influences  
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¶15. (C) As the Holy See examines the many aspects of its relationship with Poland, it seeks to maintain its focus on the pastoral rather than political. But religious subjects routinely morph into political ones. Banach wouldn't bite when asked for his view of the entry of radical elements such as Andrzej Lepper or ultra-Catholics like Roman Giertych into Poland's governing coalition and ministerial ranks (ref c). He did say that the Vatican understood the dangers that right-wing nationalists posed to Poland's future, and allowed that some saw a danger of Catholic fringe groups discrediting the mainstream Church. As far as the reputation for anti-Semitism that stuck to some nationalists, Banach commented that "no one" wanted to see the progress that had been made on such issues lost.

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Comment  
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¶16. (C) It is only a little more than a year after the death of Pope John Paul II, and it is inevitable that with the passage of time Poland will eventually become less central to the world of the Vatican. John-Paul era Vatican bureaucrats will eventually move on. Poland may become more secular. The memory of the Polish pope will certainly recede further into the past. The growth of the Catholic Church in certain parts of the developing world could also play a role here, pushing the Poles, Italians and others to less prominent roles with

the Holy See and capturing even more attention in Curial offices. For the near future, however, Poland is assured an important place at the Vatican table.ROONEY