News

People with hammers hit the remaining wall Dec. 31, 1989, in Berlin, Germany. (Monasse/IPA via ZUMA Press)

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In Warsaw's plush new Wilanow Village suburb, low-rise apartments with balconies and roof gardens overlook a matrix of smart driveways, complete with jogging tracks and flower-decked street lamps.

At its center, facing Republic Avenue, a sparkling Catholic basilica rises 250 feet above a newly laid plaza, dotted with oak saplings and futuristic sculptures.

When developers were given the greenlight to build here back in 2001, they had in mind a new breed of well-off professionals, wishing to keep well away from the clutter and pollution of the city center. But they forgot to plan for schools and clinics, or for green areas where children could play. And though the infrastructure is now improved, shops and cafes are in short supply.

Similarly, when work was initiated on the Temple of Divine Providence by then-Cardinal Józef Glemp of Warsaw, in thanksgiving for Polish independence and the pontificate of John Paul II, the project ran out of funding and had to be rescued with state money.

Though the first Mass was celebrated in style here in November 2016, the church remains unfinished, and attracts nothing like the 4,000 worshippers its circular nave was designed for.

Today, Wilanow Village stands as a metaphor for the new Eastern Europe, currently marking the 30th anniversary of the collapse of communist rule. Success and prosperity are visible on the surface. But some wonder just how stable their foundations are in a continent still recovering from its infamous East-West divide.

"Europe is not united, and we should be careful about idealizing unification when such great cultural and social varieties exist," said Jan Zaryn, a top Catholic historian. "Any worthwhile unity will presuppose respecting different value systems, without attempting to enforce ideological and organizational frameworks where they don't belong. This is something we still have to fight for."

For many Eastern Europeans, memories of the 1989 "autumn of revolutions" evoke dream-like images.

Yet the chain of events three decades ago was absolutely real, born from a potent cocktail of economic stagnation, ideological meltdown, Western pressure and

nationalist revolt.

For Poles, the way was prepared by government-opposition roundtable talks and semi-democratic elections in June 1989, which took place as pro-democracy Chinese demonstrators were massacred in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, an outrage which hung like a menacing cloud over the dramas in Eastern Europe.

For Hungarians, change was signaled by the symbolic cutting of border fences with Austria in June 1989, and the opening of the Iron Curtain to East German refugees that summer.

For Czechs, Slovaks and Romanians, it took the form of sudden uprisings in November and December 1989 — one peaceful, the other violent — and for East Germans the televised opening of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, graphically captured the revolutionary moment.

People stand atop the Berlin Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate in this Nov. 10, 1989, file photo. (CNS/Reuters/David Brauchli)

Yet the high politics of upheaval had depended on lengthy preparation, among ordinary people who gathered in the streets and squares to turn ideas and hopes into realities. And it was in that the mobilization of hearts and minds that the Catholic Church made its contribution.

In the then Czechoslovakia, the church spawned a network of underground groups, while practicing Catholics played key roles in the Charter 77 human rights movement, alongside influential priests such as Fr. Vaclav Maly, now a Prague auxiliary bishop, who sat alongside future president Václav Havel in final talks with the communist regime.

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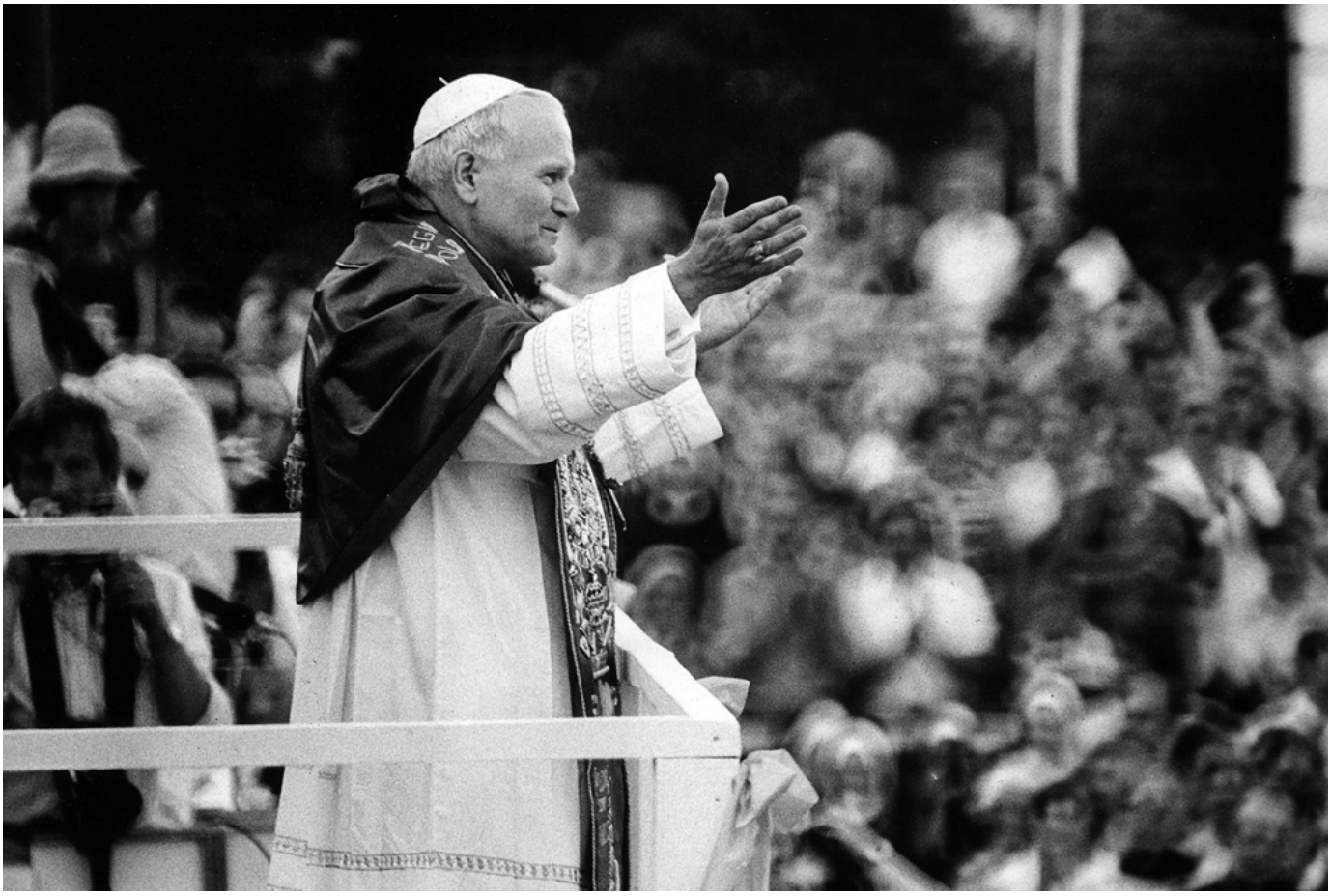
In communist-ruled East Germany, the Catholic Church boycotted state ceremonies and refused to adjust its diocesan boundaries to the new state's borders.

In Hungary, Catholic base communities also contributed to a nascent civil society, while in Romania, where the 1989 "Winter Revolution" was sparked by the arrest of a Calvinist pastor, László Tőkés, much-persecuted Catholic priests and laity had been active beneath the surface for decades.

Yet it was in Poland that the church's role proved most decisive, in offering sanctuary to independent initiatives and sustaining pressure for human rights when the Solidarity movement was crushed by martial law in December 1981.

In 1989, the Polish church was represented in all key negotiations, mediating and lending its authority to a peaceful transition to democracy.

The Polish Pope John Paul II brought millions into the streets during three communist-era homecomings, setting out the parameters of a reunited Europe to "breathe with both lungs," and triggering powerful spiritual and social impulses across the communist bloc.



Pope John Paul II greets throngs of Poles waiting for a glimpse of their native son at the monastery of Jasna Gora in Czestochowa during his 1979 trip to Poland. (CNS/Chris Niedenthal)

The Baltic states, Russia and Ukraine still belonged to the Soviet Union and had to wait till 1991 for independence, while for the republics of Yugoslavia, communism gave way to bloody Balkan conflicts over the next decade.

Since then, however, Eastern Europe has been rebuilt, helped by the security of NATO membership and the accession of 11 countries to the European Union between 2004 and 2013.

All have been steadily integrated, with painstaking effort, into the EU's political, legal and commercial frameworks. And though wide differentials remain, their economies have grown exponentially; according to The Guardian, citizens "live longer, healthier lives," and are "on average twice as wealthy."

After tight restrictions under communism, Eastern Europe's church communities also rapidly rebuilt — re-dedicating places of worship, reorganizing parish life, reviving religious orders and relaunching religious media — as the church campaigned to ensure the emerging constitutional order reflected Christian values.

Today, the church's mission is largely protected, helped by concordats and agreements with the Vatican, which enjoys diplomatic ties with just about every post-communist state. Yet while religious freedom is no longer an East-West issue, attitudes to the church still contrast widely, while disputes continue over its role in society.

Zaryn, the Polish historian, thinks key challenges to the church's mission are now coming, paradoxically, from the West. He's perturbed about the "white-gloved discrimination" which impedes it from presenting its values in public life, and sometimes spills over into repressive acts in areas such as religious education and pro-life activity.

"Under communism, the church found ways of asserting freedom which turned out to be more effective than the arms race or Western economic and technological advances," Zaryn told NCR. "But there are forces in today's Europe with totalitarian characteristics, which seem intent on suppressing individual subjectivity and forcing compliance with liberal uniformity."

Mixed feelings like these could help explain why Catholic celebrations of the anniversary of the 1989 anniversary have been low-key in Eastern Europe.

A priest listens to a confession during Mass in 2012 at the Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw, Poland. (CNS/Reuters/Kacper Pempel)

The bishops' conference of Slovakia requested the tolling of church bells on Nov. 17, to mark 30 years since the "Velvet Revolution," while the Czech church staged a national pilgrimage to Rome, recalling the canonization of St. Agnes of Prague as resistance peaked three decades ago.

However, in a statement commemorating the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the Brussels-based Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, or COMECE, cautioned that some wounds remained unhealed.

The infamous wall, built in 1961 with watchtowers, anti-vehicle trenches and a mined "death strip," symbolized Europe's "ideological division," COMECE added, while its dismantling during the 1989 protests had made the world look "different."

But while those who worked for peaceful change deserved to be remembered with praise, new efforts were needed to "revive and foster signs of hope."

"Not all the expectations the fall of the Wall brought forth have been fulfilled. It is also true that the ideologies that were behind building the Wall have not fully disappeared in Europe," said the statement, signed by representatives from 26 bishops' conferences. "We acknowledge that the process of healing and reconciliation is delicate and difficult. Even today, for some of the victims of the oppressive regimes of the past this process is far from completed."

In two decades after 1989, mass migration to Western Europe stripped Latvia of a fifth of its population and deprived countries like Bulgaria and Romania of significant percentages.

Across Eastern Europe, media commentators have highlighted the plight of citizens in rural and run-down industrial areas, feeling excluded from the benefits of liberal democracy and the free market, and disrespected by new elites.

Last March, the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, also Brussels-based, recognized that the EU's single market had contributed to "an enormous increase in material well being," but said it also needed "an infrastructure for governance in view of the common good" if it was to accord with the church's social teaching.

Labor costs and conditions still varied drastically three decades on from communism, while social justice was threatened by an unfair distribution of wealth and opportunities.

"Although the barbed wire borders of communist times have been removed, there are other borders, which confront us," the conference, incorporating 31 national groups, added in a new declaration this October. "With the fall of the Iron Curtain, we believed that freedom was achieved. 30 years later, we see that freedom, justice and reconciliation involve more than removing iron curtains."

Pope John Paul II is pictured in a 1983 photo greeting Polish Cardinal Jozef Glemp of Warsaw. (CNS/KNA)

The church has had to contend with its own problems. Hopes of a mass religious revival, high in the first years after communist rule, faded as consumer lifestyles diluted popular enthusiasm.

Today, some observers think resistance to Christian values is stronger than under communism, when anti-church policies were implemented by hostile regimes but found little popular support. Idealistic talk of a "spiritual east" and "secular west" may have long since ended, while traditional religious affiliation figures cited for each country no longer have much bearing on reality.

Yet models of church governance and organization differ sharply, such as between Poland and neighboring Germany; and while Slovaks are still predominantly Catholic, the Czechs with whom they formed a single state until 1993 are overwhelmingly non-religious.

Lingering tensions between Catholic and Orthodox leaders, inherited from communist rule, are still a feature in Romania and Slovakia — and remain acerbic further east in Ukraine.

Zaryn fears the church's internal preoccupations, intensified by disputes over reforms under Pope Francis, have inhibited its capacity to assert Europe's Christian heritage, at the very time when this is most needed.

"Virtually all branches of art and literature here derive from Christian tradition. We should see it as a continuing inspiration for Europe's development," the Polish historian told NCR. "But with the whole church now squabbling over decentralization and contrasting local interpretations of Catholic teaching, its missionary potential is much reduced. Religiousness is clearly at a low ebb in much of Europe, where the church seems to be on the defensive, rather than standing confidently in the public sphere."

In Poland itself, hopes among some Catholic enthusiasts for a workable synthesis between free market and solidarity principles have long since dissipated in the face of hard economic realities.

After 30 years of hard graft, Poland is now the EU's seventh largest economy, enjoying annual growth of up to five percent, and last year became Eastern Europe's first to be placed among the world's most developed — helped by tens of billions of euros in EU grants.

Housing, education and health care have improved, along with state help for the disabled, elderly and large families, while unemployment has dropped since Poland's EU accession from over 20% to three percent.

Yet here too, deep inequalities persist, worsened by lack of social mobility and a declining birthrate; and while the Catholic Church's influence remains ubiquitous, its position is being challenged by bitter streams of anti-clericalism.

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In November, its Statistics Institute reported a 20% drop in seminary admissions in a single year, confirming a trend which has seen priestly recruits dwindle by almost two-thirds over two decades.

The chairman of Poland's Conference of Higher Seminary Rectors, Fr. Wojciech Wojtowicz, told the church's information agency, KAI, the fall could be attributed to population shifts and a "weakening of faith" among young Poles, as well as a "media offensive" showing "only the bad sides" of church activity.

But Polish Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno, admitted tensions within the church had been significant, "especially over the most painful of all, linked with the pedophilia scandal."

Poland's recently re-elected Law and Justice government has been one of several in Eastern Europe countries facing accusations of authoritarianism, with parallel charges leveled against Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and his Czech and Romanian counterparts.

"History lies in our hands, and we must continue striving until the divisions between us are finally overcome," Italian Bishop Mariano Crociata of Latina, COMECE's first vice-president, told Vatican Radio's Polish section in November.

The whole continent was still afflicted with "symbolic, unseen walls," Crociata added, mostly relating to economic and social divisions, while healing would take time and effort. "The countries of Eastern Europe have expectations which Western Europe's inhabitants don't always grasp. Greater attention should be paid to their wounds and needs, and the Church can help here as a solid reference point."

Providing that "solid reference point" will pose a challenge, however.

In its November statement, COMECE the acknowledged the "determination, commitment and suffering" of communism's many victims, noting how the "deep yearning for political change" had contributed to Europe's freedom. It urged Christians to devote themselves "to a Europe moved by the Holy Spirit," but cautioned that a "culture of encounter" also required a "genuine capacity to listen first."

"The fall of the Berlin Wall is not only a past event to be celebrated but also has a prophetic dimension. It has taught us constructing walls between people is never the solution. … " added the EU bishops' commission, chaired by Cardinal Jean-Claude

Hollerich of Luxembourg. "We call on all Europeans to work together towards a free and united Europe through a renewed process of dialogue across mentalities and cultures, respecting our different experiences of history and sharing our hopes and expectations for a common peaceful future."

In Warsaw's sparkling new Wilanow Village, constructed in the past 15 years, the 33-ton copper-plated dome of the Divine Providence rises like a spaceship above smart, white-fronted apartment buildings.

Costed officially at $60 million, its 26 curved concrete pillars mount to a peak over 12 miles of under-floor heating pipes and half an acre of Calacatta Lincoln marble imported from the U.S., while in its cavernous, unfinished basement, the remains of prominent, recently deceased Poles are already cemented into the walls, next to decorative containers set to contain relics from the country's saints.

The last major event here, a Mass for Poland's Nov. 11 Independence Day, was attended by President Andrzej Duda, government and parliamentary officials, the Vatican's nuncio and Catholic prelates from across the country, and concelebrated by the Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz of Warsaw, who lauded Poland's post-communist successes and gave thanks for the "gift of freedom."

Just how that gift will continue to be used will be seen in the years ahead.

"Like many others, I'm a beneficiary of the great changes in Eastern and Central Europe. My professional life would have been stunted if communist rule had endured," said Zaryn. "Having been dominated, occupied and partitioned through our history, we can be satisfied, on this 30th anniversary, that we're now independent, as Europe breathes with both lungs again. But we must also ensure our new state always protects us — and resists any attempt to impose new values and doctrines on us."

[Jonathan Luxmoore covers church news from Oxford, England, and Warsaw, Poland. *The God of the Gulag* is his two-volume study of communist-era martyrs, published by Gracewing in 2016.]

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