

Amen: World Youth Day visits country steeped in our faith

August 1984 found Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago and 23 of his priests – mostly of Polish descent – trekking around Poland, 1,500 miles in 10 days. In Lichen, the site of a Marian apparition in the early 1800s and home to an icon of the Blessed Mother, the group celebrated Mass with an estimated 25,000 people gathered in the small church and the plaza surrounding it.

Through an interpreter, I interviewed some of the people there for the Mass. Shocked at the large crowd for such a small, out-of-the-way town in central Poland, I asked if the large crowd was because an American cardinal was there for the Mass.

Oh, no, the people explained. Actually, there would frequently be more people, but it was harvest time, so most of the men and boys were in the fields.

That small church has since been supplanted by a much larger church – the largest in the country, in fact – to host pilgrims and house the icon of Our Lady of Sorrows, Queen of Poland.

Back in 1984, however, martial law was in effect and the Solidarity movement was suppressed. The communist government allowed no new churches built, but existing churches could be expanded. So, we saw instances where a chapel in a cemetery was “expanded” into a full-size church, to get around the rules.

Fast forward 31 years to 2005: St. John Paul II, “the Polish Pope,” had just passed away. Tens and tens of thousands of people gathered Aug. 3, 2005, for an impromptu candlelight vigil in central Krakow’s Blonia Park, which had hosted a Mass celebrated by John Paul on one of his returns to his home country. This night, they sang songs, cried and prayed. And cried some more.

Pope John Paul’s funeral in Rome was broadcast live to Pilsudsky Square in Warsaw. Poles watched as their favorite son was laid to rest. Later that evening, a candlelight procession estimated at a quarter-million people snaked through the streets. At 9:37 p.m., the moment that the pope had died six days earlier, the throng stopped and

sang a hymn. At the end of the song, the crowd burst into sustained applause. If you want to define “thunderous applause,” this was it; the sound, echoing off the buildings of Warsaw’s streets, set off car alarms.

This is the context that welcomes World Youth Day July 25-31. Poland is Catholic – spiritually and culturally. The faith is woven into the lives and fortunes of the people.

Between my visits to Poland in 1984 and 2005, there was a lot of change. Obviously, the Iron Curtain came down, thanks in large part to the efforts of Pope John Paul II and other world leaders. By 2005, Krakow and Warsaw and towns in between saw McDonald’s restaurants and other Western influences. The churches, as in much of the rest of Europe, were a little less full than they had been, though not to the extent that had occurred in places such as France, or even Italy. Under martial law, churches had been one of the few places people could congregate lawfully. By the turn of the century, that no longer applied, and modern conveniences took time and attention away from the practice of the faith.

Still, Poland and Catholicism go hand in hand. This is the country that will welcome an expected 2.5 million people to World Youth Day. The “apostles of mercy” who are patrons of the festival – St. John Paul and St. Faustina, promoter of the Divine Mercy – are emblematic of the people who call both church and Poland home.

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