

# Polish Catholics criticize planned tax on visitors to national shrine

WARSAW, Poland - Polish Catholics have criticized plans by authorities in the southern city of Czestochowa to impose a tax on visitors to the Jasna Gora national shrine.

"Even in the toughest times for Poland, charges were never imposed on Jasna Gora pilgrims," said Pauline Father Zachariasz Jablonski, whose order runs the sanctuary. "It wasn't theology which saved our country when it was partitioned or under communism. What saved us was the Marian devotion linked to Jasna Gora."

Plans for the visitor tax, initially put at four zloties (\$1.50) per head, were announced in late December by the newly elected Czestochowa council as a way of funding local infrastructure improvements and city promotional projects.

However, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Czestochowa told the Polish Catholic news agency that no one from the council had consulted the Catholic curia.

Father Jablonski predicted the planned tax would be "viewed as an attempt to limit, rather than attract, tourism" at the site.

Monsignor Ireneusz Skubis, editor of Niedziela (Sunday), based in Czestochowa, also said pilgrims should be "greeted with goodwill, rather than just seen as a source of money."

"It should be remembered that pilgrims coming to Jasna Gora - especially young people, school pupils and first Communion children - are poor," he said.

At least a third of Poland's 10,000 Catholic parishes organize annual pilgrimages to the six centuries-old Jasna Gora ("Bright Mountain"), whose revered Black Madonna icon was painted, according to legend, by St. Luke on a plank from Christ's family home at Nazareth.