

POLAND CATHOLICS PRAY ALONG BORDER IN CONTROVERSIAL EVENT SEEN AS ANTI-MUSLIM

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BY CRISTAL HAYES ON 10/7/17

Tens of thousands of Catholics in Poland prayed together Saturday along the country's 2,000-mile border and asked for salvation—an event that was seen by some as anti-Muslim.

More than 300 churches endorsed the event and sent attendees to more than 4,000 different locations along the border.

Organizers say the prayer event marked the centenary of the apparitions of Fatima, when three shepherd children in Portugal said the Virgin Mary appeared to them, the Associated Press reported.

But, the news agency reported, the event also commemorated a large battle in the 16th century, which organizers said saved Europe from Islamization.

Fears of Islam were echoed by those in attendance.

"Islam wants to destroy Europe," Halina Kotarska, 65, told the AP as she prayed and clutched a rosary. "They want to turn us away from Christianity."

Critics of the event said praying along the border could be seen as celebrating the country's refusal to accept Muslim migrants, according to the BBC.

Rafal Pankowski, an expert on xenophobia and extremism told the BBC the prayers seemed like a way to express Islamophobia.

"The whole concept of doing it on the borders reinforces the ethno-religious, xenophobic model of national identity," Pankowski told the news organization.

But organizers say they chose the border because it symbolized wanting to "encompass the world with prayer," the BBC reported. Nearly 90 percent of the country is Catholic.

The country did not take part in a deal two years ago that would have allowed refugees into Poland.

Krzysztof Januszewski, 45, told the AP he worries Christian Europe is under siege by Islamic extremists.

"In the past, there were raids by sultans and Turks and people of other faiths against us Christians," Januszewski said. "Today Islam is flooding us and we are afraid of this too. We are afraid of terrorist threats and we are afraid of people departing from the faith."

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