

Polish Bishops turn blind eye to far-right march for country's "Catholic identity"

By: Novena

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The Polish Bishops turned a blind eye today to a far-right march to defend the country's "Catholic Polish" identity from internal "threats" and "enemies" such as migrants and refugees or the LGBT+ rights movement.

Driving the news

Tens of thousands of ultranationalists took part Monday in a march in Warsaw to commemorate the 101st anniversary of Polish independence after the First World War.

They came together under the slogan "Take care of the whole nation" – a reference to a Catholic song about the Virgin Mary – and under the symbol of a clenched fist holding a rosary, with similarities to a "White Power" logo, or even to brass knuckles.

As Al Jazeera recalled, in past years the Independence Day event has gathered far-right racists and xenophobes from all over Poland and beyond.

This year, according to organisers, the event was focused on "threats" to the nation such as Islam and Jews, and on internal "enemies" such as the liberal media, "communists" and "cultural Marxists".

Go deeper

"There is an ongoing fierce fight against our faith and our sacred values", Independence March Association head Robert Bakiewicz wrote ahead of the demonstration today.

"It is happening through the profanation of the holy cross, a blasphemous portrayal of Virgin Mary, promotion of unnatural family model, demands of the right to live in a sin against the nature and the right to kill unborn children, and finally, there is an intensification of attacks against bishops calling these ideologies by their name and dubbing them as a plague".

"We want to invoke a patriotic, national slogan, but at the same time a Catholic and Christian one and, with the march, we want to highlight that national identity is inseparable from our Catholic faith", added Association board member Tomasz Kalinowski.

Why it matters

"The Independence March is a sad event, as it shows that Poland has a huge problem with national identity, especially the youth, which has been looking for answers in ethnonationalism", sociologist, political scientist and head of the anti-racist Never Again Association Rafal Pankowski told Al Jazeera.

"This event has also ceased to be only a day for Polish nationalism. It's become a hub for far-right groups from around the world".

Pankowski said it was a "great mistake" that President Andrzej Duda participated in the March last year that brought together some 200,000 people, thereby legitimising the Polish extreme-right movement that also made gains in last month's parliamentary elections.

What's next

During today's March, Al Jazeera said nationalist activists were planning to gather signatures to support a proposed bill to deny restitutions to Jews whose properties were appropriated by the Nazis.

Poland's bishops have been complicit in that anti-restitutions push according to one Australian Holocaust descendant, who denounced in September that the Church has been fighting her tooth and nail for land in Tarnów that belonged to her mother but which was appropriated by the local diocese.

Meanwhile, the bishops kept mum on the ultranationalist March today, limiting themselves to a declaration from their president, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, on the need for citizens to give a "testimony of love for our homeland".

The Polish bishops have been under scrutiny in recent months, for their actions on everything from support for a new anti-sex ed law that critics have said belongs in the "Middle Ages" to their refusal to condemn ultraconservative violence and insults at Gay Pride marches around the country.

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