

A COMMENTARY

Pope's visit stirs Polish struggle

More than half a million Poles gathered June 3 in a pasture in the town of Gebarzewo, where Poland's 1,000-year history began, to greet Pope John Paul II. Behind all the religious fanfare, however, was the strong sentiment of the Polish people for their national independence and freedom from the brutal Soviet-imposed suppression of their rights.

The turnout at Gebarzewo was typical of the mass meetings in cities like Gdansk, Poznan and Warsaw, where Catholicism still flourishes. In fact, the Church is growing steadily as the masses of people become more and more disillusioned with the Polish-Soviet brand of "socialism."

While the Pope's visit to Mexico last January was aimed at quelling the protest movement, his visit to Poland was obviously geared to fuel the deep resentment this country's 34 million people feel towards their government as well as towards the USSR.

The Polish people have a long history of both struggle for their independence and opposition to fascist-type tyranny. When their People's Democracy was destroyed following the takeover of the pro-Khrushchev Gomulka regime in the late '50s, the

struggle, sometimes open, sometimes hidden, took the form of a struggle against social-imperialism and social-fascism—socialism in words, but imperialism and fascism in deeds.

The workers revolted against the high price of food in 1970 in Gdansk and other Baltic coastal towns, bringing Gomulka down and Gierek to power. Resistance also broke out in 1976 to price increases, forcing the regime to change its economic plan.

Then in recent years among the workers and intelligentsia, a massive human rights movement shook the regime once again with the formation of groups like the Workers Defense Committee. The millions who turned out for the Pope's arrival were expressing some of these same sentiments which the powerful church forces are using for their own benefit.

Poland is definitely seen by Western powers as a weak link in the chain of Soviet satellite countries, and it is for this reason that the Pope was sent on his "holy mission." The response from the people to his call for more freedom of religion and the press shows that the democratic struggle is still continuing. While the form may be religious, the essence of the recent events is one of anti-fascist struggle.