The Catholic Church in Poland

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The Church and State in Poland are now passing through a period of relaxation. There are innumerable small changes that testify to this, but the most important are these:

1. Declarations by representatives of the Party and the Government have stressed equality of opportunity for each citizen regardless of his religion. The ultimate criteria in the evaluation of a worker are to be his work outlay, his capability and his knowledge, and not his relationship to the Church.

2. The properties of the Catholic Church in the western territories were nationalized in 1961, and since then the Church has been in the position of tenant in that area. Now these properties have been returned. Elsewhere in Poland the Church remains the private owner of sacred objects and of small agricultural plots.

3. Talks between the episcopate and the Government, long suspended, have been resumed.

4. There has been some liberalization in the policy of taxation of the Church.

5. The policy of granting passports has been liberalized, and a greater number of permits are now being given to priests for trips to non-Communist countries either for scholarly purposes or in connection with agencies administered by them.

In recent months, moreover, the Apostolic See has established a permanent ecclesiastical administration in those regions which before World War II belonged to Germany and were transferred to Poland after the war. A number of new dioceses have also been created in those areas. These actions were made possible by the Bundestag's ratification of the treaty between Poland and Germany which demarcated Poland's western boundaries. The decision to take these actions was the result, among other things, of long efforts by the Polish episcopate within the Vatican. In recent years—this should be added to the list of facts—discussions have been held in the Vatican and in Warsaw concerning the normalization of relations between the Government and the Church in Poland, with representatives of the Roman Curia and the Polish Government participating.

Two principal reasons have been advanced to account for the situation of Polish Catholics in the period of the last three years. The first reason suggests that the changes are the result of a temporary, more favorable conjuncture caused by the economic difficulties of the country, whose resolution will depend considerably on internal calm and the cooperative effort of all citizens, regardless of their views. The second reason suggests that the improvement in Church-State relations is the result also of a lengthy and constantly advancing process of change in the relations between the Catholic Church and the Marxists governing Poland.

It is not easy to assign proper weight and priorities to these differing explanations. Certainly the growing economic problems of the present decade and the accompanying social tensions incline the Government to a more tolerant policy toward the Church. For the Church exerts a large influence on its faithful, who now make up 80 per cent of the population of 33 million. The new leaders of the Party and the Government established at the end of 1970 and the beginning of 1971 introduced a policy of economic reforms aimed at modernizing production and management. They planned that industrial and agricultural production should to a greater degree than in the past satisfy consumer needs. This new policy is eminently realistic and pragmatic. The lessening of internal tensions resulting from conflicts with the Church is one of the features of that realism.

On the other hand, the present period of "peaceful coexistence without disregarding ideological differences" is the result certainly of another phase in

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the long process of change within Catholicism itself and in the policy of the Universal Church and the Vatican. The turning point in this process was the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. We should sooner look to these events for the answer to what has made possible the relaxation between Church and State in recent years. For if there had continued to be an adherence to the old doctrine of the division into the “saved” and the “damned,” into the “militant church” and the “silent church,” a division which runs along institutional lines, then the relaxation would be completely impossible. The encyclicals Pacem in Terris, Mater et Magistra, Populorum Progressio, the resolutions of Vatican II, a series of conciliatory pronouncements, as well as moves by the Apostolic See, have all brought on conditions favoring a “policy of dialogue.” The “policy of dialogue” has its limits, but it offers favorable prospects as well. The development of relations between Church and State in the Poland of these last years is an example of achieving the most that good will can attempt at present and new perspectives that open up fresh possibilities.

Examining the situation of Polish Catholicism only on the level of politics, however, does not explain everything and, in fact, tends to blur the picture. The life of the Church cannot be reduced to a chess match with black-and-white figures. It also possesses its own internal dynamic, which in turn influences the political situation. Twenty years ago, when relations between the Church (not just the institution) and the authorities were established more dramatically than today, the two sides held the following opinions concerning the future.

The Marxists considered it to be a sure thing that after the liquidation of the capitalist system of ownership and after the social revolution, religion, as the ideology of the former class of owners, would automatically disappear.

On the Catholic side there was a lively controversy over two views. The first of them, adhered to mainly by Catholic laymen and discussed in organs published by lay intellectuals, was based on Western experience. At the basis of their view was the claim that as the urgent industrialization of the country progressed, traditional Polish mass Catholicism, associated mainly with the very large peasant class, would begin to disappear. Having reached the crisis point, it would precipitate widespread laicization (secularization). To head this off it was necessary to aim at the quickest possible reforms—internal, spiritual, intellectual and structural—which would enliven things with the spirit of the new currents in Catholic thought, especially that of Maritain and Mounier. The opposing camp relied on the assumption that mass Polish Catholicism, in large part “peasant,” is so strongly tied to the thousand-year-old Christian tradition of national culture and represents such profound religious values that it will resist the disintegrating and secularizing influences of industrial civilization as well as the propaganda of Marxist materialism and atheism.

Today—after twenty-seven years of People’s Democracy in Poland—it can be stated with absolute certainty that religion has not disappeared in this socialistic society. Nor can one substantiate the thesis that profound secularization will lead to a “paganization” of traditional Catholicism under conditions of the industrial civilization that has developed during these years. On the contrary, experience proves the strength of a traditional Catholicism closely connected with the national culture, whose religiosity, if not always enlightened, is authentic and profound and vigorous.

The fact that the present situation confirms for the most part the opinion of the “traditionalists” does not mean that history verifies their forecasts in full. For the recent reforms propagated by lay and religious Christian intellectuals have had an influence on Polish Catholics. The spirit of aggiornamento has penetrated into the life of the Church. The younger generation of priests and a large part of Catholic intellectuals have certainly received a formation in Catholicism different from the “traditional” one. Yet it is astonishing that the Church in our country shows no signs of the severe crisis that has occurred in some countries of the world. In Poland there is still no shortage of vocations, and the problem of celibacy is almost nonexistent. There is no polarization of views within Catholicism which might result in conflicts detrimental to its fundamental structures. The renewal of religious life has proceeded in the form of moderate evolution, not revolution. This fact is usually attributed to the effect on the Church community of the ideological situation in Poland. There is much truth
in this, but it is not only the argument with, and opposition to, materialism and atheism which brings about unity. The causes of unity in the Church community must also be sought in the vitality of religion itself, which in our psychological circumstances is a source of values giving human existence a meaning that extends beyond the limits of a "scientific worldview." This is related, of course, to the tradition of Polish Catholicism and its sentimental attraction, which cannot be ignored.

The changes in Catholicism in this country have been, and continue to be, influenced by historical events. Included among these are the shift of an ever increasing mass of rural population to the cities, the universalization of secondary and higher education, especially among the peasant and working classes, and the impetuous development of television and other mass media. They have to a certain degree brought about the anticipated secularization of ethical norms and concepts of the world. Customs are changing. We are on the threshold of mass mechanization and a sexual revolution among youth. There is a strenuous effort being made to popularize the results of contemporary scientific research, not only by the mass media, which is controlled exclusively by the State. They aim at discrediting religious views of the mystery of life. In spite of this, the moral authority of the Church in matters of both social and individual ethics has remained virtually undisturbed. One characteristic Polish phenomenon is the sympathy for Christian ethical values among people outside the Church. Indifferentism is spreading more as a result of the growth of a societal consumer attitude than as a product of atheism or agnosticism. The war against "practical materialism" being waged by both ideological camps has taken the place of metaphysical disputes. These phenomena likewise have their influence on the mutual relations between Church and State. On the one hand, both institutions join in some extent in fighting against moral relativism, which obstructs the mobilization of social energy around cooperative plans for economic progress that serves the common good. On the other hand, the Church and the State (which has an ideological, Marxist characteristic) compete in the area of "ethical standards" that are desirable in the present situation. In short, coexistence does not imply a retreat from the principles underlying the different worldviews or a weakening of the desire to widen influences on the minds and hearts of people.

It is for this reason that neither the legal nor the material circumstances of the Church's activity have changed in this latest period, and there is no reason to anticipate any change. The Church can continue to function only within the bounds defined heretofore by the State. This means freedom to conduct pastoral and catechetical work only on ecclesiastical property. The Church has no access to mass media and cannot establish organizations. In spite of the granting of a certain number of permissions, long withheld, for the building of new churches, the needs of the faithful are still not satisfied, especially in the newly arisen cities and residential developments. The press operated by the religious is very negligible in relation to the demand. The press and publishing houses in the hands of lay Catholics have greater possibilities, though not unlimited. Lay groups also conduct organizational activity, which influences exclusively the elite intellectual circles of the Catholic intelligentsia. They also have their representatives in the Polish sejm (parliament). They number a dozen or so, and in a certain sense they represent Polish Catholics and their good will in working together for the common good.

As for the situation of those who openly acknowledge Catholicism, they are taking advantage at the present moment of opportunities to make a career and to realize their scholarly or professional goals on an equal basis with others. Certain professions and ranks are nevertheless just as inaccessible to them as ever. This is especially true of all levels of the teaching profession, the army, the police and government administration. They do, however, take part in the life of local self-government. It goes without saying that membership in the Party requires ideological acceptance of Marxist atheism. Thus there exists an organization numbering in the hundreds of thousands whose program consists in secularizing society and making it atheistic.

Prognoses concerning the future of relations between Church and State and the fate of Catholicism have not yet been formed by anyone who feels confident of his hypotheses. The policy of the State assumes that the problem of the Church operating within the institutional environment of the People's Democracy will be around for many decades to come. In view of this prospect some revision is taking place in the official attitude to Catholics. Limited in its field of operation, the Church is renewing itself internally. The slow process of reforms in liturgical life and in pastoral service will be more and more adapted to the contemporary world and to the mentality of people living in a changing civilization, surrounded by new ideas.

The breaking off of Church policy from goals which are immediately political and the lack of identification of Catholicism with only one culture or with only one institutional system will continue to lower tensions in our country. Still, the conflict will continue. The hard gained, comparatively even "peaceful coexistence" will not easily be given up by either Church or State. The price to be paid for this coexistence cannot, however, mean that the Church will curtail its demands for improving conditions for its activities. The Government will continue to exert administrative pressures, and they will continue to be counteracted.

(Translated by Gerald Darrow)