

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



March 1988

The Church in Poland: A Cultural Umbrella

Totalitarian governments typically attempt to control and restrict almost all aspects of society, including education, art, the media, as well as religious institutions. However, in Poland -- in what appears to be a bid to gain popular support for Polish leader Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski's political and economic "reforms" -- the state recently has granted a new measure of "freedom," or at least a tolerated independence, to the Roman Catholic Church. (Some 90 percent of Poles are Roman Catholic.)

The church, wishing to avoid any government manipulation, is cautiously taking advantage of this social space. Indeed, the church is providing what some have called an "ecclesiastical umbrella," sheltering an alternative culture independent of Poland's communist authorities. Artists, journalists, academics, economists, social scientists and others have all found a place in church-sponsored activities, leading one active Polish parishioner to note that the church "has become the most interesting independent intellectual and social center in Poland" (*The Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 8, 1988).

Education: Courage to Invest in the Future

Until the early 1980's Catholic education in Poland was limited to teaching the church catechism. Since that time, however, the church has received a series of friendly gestures from a weakened government seeking international legitimacy and has developed a relatively independent alternative to the Polish government's educational

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apparatus. Church publishing houses print their own textbooks and church schools across the country include secular subjects in the curriculum. For example, the Catholic University in Lublin, officially closed since the 1950's, reopened its schools in law, economics, psychology and sociology.



The Director of the Institute of Christian Culture, the Rev. Miroslaw Mikulski (center), with students from the school. Rev. Mikulski is considered a tough leader but is also described as a "gentle giant." Having served as chaplain to the Polish national boxing team, he says: "Boxing develops courage...It was like that with my institute. I had to fight --fairly and well."

A showcase of the church's educational program is the Institute of Christian Culture (ICC) in Lubochnia, an agricultural village 60 miles south of Warsaw. The ICC offers classes from preschool to high school as well as extensive adult education. The latter curriculum offers courses in the study of world history, the Bible, Christian ethics and values. The students are awarded a diploma after completing a rigorous three and one-half year course of study and passing final examinations.

"Lubochnia is a model for the future," explains Andrzej Stelmachowski, director of the Warsaw Club of

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Religious Liberty Alert

Ethnic Tensions Lead to Religious Persecution in Malaysia

A crackdown on political dissent in Malaysia has hit that country's churches too. Last October, invoking an Internal Security Act permitting detentions of persons "likely to act in a manner prejudicial to the (national) security," the Malaysian government arrested 106 prominent citizens. Most of these were opposition political activists, including seven members of parliament. But several were church leaders -- notably Anthony Rogers, Executive Secretary of the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops, and James Lai, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Petaling Jaya. (Lai has now been freed.)

The Catholics appear to have been targeted for their political views, and the Protestants for their efforts to evangelize Muslims. In either case the arrests have had a chilling effect on religious liberty, which must include the Church's right to address social issues as well as its freedom to preach the Gospel to all persons.

Approximately 40 of the detainees, among them at least 13 Christians, remain imprisoned. Most have been sentenced, without trial, to two years behind bars.

"The government has decreed that we cannot share the Gospel with a Muslim, and the Great Commission instructs us to preach the Gospel to everyone. We here have to decide whom we obey -- God or man. If we do the latter, we also have to expect to face the consequences of imprisonment."

Government spokesmen justified the crackdown as a means of controlling rising ethnic tensions. Malaysia's people are 55 percent Malays, almost all Muslim, and 37 percent Chinese, largely Buddhist. Christians, mostly from the Chinese minority, comprise no more than six percent of the population; however, the Malay Muslim majority seems to fear them greatly. There was a clamor among Muslims last fall when rumors spread that fires at several mosques had been set by Christians and that 66,000 Malays had converted to Christianity.

Reports indicate that police questioning of the arrested Protestant leaders focused on their involvement in evan-

gelizing Muslims. The government appeared to be trying to discourage this form of Christian witness, as a way of placating Muslim sensitivities. In December, moreover, local Malaysian officials enforced zoning regulations against 33 Malaysian evangelical churches, ordering them to suspend all religious services. Last fall a missionary from New Zealand was fined and briefly jailed for trying to persuade a Muslim to convert. Islam is the state religion, although the government has until now been generally tolerant of minority religions and respectful of human rights.

Rogers and the other Catholic detainees were accused of "spreading the Communist ideology" and seeking to "launch a movement of class struggle." No proof was presented that they had committed or advocated any violence. The Catholic bishops of Malaysia rejected the charges and denounced the Internal Security Act as "immoral." Archbishop Anthony Soter Fernandez of Kuala Lumpur said that those who "sincerely express their opinion on social issues affecting our nation are honestly trying to bring about greater justice, ethnic, and religious harmony in Malaysia and are exercising their rights and duties as loyal citizens" (*Ecumenical Press Service*, 87.12.02).

An anonymous Protestant leader declared: "The government has decreed that we cannot share the Gospel with a Muslim, and the Great Commission instructs us to preach the Gospel to everyone. We here have to decide whom we obey -- God or man. If we do the latter, we also have to expect to face the consequences of imprisonment" (*Open Doors News Service*, Nov. 9, 1987).

You may write to express your concerns to:

His Excellency, Albert S. Talalla
Embassy of Malaysia
2401 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20008

-- Alan F. Wisdom

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Catholic Intellectuals. "There only are about four or five parishes like it, but I hope there soon will be Lubochnias all over the country."

Art: Preserving a Religious and Cultural Heritage

The archdiocese museum was established in Warsaw in 1980 as another part of the church's attempt to develop an independent culture in Poland. Since that time the museum has become a sanctuary for the Polish artistic community outside the state-controlled art establishment. Recently, however, a very generous contribution has broadened the church's role from merely providing a haven for independent artists to establishing one of Poland's richest and most important museums.

The church's museum is now exhibiting an enormous new collection of European paintings which includes works from almost all of the European schools, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, with a special emphasis on biblical themes. Called the Pope John Paul II Collection, it was donated by an emigre Polish couple: Zbigniew Porczynski, a survivor of Auschwitz who became a successful chemical engineer in England, and his wife Janina, who made her way to Britain after surviving a deportation to Siberia as a young girl. Because most of Poland's European art was badly destroyed or stolen by the various occupying powers of this last century, this new collection is a rare acquisition for the church.

According to *The Washington Post* (Jan. 2, 1988), "a subtle struggle between church and state over the collection is already underway." Church officials have asked for state permission to construct a new building because the five small rooms in the archdiocese museum cannot properly accommodate the new collection. Polish authorities rejected the church's request and offered instead to house the collection in an eighteenth-century state-owned palace. The church has declined the offer. One prominent art critic, Alexander Wojciechowski, said: "Clearly the state would like to bring the collection on its property and thus have a say in managing it. And that's unacceptable for the church."

Andrzej Przekazinski, director of the archdiocese museum, explains the collection's contribution to the church and to Poland: "This gift reminds us that everything is possible, and that we are not alone in the world....It really helps people psychologically by telling them we are still connected to European culture and the great European traditions. Only here could it have that special value."

The Economy: Tilling the Fallow Ground

The church is also deeply concerned about the economic well-being of the Polish people. Last fall the Roman Catholic Church finally won approval from Polish authorities for a \$10 million U.S.-funded program

to help stimulate Poland's private-sector agriculture initiatives. The Communist Party leadership initially resisted the church project, and its recent approval is the result of six years of negotiations between representatives of the Church Agricultural Committee and government authorities. A major obstacle in the negotiations was the government's insistence on the right to impose import taxes on Western products connected with the project. Then, with an important concession in July 1987, the government reversed its hardline position and granted a tax exemption and customs clearance to the church committee.

The government's commitment to cooperate will enable the church partially to revive a project, started in 1981, which will provide farming equipment and irrigation systems to private farmers. The original proposal consisted of a \$28 million pledge to the church's agricultural fund by a number of western churches and governments. The U.S. government's 1984 appropriation of \$10 million (which is to be channeled through the U.S. Catholic Relief Service) was the largest single portion of that pledge.

This sudden willingness to accept the church's initiative came in part because the project had been scaled down and in part because of the government's increasing need to rebuild Poland's crumbling economy. Wiltold Trzeciakowski, a professor of economics and director of the Church Agricultural Committee, said he

(Poland, continued on page 4)



Jozef Cardinal Glemp, Primate of Poland, has figured prominently in world news in recent years as he seeks to lead his church through turbulent times.

believes that the government has finally realized that "without cooperation with the church they cannot get out of the current crisis" (*The Washington Post*, July 26, 1987).

"Even these small recent gestures would have been unthinkable a generation ago. And perhaps they are pointing to the day when the Church's social involvement will have official state approval."

Unfortunately, there is also the very real possibility that the church project will grind to a halt after its immediate funds are exhausted. The Church Agricultural Committee has indicated that it will begin preliminary aspects of the farming and irrigation program while waiting for a decision by government officials regarding the ultimate status of the project. For now, the primary question, says Trzeciakowski, "is whether we will have a self-perpetuating business or whether we will only be able to spend the money we already have...."

The Future: Restricted and Uncertain Autonomy

A new commission of top-level Polish and Vatican Church officials is studying plans to establish full diplomatic relations with the Polish state. A joint communique, issued after a November 16, 1987, meeting between Cardinal Glemp and Gen. Jaruzelski, noted that "positive

developments" were in progress on such issues. *The National Catholic Register* (Dec. 25, 1987) suggested that "an agreement of this kind would boost the state's international standing, whereas the precise benefits for the Church are far from clear." The Polish bishops, however, are clearly in a position to use the issue as a bargaining chip to obtain domestic concessions.

Of primary benefit to the bishops is a formal recognition by the state of the Church's legal status. One Catholic political observer says: "There is a sense of movement on these issues...but we have only a few signs to interpret. Even these small recent gestures would have been unthinkable a generation ago. And perhaps they are pointing to the day when the Church's social involvement will have official state approval."

While the Polish Catholic Church may be, in some ways, unique as a focus of Polish nationalist identification, independent of a Soviet-dominated government, it nevertheless provides an instructive model for other churches struggling to survive under atheistic and oppressive regimes. In light of these positive developments in Poland, American churches might well consider how they could support similar developments in countries such as China, Nicaragua, and Cuba. --Richard S. Sperbeck



SBC Today/Rob Suggs

This cartoon originally appeared in the February 1988 issue of *SBC Today*, accompanying an article on the "religious right." Its message has implications for others as well. If the shoe fits....

NEWS BRIEFS

Philippine Bishops Rein In Communist-Infiltrated Agency

The Catholic bishops of the Philippines have moved to reorganize their social action agency, the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), after concluding that it had been manipulated by supporters of that country's communist insurgency. The plan to restructure the church agency includes removing its "corporate character" and placing it directly under the control of the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

After announcing the reorganization of the church group, Jaime Cardinal Sin of Manila said that NASSA had been "highly infiltrated" by sympathizers of the New People's Army (NPA), the communist guerrilla force. Cardinal Sin reported that funds passing through NASSA -- perhaps millions of dollars annually -- had been diverted to groups associated with the National Democratic Front, the NPA's political arm. "This money was being used to buy weapons and to strengthen the NPA," Sin said.

The discovery of this manipulation resulted from the bishops' investigation of NASSA launched last year after reports that some foreign church grants were ending up in communist hands. Cardinal Sin implied that the donor agencies (principally from European Catholic churches) were to some extent responsible for the infiltration of NASSA.

The NASSA staff apparently had operated in defiance of a 1987 pastoral letter by the Philippine bishops. The directive prohibited church representatives

from joining or supporting "political organizations that advocate class struggle or violence as the means to social change." Cardinal Sin called the NASSA staffers "well-meaning people" who had "committed a mistake in perception...They did not want to give to religious programs but to 'the struggle'."

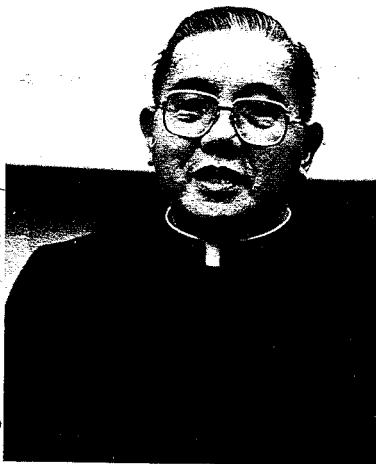
The WCC and the "State of the Union"

It is widely suspected that the World Council of Churches takes a dim view of the United States. Just how dim that view is becomes apparent in a recent WCC study paper on U.S. social trends. The paper, prepared by the WCC North American Task Force for a meeting of the WCC Staff Executive Group, describes this country as "less a land of hope than of despair, more a land of cruel deprivation than of opportunity." This picture, taken "from the underside of the U.S. population," focuses on "underlying trends," "accentuated" by the Reagan Administration, which threaten future disaster.

The WCC report catalogs a long list of U.S. ills: "The social contract between people and government...is breaking down rapidly." "Civil rights...are in frank decline." "Industrial production is weakening, the quality of production is second- and third-rate." "Trust in money and money-making is growing." "Civil and religious structures that long provided security in society are eroding." "Basic information is eroded." "Violence -- personal, national, and international -- is at high levels."

As it looks to the future, the WCC Task Force warns of "a major catastrophe (nuclear disaster, a war that destroys U.S. population centers, uncontrollable AIDS spread in the mainstream population)." Such an event might unleash "heightened violence, internally and externally," the paper predicts.

After this nightmarish recitation, in which a series of genuine problems becomes a litany of gloom, one might wonder whether the ecumenical council had abandoned all hope. Yet not so. It may be evening in America, according to the WCC, but not quite night. The report notes that "Gallup speaks of a renewed search for depth in spiritual lives" of individuals. And it does acknowledge one benefit of U.S. democracy: "Major political institutions do provide checks on gross power excesses."



Religious News Service Photo

Jaime Cardinal Sin

NEWS BRIEFS

Nicaraguan Minister Wins "Lenin Peace Prize"

Miguel d'Escoto, Nicaragua's Foreign Minister, may be the religious Left's favorite Sandinista. The son of a prominent Nicaraguan aristocrat, educated in the United States, and a longtime Maryknoll priest (until the Pope suspended him),

d'Escoto defends his government in the liberation theology language dear to its churchly sympathizers. Esteem for this Sandinista official extends also to Moscow, where the Soviet Communist Party awarded him its "Lenin Peace Prize" last year (*Crisis*, Jan. 1988).



Religious News Service Photo

Miguel d'Escoto

In remarks after accepting the prize, d'Escoto reciprocated warmly:

This prize makes us Nicaraguans come into even closer contact with Lenin, that great personality of your state and of all mankind who is the passionate champion of peace....I believe the Soviet Union is a great torch which emits hope for the preservation of peace on our planet. Always in the vanguard of the overall struggle for peace, the Soviet Union has become the personification of ethical and moral norms in international relations. I admire the revolutionary principles and consistency of the foreign policy of the Communist Party of the fraternal Soviet Union....

Now these questions remain: Will d'Escoto's U.S. admirers at least face the fact that his affections are oriented eastward? Will they share those affections, or will they repudiate them and him?

MIAMI CONFERENCE TO FOCUS ON RELIGION UNDER THE SANDINISTAS

On March 22 the Institute of Interamerican Studies of the University of Miami is sponsoring an all-day conference on "Revolution and Religion in Nicaragua." The conference will include presentations and discussion by experts on religion under Marxism, with particular focus on the case of Nicaragua. The impact of liberation theology will be a major topic of discussion. Six to eight principal participants are anticipated, including IRD Executive Director Kent Hill, Nicaraguan Catholic Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega and Humberto Belli of the Puebla Institute. The cost is \$40, including lunch. For further information, please contact Georgina Olano, Institute of Interamerican Studies, 1541 Brescia Avenue, Coral Gables, FL 33124 (305/284-6868).

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