FREEING THE OPPRESSED

By ANDRZEJ WIELOWIEYSKI

DURING the 'cold war', and the years which coincided with the pontificate of Pope Paul VI, christian communities behind the Iron Curtain were described as 'The Church of Silence'. Like many another arresting and general title, it has never been univocal. At the moment, it may be applied without qualification to Albania, where the silence of the Church is indeed deathly. There, every manifestation of religious belief entails severe punishment or even death.

In other communist countries, the situation is by no means uniform. In the majority of them, the Church is gravely constricted in so far as religious practice, catechetical instruction and publishing activity are concerned. But in East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, there are some catechetical centres in operation. Even in Lithuania, as in every other state which is part of the USSR, though religious instruction has been strictly prohibited since the Helsinki declaration, there is a continuous increase in the numbers of children attending instruction courses to prepare them for Holy Communion; and there is nothing clandestine about this activity. Religious publications are, of course, strictly limited in number, and rigidly censored; whilst all religious courses are under strict police control. In fact, any activity which can be labelled religious and which incurs the displeasure of the authorities is systematically penalized. The result is that the Church and its clergy tend, on the whole, to comply with the wishes of hostile authorities; whilst the Orthodox Church in Roumania, and to a lesser extent in Czechoslovakia and in Russia itself, shows a certain eagerness in supporting the atheistic state rule.

The only exception is Poland, where the strong position of the Church is mainly due to historical traditions which have linked the national cause with the Church. Beginning with the wars of the seventeenth century, with their markedly religious as well as their political character, even the popular masses began to identify religion with national feelings; and later on, when Poland lost her

national independence and was partitioned by the three neighbouring countries, the Church became the only institutional safeguard of national unity.

It is true that in Roumania the preservation of the national identity throughout the ages of turkish domination was also due to religion. But the Orthodox Church, with its traditional submission to secular power, its dislike of social activity, its traditional indifference to worldly matters whenever these threatened its preoccupation with the other world, proved unable to meet the requirements and challenges of rapidly changing culture and social environment. After the end of the second world war, both the Roumanian and the Polish Churches were headed by outstanding leaders. However, while the Patriarch Justinian's preoccupation with the spiritual revival led him to commit the Orthodox Church to the service of the communist state of a clearly totalitarian bent (due to the absence of democratic traditions), Cardinal Wyszynski, the Primate of Poland, was the only religious leader in the communist bloc to maintain and even strengthen the independent position of the Catholic Church, to the point where it became invested with a social power unknown in its history.[1]

It is clear, then, that the role and tasks of the Church in separate communist countries cannot be measured by the same standards. In Poland, all Church officials, apart from bishops who are diocesan, are appointed without state intervention. The Church is also financially independent, because it supports itself on monies collected from its own churchgoers; nor does it consent to state control in matters of religious service and religious instruction. It is true that state administration often exerts pressure on priests and lay Catholics, especially those engaged in actions of a political nature or who have particular influence among young people, by police surveillance and various penal sanctions. But on the whole the activity of parishes is fairly unrestricted.

An important aspect of the role played by the Polish Church consists in its public witness and in exercising a critical function analogous to that described in Harvey Cox's *Secular City*. In its pastoral letters and special communiqués issued every three months, the Episcopate defends the interests of the whole of Society by discussing frequently difficult and painful socio-economic problems. These communiqués cannot, of course, be published because of

[1] The process is described in *Nous chrétiens de Pologne* (Paris, 1979).

censorship; but they are publicly read in all churches. They deal with working conditions, wages, taxes, persecution of members of the opposition, cultural freedom, the distortion of historical facts, the educational system, and so on; the emphasis being always on the moral aspect of the matter in question. One should stress here that polish bishops, courageous and uncompromising as they are, on the whole show great restraint as far as strictly political matters and Church claims are concerned. They take upon themselves the role of social mediators.

For all these reasons, the impact of Pope John Paul II's election and especially of his pilgrimage to Poland in 1979, was quite different in Poland than in other communist countries; even though they, too, were undoubtedly affected. In Poland, the unexpected joy caused by the Pope's election and his subsequent visit stiffened the resolve of many, and helped them to regain the self-dignity and the religious identity they had lost or were in danger of losing in the midst of servility and petty preoccupations with the purely material side of existence. From the point of view of social psychology, the event was unprecedented in the nation's history: for a few days, millions of people experienced an intense degree of happiness. But in actual fact all that happened was the natural continuation of the age-old influence which the Church has exerted on successive generations of Poles.

The Pope himself treated his visit to Poland as a solemn retreat, and his last speech to two million people gathered in Cracow Green was a sort of confirmation, of strengthening, of maturity. Speaking to polish bishops in Czestochowa, he bade them defend human dignity and moral order, and made them responsible for the preservation and development of national culture. Observers rightly interpreted this speech as a challenge to the totalitarian system.

In his address to pilgrims from Lower Silesia, delivered on the same day, the Pope outlined his political philosophy, which he later amplified in his speech in New York to representatives of american countries. He openly defied totalitarianism for abusing the notion of national unity, when he said:

> The unity of a nation depends on justice in taking care of needs, rights and tasks of every member of the nation so as to prevent the generation of the conflict and contrast which arises when some are privileged and others under-privileged.

Speaking to communist leaders in Warsaw, the Pope also insisted: 'The *raison d'être* of the State is rooted in the sovereignty of Society';

and he stressed that 'it is the mission of the Church . . . to make man . . . more fully aware of his dignity . . . his rights and duties'.

The Polish Church answers this call by its large-scale efforts to awaken and strengthen people's civic and democratic feelings, and by propagating the ideal of 'citizen', as opposed to that of a 'subject', which is what the communist system and its educational policy really promote.

As far as moral feelings of the people were concerned, it was perhaps the language of the Pope which made the strongest impression: and not only on believers but on the whole of society. The perverted official language which has dominated the communist countries of eastern Europe for the last thirty years, and in the USSR for as much as sixty, is one of the most terrifying instruments of control and subjugation. People know that information published by mass media, the politicians' statements, and even classes and lectures in school and university, contain half-truths or lies. They are well-versed in reading the words that remain unspoken. But the pressure of falsehood is so overwhelming that often they give up, and, in spite of themselves, they adopt this magical pseudo-language which bears no relation to the reality: its only purpose being to sustain the official ideology and policy. Many people wittingly accept this peculiar kind of schizophrenia epitomized in a popular joke: 'I have my own opinion which I don't share'.

In the light of all this, the sixty speeches delivered by the Pope were like a great awakening. People suddenly saw that it was possible to discuss human problems in public openly and clearly in plain terms, without using empty catch-phrases. In a country where moral culture is so 'poor', and all are starving for truth, this fact alone brought great 'good news to the people'. And it presented a serious challenge to the official language. It even brought an immediate, if secondary, effect: the farewell speech by the polish President of the Council of State was visibly better and more meaningful than the empty phrases with which he had welcomed the Pope a week earlier. The foreign style prevailed. Yet it seems that in spite of this challenge and the unmasking activity of the Church, official propaganda will continue to hide behind the protective shield of sham language.

The impact of the Pope's visit on the neighbouring countries was obviously much weaker. Their mass media barely mentioned the event. Only in a part of Lithuania could people watch polish television broadcasts. News of the visit was spread by a hundred thousand

visitors, perhaps even twice as many, from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, as well as from Roumania, Bulgaria and the USSR. Some were in Poland by chance. Many people could not come because of frontier traffic restrictions introduced for the duration of the visit. And, of course, the TV and radio stations of the West provided most extensive coverage. But it could not change the social climate in the other eastern countries as much as it did in Poland. Even in northern Poland, the meetings with the Pope were less intense than in the south: this was partly because of highly efficient police action; the intimidating rumours about the number of casualties in Mexico; the real or ostensible disorganization of transport; the pressure exerted on employees, young people and teachers, and so on.

One of the many banners seen in Gniezno read in Czech: 'Don't forget your Czech brethren, Father!' The Pope noticed it at once; and on several other occasions also, he frequently referred to the neighbouring countries and their religious traditions, calling out: 'I hope they can hear me!'

But how many could really hear him? And even if they did, how many would be able to undertake the christian task of defending man's dignity and rights?

The essence and the basic force of the modern system of oppression, under different régimes, lies not so much in physical or economic oppression, but in the much more efficient socio-psychological mechanisms which, because they are a disintegrating force in society, make it defenceless in the face of political power. One of the most important of such mechanisms is the way in which the system can draw as many able and active people into its orbit as possible. Anyone, provided he is willing to co-operate, has a chance to become a 'manager', a 'boss'. The price he pays is high: he has to relinquish his freedom or even to limit his activity. Some reject the offer; but the majority do not. In this way, society is deprived of its power of resistance.

I have already mentioned the alienating impact of ignorance resulting from the lack of information which people have to a certain extent accepted as normal. I have also mentioned the sham language which is instilled even in the minds of schoolchildren, distorting their ability to think, and to understand the reality. There are other powerful mechanisms. In communist countries, one encounters such 'normal' phenomena and problems as social differences, privileges, class-conflicts, and so on. There are unsatisfied

moral, cultural and religious needs. But the resulting conflicts are rarely resolved in a satisfactory manner. Much more often than in the past, the hopelessness of their efforts discourages even the most active and worthy people. Many people oscillate between defiance and servility; one cannot be a rebel all the time. It is extremely difficult to retain one's poise and independence in the face of overwhelming pressure, falsehood and corruption. That is why many who, in the main, are honest people, try to justify their participation with such ideological excuses as patriotism or nationalism, 'reasons of state', economic progress 'at any price', the ideal of 'good work', and even 'the good of the Church'.

In this relatively liberal country, one can meet 'honest' Catholics who ask in all earnestness whether the Church is right to pose difficult social problems, or whether the activity of this opposition is not detrimental to the country's strength and prestige. I am convinced that such attitudes are even more widespread in the USSR and Roumania. Thanks to these mechanisms, the incompetent bureaucratic system of oppression can survive and operate, though to the total detriment of peace and justice. As John Paul II said, 'Peace can only be built on truth'. At the same time, the undiscriminating hatred of the whole system, one which also paralyses efforts to bring about social revival, is equally contrary to the gospel.

In such circumstances the main role of Christianity is to advocate truth and justice: that is, respect for the human dignity of every man. 'The truth shall make you free' (Jn 8, 32). Equally, it must be opposed to hatred: 'Love your enemies' (Mt 5, 44ff). These are extremely difficult tasks. But true Christianity is never easy.

My report would not be fully honest if I failed to admit that there is something slightly disingenuous about Christianity in Poland. For in spite of our many vexations, we are fortunate; we represent a social force. The Church is to be reckoned with. Even severe punishment is easier to bear when one does not feel lonely and forsaken. More than half of the three million party members somehow reconcile their party membership with religion, and with the practice of it! The twenty thousand Catholic priests enjoy, in general, traditional esteem and respect. An ardent Catholic may encounter obstacles in his professional career. Students taking too prominent a part in the activity of academic parishes are kindly asked to 'keep it down'; otherwise their careers may suffer.

Elsewhere, however, it is quite different. In eastern Germany, a Catholic or a Protestant who has received the sacrament of

confirmation cannot, as a rule, obtain his secondary-school certificate and higher education. In the USSR, Christianity is even more confined to the poor, which in the light of modern understanding of economic growth and social equality is particularly outrageous.

To bear witness to truth and justice without escaping the reality, as members of the Orthodox Church try to do, exposes one to ridicule, shame and martyrdom. One has to accept this fate with tranquillity, in the hope that, although 'my kingdom is not of this world' (Jn 19, 36), this earth may come closer to heaven. But to achieve that, Christians have to defend truth and man's dignity in spite of everything.

Good sense is also counted among christian virtues; and there is no reason to believe that Christians must necessarily seek to 'cut off the devil's tail'. The Church had to exist, to serve people and to hand down the heritage of faith under different political systems; and it fulfilled these tasks with varying success.

It is my belief that all activity, or the lack of it, should spring from a clearly defined system of moral values. I also believe that, in moments of crisis, the concern for the continuity of institutions and of cult should not, in principle, prevail over truth and man's dignity in ways that would outrage our moral sense. We certainly cannot bear witness to falsehood. But where are the limits of good sense? Political or social calculations do not help much. We never know whether the particular act of love, good example or word of hope will 'yield a harvest, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold' (Mk 4, 20). But there will be no true liberation of the oppressed unless a sufficient number of people throw off the yoke of mental and moral slavery.

What all Christians living under oppression and injustice need above all is our understanding and our prayers: that they be brave and full of faith and wisdom, as befits true believers bearing witness to 'good news'.