

*Nous Chrétiens de Pologne*

by Adam Boniecki *et al.*, Editions Cana, Paris, 1979, 167 pp. No price.

This book is unique in three ways. Firstly, the contributors are all leading figures in Polish Catholic life who have repeatedly demonstrated their courage in expressing beliefs contrary to official Marxist-Leninist doctrine (the publication of this book in the West is itself a fine example of their courage). Secondly, it is the first time that such a representative cross-section of pressing local issues has been made available to a western audience—up to now such information has been available only to researchers and Polish speakers. Thirdly, the book is a remarkable amalgam of deep faith and inspired observation linked inextricably with the contributors' personal joys and sorrows. The authors' love for Poland shines through.

To help the uninformed there is a preface by the Polish-born journalist Jean Offredo, which gives a brief history and outline of the political environment surrounding the Church in Poland today. When we recall that some 90 per cent of the population is Catholic (while only the ruling apparatus with its appendages is predominantly anti-religious) we begin to realize the importance of this book for an understanding of Polish society. It is also worth noting that the hopes and disappointments which shaped the authors' ideas and personalities were also experienced by Pope John Paul II.

What attitude should Catholics in Poland adopt towards the ruling political power? This is an important question not only in Poland but also in other communist societies. Andrzej Wielowiejski argues both against opting out and against co-operating. He also rejects the narrow ecclesiastical attitude which presses for political power or influence and is allied to an extreme conservatism. This attitude, he observes, has become much less prevalent. Instead Wielowiejski advocates a "democratic attitude" which applies constant and firm pressure in order to obtain basic rights and freedom of worship. This attitude reflects the demands of Polish dissident groups. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, in his article on Christians and human rights, also argues that it is the duty of Christians to fight for human rights, for without such rights the Christian is himself endangered. In another article Jerzy Turowicz, editor of the important Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, is also concerned with the delicate question of attitude. What does it mean, he asks, to be a Catholic journalist in a communist State and what sort of editorial policy can a Catholic newspaper adopt?

The difficulties which western observers face in understanding the specific character of Catholicism in Poland—even after prolonged observation—may arise from the assumption that Polish Catholicism is homogeneous or little differentiated. The contributions of the remaining authors

demonstrate how one's understanding can be aided by focusing on a group or stratum. One aspect which emerges strongly is the importance of the "bearers of Catholic culture". Jacek Wozniakowski stresses the growing significance of the intellectuals in Polish Catholic life; Stefan Wilkanowicz argues for the "apostolic role" of the laity as a whole; and Fr Adam Boniecki, in a powerful article, outlines the crucial role of the clergy and describes how splendid it is to be a priest in Poland. Could a Party member in Poland today say the same about his own commitment? I doubt it.

Women, too, are bearers of Catholicism in Poland. Portrayed by Józefa Hennelowa with outstanding sensitivity and with due regard for sociological categories, Polish women emerge as pivotal figures in national life: they are in some ways heroic and in other ways tragic. It is not inappropriate to liken them to Our Lady at the foot of the Cross. At certain points in history women undoubtedly played a vital part in handing on the Catholic faith in Poland.

The odd man out in this collection is Andrzej Swiecicki. Swiecicki's article is strictly sociological and, as such, necessary for a complete picture of religious issues. Some of his observations are revealing: in particular, he notes that the decreasing level of religiosity, which in western societies has often been attributed to the twin processes of urbanization and industrialization, is not at all obvious in Poland although both these processes have taken an extreme form there. Swiecicki points to the highly industrialized yet also highly religious area of Upper Silesia. Unfortunately, his evidence is fragmentary since it is difficult to carry out studies which are so obviously at odds with the Marxist-Leninist view of religion.

A word of warning: the views expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the views of the Polish episcopate. However, there is no doubt that the latter listen carefully to the intellectuals who are only seeking to initiate a broad discussion. This book should be published in Polish and made available to all in Poland so that such a discussion may take place publicly.

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