

Poland: Troubled Relations Between Church and State

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Appearances always tend to be deceptive where Polish affairs are concerned, but the evidence of the past year points all too clearly towards a substantially more difficult period in Church-State relations than looked likely in the immediate aftermath of Edward Gierek's accession to power in December 1970. A sample of the official attitude towards the Church may be found in the following authoritative statement of Party thinking, taken from a speech made by Jan Szydlak in March :¹

The experience of recent years has shown once more that the main, organized anti-socialist power in this country – a *sui generis* centre, consolidating all trends that are, in essence, directed against our system and are, at the same time, their last hope – is the reactionary section of the Episcopate, acting on the strength of the institutional structure of the Roman Catholic Church. For this is the only power among the social rightists which has at its disposal a complex philosophical system, a strong organizational basis and vast cadres, which also forms part of a well-knit organization (which in fact, distinguishes the Catholic Church from all other Christian denominations). This power's potential for exerting effective influence is at present limited to a certain degree. Its political argumentation, geared above all to winning by exploiting our difficulties and failures, loses its effectiveness. However, as we can see, even in this new situation, every possibility of political manoeuvring against our Party and our system is being diligently exploited.

This uncompromising statement of the Party's attitude is in stark contrast to the conciliatory statements made by Piotr Jaroszewicz, the Polish Prime Minister, in December 1970 – thus immediately after taking office – when he said in the *Sejm* (Parliament) that “the government would now try to bring about a full normalization of relations with the Catholic Church”.² It is fair to conclude even from a mere juxtaposition of these two statements that the honeymoon period between Church and State in Poland is over, arguably it ended somewhere over a year ago.³ During the honeymoon period the government did offer a number of minor concessions to the Episcopate, presumably in the expectation that it would receive major ones in return.

The Episcopate, for its part, set out its own conception of its role in its New Year message for 1971. It called for a complete freedom of conscience and of religious life, for the right freely to shape the national

culture according to Christian principles, for the right to truth in social life, for the right to reasonable material conditions and for freedom from harassment by the authorities.⁴ This statement of principles may have represented a maximum set of demands, but there is no evidence that the Episcopate is prepared to modify them substantially. The demands of the Church, in the light of this New Year message, are extremely far-reaching in a communist context and self-evidently seek to assert a wide-ranging ecclesiastical role in social affairs. They must be seen as in direct conflict with the Communist Party's own conception of the leading role of the Party, its political monopoly.

Conflict has, predictably, arisen in several fields, some of them practical, some ideological. Church building falls into the former category. The Episcopate has argued that there has been no great increase in the number of church buildings in Poland since the war, whereas since 1945 the population has grown from 24 million to 33 million and, also, there has been a massive shift from rural to urban areas (the urban population rose from 31.8 per cent in 1945 to 50.3 per cent in 1967). So, for example, important industrial quarters in cities or new towns like Nowa Huta are without a single church and the Episcopate has let it be known that at least 1000 new church buildings are necessary, 50 of them in Warsaw. In 1971, the authorities gave permission for 30 new churches to be erected, a considerable increase over the late Gomulka era, when the number of churches built in a year remained in single figures. The authorities have argued, not without some justification, that given the scarcity of resources in Poland, church building must be regarded as a relatively low priority.

Other concessions have also been made to the Church. The abolition of church inventories – an irritant in that the maintenance of these inventories enabled local State authorities to exercise a constant supervisory power over the parishes – was one of these (22 February, 1972); another was the freeing of all church income produced by agriculture from tax – even if this represented only a small part of the revenues of the Church; and in 1972, the authorities proved very helpful in making arrangements for about a thousand pilgrims to visit Rome in order to celebrate the first anniversary of the beatification of Fr. Maksymilian Kolbe, who had sacrificed his life in Auschwitz during the war.

But these gestures were at no point intended as anything more than concessions. Jaroszewicz reiterated the determination of the Polish authorities to consider normalization of relations with the Church as invariably something subordinate to the construction of socialism (28 March, 1972). He hoped that “guarantees will be obtained that religious activity of the Roman Catholic Church will remain within the framework defined by

our national interest and by the law". The kernel of the conflict was the very different interpretations of "national interest" insisted on by the two parties.

The issue on which Church and State have come into serious conflict has been that of educational reform. In 1973, a commission of experts proposed a new and thoroughly revised scheme of education for Poland, aimed at creating a large number of well-qualified individuals with a socialist outlook in life. The Episcopate identified the educational reform project as a serious threat and repeatedly protested against its introduction. Thus, in a statement issued on 18 June 1973, the Episcopate stated that the State-run schools would teach atheistic principles and undermine the religious motivation of children. It saw the main danger in the heavy emphasis on extra-curricular activities, which would leave little time for religious education – there has been no religious education within the State educational framework since the early 1960s. The Episcopate argued in this connection that "parents have a duty to bring up children in accordance with their own religious beliefs. The State has a duty to respect this right. The vast majority of Polish society consists of believers." Equally, the content of education caused serious concern. There were plans to introduce a course in schools on "the preparation for life in the socialist family" and to increase atheistic propaganda generally.

The authorities have seldom replied to these protests by the Episcopate directly. Its attitude has usually been conveyed in statements such as the one quoted at the beginning of this article. The approach taken by the authorities is to hint that the hard line taken by the Church is the responsibility of a small section of the Episcopate and that it is not representative of the body of the Church. There is, in fact, no evidence to suggest that the Episcopate is divided on its approach to the State.

The role of the Vatican is another problem which has complicated Church-State relations in Poland. The Polish foreign minister, Stefan Olszowski, paid an official visit to Rome in November 1973, the first such visit to the Vatican by a Polish government minister since the war. There were high expectations that Poland and the Vatican would establish normal relations, to be followed eventually by a visit to Poland from the Pope. In February 1974, Olszowski's visit was returned when Archbishop Casaroli, who acts as *de facto* foreign minister for the Vatican, paid a formal visit to the Polish government. Inevitably, Church-State relations within Poland played an important part in normalizing Polish-Vatican relations. Stefan, Cardinal Wyszyński, in a series of sermons at the end of 1973, outlined the Episcopate's view of the situation. He insisted that there could be no Polish-Vatican normalization (i.e. a Concordat) prior to

Church-State normalization. The conditions for this were that the Church should be free to educate the country's youth and that forced laicization be abandoned; discrimination against believers should also be ended; Catholic culture should be given greater freedom, it should have more access to the media, for example, on the principle that "Poland should not be a country for non-believers only"; that the issue of church building be resolved; and Wyszynski described the educational reform as "the greatest threat to the Church in Poland in 25 years". The significance of this *prise de position* was heightened by the fact that Wyszynski made them immediately after a three week stay in the Vatican.

It was clear from the way in which the Roman Catholic press treated Casaroli's visit that the Episcopate was uneasy about whether the Vatican might come to some agreement with the Polish State without safeguarding the interests of the Church. Janusz Zablocki, the leader of the Catholic *Znak* group in the *Sejm*, warned that Polish Catholics would not consent to Polish-Vatican normalization while they themselves suffered discrimination (14 December, 1973) and *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the weekly journal that generally voices the view of the Episcopate, hardly mentioned Casaroli's visit at all. When, on 7 February 1974, Wyszynski and Casaroli jointly celebrated mass in St. John's Cathedral in Warsaw, Wyszynski pointedly repeated his well-known thesis on the historical mission of the Church in Poland and his views on normalization. At the same time, the Vatican indicated its rising impatience with the Polish Episcopate by announcing the removal of Cardinal Mindszenty at the very time when Casaroli was in Warsaw.⁵ All the evidence suggests that (a) the hoped for normalization between Church and State in Poland is increasingly remote and (b) that the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* is causing serious concern to the Polish Episcopate in as much as it fears that its own interests vis-à-vis the Polish State differ from those of the Vatican and could be overlooked.

¹ Text of Szydlak's speech in *Nowe Drogi*, May 1974.

² *Trybuna Ludu*, 24 December, 1970.

³ The antecedents of the present state of affairs are set out in Lucjan Blit, "The Insoluble Problem: Church and State in Poland", *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 1, No. 3, May-June 1973, pp. 8-11.

⁴ Cited by Stanislaw Staron, "The State and the Church", in (eds.) Adam Bromke and John W. Strong *Gierek's Poland*, (New York, London: Praeger, 1973), p. 167.

⁵ See George Schöpflin, "The Mindszenty Affair", *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 2, No. 2, March-April 1974, pp. 10-11.