
Editorial

Since the communist take-over in 1945, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, so far from withering away, has become stronger. Since the middle '30s the number of parishes, dioceses, priests and religious as well as churches has greatly increased. In most other parts of the world the number of men ordained since the war has gone down year by year. But in Poland twice as many are ordained as 40 years ago. Visitors to Poland are struck by the large numbers in church: in the cities attendance at Mass on Sundays is said to be 77% and in rural areas 87%. Almost all (92-95%) Polish children are prepared for First Communion and over 90% of the population are buried according to the Catholic rite.

Why is this? The Roman Catholic Church is, of course, closely identified with the Polish nation. Thus to be a Pole automatically means, for most Poles, to be a Catholic. But human reason cannot fully explain anything so mysterious. The Church's leaders have stood firm against every threat and have actively promoted the faith with a success that the West may envy. For example, an extraordinary programme of spiritual renewal was organized in Poland during the decade preceding the millennial celebrations of 1966.

But relations between Church and State have not been easy. In 1945 when the communists took power the concordat between Rome and Warsaw, which had been in force since 1925, was broken. By 1948 open conflict began. The Church was accused of being hostile to the new regime whilst the bishops accused the government of bad faith in its dealing with the Church. By 1953 Cardinal Wyszynski had been placed under house arrest; eight bishops and 900 priests were in prison. With the Stalinization thaw of 1956 Poland entered a happier phase. Wladislaw Gomulka returned to power as first secretary of the Party. Cardinal Wyszynski was freed from house arrest and the bishops and other imprisoned priests were released. In December 1956 an agreement was made between the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the government. At first the Church appeared to have won for itself a remarkably favourable position, but within a few years some of the concessions were withdrawn.

In 1970 the era of Edward Gierek's leadership of the Party started favourably for the Church. The Prime Minister expressed the wish that co-operation with all citizens – believers and unbelievers – might be strengthened. In 1971 the Director of the Office of Religious Affairs, expressing the government's views on the normalization of relations, said ambiguously: "We expect all practises and trends which were hostile or antagonistic towards People's Poland, which in the past were often the cause of serious tensions and conflicts between State and Church, to be gone never to return". In any polity where one party has a monopoly of power, there are no enforceable guarantees of freedom. Already by 1972 the Polish hierarchy issued a communiqué complaining that the authorities were harassing the Church. The Primate further accused the government of not permitting the construction of a large number of new churches which he deemed necessary. But the cause of friction went deeper than this. The government's attempt to impose the beliefs of Marxism-Leninism on the population was seen by the Episcopate as an attack on the Church at a fundamental level. In a pastoral letter of May 1973, the bishops stated: "We must defend ourselves, our families and the whole nation against the secularism and atheism that are being imposed upon us . . ." Another reason for complaint was the lack of a free Catholic press. Yet in comparison with most other East European countries, Poland appears not to be so badly off in this respect as indeed in others. Recently the government's efforts to expand state influence among the peasantry and the resulting disruption of traditional Polish village life, upon which much of the Church's strength is based, has worried the Episcopate. Even more threatening to the Church is the government's programme for modernizing the school system: many of the small village schools are being closed and the children sent to larger schools in the cities. This can make it difficult for children to go to classes of religious instruction.

Nevertheless, despite the Episcopate's many complaints, the Church is trying to maintain a position of loyal opposition towards the State. But this is extremely difficult when any allegiance other than to the Party itself is considered a threat to the communist order. Since last year's explosive Constitutional debate and strikes, the Episcopate has become more outspoken: it has demanded social justice and defended the rights of Polish citizens (see Lucjan Blit's article, pp. 81–84). Such outspokenness by official church leaders is most unusual in Eastern Europe and requires great courage and great wisdom. Cardinal Wyszynski certainly has the courage. He has his critics among the faithful as well as among Party members, but his record over many years looks increasingly impressive.