

GDR: Evening in a Parish

JOHN ARNOLD

While on a visit to East Germany earlier this year, I and a companion were invited to a parish evening in the suburbs of a large industrial city. We found over a hundred people – a good cross-section – sitting informally at candle-lit tables, piled with refreshments. The Pastor apologized to us for the shabbiness of the hall, and seemed surprised when we both said that it was about as shabby as our own at home. The fact is that most East Germans simply assume that all Western churches are as affluent as those of the Federal Republic, and that we all enjoy the standard of living which they watch every evening through the magic window of West German television. There was nothing to apologize for; but both on that evening and throughout the visit we found ourselves commenting on the astonishing similarity in the lives of our churches, and in the problems and opportunities they face as folk-churches in semi-affluent advanced industrialized societies. The one big difference, of course, is the political framework for social life and the official attitudes of the State to the Church and to individual believers.

The young people of the parish spoke to us and to each other frankly about the pressures and discrimination they face. As the evening passed, I found myself wondering whether we in a parish in England would have been able to provide such a good and varied run of speakers, articulate both about their faith and about its outworking in the everyday world. There were several young married couples present, who spoke very simply and absolutely convincingly of the “tender way” by which one partner or the other had come into the fellowship of the Church through courtship and marriage with a believer. (I was reminded of Cardinal Duchesne’s *bon mot* about the triumph of the gospel during the dark ages: “Barbarian kings were converted in the arms of Christian princesses”.) There is no doubt that the greatest pressure is experienced in late teens and early twenties at the stage when admission to higher education or any kind of training, including apprenticeship, is treated not as a right to be enjoyed by those best qualified to benefit but as a privilege reserved for those who share, or pretend to share, the ideology of the

State and of the Socialist Unity Party. As the young people talked – with concern but without bitterness – of the problems and temptations they faced, it was very moving to see how they were being supported and encouraged by those who were a stage or two ahead in their pilgrimage. Thirty-year olds are already veterans; and they had won the right to say “Hold fast, keep going; we can tell you from experience that it really is tough, but if you hang on you will be respected, and pressure will diminish. You won’t get the promotion you deserve; but you will get by. And, of course, you will start to feel it coming back as soon as your own children start growing up and it is their turn to go through the mill.”

The calibre and maturity of the younger laity is very impressive, with regard not only to the State but also to the Church. At one stage in the evening a senior clergyman made a contribution to the discussion which was basically helpful but just at one or two points a little unctuous and “churchy”. He was immediately challenged by a young scientist who said, to applause, “That may be all right for you. You have chosen a career in the Church, and you live to some extent in a State within the State. But we have to live simply in the State as it is, and face the pressures of the everyday lay world”. The clergyman to his credit took it on the chin; but it was the kind of moment which could have gone badly wrong with more aggressive and immature laity or with an edgy or pompous dignitary. We have come a long way in the short time since the German Evangelical Churches were among the most clericalized and paternalistic in Europe.

And, despite the persistence of restrictions and discrimination which we in England would regard as intolerable, the situation of the churches has come a long way since the 1950s. By standing quietly but firmly for the faith, they, like countless individual members, have won through to a certain grudging respect and an uneasy but tolerated place in society.

It was a great experience to hear what the people of that parish had to say to us. We were not called on to say much about England and the Church of England; and that also was an encouraging sign that foreign visitors no longer have to be paid exaggerated respect or treated as exotic beasts. We could, however, join in the conversation; and at one moment I forgot myself sufficiently to interrupt and indeed flatly contradict a speaker, who had said in passing, “Marxism however has a purely scientific basis”. If Marxism did have a *purely* scientific basis, it would be everywhere accepted in the modern world, except by other scientists continually verifying it. But there is a considerable component of faith and of belief in unverifiable hopes for the future, which call for personal response and commitment. The test of any faith is whether it can be transmitted to the grandchildren of the founding fathers; and it remains to be seen whether Marxism, at least in the highly managerial and technocratic form which it has assumed in East Germany, will evoke anything more than notional assent in a generation’s time.

It will have to put on a more human face in the 21st century, if it is to win the hearts of the descendants of that other minority who go quietly but resolutely about their daily lives in a socialist State, and who meet from time to time for refreshment and fellowship, to exchange pilgrims' tales and to strengthen one another in the faith, as generations of believers have done for centuries.

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