

The Contribution of Catholic Christians to Social Renewal in East Germany

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One of the characteristics of the political situation in both East and West Germany immediately after the war was a general respect for the churches because of their attitude during the Nazi regime. It is true that this had not been an attitude of political opposition. However, the defence of church institutions and the inevitable conflicts between the Christian faith and Nazi ideology had restricted the influence of the Nazis who were trying to gain total control of society. On the whole, the Nazis had failed to dominate or exert any decisive influence over the Catholic Church. General respect for the Christian churches was common to all parts of Germany, as well as to all anti-fascist parties, at that time also including the communists. I remember that my parents, who were among the founding members of the Christian Democratic Union in my native town of Rostock, used to tell me that shortly after the war, in 1945, there was a political meeting of all the newly founded parties and organisations in Rostock in the city theatre and that among the main speakers, as guests of honour, were the superintendent of the Protestant Church and the dean of the Catholic Church.

This was the situation at the very beginning; but in East Germany this political honeymoon did not last very long. Soon it became quite clear that the Soviet authorities and their communist allies were not ready to restore to the churches the rights which the latter had enjoyed during the Weimar Republic, nor were they ready to allow Christians to refound their own schools or their own social and cultural organisations, which had been forbidden or abolished by the Nazis. In fact, up to the early 1930s, German Catholicism had been characterised by a rich variety of organisations, a highly developed network of different social, political and cultural associations, including even trade unions. Now East German Catholics discovered that they would be forced to continue their social and cultural activities in the semi-official, semi-secret circles and groups which had been developed under the umbrella of the church during the Nazi

period; so quite a number of Catholics were very soon asking themselves what the difference was between the system which had just collapsed and the new system which was about to be set up. In my own view it would be totally wrong to identify communism with fascism or Marxist socialism with national socialism, because Marx's starting point was a humanistic one. He thought that class struggle would finally lead to the liberation of mankind, whereas Hitler wanted to establish the rule of the so-called Germanic race over the rest of mankind. But for Catholics two features of the newly emerging political order were most prominent — atheism and totalitarianism — and these were features which they undoubtedly knew only too well from Hitler's rule. In addition, leading non-communist personalities who had begun their work for a new democratic Germany were arrested or simply disappeared — among them leading figures of the Christian Democratic Union, and also young Christians who (together with Erich Honecker, who was later to become leader of the Communist Party) had founded the Free German Youth as an organisation which claimed to unite young people of every democratic persuasion and from every section of the population.

It was against this background that the Catholic bishops very early adopted a strategy consisting of the following elements.

a) A clear distancing of the church from any attempts by the political power to involve it in activities which, under the guise of, for example, the 'struggle for peace', could be interpreted as support for or acceptance of a government or system whose aims seemed to be in sharp contrast to fundamental Christian values and which was not based on democratic elections and the recognition of civil liberties.

b) Practical cooperation with the state and local authorities in such areas as would not compromise the church in matters of principle, for example, in the field of public health and public welfare. The church had maintained and was still maintaining hospitals and institutions for severely handicapped people. The communists were in fact quite glad that the church had taken charge of the severely handicapped and young people, although they were not prepared to allow the churches to run schools.

c) A third and very important element in the bishops' strategy was their intention to restrict open conflict between church and state to issues which in their view represented a point of principle for the faith and the Christian family — such as the attempt by the party to replace religious sacraments or traditional expressions of religious faith or religious life with newly introduced socialist rites. One example is the youth initiation ceremony which was introduced by the East German government and which was intended as a continuation of an atheist tradition dating from the 19th century.

The rationale of this strategy was to preserve the integrity of the church and its internal freedom, and in this way to avoid the fate of the church in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. This seemed of particular importance because the Catholic Church in East Germany is a very small minority, in contrast to the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia and Hungary and especially in Poland. The strategy was partly successful, because the GDR, in spite of the division of the country and of the nation, remained a part of the wider Germany.

In the 1970s the communists began to claim that two German nations had developed — a bourgeois Germany and a socialist Germany. This claim was without any basis in reality. To a greater extent than any other Eastern European leadership, then, the GDR leadership had to consider the public effect of their actions on the whole of Germany, as well as on the international community. Furthermore, the anti-fascist reputation of the churches had at the very beginning prevented some of the very harsh measures against church institutions which were typical of Eastern Europe. Basically the strategy of the bishops was a survival strategy and as such it was successful. Nobody, particularly none of those who held political power in the GDR, could have had any doubts as to the irreconcilability in principle of the Catholic faith with Marxism and of the church with a socialist society, which was founded on materialist and atheist principles. As a consequence, only a comparatively small number of Catholics could be persuaded to support the government in prominent positions, even if these positions were of relatively minor importance.

This survival strategy had its price, however, and in fairness something must be said about this. First of all, its practical result was that the activities of Catholic laity were restricted to the space within the church and took place under the church's protection, and such activities were therefore dependent on confirmation by the church authorities. This state of affairs was in sharp contrast to the proud traditions of the Catholic laity in Germany. Necessarily, most activities, particularly the work of the numerous family or parents' circles, were at the level of the parishes, without any kind of central coordination — that is, without any effect on society as a whole. This, of course, tended to restrict people's attention to the parish and to difficulties with the local authorities, particularly with the local schools, and generally to restrict the horizon of Catholics. Only the Kolping Association, which unofficially continued to exist, and various groups of students, academics and professional people had some countrywide contacts. It was particularly in these groups that issues relating to society as a whole were discussed. And it was

from these groups that special initiatives were developed, by people who regarded it as their main aim to make a critical analysis both of society and of the church and its role in society.

There was however a second and more serious consequence of the clear, wide and necessary distance which the church kept between itself and the socialist state. This was a lack of any concern to participate in improving society. Since the foundations of society were regarded as totally wrong, any action to improve this society was held to be futile and hopeless. There was thus a real danger that the church would lose any specific interest in the existing social and political order as an incorrigible evil which could not be reformed. This danger was compounded by the fact that the churches tended to be exclusively represented by the bishops; and strange as it may seem, this restriction of horizons was reinforced by the relatively intact nature of the church and the relative internal liberty within its institutional framework. I still remember the striking contrast which I noticed, as a member of the synod which we held in the mid-seventies, between the life I knew from school and university, from society in general, and the totally different world I experienced in the work of the synod and its committees. In fact I met priests who hardly knew more about the society of the GDR than some visitors from West Germany.

Of course it can rightly be argued that many, if not all, of the attempts undertaken by certain Christians of both denominations to find ways of social and political involvement in a socialist society were based on illusions and some of them were definitely dangerous because they could be misused by those in power for their own political purposes. But at the same time it is also true that even illusions may motivate people to take an active part in history whereas a sober and critical analysis more often than not is associated with the passive attitude of an observer waiting for better times. In my view this is the fundamental reason for the reluctance of the Catholic Church in the GDR in the mid-eighties to take up specific social and political causes, an attitude which clearly differed from that adopted by quite a number of evangelical Christians and their churches. It took some time for Catholic Christians, including their bishops, to recognise that socialism and atheism were beginning to lose their militant vigour, were in fact beginning to crumble; that a deep crisis, accompanied by general resignation, was spreading through society; and that a totally new opportunity was emerging which made social and political involvement a realistic possibility again. This turning-point was probably the gathering of 100,000 Catholics in Dresden in 1987. Although the pattern of this gathering was still traditional — the bishops represented the cause of the church at public rallies, while the meetings of the Catholic laity were shielded from the public in church

buildings — there were two new phenomena. Firstly, the bishops demanded a social and political role for Christians in society, at the same time explicitly withholding recognition of the leadership of the Marxist party in that society. Secondly, the Dresden meetings strengthened the independent work of the Catholic laity considerably and in fact marked the beginning of quite a number of independent Catholic groups which were aiming to involve themselves in a society which was quite obviously approaching a critical stage. It was on this basis that a group of Catholic priests and laymen, backed by the authority of the bishops but acting on their own responsibility, took part in the ecumenical conferences which in 1988 united representatives of all Christian churches and denominations in the GDR in order to discuss issues confronting society. These ecumenical conferences provided the focus for a very broad discussion in the various Protestant and Catholic parishes, communities and groups about the situation in the country and the inevitable ethical, social, political, economic and ecological consequences. The papers which the ecumenical conference adopted in the spring of 1989 — at a time, that is, when nobody could have hoped for the fundamental change which would take place only a few months later — presented a clear analysis and a catalogue of demands for the radical reform of society. These papers had been worked out and adopted by the most broadly-based meeting of Christians which had ever taken place in Germany since the Reformation. The impact on Catholic laity was considerable. For the first time for decades, Catholic Christians founded independent groups and initiatives for political and social purposes which did not come into conflict with the bishops, and indeed enjoyed their support if not their cooperation.

In September 1988 a conference of lay representatives initiated a discussion with the office of the Bishop of Berlin, at that time Cardinal Meisner. The aim was to heighten a sense of responsibility among the laity in individual parishes and increase their activity. The discussion was to prepare a conference of parish representatives in October 1989. Under the influence of the conference of lay representatives and as a result of the deepening crisis in the country, the discussion gained increasing momentum and became increasingly concerned with political issues, which then became the main topic at the October conference. The conference in fact took place only a few days after Erich Honecker's resignation from the post of First Secretary of the Party and chairman of the State Council. For the eastern part of the diocese of Berlin (the diocese comprises both East and West Berlin), this conference meant in practice the beginning of an independent Catholic movement, independent in the sense that it took decisions and undertook activities on its own initiative and

responsibility, although in contact and cooperation with the bishops. In the following weeks and months, up to Christmas 1989, similar conferences were held in the other East German dioceses. The part taken by the bishops differed somewhat in importance and intensity but on the whole these months saw the revival and rebirth of an independent and lay movement, answerable to itself for its activities, in the Eastern part of Germany. However, this new movement differed considerably in outlook and structure from that in the Weimar Republic or in present-day West Germany. In fact, it was a highly heterogeneous phenomenon, consisting of independent and informal groups on a local basis, which were quite similar in structure to ecological groups or citizens' initiatives as we know them in Western Europe. After decades of rigid and over-centralised organisation, there was a distinct anti-institutional bias and very little readiness amongst the groups to integrate themselves into any kind of larger organisation, or to accept the decisions of central bodies, even if those bodies had been elected democratically. Most of these groups took an active part in local political action, particularly in the work of the numerous Round Tables which were so important in the 'peaceful revolution' in the GDR, and in the work of the committee responsible for dismantling the State Security. They were also involved in discussing various political issues, especially education, which for many Christian parents and pupils had for years been a source of constant sorrow and humiliation. A common feature of the newly formed groups was an explicit ecumenical commitment; some Catholics deliberately rejected the idea of forming groups of their own and joined groups of Protestant Christians. It is remarkable that, in spite of the informal and heterogeneous character of the new lay movement, it was possible in February 1990 to set up a Joint Action Committee of Catholic Christians in the GDR, as an instrument for dialogue and cooperation among different Catholic groups. The Committee consists of representatives from all East German dioceses. In February, it adopted a declaration for the first democratic elections in March 1990, which appealed to all Catholics to take an active part in the process of social renewal and outlined a number of issues, particularly in education, welfare and political ethics, which were intended to serve as guidelines for the electorate in the forthcoming elections. At the same time, the declaration carefully avoided supporting a specific political party. In fact, Catholics can be found in leading positions in all parties, naturally with the exception of the Marxist party. An indication of the importance of the new lay movement was that this time the bishops — who for so long had been the voice of the church — did not formulate a declaration of their own but in a short, pastoral letter endorsed and supported the declaration

of the laity, although they had learned about it after it had been passed by the joint committee and only a day before its publication in the press.

In the month following the elections, we saw a new step in the development of the Catholic lay movement. Parallel to the various organisations of Catholic families, Catholic employees and employers, academics, teachers and so on in West Germany, similar organisations have been set up in the GDR, because it is thought that such organisations provide the most effective way to pursue specific aims in a pluralistic society. In all cases, East German Catholics made a point of first founding their own organisations before they would cooperate, and then start to merge, with their West German counterparts. Their aim was to avoid simply setting up branches of West German organisations in East Germany. Consequently all these new organisations have sent representatives to the Joint Action Committee. As a result, the Catholic lay movement in the GDR today is a highly complex phenomenon, comprising, on the one hand, informal and flexible groups, and, on the other hand, formally structured organisations which are still in the infant stage. As a whole, and also in its separate parts, the Catholic lay movement in East Germany cooperates closely with its counterpart in West Germany. The Central Committee of German Catholics (in West Germany) and the Joint Action Committee of Catholic Christians in the GDR have together adopted the Berlin Declaration of German Catholics. The movement in the GDR reflects the present transitional stage of society in East Germany. It is our conviction that this transitional stage will last for some time and will confront people in East Germany with difficult tasks and problems. The Catholic laity will have to accept this challenge and as a small minority will have to help their fellow citizens to avoid both despair and illusion and to find their way into a new society — a society which does not claim to be the final stage or aim of human history but offers everybody a chance to contribute to its continuous improvement. The special task of Christians of all denominations will be to work for justice and full reconciliation, and to see that human rights and human dignity are restored, without taking revenge. This will become more difficult when the economic crisis in East Germany intensifies. It is a great challenge and an exciting opportunity: to spread Christ's message in a world which has lost faith but which is looking for a new hope. May God help us in this work.