

The Catholic Church in the GDR: a Look Back in Anger

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I would like to look back with you over the 45-year history of the Catholic Church on the territory of the present GDR. You will soon see that I am looking back with mixed feelings.

The Catholic Church in the GDR was and still is a diaspora church. In 1988 the population of the GDR was 16.5 million: of these one million were Catholics, some six per cent of the population. It was refugees after the Second World War who first gave a big boost to the number of Catholics in what was to become the GDR. The influx of believers from Silesia, Pomerania, East Prussia, the Sudetenland and Hungary marked a new beginning in pastoral activity. At the same time, tried and tested church structures were being reestablished and consolidated. The period up to the building of the Wall could be called 'the phase of unbroken Catholicism'. The concepts Christianity, Catholicism and Catholic Church were to all intents and purposes identical for the majority of Christians. The faith of this diaspora church which had suddenly grown so much in size found self-confident expression in a rich variety of ceremonies, festivals and holy days throughout the church's year. The already existing religious traditions were supplemented by traditions brought in by the immigrants.

Many parishes came back to life at this time. For many of the new arrivals, the church became their 'sacred homeland', to use a slogan from the contemporary pastoral programme of the Leipzig Oratorium. It proved possible to link the new churches and chapels which sprang up to the old system of church administration. The experience of surviving Nazi persecution shared by communists and Christians led in the immediate post-war period, when the communists came to power with Soviet help, to a certain respect for Christians and the church.

The inner mood of the parishes and the clergy at large was also unbroken. All church thinking and action enjoyed deep-rooted trust. No criticisms, doubts or even reservations were expressed in the face

of obvious weaknesses or errors. So the experiences of the Nazi period were not worked through. From 1947 the process of communist indoctrination and Sovietisation steadily intensified. There was, it is true, no direct persecution of the church and of believers as such, apart from exceptional cases; but it was clear that the aim was to confine the church to worship only. Nevertheless, in proportion as the SED set about making its own communist ideology the basis of all state policies of the newly-founded GDR, the churches, including the Catholic Church, became a kind of sanctuary or asylum for people who thought differently. This in turn led to continually escalating attacks on the churches on the part of the SED — the introduction of the *Jugendweihe* (Youth Dedication ceremony) for example, or the attempts to undermine church youth work in the 1950s.

In Heinrich Wienken (1883-1961) and Konrad Graf von Preysing (1880-1950) the Catholics in the former Soviet Zone of Occupation and then in the earlier years of the GDR had two church hierarchs who reacted in very different ways to the communist challenge. Essentially each held to the position he had previously adopted towards National Socialism, Preysing from 1935 as Bishop of Berlin and Wienken from 1937 as Commissary of the Fulda Bishops' Conference and hence as political intermediary between the Catholic Church and the National Socialist state. Preysing kept up contact with the Russians and their East German tenants through his deputies, but kept himself at a distance from both Russian and German communists, as he had previously done with the Nazis. In contrast, Wienken followed the line of direct contact, as he had done under the Nazis on the instructions of Cardinal Adolf Bertram of Breslau. Wienken wanted in this way to secure the existence and survival of the Catholic Church. The year 1945 did not mean a reversal for Wienken's church policies, but their continuation. Questions of the political order were, then, for Wienken of incidental significance. In the immediate post-war period a good many churchmen, like Wienken, placed their hopes in politicians of the CDU of the GDR like Hermes, Lemmer or Jakob Kaiser — for example, Bishop Legge in Meissen, Bishop Weskamm in Magdeburg and Auxiliary Bishop Freusberg in Erfurt. Their attitude was determined by their hope that in this way they would be able to preserve, strengthen and develop the life of their church. Preysing, by contrast, regarded this policy with extreme scepticism. One reason was that Preysing, like many Catholics in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and then in the GDR, thought that the unpopular communist system would not last long. He therefore felt it necessary to subject the religious and church policies of the Soviet Military Administration, and then of the government of the GDR, to sharp public criticism. Wienken, on the other hand, tried to achieve compromises and

concessions behind the scenes using diplomatic methods. In the subsequent policies of the Catholic Church elements of both strategies are to be found — of Preysing's more 'western' line and Wienken's more 'eastern' line. Nevertheless, the predominant line characterising Catholicism in the GDR well into the 1970s was the emphasis on distance, expressed most clearly by Bishop Otto Spülbeck of Meissen at the 1956 Catholic conference in Köln, when he used the image of the 'alien house' which the GDR represents for Catholics. One important factor, of course, was that the SED itself had attempted to crush any Christian initiatives through brutal power politics and had thereby persuaded Christians that desire for any kind of cooperation was Utopian.

A second stage is characterised by the phrases 'the building of the Wall', 'the Second Vatican Council' and 'the Meissen Diocesan Synod'. This phase is characterised by the fact that from 1960 the SED resigned itself to the continued existence of the church in the GDR, and the church — especially after the building of the Wall — to the continued existence of the GDR. Those sections of West German dioceses which were in the GDR (Erfurt-Meiningen, Magdeburg, Schwerin) were now *de facto* separate, although the state did tolerate material assistance to the church from the church in the Federal Republic. Three days after 13 August 1961 the Pope named Alfred Bengsch, the Auxiliary Bishop of East Berlin, as the successor to Julius Döpfner, who had been transferred to Munich. From that time on he embodied the unity of the Berlin Diocese. The GDR authorities soon allowed him the possibility of travelling regularly to West Berlin. The connections of the Catholic bishops in the GDR with the Vatican were also left untouched. The GDR bishops were therefore able to take part in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Two bishops were particularly prominent here: Alfred Bengsch and Otto Spülbeck. The latter was an enthusiastic supporter of the renewal of the Catholic Church which the Council was trying to achieve, while Bengsch boasted openly of having voted against the Council documents *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*. *Gaudium et spes* especially was a thorn in the flesh for Bengsch, and it is due to his influence in the Bishops' Conference that this important Council document was for all practical purposes not taken up by the church in the GDR. Bengsch presided over the Berlin Bishops' Conference from 1961 to 1979 and established a church policy which reduced contact with the state to the absolute minimum necessary. Anything which looked like a deal with the state or a compromise with the party was to be avoided at all costs. The Catholic Church lived at an ever greater distance from the problems of society and only intervened when the church's own interests were involved or when sexual morality was under discussion.

It was during this phase that the identity of Christianity, Catholicism and Catholic Church suffered its first rifts, and then in the end fell completely apart. The decisive factor here was the process of reform within the church set in train by the Second Vatican Council. A church which was becoming smaller was developing its own distinctive profile. Despite Cardinal Bengsch's restrictive attitude towards the Council, it began to produce its first effects in the GDR. Spiritual unrest of a kind not seen before began to manifest itself in student communities and other critically-minded groups. For the first time there was a widespread demand for ecumenism. The first ecumenical efforts were made. The Catholics in the GDR discovered authentic Christianity and Christian faith outside their own church. This also led naturally to people questioning their own church customs and their own way of living and witnessing to their faith. The debates of the generation of 1968 had their effects on the GDR as well. A clear signal was given by Bishop Otto Spülbeck and Meissen Diocese with the Meissen Diocesan Synod, which was convened by Spülbeck in 1966 with Papal approval and which met in 1969. Debating together, priests and laity took decisions of far-reaching importance for the involvement of Catholic Christians in the life of both church and society and thereby laid down important preconditions for a projected Pastoral Synod to involve all church administrative areas in the GDR. A theological and pastoral position paper on the goals and tasks of the post-conciliar process of renewal in the Meissen Diocese played an important role in this process.

Special credit for the preparation of this paper must go to the Leipzig New Testament scholar Wolfgang Trilling and the Erfurt lecturer on Church Law Benno Löbmann. It was in this decree from the Meissen Diocesan Synod that for the first time within the Catholic Church in the GDR an attempt was made to define the position of the church as such within a socialist system. It was comparable to the definition of the position of the Protestant Churches in the GDR as a 'Church in Socialism' in the Declaration of the Fürstenwald Synod of the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders of April 1967 — comparable insofar as this was the first time an attempt had been made within the Catholic Church in the GDR to make statements about how Catholic Christians ought to live out and bear witness to their faith in an increasingly atheistic society. There was no question of an acceptance of the GDR's system of 'real existing socialism', but the Catholic Christians were to involve themselves in the life of both church and society in the GDR. Cardinal Alfred Bengsch exerted his influence to the utmost to prevent this statement from having any effect. He went as far as ordering a negative appraisal by an ecclesiastical lawyer.

The sudden death of Bishop Spülbeck on 21 June 1970, shortly after a violent argument with Bengsch, settled this question, so eminently important for the definition of the position of the Catholic Church in the GDR, in favour of the church-political line of Cardinal Bengsch. From now on the Catholic Church practised social abstinence, living at a distance from GDR society. Bengsch and the overwhelming majority of GDR bishops followed the course of non-cooperation in a system which was in principle inimical to the church, and which, in their view, gave no opportunity for justifiable cooperation. Spülbeck's successor Schaffran finally put an end to the Meissen Synod, even though he had continued to promulgate the Synod's decrees.

The decisions of the Meissen Diocesan Synod were rendered to all intents and purposes irrelevant by the convening of a Pastoral Synod involving all church administrative districts in the GDR, and which met for its first session in Dresden in March 1973. This development was not uncontested. There were debates within the church about the involvement of the church and Christians in society, and about their missionary task. The most prominent protagonists in these discussions were student communities and circles of academics; the *Aktionskreis Halle* (a free association of priests and laity within the church, formed in 1969, which was regarded with suspicion by both state and church); the working group on social ethics *Pacem in Terris*; and the Leipzig Oratorium. Eventually these discussions were suppressed by church administrative means in connection with the Meissen Diocesan Synod and the Dresden Pastoral Synod, and this led to considerable tension within the church.

The climate worsened, mistrust of official church representatives grew, and demands were formulated and lodged. It was a stirring time, with debates and documents. From the other side there were frequent expressions of agonised concern about church unity, which went along with a ghetto mentality. This was certainly made more intense as a result of the fact that many priests and parishioners in the GDR were not native Germans. When they used the word 'here', a good many of my colleagues at the Theological Seminary in Erfurt did not mean Erfurt or Thuringia or Saxony, but Breslau (Wroclaw), Paderborn or Sauerland. One of them, who still teaches in Erfurt, always liked to refer to the GDR as 'Alaska'. This inability, very widespread among members of the Catholic Church in the GDR, to accept democratic ways of thinking or democratic structures within their own church, or to participate in them in any way, also led to a polarising of positions within the clergy and within parishes, and in many cases between them and the church leadership. We might also mention here the long-standing conflict between Bishop Johannes

Braun and the *Aktionskreis Halle* and many similar cases (Karl Herbst, Wolfgang Trilling).

In the end, then, the Dresden Pastoral Synod also failed. Not the least important reason for this was that the Berlin Conference of Ordinaries had secured for itself, by Synod statute, the right of veto which could not only be applied to statements of obligatory doctrine in matters of faith and morals but which could also be used on the grounds of 'common pastoral responsibility'. Nor did the bishops hesitate over using this right of veto to prevent discussion on Proposal 5, 'The Apostolate and Service in the World'. The Dresden Pastoral Synod did not lead, then, to a new orientation for the Catholic Church in the GDR.

At the same time the process of the achievement of canonical independence for the ecclesiastical administrative districts in the GDR was completed. Since 1971 the Berlin Conference of Ordinaries, founded in 1950 as the East German Bishops' Conference, had been sending its own representative to the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, which had been set up after the Second Vatican Council. In 1972 the Diocese of Berlin was separated out from the simultaneously dissolved German Metropolitan Union of Breslau and was subordinated directly to the Pope, while the Görlitz remnant of the old Breslau Archdiocese became the Görlitz Apostolic Administration. In 1973, after the conclusion of the Definitive Treaty between the two German states, the Pope then named the leaders of those Catholic administrative regions which territorially belonged to dioceses in the Federal Republic as Apostolic Administrators for those regions, with all the rights and duties of an ordinary directly subordinate to Rome. The last step was in 1976 when on 10 April Pope Paul VI raised the Berlin Conference of Ordinaries to the level of a territorial Bishops' Conference. Since then it has officially called itself the Berlin Bishops' Conference and has also separated itself from the All-German Bishops' Conference, to which it had hitherto belonged as a regional conference.

I see, then, the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s as a third phase in the history of the Catholic Church in the GDR. It is connected with the fact that the great universal Catholic Church is no longer the homeland, the trusted homeland, that it once was, and in which people lived willingly and gladly. Developments like the Meissen Diocesan Synod and the Dresden Pastoral Synod contributed to a situation in which this church seemed more and more to be taking on the features of an all too familiar system, with which people were confronted in their everyday life in society. Little wonder, then, that the people began searching for a place where such a thing was to be rediscovered — that is, where the lost security was going to be

provided again. After all kinds of trouble and frustration this place was nevertheless quickly found: the local community. This was above all — although not exclusively — the parish. The Christian community regained significance all over again as the place where the Christian life was realised in three ways: in hearing and proclaiming the Gospel; in the community coming together; and in the common search for ways of living together as brothers and sisters in the special conditions of life in an ever more dechristianised society. For a good many, all this was connected with a disappointed and conscious turning away from the 'official' church. Nobody expected hope or decisive initiatives for a convincing and authentic Christian life from that quarter any more. A shadow society arose widely in the parishes, a society in which people lived as it were alongside the official socialist society. Many took refuge in their Catholic niche.

Nevertheless, something which was new for the Catholic Church in the GDR was beginning tentatively to develop. A new sensitivity was developing for the problems of society, for the task of Christians in the world, for critical questioning of authority, for problems of justice and peace throughout the world. The encyclicals *Pacem in terris* of John XXIII and *Populorum progressio* of Paul VI were greeted with acclamation. The World Church was addressing itself to the big questions of human survival, while in the GDR the Catholic Church continued to maintain a deafening silence on these matters. The silence continued even after 6 March 1978, when the point had been reached where the Conference of Protestant Church Leaders and Chairman of the Council of State, Erich Honecker, sat down to a conversation together. There was nothing in the Catholic Church to correspond to the readiness of the Protestant Church in the GDR to engage in positive and critical discussion in the double role of Christians and citizens.

So the Catholic Church largely missed out on the beginning of the discussions on the peace question, on which both the basis groups and the synods and leaders of the Protestant Church had been expressing critical opinions since 1978. The discussion on the ethics of peace soon came to a head and then broadened into a discussion of human rights and the protection of the environment. The Protestant Church assumed the role more and more of advocate for those at the grass roots who were taking a critical attitude on peace issues. Meanwhile the Catholic Church, remaining faithful to its basic position of social abstinence, did not become involved in this debate. The consequence of this was that Catholics who felt strongly about these questions sought the shelter of the Protestant Church.

The beginning of the 1980s did nevertheless see a certain change in tendency. With the deaths of Cardinal Bengsch in December 1979 and

of Bishop Hugo Aufderbeck in January 1981 a new generation of bishops began to establish itself, notably in the person of Bishop Joachim Wanke of Erfurt. While the new Bishop of Berlin, Joachim Meisner, held fast to the Bengsch line, there were signs of a change of tendency in Wanke. He was the first Catholic bishop in the GDR to take up the peace question, and his position on many issues was similar to that of the Protestant Church. The Pope expressed his approval. During the *ad limina* visit of the bishops of the GDR on 28 October 1982 Pope John Paul II encouraged the bishops to concern themselves with this question and in doing so to cultivate closer contact with the Protestant Church. This was also decisive for the Pastoral Letter of 1 January 1983, in which for the first time the Catholic bishops together addressed the question of Christian responsibility for peace and thereby commented on the society in which they were living. The Catholic bishops subsequently spoke several times about the problem of emigration and urged people to stay. The high points of this development were a pastoral letter from the Berlin Bishops' Conference in September 1986, with consciously differentiated statements about the social involvement of Catholic Christians, and the Catholic Assembly in Dresden in July 1987. The Catholic Assembly represented another milestone in the history of the Catholic Church in the GDR. The grass roots of the church gave a clear welcome to the opening up of the official church which was becoming evident. Dresden gave a further impetus to the church. Many delegates to the Congress which preceded the meeting requested the bishops to involve themselves more intensively in ecumenical activity, and above all to participate fully, and not just as observers, in the Ecumenical Assembly of Churches and Christians for Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation which began in February 1988. It was through this Ecumenical Assembly that a remarkable process started, involving the Catholic Church as well, which finally resulted in the peaceful revolution in the GDR. It is characteristic, however, that this time as well the impulse came not from the hierarchy, but from below. It is true, there were individual bishops who spoke up (Braun, Reinelt). But in general this time too the 'official' church involved itself much too late. Many people in parishes asked, 'Why only now?' It was particularly painful when various Catholic dignitaries such as Gerhard Lange, the Berlin prelate and church politics commissioner of the Bishops' Conference, or Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Köln, the former Bishop of Berlin, presumed to the role of victors in the *Rheinischer Merkur* of 5 January 1990. 'The success,' writes Rev. Heinz-Josef Durstewitz in a letter of 28 November 1989 to Georg Sterzinsky, the Bishop of Berlin, 'is the fact that now thinking people are no longer interested in what comes out of

our church of a political nature, because even if it was good it usually came too late.' And he goes on to suggest something which many Catholics in the GDR are indeed perceiving: a new, rich and personal conception of Catholic church politics in the GDR.

Happily, Durstewitz' appeal does not seem to have been without effect. The Catholic Church has since finally joined the Organisation of Christian Churches as a full member; the *Justitia et Pax* commission has opened itself up to lay participation; and finally Bishop Sterzinsky made an impression with his greeting to the Synod of the Federation of Protestant Churches in East Berlin at the end of February 1990, which included the confession: 'We had no hope that demonstrations or the expression of people's will could lead to success, and we regret that for that reason we held back and played far too small a part in bringing about the new initiatives'. It is also important that Sterzinsky took this opportunity explicitly to thank Protestant Christians and communities for their courageous involvement in the events of autumn 1989 which led to the upheaval in East German society.

Here at last, then, are plain words, which not only confess guilt but also show a readiness for a new policy on the part of the church. This is a signal which will encourage many committed Catholics to continue their witness.