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Polish Jesuits Facing Communism and its Consequences*

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What Happened?

Fifty years ago the Russian troops fighting against the Germans liberated Poland from Nazi occupation and then imposed a materialistic and atheistic system on a nation which had belonged to Catholic culture and tradition since the year 966. The result was a confrontation between the Christian vision of reality with an ideology that left no room for God in social, cultural and political life. The experiment in building a world without God was conducted by various means: persecution and oppression, especially in the first period (until 1956); indoctrination at all levels and in different milieux (in schools, universities, social organisations, publications, the mass media and so on). The instrument for controlling society and spreading atheism was the one-party system with its ideology that penetrated every sphere of life. All this was carried out within a totalitarian system, and although officially the country was a '*People's* Democracy' behind this curious tautology lay a quite different reality. It was not the people who governed, but a new class, the '*nomenklatura*', possessing unlimited power, riches and other privileges, especially impunity. The slogan 'proletarians of all countries, unite!' was unceasingly repeated, but in fact everything was done to disrupt solidarity among human groups. One of the characteristic traits of communism was falsification of history and also falsification of the truth about everyday life. There was a great gap between life as it really was and life as it was presented in the mass media.

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland was confronted with a challenge, one of the greatest in its history. The communist system recognised the Church as its enemy. After an initial period of persecution, however, it became clear that the Church had the inner strength to offer effective resistance, and the communist authorities adopted a more liberal attitude towards religion and religious life. Slowly both the Church and the religious orders started to find their way in the new situation. In the first phase they had been deprived of many of their apostolic works – schools, publishing houses, periodicals, retreat houses. However, the Jesuits soon started up new apostolates, especially work in parishes and the teaching of catechetics within the parish. This was a great contribution to the basic, immediate pastoral care which was required, but it also had its negative aspects. The limitation of the field of action and the impossibility of undertaking a serious discernment because the situation was not a normal one led to an identity problem. Sometimes this involved a process of what

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was called 'diocesanisation' in which religious engaged in parishes began to lead a lifestyle more appropriate to diocesan clergy.

During the whole communist period the Society of Jesus in Poland was able to organise a more or less normal formation for its young men. In both Jesuit provinces (Greater Poland and Southern Poland) the novitiates functioned, in Kalisz (now in Gdynia) and in Stara Wieś respectively. Intellectual formation was assured at the Faculty of Philosophy in Kraków and at the 'Bobolanum' Faculty of Theology in Warsaw, both finally recognised by the communist government in May 1989. From the 1970s it was possible to send young Polish Jesuits abroad for theological and other studies, especially to Rome, but also to other academic centres of the Society in Europe. Thanks to this initiative, we now have in Poland a good number of Jesuits trained in the 'free world'. It was the best way to break out of the isolation imposed on the Polish Jesuit provinces by the communists, as in other Eastern European countries.

The involvement in the parishes was slowly enriched by other forms of apostolate. An editorial centre in Kraków was never closed even though in some years it succeeded in publishing only one booklet. Two Jesuit journals were able to resume publication in 1982: *Przegląd Powszechny* (a social-cultural-religious review) and the *Posłaniec Serca Jezusowego (Messenger of the Sacred Heart).* Retreats could be organised, at the beginning just for priests and religious, then later also for lay men and women. From the 1960s the Polish Jesuits were also able to send missionaries abroad, to Zambia, Madagascar, the Middle East, Brazil, Taiwan. This missionary activity is evidence of the openness of the Polish Jesuits to the needs of the universal Church.

The Church in Poland not only defended its rights, but became increasingly active in defence of the human person and his dignity. The Jesuits were involved here too. For many, unbelievers included, the Church thus became a point of reference in their fight for human and national rights. An important event in Polish history was the election of Pope John Paul II on 16 October 1978. Two years later, in August 1980, Solidarity was born, ushering in the last phase of communism in Poland and in other countries.

The Consequences

The year 1989 brought the collapse of communism in Poland. The totalitarian one-party system had become degenerate and collapsed quickly at the end. It lacked any authentic principle of unity for the diverse groups in the larger community of the people. The system was exhausted and had nothing to offer in the material field; in the spiritual sphere it had never been able to answer the fundamental questions of every human person, questions about life and death. The fall of communism revealed an enormous expanse of devastation in all the domains of human and social life. The extent of this devastation indicates the extent of the challenge which confronts the Church, including the Polish Jesuits. We must undertake deeper reflection upon what has happened if we are to answer this challenge. This reflection has been going on among my Polish brethren at different levels over the last five years.

Let me mention just a few examples of the consequences of the system we have inherited. The environment of man, God's creature, has been systematically and wantonly devastated. The product of the system, *homo sovieticus*, has a distinctive mentality. Something has changed in the depths of human consciousness after living for years in that artificial world. People were taught to live in an impersonal, collec-

tive agglomerate, and not in an authentic community. Society disintegrated. Authentic social and human relations were never built, much less consolidated. People were not educated to care for the common good, or to participate authentically in political life while sharing in that care. As a result of this our social and political life are now characterised by confusion and strife. The ethos of work has been ruined. We may speak of an illness of which the symptom is an incapacity to work. Large numbers of people are devoid of initiative and responsibility, incapable of creative activity. One of the characteristic features of life in communist countries was a lack of confidence, with suspicion and prejudice governing interpersonal relations. This reserve was necessary if an individual was to be able to survive the system and avoid exposing himself to danger. A society emerging from the experience of communism, then, has many wounds. It is a sick society which needs help, patient help, and there is not much hope of quick results. Many years are needed to reconstruct what took years to destroy.

Everyone living in the communist system was more or less contaminated. The system deformed the individual and generated attitudes which I have already described. Young people entering religious life were not immune. With the best will in the world they often brought these attitudes with them into the houses of formation and religious communities. The task confronting those responsible for their formation was, and still is, to purify their motivation and to introduce them to an attitude of openness and trust in interpersonal relations. The *Ordo formationis* used in the Polish Jesuit provinces quite clearly addresses this problem.

So far I have stressed the negative aspects of the experience of living in communist Poland. Obviously I would be giving a very one-sided view of reality, however, if I did not mention the fact that this was also a time of resistance and of magnificent witness to solidarity and fidelity. The Church in Poland was very dynamic in the pastoral sphere, in catechetics, in the formation of millions of children and young people. I would even say that if Poland felt the effects of communism less than some other countries we owe this in large measure to the Church. We should nevertheless undertake a serious examination of conscience to see whether we fulfilled our mission to the greatest extent possible at that time.

New Challenges

1989 brought the fall of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of a divided world and of the Soviet Empire. The difficult past continues to mark the present, however, which it conditions and influences. The past shaped people's mentality and it is not easy to overcome. It was easier to pull down the stone wall than the inner walls that had grown up in human hearts. It is not easy, after so many years, to change one's mentality and one's attitudes and to accept responsibility for one's future. It is not easy to free oneself inwardly from a system that on the one hand enslaved, but on the other hand assured a certain protection while inculcating an attitude of passivity and conformity. We have regained freedom, but often we do not know what to do with it. Many accept only one aspect of freedom – 'freedom from' – and take this to mean that they can do anything they want, not taking into account the rights of others. Democracy is a good system; but our task now is to help people to understand that it is necessary to commit themselves to the common good, and not to the particular and egotistic interests of single groups. It is a paradoxical fact that while the communists were unable to destroy Solidarity it has destroyed itself in free Poland.

At the same time, we are confronting new problems. With the passing of the

communist system institutional atheism is no more, but now it is secularism that is spreading, secularism as a way of life led as if God did not exist. This secularism is accompanied by consumerism, a desire for prosperity, which is very often unrealistic for the greater part of impoverished postcommunist Europe. This desire to consume unobtainable goods produces disappointment, causing frustration and aggressive attitudes.

This is the complex reality – the heritage of the past and the new challenges – which forms the context for the mission of the Church and of the Society of Jesus in Poland. The Church in Poland is looking for its new place in a society which is becoming pluralistic. During communism, the Church was a unique independent institution, and it had a substitutive function in social and political life, defending the nation against the totalitarian system. In many ways it was easier for the Church to win acceptance among the people, even among unbelievers, during the communist period.

We experienced evil, violence and hatred. There is a great need for forgiveness and reconciliation, both within Poland and between Poland and neighbouring countries. The field for potential action here is enormous: forming human hearts and consciences, building interpersonal and social relations based on the Gospel. People must be taught how to communicate with each other in a genuine way, how to get to know one another, how to pull down walls of prejudice, misunderstanding and mistrust. The Church in Poland now needs also to activate the laity more. Under communism there was a high number of vocations for priesthood and the religious life, but many lay Catholics were left quite passive. Continuing but partially reducing their pastoral work in parishes over the past five years, the Polish Jesuits, now numbering 730, have opened up to new possibilities, responding to the challenges of the postcommunist situation. We may identify five main fields of apostolate as characteristic of this new period.

The Apostolate of the Spiritual Exercises

At the moment we have five retreat houses in Poland, two of which – in Częstochowa and Gdynia – are very dynamic spiritual centres. Thousands of laymen and women, religious, seminarians and priests have participated in directed retreats lasting eight or ten days. Some of them repeat the experience every year. This form of apostolate is particularly important in the postcommunist environment and in the face of new challenges. Participants are introduced to deeper reflection, prayer and discernment in order to enable them to deal with new situations. Even the priests, seminarians and religious are rediscovering the importance of spiritual direction and of deep personal experience. To support this retreat movement, in September 1994 the Kraków Jesuits launched a new review of Ignatian spirituality, *Życie Duchowe*, as a vehicle for communication and a means of continuing the retreat experience. I am personally convinced that this rebirth of the Spiritual Exercises will have another effect: it will contribute to the renewal of Jesuits themselves, of their life and apostolate.

Education

I have already mentioned the fact that two faculties – of philosophy in Kraków and of theology in Warsaw – continued to function during the communist era. At that time they were restricted to Jesuits but from 1989 non-Jesuits were able to attend and in a short time they became dynamic academic centres for the education of laymen

and women. In Kraków an Institute of Religious Culture has been set up. It runs a three-year programme, and it is also possible to specialise in religious pedagogy (a five-year programme with 400 students). With this institute the Polish Jesuits have returned to their traditional apostolate of education. In September 1994 the Warsaw Jesuit Province opened its first high school, in Gdynia.

The Mass Media

In 1989 the Polish Bishops' Conference entrusted to the Jesuits responsibility for Catholic programmes on state radio and television. Obviously the Jesuits are doing this work in collaboration with lay people. Fr Andrzej Koprowski's team is seeking to show the new face of the Church and to educate people in Christian behaviour. We have already mentioned the new Jesuit journals. There is also a book-publishing centre in Kraków.

Social Commitment

Under communism, the priority for the Polish Jesuits was the defence of the faith, and this is readily understandable. In a certain sense the defence of the faith became an issue of social justice. The individual human being was not to be left alone, deprived of transcendental values, condemned to live without God and without essential points of reference for human existence. Now in the postcommunist situation it is also necessary to give greater commitment to another dimension of the faith with social implications: the love of one's neighbour. The Jesuits in Kraków, for example, have made a significant commitment to orphans, and have organised a centre for them in Żmiąca, involving many lay people in this work. There are also two centres for deprived young people in Kraków and Nowy Sącz.

Commitment in Other Formerly Communist Countries

The Polish Jesuits were among the first to organise the independent Russian region of the Society of Jesus, comprising the territory of the former Soviet Union except for the Baltic countries. One of these Jesuits is in Moscow, and there are three in Novosibirsk, two in Ukraine and one in Kazakhstan. Some young Jesuits in Poland are preparing themselves to go to Russia. They are also helping their brethren in other formerly communist countries: two in Bohemia and one in Romania.