

# The Polish Episcopate: Spokesman for Society

LUCJAN BLIT

Churches should keep away from politics. This is the basic dogma of most Marxist, and certainly of all communist regimes wherever they exist. The monopolistic Party in such countries finds it difficult enough to tolerate the pastoral activities of the Church's clergy, let alone any church pronouncement on political or social matters which contradicts, or is merely different from, the official dogmas proclaimed by the Party. Yet a totalitarian system, by its very nature, makes every public activity political. The situation which exists now in People's Poland has driven the Roman Catholic Church (to which some 90% of the 35 million Poles belong) to commit herself unambiguously on the most fundamental problems facing the Poles.

The year 1976 began and ended in Poland with highly explosive national debates. The first was connected with the Party's proposed changes in the Polish Constitution. These changes concerned three problems: the Communist Party's monopoly of political power in the country was to be asserted; the satellite role of People's Poland vis-à-vis Soviet Russia was to be presented as a voluntary act on the part of the Polish nation; and finally, the rights of every citizen were to be made dependent on the fulfilment of his duties toward the State. To be fair, these three new clauses in the Constitution would have no more than codified the political reality of present-day Poland. Yet a wave of protest letters, signed by thousands of Poles, reached the communist leadership (see, for example, the document pp. 84-85). In January 1976 the head of the Church, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, too sent a letter to the government, opposing in the name of the Polish Episcopate all three proposals.<sup>1</sup> (A statement made by the Episcopate and dated March 1976 is printed on pp. 85-87. *Ed.*) On the first Sunday in May 1976 a solemn letter signed by the Episcopate which protested against the proposed new clauses was read from the pulpits of the 13,000 Roman Catholic churches. Thus the Church publicly supported the action of academics and other members of the Polish intelligentsia.<sup>2</sup>

Impressed by the protests, the Party and government were compelled

to tone down the proposed new clauses. But when Stanislaw Stomma, the leader of the Catholic *Znak* group<sup>3</sup> (consisting of five members) in the Sejm, could not force himself to vote for these changes, he was removed from the list of candidates for the coming parliamentary elections. Such petty revenge on the only independent group in the tightly controlled Sejm was foolish. It removed from public life one of the few bridges which exist between an unpopular and isolated ruling group and the Church – the only nationally representative and influential body, which most Poles trust and are ready to follow in difficult times.

An explosion erupted at the end of June 1976 which the Party did not foresee. On 24 June the Polish premier (who is also a member of the Party's Politbureau) suddenly announced that from the next day the prices of a whole range of food items would be raised by between 40–80%. Whereas an average working class family in Britain spends 26% of its earnings on food, a similar family in Poland spends 52%, (i.e. double) on bread, meat, butter etc. On 25 June the workers in at least 11 industrial centres went on strike, and some spirited demonstrations took place especially in Warsaw and Radom. The government (and Politbureau) shocked by such a hostile reaction at once withdrew its decree. But the police dealt with this opposition in its usual way: a few people lost their lives; hundreds, maybe thousands, were arrested and brutally beaten while in detention. Courts handed out heavy prison sentences to those who were suspected of playing an active role in this spontaneous working class action. Nearly a thousand people who went on strike on 25 June were sacked from their jobs. In Poland, as in other socialist countries in Eastern Europe, there are no state or other funds for the unemployed.

In December 1970, when the Polish workers in the three Baltic ports began to strike, which threatened to evolve into a general strike and into an uprising against the discredited Gomulka regime, the workers fought (and partly won) their battles alone. But the situation was different in 1976. Many members of the intelligentsia used every means they could to help and every channel of communication open to them to express their sympathy for the persecuted workers. The Church did likewise. On 26 September the Primate, Cardinal Wyszynski, devoted his sermon to defending the persecuted workers and said that it is "a painful fact that in a workers' State the workers have to fight for their rights". At the same time the Polish Episcopate sent a letter to the state authorities appealing for an amnesty for the workers involved in the June strikes and demonstrations.<sup>4</sup> A few days later, on Sunday 28 November, a Pastoral Letter, signed by the Primate and Bishops, was read in all Roman Catholic churches. It listed the areas of conflict between Church and State and condemned the regime's attacks on religious faith. Such attacks were violations of citizens' rights according to international charters, which

the Polish government had signed, and contradicted the principles of the Polish Constitution. The Pastoral Letter continued: "Embittered people do not make good workers... Regardless of qualifications, skills and talents, leading positions in the professions are closed (to believers) unless the candidates profess atheism. Chicanery against students... threats, blackmail, long and onerous interrogations" are designed to wean them away from academic chaplains and church lectures. Seminarists, the Letter complained, were called up for military service contrary to church-state agreements. "Those who only superficially observe the life of the Church in Poland – the Letter added – may have the illusion that church activities meet no difficulties. In reality there is no end to the disgusting and brutal assault on God and Christ's Church." And the Letter ended with the words: "The Church is under attack. Be sober, alert and vigilant".<sup>5</sup>

Until now the Episcopate has carefully avoided being associated with any movement outside the Church. But after the June turmoil the Episcopate officially declared its full support for the Workers Defence Committee formed by 20 prominent members of the intelligentsia. The bishops were deeply disappointed with the practice of the Gierek regime<sup>6</sup> as opposed to the soothing words which the Party leader from time to time, especially in moments of political crisis in the country, addressed to the believers. On Sunday 28 November, all church collections were dedicated to helping the arrested or sacked workers and their families. The money was handed over to the Defence Committee, which includes a Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Jan Zieja<sup>7</sup> among its members.

Cardinal Wyszyński has evidently decided to throw his great influence and popularity behind the widespread protest movement against the police brutality displayed during the June strikes. In a 50-minute sermon on 7 December in Warsaw Cathedral (St. John's) the Primate said that he had a list of 34 workers who had been brutally mishandled by the police while under arrest.<sup>8</sup> A week later he went further: he criticized the role played by the so-called Trade Unions, which are in reality merely "transmission belts" of the Communist Party. The Primate said: "Trade Unions exist not for the sake of politics but for economic matters. They ought to fight for just earnings". He broadened the meaning of his appeal by stating that "if justice had been pursued, then the turmoils of 1956, 1970 and 1976 would not have occurred".<sup>9</sup>

The present regime has realized that it needs the Church's help in calming down society when physical terror and the threat of intervention by the Soviet army no longer have any effect; and yet it is bound by its Marxist-Leninist philosophy to oppose religious belief. While the Party leader and the premier publicly declared their wish to see the faithful collaborate in repairing the country's economy, while the government sent a large bouquet of flowers and a congratulatory

message to the Primate on his 75th birthday<sup>10</sup> (3 August), simultaneously a closed meeting of high Party functionaries was told by the Minister for Religious Affairs, Mr. Kakol, that the struggle against religion must be energetically pursued. The government, said the Minister, was contemplating, for example, new steps to prevent children taking part in religious activities.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the Party and government plan to do in their hitherto unrewarding struggle with the Church, the year 1976 seems likely to be a turning point for organized religion in Poland. From being the moral authority of the nation the Episcopate has, by the force of circumstances and by its own volition, become the spokesman for society.

<sup>1</sup> *Financial Times*, 13 January 1976.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 6 May 1976.

<sup>3</sup> See "Catholic Intellectuals and Constitutional Change in Poland" by Roman Slowacki in RCL Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 12-15.

<sup>4</sup> *Guardian*, 20 November 1976.

<sup>5</sup> *Reuters*, 28 November 1976. *International Herald Tribune*, 29 November 1976.

<sup>6</sup> In 1976 the government issued only 20 building permits for new churches and chapels.

<sup>7</sup> *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 November 1976.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 December 1976.

<sup>9</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 December 1976.

<sup>10</sup> *Guardian*, 1 October 1976.

<sup>11</sup> *Documentation Catholique*, Paris, August 1976.

## Poles Demand Basic Freedoms

*The decision to introduce amendments to Poland's Constitution evoked protests from religious leaders, writers, university professors, students, artists and scientists. The first of such protests (printed below) was signed by 59 people, mainly intellectuals, and sent to the Speaker of the Polish Parliament on 5 December 1975.*

The directives for the 7th Party Congress of the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party) include the announcement of a change in the Constitution. Following the conference in Helsinki, during which the Polish government, together with the governments of 34 other nations, formally asserted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we consider that the introduction of these basic freedoms should constitute a new milestone in the history of our country and in the lives of individuals. Prompted by our civic concern, we feel that the Constitution and the legislation based on it

should above all guarantee the following civil rights:

*Freedom of conscience and religious practice.* These freedoms do not exist when people professing religious beliefs or expressing an ideology other than that which is officially made compulsory are barred from a considerable number of key posts in public offices and institutions, in social organizations and in the national economy. Therefore all citizens, irrespective of their religion, ideology or party-political affiliation, must be assured of an equal right to take up government posts. The deciding factors for such appointments should only be one's qualifications, ability, and personal integrity. The free practice of religion and the building of places of worship must also be made possible for all denominational groups.

*Freedom of work.* There is no such freedom while the State is the sole employer, and while trade unions are forced to conform to the administration