

The Problems and Tasks Confronting the Church in Central and Eastern Europe Today

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We are going to consider the situation and the tasks of the church in those countries which until only yesterday were socialist. Indeed, some still are. Let us first look for a moment, then, at the state of man and society in a region which has been subject to a totalitarian system. Let me start by quoting some extracts from an article by a Moscow philosopher, Yuli Schreider, published in our journal *Znak* under the title 'Christianising Russian Society under the Threat of Anthropological Disaster'. Where does this threat come from?

Schreider sees it in these terms:

We are well aware that our economy has been hit by a complete disaster, and that a species of man has been produced who is incapable of acting in an independent and responsible way. This new human species is a consequence of the fact that we have been living in an isolated world characterised by total ideologisation. It has been our lot to live through the unique experience of an ideological structure which has regulated people's consciousness. Anyone who has not lived in this kind of system is not in a position to understand it.

Three basic principles determine the behaviour of man, the development of society and everything that happens in an ideologised world:

1. Everything which must happen will happen quickly and definitively (the universe must be strictly determined, otherwise the door is open to rebellion against the ideology).
2. The essential thing is not what now exists, but what must be (in concrete terms this means that one must not ask oneself 'what is this?' but try to find an answer to the question 'what ought to exist?').
3. Anyone who is opposed to what must be, or who does not contribute towards bringing it about, violates the laws of the universe and hence must perish, in line with these laws.

It follows, then, that anyone who is to be completely liberated by communism must come to terms with a system of complete determinism and complete submission. Such a man loses the capacity to reflect on what actually exists: he is busy listening only for the voice from on high, the voice which will determine what is to be and what is necessarily going to happen. He must come to terms with the fact that he has the right to live only as long as he accepts this determinism, this submission. Otherwise he is the enemy of society and of history.

In the long run an increasing number of people have realised the falsity of this line of argument and have begun to rebel against the hypocrisy and constraint involved. But in their rebellion they have not always succeeded in freeing themselves from ideological slavery. From my experience of the Polish situation I can distinguish several categories of victims of communism:

- those who are in subjection to the ideology, and who are suffering from intellectual atrophy and moral debasement;
- those who oppose it blindly and systematically, but who are likewise in subjection to its influence;
- those who have lost their way, and who have fallen into relativism and scepticism, and even nihilism;
- those who have apparently freed themselves from the shackles of ideology, but who have not in fact abandoned the tendency to think in manichaeian terms;
- those who are imbued with the master-slave mentality which is the source of defiance or codified hostility and which causes a paralysis of fraternity and goodwill in human relations;
- those who have learnt passivity and forgotten how to cooperate with others.

Even this short summary begins to show the extent of the damage. The decade of Solidarity in Poland has been an opportunity to provide a certain protection against disaster: it has taught people independence of spirit and the will to take action and work together, and has revived attachment to fundamental values. If this was a miracle, success is nevertheless only partial, for there is still a long road to travel and the sky is already clouding over.

The system does not only disorientate the spirit, making it incapable of taking initiatives and of working together with others, but also exposes conflicts between nationalities, religions and races. Shreider explains it in these terms:

The ideologisation of society deliberately retained the potential for hatred, a potential which was channelled with precision in directions determined by those in power. The relaxation of ideological pressure has meant that there is now nobody in

control of this cauldron of passions, even though there have been various efforts to make use of them in different ways. There is no hope that these passions will subside of themselves, because the energy of evil equals the energy expended in the search for truth, and today the need for truth is even greater than the need for food or clothing.

There is a feeling that truth is missing. Meanwhile the false truths which people have absorbed by habit have been discredited. Our society is suffering from stress and is prey to violent passions. One of the features of the search for truth going on today is pursuit of the guilty, of those who are now going to have to pay the bill, of those (by no means innocent) after whom people can shout in chorus 'Crucify him!'

Evangelisation has to take place in societies suffering from deep divisions and with very deformed human beings; and it also has to take place in a period of transition from dictatorship to democracy, from totalitarianism to pluralism, and from an integrated bureaucratic economy to a market economy with all its advantages as well as its dangers. The task of evangelisation has to be taken on by a church which is partially destroyed, partially powerless, partially still clandestine. The only church which seems to have emerged victorious is that of Poland. But let us look more closely at this so-called victory.

In his report to the European bishops in 1985, Cardinal Danneels made this remark: 'One of the characteristic features of Europe is its post-Christian situation, a situation which extends from the Atlantic to the Urals.' But when one applies this to Poland, one is talking about a post-Marxist situation, characterised amongst other things by a return to Christianity. For 20 years, and probably since the millennium of its conversion to Christianity, Poland has seen a steadily rising percentage of people both young and old who identify themselves as practising believers. We can also discern a tendency amongst intellectuals, artists and trade union activists to return to the faith. At the same time numbers are keeping up in the seminaries. Nevertheless, the fact that Marxism has collapsed as an ideology does not mean that it has no lingering after-effects. Quite the contrary. Its destructive effects are plainly to be seen in the economic and moral spheres. Along with the return to religion, the moral degradation of society has become more profound. We may note the labour crisis as well as crises of the family and of man in general. The shocking number of abortions has many causes, both material and psychological. The psychological causes include a hazy understanding of the human being, which also demonstrates an ignorance of the content of religion.

For some decades there has been progressive integration of national and spiritual values, at the same time as there has been a secularisation of people's ways of thinking and an increasing disjunction between faith and life. Deficiencies in ethics may not be getting worse but they are becoming more and more clearly apparent, as is our intellectual unpreparedness, and the absence of any Christian thinking about the problems of contemporary man.

The Evangelisation of Culture

The evangelisation of culture is therefore a task of prime importance for us. To put it another way, we need to reintroduce culture, and we need to transform this culture. What kind of state is it in? Above all it is heterogeneous, full of internal contradictions, devoid of any structure of values. The church attempts to transmit the latter, but within the habitual framework of catechising and preaching, and often in the form of abstract principles, of moralistic prohibitions or instructions cut off alike from their theological basis and from everyday life, or at best only partially related to life.

The culture of the masses, by which we are all more or less influenced, is a strange mish-mash. The disappearing ideology has been replaced by the values of consumption and entertainment. In short, culture is under threat from the dominance of relativism and from the stimulation of lower needs to the detriment of higher needs.

The clash between the teachings of the church and the instruction provided by schools and the culture of the masses leads to a schizophrenic mentality, to the coexistence of contradictory elements, which become factors in the process of disorientation, of moral instability and psychological weakness in the face of difficulties.

The evangelisation of culture consists in building a culture equipped with a system of values, with a moral framework which is at once solid and open, and which builds itself up through dialogue, that is to say by the interchange of values. We are talking here as much about personal culture as about the culture of nations and societies; as much about individual behaviour as about a cultural policy which is capable of facilitating this interchange and of searching for complementary values. This is a difficult task, more difficult than simply letting oneself slide into a relativist and permissive culture, only to react later against its evils with an authoritarian and traditionalist approach.

The Conversion of Laity and Priests

Since the Second Vatican Council, the two most recent episcopal synods and the exhortation *Christifideles laici* it has become evident that the church's mission is the task of all its members and that there is no distinction to be made within the church between active members and 'supporters'. If there were such a distinction it would be a deep-seated weakness. Now, it is not clear to everyone that this theology of the church demands a real pastoral revolution. It is a fact that hitherto the laity have been looked on as objects of evangelisation, and only a few of them have been conceded the status of 'subjects'. It is therefore a matter of urgency to recognise this as the status of everyone who has been baptised, and above all to make the individual concerned conscious of the fact, because he is often unaware that this is the case. It is not sufficient simply to proclaim this status: the whole education system must be remodelled, and introduced to the Christian life as the culmination of a mission and not as some kind of adjustment to coercive norms. In order to achieve this, teaching is insufficient: the child must be guided to take charge of this mission, and favourable conditions created to allow him to do so. A system of education must be promoted which will encourage the child to discover his own vocation.

The concept of mission must go along with a study of its scope and its specific characteristics. Here too we come up against difficulties, for evangelisation very often consists of nothing more than introducing people to the faith and to the need to obey commandments understood in a very narrow sense: evangelisation, in short, of a kind which does little to contribute to the building of a new civilisation, with the economic and political activity such a civilisation entails, inasmuch as these activities represent Christian service of man and a path towards sanctity. Who is to say what the sanctity of a businessman consists of? Is it to be restricted to those acts of mercy he does outside the area of his business concerns?

I would not presume to imagine the possible consequences if each Christian were to be answerable for the continuation of Christ's mission in the church community; but I know that this would have enormous implications of a kind which would be capable of changing the whole appearance of the church.

Converting the laity goes together with converting the priests, who frequently do not understand the position of the laity in the church. Without priests, it is of course difficult to raise the consciousness of the laity. Difficult, but of the first importance, particularly in those countries where political pressure is clearly aimed at clericalising the church and preventing the laity from involving themselves in any kind

of activity, forcing them either into passivity or into the underground church. Within the latter they learn to act autonomously, distancing themselves from parish structures and from the majority of the clergy in whom they have no confidence or who have not dared to become involved in illegal activity. In Poland we have not been reduced to this extreme situation, but a large proportion of the clergy still do not know how to work with laymen who have discovered their mission in the church and in the world.

The Community

The church today is struggling to make its mark as a community. The revived use of the concept 'the people of God' is a step in this direction, but one which has been only partially successful, since this concept is often deformed by use. In Poland, for example, it often happens that the term 'the people of God' means just 'the faithful' — that is, the laity, and not the church. We have to make an effort, then, to speak of the church as a 'communion' which unites Christians with God and with others. An understanding of the church as a communion or community makes it possible to avoid internal divisions and individualism on the part of a large number of Christians. I myself incline towards an understanding of the church as a family with Christ at its head. This conception arguably best conveys the essential nature of the church while at the same time being accessible to all. It makes clear the link with Christ without harming the hierarchical structure of the church, and also places stress on mutual responsibility and love rather than on the institution. This vision of the church is the easiest to understand, but it has enormous implications as far as structures and customs are concerned.

If the church is to be a family, this will come about in small communities where everybody knows everybody else. Fifty thousand people, or even ten thousand, cannot after all constitute a family. On this basis we can see that the structure of the church is tending to change. The parish has to be transformed into a community of communities. This can come about by the flexible application of pluralist principles, or by dividing the parish up into groups of a few hundred members or into basis communities.

The formation of communities is essential for the church as a whole, and in particular for local churches where a shortage of priests makes it impossible for parish pastoral activity to function normally. The experiences of different church basis communities are potentially of great importance here. On the vast territory of the USSR the Brazilian model of basis communities would be the most appropriate.

In Poland, smaller communities are needed in order to do evangelistic work in the places where people live and work, to convey the Good News and to build a network of solidarity into everyday life. In the face of conflicts both old and new amongst the nationalities, the church has a role of inestimable importance to play in societies which are in the process of becoming more and more diversified.

To sum up, one could say that given the new situation in Europe the church ought to be more Christian, more catholic and more ecclesial. More Christian: more Christ-centred, more inclined to imitate Christ; ready to take responsibility for Christ's mission. More catholic: more universal, more concerned for all men and for the whole of civilisation. More ecclesial: more like a community, more like a family. These requirements have a pressing urgency, particularly in view of the challenge of evangelisation which the post-Marxist societies are now presenting to the church.