

A DISSIDENT PARISH IN EAST GERMANY -

The Unique Story of Holy Cross in Halle

by Paul Oestreicher

Dr Paul Oestreicher, priest and political scientist, is a former Director of the Centre for International Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral. A member of the Advisory Editorial Board of REE since its founding, he contributed this article following its publication in July in the *Tablet* (British).

While most Catholic parishes in 'old Europe' can look back over a history of many centuries, a Festschrift has just appeared documenting the first fifty years of a parish in communist eastern Germany that is, in almost every way, unique. The city of Halle, birthplace of Handel, was an almost entirely Lutheran city until thousands of German Catholic refugees started arriving, expelled after the war from territories that were now Polish or Czech. In 1955 the authorities permitted the creation of a new parish to be called Heilig Kreuz - Holy Cross - at the heart of a city under Soviet occupation still scarred by the ruins of war.

Parish life began in makeshift borrowed premises until a license was issued to build a simple hall in a back garden. It was to become a treasured sanctuary of prayer, of community and of resistance. When the Wall came down and the German Democratic Republic ceased to exist, it took two volumes to tell one part of the story, the attempt of the Stasi, the security police, to infiltrate and undermine the life of the parish and to destroy the ministry of its principal priest, Dr. Claus Herold.

While the Catholic Church in Poland, the unofficial voice of the Polish people, received world wide admiration, hardly anything was known about the Catholic Church in Poland's German neighbour. In what was the heartland of the Lutheran Reformation it was Protestantism that presented a serious problem for the communist rulers. Its policy of critical solidarity with society remained a thorn in the side of the ruling Party and an important factor in leading to the eventual peaceful collapse of the regime.

Under the leadership of Cardinal Bengsch and his successors (the word under is not lightly chosen) the Catholic minority adopted a strategy tested nowhere else in Eastern Europe, a strategy of almost total abstinence from public life. Bengsch was an admirer of Pope Pius XII and an unbending anti-communist. For the reforms of John XXIII and Vatican II he had little sympathy. He made that very clear. His priests were firmly told: "this is an

alien society in which we have no active role to play. We shall not at any point give any acclamation to the state nor accept office in any of its organisations. Neither, unless the Church's interests are directly threatened, will we ever criticise the state. The Church will be a place of holy life and sanctuary for its members." This is best described as the politics of 'inner emigration' or of the holy ghetto.

Within its terms, this policy worked well. Unlike in countries further east, there was not a single 'peace priest' to give comfort to the Party. This strategy, however, amounted to an unwritten concordat with the state. "You leave us alone, and we promise to give you no trouble." That suited the Party well. It fitted every communist conception of the Church, an alien but irrelevant and dying foreign body. The Party did not even mind these misfits being largely financed by the Church in the West. That also applied to the Protestant majority. It brought in much needed hard currency and underlined that Christians did not really belong. No open conflict with the Church might also mean better chances of good relations with Rome, if possible over the head of the Cardinal.

Specially among intellectuals, for whom Vatican II had become a great inspiration, there was inevitable frustration. Were Catholics really to settle for social irrelevance? Some, particularly in the universities, made common cause with Protestant groups. Were they to be condemned to silence in the face of social injustice?

Holy Cross, Halle, was to stand out as a dissident beacon, a thorn in the side of the state and an embarrassment to the bishops. Its first priest, Friedhelm Wortmann, was so unguardedly outspoken, that he was simply exiled by the Bishop, at the State's request, to a West German parish. When Claus Herold, who had been a popular diocesan youth chaplain, came in the late sixties, that could not be repeated. Such was the local solidarity, that neither Bishop nor Party could remove him.

In those years I was Secretary of the East West Relations Advisory Committee of the British Council of Churches. Building ecumenical bridges across the Iron Curtain was my job. Although the Protestant Churches were my primary partners, I found my spiritual home as an Anglican priest at Holy Cross in Halle. A parish retreat was an uplifting experience. A lay council, unlike in other parishes, worked with but not under the clergy. Ecumenism was writ large. The documents of the Council, and specially Pope John's *Pacem in Terris*, counted more than edicts from Berlin. It was a place of freedom and of joy, happy to become part of Coventry Cathedral's ecumenical Community of the Cross of Nails. The emancipation

of the laity and particularly of women was refreshing. It was a eucharistic community that prayed, that thought and that danced.

And it was a parish with a social and political conscience. Fr. Herold, against much church and state opposition, even managed to obtain a doctorate at the Protestant Faculty of Theology. It was under his protection that an association with a nation-wide membership was formed: the Aktionskreis Halle. It was to enable Catholic intellectuals to debate and take an active part in the life of society. Almost like a miracle, it survived, though infiltrated by the Stasi and disliked by the hierarchy. So obviously was its agenda taken from the social teaching of the Church, that to proscribe it ecclesiastically would have been ludicrous and a favour to the state. To shut it down on political grounds would simply have created unwanted martyrs. When the secret police files were opened, it emerged that not a single member of its leadership had been drawn into the army of state informers.

This East German version of Christian Action, unmistakably Catholic and with an open agenda, was lay led. Its intellectual head had been a seminarian who had married instead of seeking ordination. Cold shouldered by the hierarchy, Joachim Garstecki was the expert on issues of peace and human rights in the theological research department of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Berlin. His intellectual output was influential throughout Europe. In a reunited Germany he was to become the Secretary General of Pax Christi. Holy Cross was his spiritual home, unconstrained and free.

Heinrich Pera, the Assistant Priest, was the third star in this constellation. A state registered nurse, he was the only Catholic priest in the GDR paid by the state. A nurse and in practise a pastor as well, he was respected and loved in the University Hospital, even a member of its football team, with a broken nose to show for it. Fr. Heinrich discovered the hospice movement almost by chance on a visit to Nova Huta in Poland. 'That's what we need', he concluded. He asked me, would I invite him to England to learn more. I did. The state agreed he could go. His Bishop did not. So I asked Cardinal Hume to invite him. That did the trick. Heinrich went first to St. Christopher's where he met Dame Cecily Saunders, then to St. Joseph's, then to Dr. Sheila Cassidy's Hospice in Portsmouth. Despite his minimal English, he learnt well and quickly.

Back in Halle, against enormous odds, he founded the first hospice in the GDR, attached to the Catholic Hospital of St Elisabeth. Like his friend Garstecki, when the Wall came down his responsibilities extended to the whole of Germany. He became chair of the

national hospice movement. So impressed was Rome with his work and writings that he was invited to become an advisor to the Curia on terminal care. Fr. Heinrich felt he needed to stay closer to the grass roots. He declined.

When communist rule collapsed, it is not surprising that the people asked Claus Herold to chair the citizen's Round Table that filled the immediate power vacuum. He and the people of Holy Cross, together with their Lutheran neighbours, had earned a modest place in history. No one had taken seriously the faked Stasi montages that had shown Claus Herold cavorting with half naked girls in a night club. It was not that easy to bring down this priest. Neither he nor Fr. Heinrich lived to join this year's anniversary celebrations. Huge crowds, far beyond the Church's membership, came to their pontifical requiems. With hindsight, the Diocesan Bishop now had only words of warm appreciation.

Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht had once declared: "the only new spires in our land will be communist spires." Holy Cross had no need of a spire to bring light into dark places.

Now, still on the same site, there is a beautiful new, but still modest church. Times have changed, new crises have arisen. With an economic downturn and a dire shortage of priests, parish amalgamations have become unavoidable. Given its strong lay leadership, Holy Cross is better placed than most to face the future with hope.