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## LIGHT-LIFE: OASES OF RENEWAL\*

by Paul Keim

Paul Keim (Mennonite) is a native of Goshen, Indiana, and a 1978 graduate of Goshen College where he received a B.A. in Bible and German. Paul and his wife, Julie, served with the Mennonite Central Committee in Poland from September of 1980 to December of 1982. After language study in Kraków, Paul enrolled at the University of Warsaw where he studied linguistics focusing on Hebrew and Polish. From December of 1982 to July of 1983, he worked under MCC at Keston College, England where he assisted in the Polish department. Paul is now enrolled at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

One of the most significant aspects of religious life in Poland in recent years has been the Light-Life or "Oasis" movement. This post-conciliar renewal movement is active primarily among high school and university students. In the past decade the movement has expanded dramatically throughout the entire country. Among the various Christian youth movements in Eastern Europe, Oasis stands out for its charismatic vitality, its highly developed organizational structure and its comprehensive program for spiritual renewal.

Since Poland was 'christianized' in 966 A.D., the Roman Catholic Church has played an important role in the nation's affairs. When Poland was partitioned by her powerful neighbors in the 18th century and ceased to exist as an independent political entity for over 100 years, it was the Church which preserved Polish cultural identity and the burning desire for national revival. When an independent Polish republic was established after World War I, the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed special status under the constitution.

It was a different Poland which emerged from the horrors of the Second World War. Her population had been decimated, much of her material culture destroyed, and her borders were shifted several hundred miles to the West. For the first time in Poland's thousand year history, the nation was comprised of an almost totally homogeneous Polish population. Moreover, liberation by the Red Army had led to the establishment of a Communist regime

the ensuing social struggle, the Church was able to maintain its independence, and over the years has been the most consistent defender of human rights and religious liberties.

In 1951, a young priest in the Katowice diocese named Franciszek Blachnicki was appointed to organize summer retreats for the altar boys of his district. By 1954 he had worked out a two-week program of spiritual instruction and recreation which he called the "Oasis of God's Children." The aim of these retreats was to introduce to the participants an experiential model of Christian faith which they could incorporate into their daily lives.

In 1957 Fr. Blachnicki started a national campaign against the abuse of alcohol and tobacco, which was a serious social problem in Poland. The campaign developed into a movement, under whose auspices the Oases of God's Children continued to be organized. However, the movement became conspicuous enough to displease the authorities, and in 1960 its offices were forcibly closed and Fr. Blachnicki was arrested.

Upon his release from prison several months later, Fr. Blachnicki relocated to the southeast of Poland. While studying at the Catholic University in Lublin, he worked out a comprehensive program of Oasis retreats based on his previous experience in the abstinence campaign and with the Oases of God's Children. After a two year lull, Fr. Blachnicki resumed the organizing of Oasis retreats for young people.

The movement was greatly encouraged by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, in which the reform of the liturgy played an important part. In 1967 a retreat for teenage boys was organized called "New life," whose program was based on the conciliar teaching that the liturgy should be used in educating young people in the essentials of Christian faith. In that same year, Fr. Blachnicki became the National Coordinator for Liturgical Renewal, responsible for creating a Polish liturgy for use throughout the country.

The number of participants at the Oasis summer retreats steadily increased, and by 1969 many of the more active young people in the movement were expressing the desire for follow-up activities which would build upon the experiences of the two week retreat program. As a result, small groups were formed to cultivate spiritual renewal at the parish level. These liturgical communities began to affect individuals and families in parishes throughout Poland, giving rise to a vision of spiritual renewal called the

"Living Church."

After 1972 the number and variety of retreats, now called "Oases of the Living Church" expanded greatly and included Oases for school children, high school and university students, young workers, priests, nuns and seminarians. A systematic course was undertaken to educate retreat leaders in the methodology of the Oasis program. As the movement spread, local bishops began organizing Oasis camps independently of the main movement.

In 1975 Pope Paul VI published his exhortation on Evangelism in the Modern World. The directives contained within it were adopted by the movement. The following year, the first congress of Oasis leaders took place, during which the name "Light-Life" was chosen as the official title of the movement. This name is intended to signify the need to bring the light of the truth of the Gospel to bear on the way Christians live their daily lives. At the congress, the movement's goals were summarized in this way: "All members should strive towards Christian Maturity through God's Word, worship, prayer, fellowship, evangelistic witness and service." A revised program for the movement was adopted which stressed the essential connection between evangelization and Church renewal, and Oasis identified itself as an evangelistic movement.

The Oasis method of spiritual renewal has proved successful in spite of the difficult conditions created by a Communist government. Though independent religious youth organizations are technically illegal under the present system, the movement has continued to thrive. Since 1978 attendance at the summer retreats has doubled. During the summer of 1981, more than 45,000 young people participated, and in spite of the imposition of martial law, it is reported that even more took part in the summer 1982. Eighty percent of the participants are between the ages of 15 and 18. Perhaps even more significant, close to forty percent of all young men being called into the priesthood come from the ranks of the Oasis movement.

Though the Church in Poland enjoys relatively greater freedom in its activities than those in the other countries of Eastern Europe, the Oasis movement has not been immune to harassment by local authorities. In some cases, young people have been forced to leave retreat centers, and those who have provided food and lodging for participants have on occasion been fined. When Pope Paul II was Archbishop of Kraków, he supported the movement and

openly criticized the authorities several times for disrupting its activities. Fr. Blachnicki has also been subjected to harrassment. During the harsh winter of 1977, for example, he was not allowed to buy any coal for heating. He appealed for help to his friends in the Oasis movement, and within a few days, thousands of small packages arrived at the post office for him, each containing a piece of coal.

Fr. Blachnicki emigrated to West Germany in December, 1981, where he continues to implement methods for work which he initiated in Poland, hoping to expand the movement to other countries.

#### What is Light-Life

Light-Life is a renewal movement within the Roman Catholic Church of Poland. If we take a closer look at each of the constituent parts of this summarized definition of Oasis, we may gain a deeper insight into its distinctive and essential elements.

First, Light-Life is a renewal movement. Renewal implies a critique of the status quo, an awareness of inadequacies and a vision for the way things can or should be. The Oasis method originally arose out of a new orientation to pastoral ministry. In the traditional model, the catechetical process seemed to consist of passing on religious knowledge or teaching certain religious practices rather than cultivating mature Christian faith. The movement's vision for pastoral ministry emphasized a living faith based on a personal relationship with Christ, Bible study, prayer, worship and testimony.

An emphasis on evangelization as an essential element of renewal arose, at least in part, from observations and experiences within the movement itself. It became evident that in some regions, and sometimes whole dioceses, post-Oasis fellowship groups had difficulty maintaining their dynamism. They met irregularly and with little enthusiasm, tended to form closed groups and exhibited a tendency to feel and act superior. Moreover, only a small percentage of them attended follow-up Oasis retreats and many discontinued any involvement after leaving high school.

In seeking the causes of this problem, Oasis leaders discovered that it was almost always associated with never having experienced a personal encounter with Christ. This shortcoming was dealt with at length during the first national congress of Oasis leaders in 1976, and at subsequent

congresses. The result was a clear and forceful emphasis on the importance of this first step toward mature Christian faith. Light-Life identified itself clearly as an evangelistic movement, dedicated to leading people to accept Christ as Savior and Lord. They saw evangelism, in this sense, as the road to spiritual revival through the actualization of personal faith.

The centrality of evangelism in the Oasis program led directly to contacts with Protestant evangelistic organizations. Individuals and groups of Protestant Christians began attending Oasis retreats, participating and sharing their own experiences in such areas as methods of evangelism, Bible study and personal testimony. Such contacts became increasingly significant as ecumenical encounters and cooperation, otherwise tragically rare in Poland. This activity has led to a certain amount of criticism and charges of 'protestantization' from within the Church, but the movement has successfully defended itself against such charges by appealing to official Church documents such as Pope Paul's exhortation on evangelism "Evangelii Nuntiandi," Pope John Paul's encyclical "Redemptor Hominis," and the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council, which give tacit approval to ecumenical cooperation.

The importance to Oasis of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council cannot be overemphasized. Between 1963 and 1973 the movement systematically adopted the vision and program of Vatican II and identified itself as a conciliar movement. When he was still Archbishop of Kraków, the present Pope said: "Light-Life, the Oasis movement, is the ecclesiology of Vatican II translated into the language of a concrete movement and concrete activities." Bishop Tadeusz Błaszkiewicz, a member of the Polish Episcopate's Commission for the Liturgy, called the Oasis method a road "which is the realization of the Second Vatican Council, expressly based on the liturgy."

Another characteristic aspect of renewal within the Light-Life movement is its charismatic emphasis. By the mid-1970s, it became clear that more and more members of Oasis fellowship groups were experiencing the manifestation of spiritual gifts. This phenomenon was discussed at the movement's second national congress in light of the enthusiasm and controversy it was generating. It was noted that especially prevalent were the gifts of speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy and physical and emotional healing. Movement leaders expressed affirmation and encouragement for the

exercise of spiritual gifts, including those referred to as "extraordinary" or "supernatural." In subsequent statements, the movement identified itself as charismatic and part of the world wide movement of Catholic charismatic renewal. In some regions, Oasis is known simply as "the charismatic movement." This has led to some contact between Oasis members and Polish Pentecostals, though these relationships still tend to be cautious and sporadic.

The second element of this definition considers Oasis as a renewal movement. Though it exhibits certain organizational structures, it is by nature a popular movement which has its roots in local parish communities. It is essentially a lay movement, characterized by dynamic spontaneity, an emphasis on participation and experiencing for oneself, and effective organs of communication. That the movement exists at all under the present system is somewhat surprising. Though it was officially identified and patronized as part of the Church's post-conciliar liturgical reform, Oasis developed to encompass a wide range of social as well as theological concerns.

In the third place, we see that Light-Life is a renewal movement within the Roman Catholic Church of Poland. This means not only that the movement is supported by the Church hierarchy, but also signifies the extent to which the movement has remained true to the heritage and tradition out of which it developed. This is due, in part, to the conciliar reform which legitimized an evolved vision of the Church as community (communio sanctorum) rather than societas perfecta. This model of ecclesiology leaves more room for movement, dialogue and renewal within the Church, thereby diffusing otherwise "heretical" or "sectarian" tendencies.

Another factor which contributes to the identification of Light-Life as an ecclesiastical movement is the political system in Poland, which restricts all spiritual activities to existing Church structures. This has the unintentionally positive effect of compelling charismatic activities to develop within the recognized structures of the local Church. The problem common to churches in the West, of integrating para-church organizations with the ministry of the local church, does not exist there. Oasis represents an attempt to utilize the circumstances of a restrictive system to the Church's greatest advantage.

Fourth, Light-Life is a renewal movement within the Roman Catholic

Church of Poland. This is the theological, ecclesiastical and cultural womb in which Oasis was formed and the breast which nourished it. The movement has consistently based its activities on church teaching contained in papal and conciliar documents, and in the Bible. While Light-Life has extended the Church's growing edge in various ways, this has not been at the expense of traditional Catholic piety. Polish Catholicism's proverbially strong devotion to the Virgin Mary has been retained and cultivated within the movement. This has contributed to difficulties in ecumenical relations with Polish Protestants. Polish Pentecostals are particularly chagrined when charismatic Oasis members, exercising the gift of prophecy, receive messages which seem to affirm the adoration of the Virgin. Oasis has also reiterated the movement's strong commitment to the cult of Mary, prayer to the saints, pilgrimages and use of images to contradict the accusations of "protestantization" from within the Church.

Finally, Light-Life is a renewal movement within the Roman Catholic Church of Poland. This crucial qualifier distinguishes the kind of Catholicism in which Oasis developed and the social and political agenda which has taken on increased significance within the movement since 1980. In keeping with the Polish Roman Catholic Church's historical role as patron of Polishness, a quasi-political program has been developed within the framework of the Light-Life movement, the goal of which is to liberate Poland from the dominating influence of Soviet Communism.

It is in this "theology of spiritual liberation" where one gains clearest insight into the nature of Light-Life's "quiet revolution". It is essentially an extension of this fundamental principle followed by the movement: "We will never ask what we are allowed to do, but simply do what we must as Christians who want to live according to the Gospel in the freedom of God's children. We will never let fear keep us from doing what we feel we must do as disciples of Christ."

By committing themselves to openly testifying about their spiritual renewal and to living according to their faith, a way was discovered to attain personal and social freedom without the use of violence. When the authorities threatened to break up Oasis retreats by force, none of the groups disbanded. Instead, they told the authorities that they would continue to carry out their program, and if they came to drive them away with force,



they should as Christians not fight against them with force, but pray for them and rejoice at being able to suffer for righteousness. As it turned out, the authorities never did come to drive them away by force, which served to confirm the movement's commitment to nonviolence. They call this "engaging in a political struggle in a way which transcends politics."

Whether Oasis will be able to sustain a campaign with such openly political overtones remains to be seen. More important perhaps, is the extent to which Light-Life and Oasis methodology will be able to penetrate and permeate traditional Polish religiosity in the villages and among the working class. An authentic spiritual transformation there would have truly monumental implications theologically, socially and politically, not only in Poland and Eastern Europe, but throughout the world.

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