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## RESPONSE TO THE U.S.CATHOLIC BISHOPS' LETTER

By **Janice Broun**  
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In evaluating the U.S. Catholic Bishop's Conference "Statement on Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe" I shall concentrate on the countries I covered in my book "Conscience and Captivity" and also refer to more recent developments. The Statement is an admirably balanced piece of work, very adequately researched and sensitively presented. I would like to quote a number of perceptive comments which it makes but as there is not space, I will concentrate on criticizing it on a few necessary points.

Ecclesial or institutional freedom should include, in addition to "freedom to choose and train ministers in their own institutions" the following statement: "without a numerus clausus imposed by the state authorities, and in response to the actual needs of their churches".

While the Statement wisely emphasizes that few Eastern European states have a tradition of religious or political freedom or tolerance it should have been more specific in pinpointing the more particular responsibility of the Catholic Church in suppressing freedom of religion in the past. Much of what is now Czechoslovakia and Hungary would be predominantly Protestant had it not been for the fact that the Counter Reformation was enforced with all the might of the secular arm. The extremely difficult situation of several Eastern Rite Catholic Churches today is to a considerable measure due to Communist governments exploiting lingering resentment against the methods the Catholic Church in alliance with the ruling powers utilized to incorporate large numbers of Orthodox believers.

In Czechoslovakia I met a number of active Christians in well-paid professional jobs. I was told in Prague that discrimination in further education nowadays is primarily against students of arts and humanities (only 3% of the total) rather than against church going students. However, Hungarians as well as Czechs have emphasized that discrimination is far worse outside the big cities where churchgoers are more conspicuous and less vulnerable.

The information on the Slovak Eastern Rite Church is somewhat misleading. It has emerged from its suppression with 355,320 members, 100,000 more than at the Communist takeover. It does not regularly come under attack in the way that Latin-Rite Catholics do and the main danger to it appears to be internal divisions between its Slovak and Ukrainian elements.

The section on the GDR gives the impression that it is only the Catholic church which has been critical of the government and fails to acknowledge the far more important role of the extremely responsible Federation of Evangelical Churches in this respect.

The Romanian section makes the common error of giving too much prominence to the complaints of Hungarian elements, and not enough to those of Romanians, whether Latin or Eastern Rite. It should have made reference to the effects on religious life of the systemization of village resettlement.

Thousands of members of every denomination and most nationalities, Romanian even more than Hungarian or German, will be affected. As Catholic spokesperson, Doina Cornea, pointed out, people will lose their houses, churches, cemeteries, farms, whole villages and parishes, and almost the entire basis of their existence. There is little prospect, under the present anti-religious regime, of any new churches being built to replace those demolished. The Statement should have given more prominence to the Eastern Rite Church and to the current campaign by the authorities to split it and to increase tension between national groups over the matter of rites.

With regard to the Serbian Orthodox Church the Statement is too charitable. In my opinion the whole-hearted commitment of this church to Serbian nationalism has vitiated its claim to speak for human rights for Yugoslavs as a whole. In that respect the Catholic Church as represented by the late Archbishop Jože Pogačnik of Ljubljana, Cardinal Franjo Kuharić and Bishop Alojzije Šuštar today as well as such journalists as Živko Kustić of the Catholic weekly Glas Koncila, has been admirable. Šustar complained to me that the church was not allowed any charitable work although religious without habits may work in state institutions. On a visit to Slovenia in autumn 1988 I was assured that there had been no discrimination against believers in normal walks of life since Tito's death. The church was getting on very capably, with only a relatively minor limitation remaining. However, Slovenia is ahead of other republics in most respects; a major omission in the Statement is reference to the long standing and continuing diversity of approach towards religion in the different republics. Bosnia still has the reputation of being the most illiberal and liable to imprison believers on flimsy pretexts, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim. Despite the generally improving situation for believers in Yugoslavia, there is always an element of unpredictability of which the Statement did not take account.

I do not see much sign of liberalization in the GDR and would recommend its exclusion from the list of countries with whom the U.S. should re-assess its policy. The Statement hits the nail on the head there when it says: "It is the state's monopolization of youth, its ideological threat and the virtual impossibility for practicing Christians to have access to higher studies and public offices, rather than the direct attacks and subversion of the church common in some other Eastern European countries that impede improvement in church state

relations." Unfortunately the government has not yet honored the promise it made during discussions with Protestant church leaders back in 1978. There has been almost no improvement in the area of discrimination, despite confidential complaints made on behalf of victimized individuals, mostly young people, some of whom had been offered places in higher education if they spied on church members. Out of forty cases raised by the Saxony Protestant Church Synod in 1985 only one was resolved. The only opportunity for employment for many Christian young people is in the fairly substantial charitable, social and medical institutions run by the churches. This almost unique feature in Eastern European life should have been acknowledged in the Statement. The churches are the only bodies which speak out on behalf of society as a whole and strict censorship of the Protestant church press has resumed. The Catholic Church and press is still very cautious -- to the disappointment of its members. Furthermore, Honecker has joined the Ceausescu admiration society.

Since the Statement was compiled changes in most countries have been negligible. Although in Albania Bishop Nikoll Troshani and some elderly priests have been released, there has been no indication of any relaxation of the ban on religion.

In Bulgaria the Catholic Church has been allowed to import missals. The Eastern Rite church was allowed two hundred for its ten thousand members. It remains to be seen whether the quota for the 60,000 strong Latin Rite church is on the same 'generous' scale. With the government resolutely opposed to the Soviet line on glasnost and perestroika, and clamping down on increasing signs of grassroots activity in the Orthodox Church, and on religious activists involved in the new Association for the Defense of Human Rights, and with Vatican radio still jammed, the outlook for believers does not look hopeful.

Whether in Czechoslovakia the limited concessions made last summer with regard to the church press, religious orders and registration for religious instruction in schools amount to much remains to be seen. Hungary is the one country where substantial progress is being made to restore greater freedom to the churches. Things are moving fast. Some of the daring demands made by the bishops in 1988 have already been met on an interim basis. It remains to be seen what the Commission (on which the churches are not represented, though they will be able to comment on its proposals) works out for the forthcoming legislation on church state relations. The three major churches may be prevented from attaining complete autonomy by their continuing need for state subsidies, and possibly, by their preference for the old style Hungarian alliance of church and state -- though on more equal terms.

In all, as the Statement emphasizes, religious liberty and human rights are indivisible. The Catholic Church in several parts of Eastern Europe has become committed to trying to promote both. Now is its chance to wipe out its past bad record. Now is the chance for Christians to make a major contribution to putting their nations back on the road to reconciliation and reconstruction, provided they are allowed to help. Meanwhile, the situation demands our constant monitoring and concern.