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CATHOLIC GLASNOST - BY ALL MEANS

By **Robert Tobias**
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The American Roman Catholic bishops' "Statement on Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" is a small beginning step forward in Catholic-East European relationships. While it sees a general pattern of intolerance, hostility and repression of religion in East Europe, albeit without very careful documentation, it also sees some more hopeful realities. The bishops identify and commend some positive possibilities represented in glasnost and perestroika, herald the rise to power of new political leadership, commend some specific progressive measures in certain countries, recognize that disarmament and improved political relations will go hand in hand with improved religious freedoms.

What the Catholic bishops do not do is to recognize Rome's own share of culpability for East European leaders' distrust of Rome and Rome's apparent imperialistic intentions.¹ For example, the Statement makes a great deal of the continued status of illegality of the Eastern Catholic (Uniate) Church in the Ukraine, and virtually that in Rumania. But the Statement does not mention that these churches were once Orthodox and became "Roman" by their forced conversion in 1595/1915-16 and 1698 respectively. What is to the American bishops (and Uniate refugees) disallowed legal status, is in Romania since 1948 regarded as "voluntary re-integration" into their mother church. In this, as in many other matters, Rome has an obligation to exercise its own glasnost--honest openness--if it wishes to have a new base of trust on which perestroika--restructuring--towards religious freedom can take place.

When Rome is ready to sit down with Eastern governments, it will have to lay on the table its own sad history of feudal oppression (10 million acres of serfdom in Hungary alone), concordats with oppressive regimes, participation in political intrigue and suppression with Dollfuss in Austria, Pilsudski in Poland, Mussolini in Italy, condemnation over the past 200 years of every major statesman in Italy (Massini, Garibaldi, Cadorus, Umberto, D'Szeglio) until Mussolini whom it did not condemn, support of the Nazi German invasion of Russia from the west and Fascist invasion from the south, collaboration in war crimes through Cardinal Stepinac in Yugoslavia, exercise of authoritarian methods and doctrinaire content in education, marriages and press wherever Catholicism holds strong power and influence, manipulation of political decisions through Christian (Catholic) Democratic Parties. Rome will have to deal openly with that side of its history if it expects credibility from Communists, some of them its former victims, concerning its own "new leaf" and a restored "religious freedom" which will not be grossly abused. The American bishops could probably

help make that happen, though their Statement's pretense to being innocent victims while calling on U.S. diplomacy to pick up their cudgels will hardly prove to Communists that Rome has changed.

The bishops' "starting point for action" . . . "is to inform ourselves." Fine, the whole story. "We must respond to the dire need for education about the complex realities of the situation. . . . avoid the polemics, over-simplifications and self-righteousness which are so tempting in this area." Fine. That means to get acquainted in open dialogue with what East Europeans have experienced at the hands of Rome.

But what the American bishops can probably best do is to demonstrate in this land how a Catholic Church with much power and religious freedom exercises that power and freedom in matters of social and economic justice (their statement on this subject is a very positive factor), in landlording, spiritual openness in education and marital institutions, third world and poverty concerns, nuclear weapons and military escalation--and then talk with East European Communists, with all that is sordid as well as promising openly laid out on the table. That would be glasnost. Some great perestroika might conceivably follow.

1. See my chapter on Roman Catholicism in Communist-Christian Encounter in East Europe. (Indianapolis: School of Religion Press, 1956), pp. 150 ff.