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THE U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS ON EASTERN EUROPE

by Charles C. West
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Once again we are in debt to the Council of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S.A. for a clear and correct statement of the principles of religious liberty and for applying them to the carefully described condition of the churches in communion with Rome in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This is a statement in the spirit of Vatican II. No special rights are claimed, but only those which are demanded for all Christians and indeed for all religion. The freedom of individuals and of the dignity of every human person and is "an essential element for peaceful human coexistence". This involves not only freedom of worship but also of evangelism, institutional life, social witness, and "the freedom to enter or leave a community of faith". The principles the statement sets forth could be affirmed by all churches of whatever confession on behalf of all believers of whatever religion. It is good to see them set forth on our behalf again.

The description of church conditions in various countries in Eastern Europe is also on the whole accurate, and applies to the experience of other churches as well as that of Rome. The differentiations among the various countries and among the various nations within the Soviet Union is well set forth. The statement puts in capsule form the complex situation we all face.

The situation is changing, however, after years of relative stagnation. By the time this comment is published, it will have changed even more, rendering all our descriptions somewhat out of date. It is important, therefore, to identify trends which will bear watching. Let me here discuss just two of them.

1. There has always been a tension within East European Marxism between the policies of governments and the reflection of intellectuals. Marxism-Leninism with its dogmatic atheism does not have nearly the grip on the public mind--not even on minds of those who run governments--as appears from the policies and actions of these governments. Now the policies and actions are beginning to change, and ideological change is even more rapid. It is ever less the case in Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland that Marxism confronts religion with a "scientific atheist" dogma. As the movement toward a more open politics proceeds apace, so does the movement toward a more open ideology. Accommodationist theories, reevaluating religion in relation to Marxist thought, and even taking open issue with Marx and Lenin on the subject, are beginning to emerge from the Communist side. They are

spurred by the example of the Italian Communist Party in the West which has long since dismantled this antagonism, and of which practicing Catholics and Protestants are members. It may be a while before these changes on the highest intellectual level work their way down into the attitudes of local officials toward church life in their districts, or to the teaching in government schools. But the trend is in this direction. We may be approaching the time when the scientific atheist premise of education in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union does not differ all that much from the same premise in the science classroom of an American high school. The trend will bear watching and encouraging.

This raises a counterquestion to Christians in the East. In what sense are they prepared to declare themselves as loyal citizens of a de-ideologized, but nevertheless socialist society? The Evangelical Church in the German Democratic Republic long since answered this question, forthrightly declaring Christians to be loyal participants in an "improvable socialism". But practically nothing is said in the Bishops' report about the varying political attitudes of the Roman Catholic Churches in the East. The one exception is the Church's condemnation of the Pacem in Terris movement in Czechoslovakia, which was designed by the state to infiltrate and control the church there. In fact, the position of the Catholic Church in Hungary has been greatly improved by the softening of its policy of opposition to the state on matters of church property and education. In the German Democratic Republic some Roman Catholics participate in the Christian Democratic Union, although both the Evangelical and the Catholic churches officially have maintained their distance from this form of political accommodation. In Poland, of the three Catholic groups with membership in the Parliament, only one has the blessing of the Church. So it goes elsewhere. Neither the Catholic Church nor the Orthodox Church nor the Protestant Churches are a phalanx toward the state, regardless of the statements of their bishops and moderators. They will be even less so in the coming years as the question of redefining both political authority and economic structure in an atmosphere of greater freedom arises. The next time authorities of the Roman Catholic Church speak to the conditions of Eastern Europe, they too will have to participate in this discussion.

2. The opposition to Marxist-Leninist ideology in the Soviet Union and in the rest of Eastern Europe has always been motivated both by concern for human freedom and by religious nationalism. As this ideology loses its grip, nationalism will grow stronger. The picture will not always be a happy one. The fate of the Uniate Catholic Churches in the Ukraine and in Romania, which the Bishops' report deplors, is in high degree a question of Romanian or Ukrainian-Russian national self-understanding. Resentment against and repression of these churches is not a Marxist-Leninist phenomenon. It is rooted deeply in history, a history of national struggles and of forced conversions from Orthodox to Catholic and from Catholic to Orthodox depending on whose armies controlled the area. The

suppression of these churches by Communist governments is the latest episode in this age-old battle. Ironically, it is directed in Transylvania against the Reformed and Lutheran Churches as well as the Roman Catholic today, as part of the mass displacement and forced Romanianizing of the Hungarian and German speaking population.

An analogous though somewhat different case is the Protestant-Catholic tension in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Here, unfortunately, the brutalities of the Counter-Reformation have not been forgotten. Fear of Roman Catholic domination has been somewhat suppressed by common confrontation with the Marxist-Leninist state, but as the power of the state ideology recedes, it has already begun to express itself again. One must face it: Protestant churches look with a combination of fear and envy--mixed with their principled opposition--to Roman Catholic success in permeating and controlling the culture and power centers of a nation, especially when they contemplate the secularized results, notably in Scandinavia or East Germany, of their own attempts to do the same.

Thirdly, under this heading, one must mention the Muslims in Albania and Bulgaria and the Jews who no longer live in great numbers in Poland or in Germany but whose absence is a judgement of God on the Christian nations that drove them out.

The question of the relation between religious confession and national existence is critical for the future of all the countries in this part of the world. Unless some transcendence, in both judgement and grace, of the church over the nation is established, old battles will be fought again.

Unless some honest ecumenism--a genuine respect by each confession, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, for the ecclesial reality and the work of the Holy Spirit in the others--is discovered, either national conflicts will be intensified by Christians fighting Christians once again, or some deadening blanket of secularism will spread itself over the area to replace the Marxist-Leninist fabric, and effectively relativize all of our claims. If that happens, a Reformed Christian like this writer would have to call it the providential judgement of God.

But it is a judgment which, by repentance, we can avoid.