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REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MEDIATING THE PRESENT CRISIS IN POLAND

by James Will

Dr. Will is the chairperson of C.A.R.E.E. This is his second piece on Poland to appear in OPREE; the first one was entitled "The Church and Contemporary Social Dynamics in Poland" (Vol. 1, No. 2, April, 1981). Originally delivered as a banquet address at the Third North American Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Washington, DC on May 29, 1982, it was transcribed and with minor stylistic changes is presented here in essay form. A United Methodist professor of systematic theology, James Will teaches at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

Understanding of the role of the Polish Church in mediating their present social crisis is difficult, not simply because this is a complex issue, but in addition, persons must try to communicate through a number of kinds of barriers. For many of us, the first barrier is language. I also have discovered that no matter how well I come to know Polish sisters and brothers and colleagues, whether Marxist or Christian, there is a kind of cultural barrier. Finally, there is the Protestant-Catholic divide between my own Christian tradition and the Christian tradition of most Poles. Some of the creative people I know there are Marxists in one form or another and members of the Communist Party; so that, of course, is another kind of barrier.

I went to Poland immediately after the World Council's hearings on disarmament in Amsterdam which ended November 28, 1981, and stayed there as long as I had intended, until December 22, even though the events of December 13 made that problematic for a little while. I remember how thankful I was, when I awakened on December 13, that I had had a good reason to refuse the invitation to preach in the Methodist Church on that Sunday morning. As it happened, I had been to the Yiddish theatre in Warsaw the previous evening. It is one of the few such theatres left in Europe. As I returned to my hotel in a taxi just after midnight, I passed
by the Methodist building with its chapel and the English Language College on the corner of Mokotowska and Marszalkowska streets. Just behind the Methodist building was the Solidarity headquarters on Mokotowska street. I noticed that the whole section was blocked with military vehicles and a line of soldiers, so I realized earlier than many in Warsaw that something was happening! I went on to the hotel and got up Sunday morning to see military vehicles all over. I soon discovered that what they call "the state of war" (since emergency laws or martial law as such are not specified in their Constitution) had been declared. I do not know what I would have said to the Methodist congregation on Sunday morning, December 13, if I had indeed been in the position to accept that invitation. I know what Professor Benedyktovicz, the Methodist pastor who also is a professor in the Christian Theological Academy, said. Professor Benedyktovicz told me the sermon he had prepared did not seem quite appropriate to the moment; he substituted the reading from Revelation 18. In that apocalyptic moment he thought it more relevant.

It is important for us to look concretely at this situation and to share some experience and judgment about it. Let us consider first the five elements of Polish history that are very relevant to the present situation. The realization of justice for any people is the result of a long historical struggle. Sometimes our abstractions tend to obscure that, whether from the Christian side we talk about natural law and natural rights, or in the American translation of that as "endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." Such language suggests that there is a kind of direct ontological relationship between what occurs in history and some predetermined structure of right. Whatever we think about that, it seems to me that all of us understand that it takes a long historical struggle for the realization of those rights. Therefore it is important for us to remember certain elements of Polish history that are relevant to this present situation.

The first of them is simply the millenium-long relationship between the Christian Church, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, and the Polish people. The Piast prince who united those west Slavic tribes in 900 into what became Poland, was converted and baptized in 966. From that
point on there is a kind of intertwining of the religious history and the social-political history of Poland that has to be understood.

Secondly, that millenium-long interrelationship was strengthened by the territorial conflict that went on in central Europe between Russia on Poland's east and Prussia on Poland's north and west that left a tragic legacy of nationalistic hostility. It is largely the result of the partitions of the 19th century which lasted until the treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

Thirdly, the fact that the Russians were Orthodox and the Germans were Lutheran strengthened the relation of Polish nationalism and Roman Catholicism and augmented the social power of the Church. Unfortunately it has also made the Church, perhaps, too focused on Polish national problems and has compromised some of the universal dimensions of the Church. But since Vatican II, especially with regard to the Papal social teaching, Poland is one of the places where that teaching has been taken most seriously. At least some of the human rights dimensions of "Pacem in Terris" and Vatican II have been made a constant kind of teaching base in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. But the social power of the Church really is the result of its being identified with the nation.

Fourthly, the boundaries created at Yalta and Potsdam have made Poland a very homogeneous society ethnically and religiously. The German people were moved out from Silesia and Pomerania in the west as the result of those decisions at Yalta and Potsdam. What had been a very large Orthodox population in eastern Poland during the Yagellonian period is now a Ukrainian population in the Soviet Union. Poland was not always homogeneous. It was one of the first societies in Europe that had to learn a kind of tolerance, not a perfect tolerance but a kind of tolerance in which Orthodox and Catholic populations could live together within the same state. A certain tolerance was also developed towards the Jews in Poland so that there would be upwards of three million Jews there to be destroyed during the Holocaust. In point of fact, there are now only ten thousand Jews (at least that is the number constantly given) left in Poland—about two thousand of them practicing, four thousand more related to a Jewish cultural association and another four thousand not
identified directly with a Jewish community. It is a small population and it is very difficult to deal with that history of what happened in the Warsaw Getto, Auschwitz and elsewhere. But now Poland is a very homogeneous population in borders that are close to ancient Poloniae and that enhances also the social power of the Church.

As the fifth historical point, we should note that the Communist Party in Poland has come closer to the Polish national tradition ever since 1956, when Wladislaw Gomulka came out of jail and house arrest much against the will of Khruschev and company, who had come to Warsaw to block it and had even set their military forces in motion towards Warsaw. Nevertheless, they were persuaded to allow Gomulka, who was looked upon as a kind of Polish nationalist-Titoist, to head the party. From 1956 on there has developed an increasing Polish nationalism also in the Communist Party; and that Polish national tradition includes, of course, the Church. One of the things that astonished me in 1980, though I have not, of course, been in any position to check it out beyond that, is the affirmation from sociologists in the Academy of Catholic Theology and Lublin University that 50 percent of the Communist Party in 1980 was made up of practicing Roman Catholics. The nomenclature system kept them at lower levels in the party, but nevertheless the rank and file of the party was made up in very large part of Roman Catholics. Many of them—I don’t know the proportions—faded away by the hundreds of thousands in 1980-81. Thus the structure of the party may be somewhat different now, but before all of these events there was a large overlap between the Roman Catholic Church and the Communist Party in Poland.

The crucial dimensions of the Polish struggle since 1948 have been with the Soviet-imposed system of socialism. (Not all might agree with that way of putting it, but I think most of the Poles I know would agree.) This is complicated by the Soviet Union's perceived security need for a buffer zone between itself and Germany. So Poland was built into a Soviet-dominated economic and military system. This was and is deeply resented and resisted by the vast majority of the Polish people on national grounds. Out of this long history of hostility they look upon Soviet imperialism as simply an extension of tsarist imperialism that
they had struggled against for centuries. They are not always careful to make the kind of distinctions that reality might require. This opposition is also on cultural grounds. The Polish people have been deeply influenced by a tradition of tolerance that developed. One of the fascinating aspects of that is that they had one of the first constitutionally limited monarchies and a parliamentary system which, though limited to the nobility, was nevertheless open thereby to 15 percent of the population. At one point in the 16th century a majority of that nobility that made up the parliament was Calvinist, more for political reasons than religious (because they were very careful not to allow Calvinism to reach down to the peasants). They wanted Calvinism as a justification for the role of the laity in both religious and political leadership. The influence of the Enlightenment clearly had a profound effect on Poland in a way that it did not reach into Russia. Therefore there are very strong cultural differences, as well as national differences that fueled the resentment and resistance.

The Roman Catholic Church under Cardinal Wyszynski followed a very wise course in the midst of this difficult history. It took the position much earlier than those who led the councils of state in the Vatican, that it was possible for the Roman Catholic Church in Poland to cooperate with a socialist government insofar as that socialist government could be perceived as trying to create a just society on the basis of the common good. There was a kind of self-confidence as Wyszynski led the Church in that route, which indicates the perceived strength of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. I remember being told the story of those faithful laity who would question their Cardinal Primate as to the wisdom of meeting with Communist leaders, negotiating with them or entering into agreements with them. At least the story goes that Cardinal Wyszynski's response was: "My dearest, it is much more dangerous for them than for us." I really think this was the perception. The Church early on took the position that they would seek to protect the personal dignity and the human rights of all the Polish people. In this process they accepted, or tried to accept insofar as a Church that has a national identification can, the separation of Church and State—understood as not a separation
of Church and nation, but of Church and State, a Communist State. They accepted that in terms of direct access to political power, but they worked to extend the cultural influence and the social power of the Church, which, as Professor Swiecicki said to me some time ago, is in the long run political power, but in the short run it is not.

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland has taken the papal social teaching on human rights very seriously and has used their power persuasively to affect the moral dimensions of public policy, as they understand them. "Pacem in Terris," when it was published in 1963 as the first systematization of the Roman Catholic teaching on human rights in relation to peace, became the basis of nineteen lectures given by the Cardinal in Warsaw on the implications of the teaching of "Pacem in Terris" for Polish society. The Episcopate sponsored a symposium in 1973, on the tenth anniversary of "Pacem in Terris," on the theme of the realization of human rights as a necessary condition of both domestic and international peace. One sentence from that document indicates the way in which this human rights teaching became a kind of premise for the role that the Church has played in the more recent events. It reads: "A person must not be a merely passive object of the government, but must be the active element of the social life."

Much was also made of the teaching of "Gaudium et Spes," so that when this teaching of "The Church in the Modern World" was directly relevant to the events of 1980–1981, they had already established this as the universal teaching of the Church and not just some kind of opportunistic political action on their part. Section 68 of "Gaudium et Spes" teaches that among the basic human rights must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions and taking part freely in the activities of these unions. Without the risk of reprisal, it was exactly to this article that they referred in supporting the emergence of Solidarity in August, 1980. They continued to support it by their good counsel, providing a circle of advisers that were often, in my judgment, more prudent, more careful and more wise than the kind of counsel that came from Jacek Kuron and the leaders of KOR. They sought always to proceed moderately in terms of the political reality of Poland and tried to keep
Solidarity on the track of being an independent labor union and not an alternate political party.

Let me say more about the Communist Party, which I do not know as well as the Church. I have come to know some excellent members of that party, especially in the Polish Institute of International Affairs. I have been interested in the role that Poland has played in disarmament negotiations from the first stages of the emergence of a Polish national party. The Gomulka government early proposed the so-called Rapacki plan looking towards an atomic-free zone in central Europe. This seems again to be very current and relevant, but with the initiative now emerging more from the Netherlands and the German Federal Republic peace forces.

There is in Poland a certain resonance on the basis of the Rapacki plan to that proposal for nuclear-free zones in central Europe or in the whole of Europe. In dealing with these Marxist-oriented experts on disarmament in the Polish Institute for International Affairs, I have come to understand some of the dynamics of the party. The party has become increasingly nationalistic since Gomulka in 1956 and increasingly pragmatic since Gierek in 1971. Pragmatic in the good sense—less dogmatic and less ideological. But pragmatic also in the bad sense—less moral. I think that committed Marxists are often highly ethical and pragmatic Marxists less ethical.

The Gierek government sought rapid expansion to fulfill what I would understand to be a socialist goal—that is, a goal for full employment for a growing population. Poland is one of the few growing populations in Europe and it is a kind of dynamic society that has to keep growing rather rapidly industrially if full employment in any meaningful sense is to be achieved. I think the Gierek government aimed at that and, of course, aimed at meeting the consumer needs of a population that had suffered greatly, that had sacrificed much in the rebuilding of a devastated society, and now expected some of the fruits of that hard work.

There was rapid expansion, which faltered in the latter half of the '70s for a number of reasons. There was a technical and administrative incapacity that could not keep up with the role of development they were
trying to achieve. There was a growing corruption, unfortunately, in the
governing class and in the administration, as well as amongst the
workers. Even those at the top of the society were involved in it, and
about forty of them are under arrest and indictment by the military
government. A further problem was a kind of "verbal fundamentalism" of
the plan. That is a theological category, but it strikes me that often
there is an attitude towards the plan by Communists which is akin to a
fundamentalistic attitude towards the Bible. If it is written, it has to
be true! They simply carried on a propaganda of success on the basis of
the plan which was so far from reality that it created a kind of distrust
and even disgust for that whole process. I can recall them telling me the
farce of the dedication of the largest carpet plant they have in Lodz. It
finally came on line fourteen months after the plan had indicated it
should. There was never any admission that that was the case. The
directors kept coming on television saying it is right on schedule and
getting their awards for doing so. When it was supposed to be dedicated,
they spent two weeks building a false wall across that part which wasn't
finished and set up all the machinery they could. Gierek came and they
paraded him around and took television shots of all of this, and he
dedicated it as though it were finished right on schedule. Well, fourteen
months later it was finally finished. All of that was known, well known,
and resented.

The Western recession after 1975 complicated their plans for sale of
products in the West and repayment of loans on the basis of those sales.
They had thought, for instance, that the Fiats they were building could
be sold in the West, or the Fiat Company could sell them in the Third
World. Of course, it became impossible after 1975. The imbalance of
foreign trade in the late '70s, with the necessary adjustments of cutting
imports, increasing exports and the pace of production for export, led to
growing resentment amongst the workers. This discontent with, and
distrust of, the system, as we know, broke out in the widespread strikes

The Communist Party, insofar as I understand its own thinking about
this issue, deals with it in terms of a crisis precipitated by a growing
contradiction between the level of productive forces, a higher technical
capacity amongst the work force, and the organization of production
relations. The Marxists, at least, join most of the others in and outside
the Church in Poland, to support the formula of an independent labor
union. Everybody still intends to reconstitute an independent labor union
in Poland; but without the political radicalism that had developed in
Solidarity. That means that they want it reorganized in terms of a
national industrial and trade union, but not with the regional
organization that Solidarity had, which made it the greatest political
power in each voyevodship in Poland. Solidarity deliberately organized in
that way for exactly that kind of political strength. It is that
structure of organization that was reflected in the National Committee
meeting in Gdansk just prior to the time martial law was declared. Those
regional representatives had struggled at the local level with a party
and bureaucracy in the administration, the economy and the government
which represented the old line "persons in place," because of the
nomenclature system, that strongly resisted reforms—even reforms that
were agreed to at the national level were not being implemented at local
and regional levels. There was this kind of great tension developing
everywhere throughout the country. Those representatives coming from
these regions to the national Committee of Solidarity were far more
radical than the Presidium, even though the Presidium had become
increasingly radicalized. It was exactly their counsel and their
decisions that finally led the government of General Jaruzelski to
declare martial law.

To find some kind of formula that would allow for an independent
labor union without that political radicalism seems to be the intention,
at least the expressed intention, of everyone in and outside of
government. They, however, cannot find the formula for reestablishing
negotiations. The Church's formula from the beginning, just three days
after the declaration of martial law when the General Committee of the
Episcopate met on December 17, which they have expressed over and over
again, is that the Presidium of Solidarity and Lech Walesa must be
released to take up negotiations, which may reconstitute Solidarity in a
mode that expresses the social forces that have emerged within it, yet will moderate the political radicalism that endangered not only Solidarity but all of Poland, given its geo-political situation.

The Polish Catholic Social Union, which is one of the three groups mediating between the Church and the State, that specifically bases itself on Catholic social teaching, tried to develop such a formula prior to martial law. They tried to persuade the Episcopate to support them in the creation of a Christian political party that would take the political onus off of Solidarity and would incorporate into a party structure those political dimensions that did not properly belong to a labor union. The Primate and the Episcopate did not support that notion of a Christian party. Since martial law, they have been trying to persuade the Episcopate to support them in the creation of Christian labor unions that could take the forces of Solidarity, now suspended, into a new formula that would be acceptable. But again the Church does not support that. The Church, it seems to me, does not want so direct a political involvement, but has sought to mediate between the government and the social forces as they have emerged in Solidarity in a reconciling fashion that can hold the Polish nation together.

I was interested to find, when I was there, that the new economic law which was in large part formulated prior to martial law has now been adopted by the Seym, the parliament. That law tries to find its own way of resolving the contradiction between the new level of productive forces and the organization of productive relations, by providing for worker-management councils. But the workers are so alienated that in most instances the government is afraid to implement this law. They have begun to implement it in some very small and unimportant factories, but in none of the major factories are they in the position to even begin to implement that notion of worker-management councils.

The dominant social reality in Poland today is a kind of rage, a kind of deep and terrible anger. It grows out of the frustration of a stalemate between the party hardliners, as I would call them, and almost the whole population under thirty—and that is a very large part of the Polish population, which is a relatively youthful one. The average age of
the workers in Gdansk is only twenty-five. On the one hand there are persons like Olshovski, one of the hardliners who controls the mass media and follows a provocative propaganda policy. Even some of the party members would suggest that he does so precisely to foment demonstrations and to bring down the Jaruzelski government. I refer to the kind of demonstrations that occurred on May 1, 1982, accepted first, then again on May 3, put down by the government, and on May 13, more brutally put down.

On the other hand, the students and youth are constantly ready to be ignited. Some of my friends who teach, Professor Kondziela from Lublin University and Professor Swiecicki from the Academy of Catholic Theology, told me that it is almost impossible for them to exercise any influence over their students on these issues. They have to marshal all the intellectual and moral force they have to give any kind of prudent counsel to their students. The students are proud to be in jail or to have been interned. There is a readiness for a kind of tragic heroism, throwing themselves on the barricades without perhaps any hope of success. The result of the May demonstrations, for instance, was the arrest of two of the deans of faculty in the University of Warsaw because of their relationship to these students. Fortunately, they were soon released.

The Church stresses in this situation non-violence, moderation, and negotiations. I want to end by quoting what Archbishop Glemp said about this "rage." He spoke in Rome and directed these words more to some of us in the West than to his own people. When he was in Rome on February 7, 1982 and preached in St. Stanislaus he said: "Our Fatherland is sick. The Poles are overcome by anger. We are enraged against one another. It is a strong wrath and can be directed at several social groups." And then he said: "We are confident that with God's help we will be able to explain to ourselves the reasons for our anger in a dialogue and not by force. Poland must not become an arena of bloody confrontation. No one must be allowed to manipulate our wrath." That is, of course, the sentence directed to us, to our government, to its policy of sanctions, to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. "No one must be allowed to manipulate our
wrath, because the people want to shed this illness of rage all by itself and emerge all in one." He includes in those people the Communist Party members, some but not all of whom are Roman Catholics.

The Polish national tradition and the identification of the Polish Church with the entire Polish nation is expressed beautifully in this, "because the people want to shed their illness of rage all by itself and emerge all in one, and be healed." Be shalom! Be whole! And it seems to me that the Church, whatever its shortcomings, with regard to the way in which it has acted in relation to the Polish Communist Party, in relation to these pulsating points of confrontation between the Polish people and that Party, the evolution of the Party as a national party, the democratization of some aspects of Polish life and the way in which it has worked for an atmosphere of moderation, of non-violence, of dialogue for the unity of the whole nation is, I think, commendable. I am grateful to understand and appreciate a part of that and to have been able to be associated with some Polish Church leaders whom I admire a great deal.