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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN CROATIA, YUGOSLAVIA IN THE 1970'S AND 1980'S.

by Jure Kristo

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The relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the communist regime in Yugoslavia is almost as bad now as in the immediate postwar period (1945-1953). The Communist Party began its relentless, organized attack on the Catholic Church in 1971 through the media and other channels; this onslaught peaked in 1981. Unreasonable, escalated anti-religious propaganda, and imprisonment of a number of priests took place. The attack on the Roman Catholic Church in the 80's is being led by the same people, together with their followers, who led the attack in the 40's. Jakov Blažević, who was the state prosecutor during the infamous trial of Cardinal Alojzius Stepinac (pronounced Stepinatz) in 1946, renewed his bitter criticism of the "Stepinac church" in Croatia in the beginning of 1981. Ever since, there is rarely a day in which an article in the newspapers or a special on the radio or television is not addressed to the criticism of the Roman Catholic Church and its role among Croats. This may be an indication of the political situation in Croatia and, more broadly, in Yugoslavia, which further complicates the analysis.

The relationship between the church and state in Yugoslavia, particularly when it is a question of the Roman Catholic Church, is as complex as the political structure of Yugoslavia. Consequently, one must proceed carefully and try to be as clear as possible. First, a short historical survey of the situation of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia will be given. Then an analysis of the present status of the relationship between church and state will be attempted. Finally, a few propositions about the possible improvement of the
relationship between the Catholic Church and the communist regime in Yugoslavia will follow.

1. Catholic Church in Yugoslavia—A Painful History

Comprehending something necessarily implies knowing its history. This is also true about Croatian people and the Catholic Church in its midst. A closer look at a map of Yugoslavia reveals that it is composed of six states (called republics) and two autonomous regions. The states comprise, roughly, respective nations. Religiously, Yugoslavia can be divided into two spheres. The East, comprising Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, is predominantly Orthodox with substantial minorities of Albanian Moslems in Kosovo-Metohija and Croatian Catholics and other minorities in Vojvodina. The West, comprising Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Slovenia, is Roman Catholic with substantial Orthodox and Moslem minorities in Croatia and in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Until 1919, the Catholic West together with Vojvodina were part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In 1919, the Croatians and Slovenians decided to join the kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro in order to form the kingdom of Slovenians, Croatians, and Serbians, later renamed Yugoslavia. From the beginning, a clash occurred between two opposing views concerning the structure of the state. On one hand, the Serbians showed hegemonistic tendencies by envisaging all the other nations as an avenue for creating the so-called Great Serbia. On the other hand, Croatians advocated a federalism that would give every nation a relative autonomy and equal treatment. Tension between Serbia and Croatia marked the political life in Yugoslavia between 1919 and 1941.

This political tension was reflected in the religious sphere as well. The patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church was established immediately and comprised many metropolitanates throughout the new state. The Vatican recognized the new state and diplomatic relations were established. The Vatican also tried to regulate its relationship with the state by a concordate. This concordate was signed in 1935, but the Serbian Orthodox Church opposed it vehemently. To many Catholics in the country it seemed that the Serbian Orthodox Church wanted to continue having the privilege of the state religion which it enjoyed in the kingdom before unification with other nations. The other nations in the state felt they were in a subordinate position to the Serbians and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Croatians in particular resented this situation.
The atrocities committed by certain elements in both nations, during World War II were a direct consequence of the tension created by their unequal status. With generous help from the Allies, the Communist Party, led by Josip Broz Tito, came to power in 1945 in what was called the New Yugoslavia.

The Catholic population was generally afraid of "godless communism" before it had any firsthand experience of it. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia made sure that the people's fears were justified. Almost immediately after taking power, The Communist Party organized numerous trials. Stella Alexander best describes these trials when she says that they were "swift, ruthless, with few legal trimmings, and identifying precisely the objects of the authorities' vengeance." The archbishop of Zagreb, Aloysius Stepinac, was immediately arrested. There was an attempt to convince the Catholic hierarchy to secede from the Vatican and create a national Catholic Church modeled after national Orthodox churches. When the proposal was flatly refused and when Archbishop Stepinac raised his voice against the unfounded imprisonments and senseless killings of bishops, priests, and the faithful, the Party decided to stage the trial of Archbishop Stepinac himself. He was sentenced to sixteen years at hard labor.

From then on, the history of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Yugoslavia was marked by ups and downs. It is important to bear in mind that the improvement and worsening of this relationship did not depend exclusively on the willingness or lack of it of either the Catholic hierarchy or the Communist Party but likewise on the internal restructuring of the Party and on global international relations.

The decade of the 50's was for the Catholic Church a decade of continued repression and persecution. The Communist Party itself was going through some kind of "identity crisis", since it was ousted in 1948 from the communist alliance led by the Soviet Union. In 1952, Archbishop Stepinac, under house arrest, was elevated to cardinal, which angered the Communist Party (newly renamed the League of Communist of Yugoslavia--hereafter LCY) to the point of breaking diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

In the sixties, there was an improvement in the relations between the Catholic Church and the government in Yugoslavia. In 1960 Cardinal Stepinac died; the leadership of the LCY then changed its tactics and sought to reestablish
diplomatic relations with the Vatican directly. In 1966, this effort was re­warded by the signing of a document, Protokol, clarifying the idiosyncratic relationship between the church and state in Yugoslavia. This displeased the Croatian Catholic hierarchy because it felt that the Vatican and Yugoslav politicians bypassed them completely in bringing about a decision vital to their church and their nation. In the course of this same year, 1966, Aleksandar Ranković, vice president and head of the infamous security police (UDBA) was purged from the Party and numerous repressive practices were revealed and admitted. It appeared that the anti-centralist, federalist forces had finally won. Roman Catholics became hopeful that a new and better period had finally arrived for them, too.

The next decade, however, would demonstrate that their hopes were in vain. In 1971, the entire leadership of the League of Communists of Croatia was forced to resign under accusations of liberalism and exclusivism. There was again a sharp turn toward centralism in the Party. The Catholic Church was accused of supporting Croatian nationalism and of overt opposition to the policies of the CLY. These accusations have been repeated in one form or another for over a decade, and the harangue is still going on.

This sketch of the relationship between Catholic Church and state in Yugoslavia was a necessary prologue to understanding the status of that relationship today.

2. The Catholic Church in Yugoslavia at Present

Although the objectives of the League of Communists of Croatia and League of Communists of Yugoslavia are not clear when they attack the Catholic Church among Croats in Yugoslavia, it is a fact that the church continues to be under heavy fire. Some motives may become clearer if we bear in mind the concrete socio-political factors present in the region and on a global level. For the last few years, the Catholic Church has been headed by a Slavic Polish Pope, who knows firsthand how the communist machinery works and who would not let himself be manipulated by well-polished propaganda. On the contrary, the Polish Pope is very firm in pressing the question of social justice and respect of human rights. Moreover, the Pope speaks Croatian, sides with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia, and uses every opportunity to encourage the justified struggle of the Croatian nation. For the first time in decades the Vatican
acknowledges that the Croatian nation has been frequently wronged and is resolved to resist the heavy propaganda on the part of the Yugoslav government.

In 1980, President-for-life Tito died. The communist government that he left seems to be too afraid of the challenges that history has laid upon it. The economy was in disarray with an over-twenty billion dollars debt to the West and excessive unemployment. The government was aware that a decisive crisis could occur at any moment to threaten the very existence of Yugoslavia, because various segments of the population--particularly the Croatians and Albanians--were dissatisfied. This was also the year of the beginning of the Polish crisis, caused by the resoluteness of a frustrated working class, who theoretically is the central interest of the Communist Party. It also became apparent that the Catholic Church in Poland was the most respected authority in the country.

The Yugoslav government feared the repetition of the Polish experiment in Yugoslavia. One way of preventing this crisis, it decided, was to attack the Catholic Church and present it to the people as the most reactionary element of the society, as a clericalist institution that harbors and protects fascists, and so on. The term "Stepinac church" has been invented to suggest that the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia espouses an ideology contrary to the interests of the Croatian nation.

The year 1981 was no more favorable to the League of Communists in Yugoslavia than the previous year. Already in 1980, a group of Croatian intelligentsia, among them two prominent Catholic priests, submitted to the central Yugoslav government a request for amnesty for all political prisoners in Yugoslavia and the elimination from the criminal statute of the paragraph applying to political offenders. The government responded early in 1981 by putting on trial some of the most prominent Croatian intellectuals such as Dr. Franjo Tudjman, former Army general and a lifelong member of the Communist Party, Dr. Marko Veselica, professor of economics and former deputy from Zagreb in the federal Parliament, Vlado Gotovac, the poet and philosopher, Dobroslav Paraga, the student leader, and others.

By the end of March, Yugoslavia experienced one of its most difficult crises. The rioting in the autonomous region of Kosovo had to be suppressed by the military and police. In addition to all of this, the Western press, particularly the West European, increased its criticism of the Yugoslav govern-
ment. It had revealed that the Yugoslav government has been directly involved, through its secret police, with terrorist activity, including the assassinations of its own citizens living in western countries.

With this historical background, it is safe to assume that the attack on the Catholic Church has served two purposes. On one hand, the Church is chosen as the scapegoat for the economic and political failure of the system. On the other hand, the insistence of the Catholic Church on human rights has been considered to have a destabilizing effect on the country, which also means on the authoritarian grip of the Communist Party.

The position of the Catholic hierarchy has been unequivocal. Its views have most often been presented through the homilies and pastoral letters of Zagreb's Archbishop Franjo Kuharić, the President of the Episcopal Conference of Yugoslavia. In his 1980 Christmas homily, Archbishop Kuharić clearly stated that the Church must protect everything that is human and encourage others to respect human rights including the right to practice religion without fear and interference. Kuharić also mentioned the right of the imprisoned to be respected as human individuals and not to be exposed to torture, inhuman conditions, or solitary confinement in heatless cement cubicles. The government immediately interpreted the archbishop as taking Croatian political prisoners under his wing. Archbishop Kuharić reasserted this position during the customary visit of all religious representatives to the president of the Croatian Parliament (Sabor), Jure Bilić, at the beginning of the new year. He said then that the common good is being fulfilled "when the personal, national, and religious identity of every person is guaranteed, when his or her unalienable personal dignity is protected, when everyone's freedom of conscience is secured so that he or she may live a private and public life in accordance with his or her conviction, when the education of his or her children is entrusted to his or her own conscience without interference, when the conditions pertaining to work, living conditions, and spiritual growth which are appropriate to the human being are secured."

However, soon after these events, a torrent of orchestrated attacks upon the Catholic Church began. It was initiated, as we indicated at the beginning of this essay, by the President of the Presidency of Croatia, Jakov Blažević, the state prosecutor during the Stepinac trial in 1946. He was irritated by the continuous public veneration of the late cardinal's grave and the Church's pro-
motion of the cause of Cardinal Stepinac's beatification. Blažević vehemently attacked the church he put on trial and indicated that the present church deserved the same fate. 6

In the same speech, Blažević reproached some of the elements in his party for believing that "the first premise of socialism" ought to be respect of religious liberties. He called it a contradiction in adjecto. This is indicative of the disposition of certain members of the Communist Party in Croatia and Yugoslavia. Apparently, there are at least two factions in the Party itself regarding religion. One espouses the conservative, stalinistic ideas of religion (the "opium of people") which must be eradicated from the midst of humankind. The other faction is more open to contemporary studies and attitudes toward religion and views religion as an important part in the life of believers and, thus, as a possible positive element for a socialist society. In any case, the suppression of religion by administrative measures is considered by this group as not only outmoded but very detrimental for society. This group includes professors and other intellectuals who call themselves sociologists or philosophers of religion. It is significant that a number of professional Party politicians espouses these same ideas on religion. They are mostly younger Party members who come in conflict with the older, war-period generation. It is safe to assert, however, that at present the conservative, combative, centralistic part of the Party has gained the upper hand and sets the concrete policies. This it true at least in Croatia.

As far as the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia is concerned, it is not without its internal divisions. The line of division separates the hierarchy, which has achieved a surprising degree of consensus regarding the question of the relationship between church and state, on one hand, and a group of theologians gathered around the Catholic publishing house, "Kršćanska sadašnjost" [Christian actuality], and in the theological association of the same name.

The reasons for their disagreements are somewhat obscure. The hierarchy was irritated by the very idea of a theological association. This is understandable when one remembers that the idea of an association of priests has a very bad history in the context of Yugoslavia. The government, from the very outset, encouraged priest associations, granting to their members a privileged status in comparison to the non-associated priests and ordinary faithful. The hierarchy, for its part, interpreted these priest-associations as a subtle attempt on the government's part at creating divisions within the
Catholic Church and at exempting a body of the clergy members from hierarchical supervision. When, therefore, a group of theologians (made up almost exclusively of priests) decided to form an association, it reawakened in bishops a sense of danger. As a result, many bishops demanded the dismantling of the association, and some (like Frančić, the diocese of Split) forbade the members of the association, to do any pastoral work in their dioceses. Theologians, for their part, complain, albeit privately, that bishops have an antiquated idea of the Church and that they are generally too conservative. Their conservatism, some theologians believe, has damaging ramifications on the political scene as well. These theologians, most of them more immediately engaged in the work of "Kršćanska sadašnjost", believe that bishops should publically endorse the so-called self-governing socialism of Yugoslavia and invite the faithful to do the same. The Croatian people as a whole and the Catholic Church in particular, they contend, would benefit from this change of attitude on the part of the hierarchy.

Some bishops also have problems with the Franciscans. This is particularly the case in Bosnia and Hercegovina. The bone of contention is the control of parishes. Ever since the Turks captured these lands, the Franciscans were, for all practical purposes, the only pastors in this region. Recently, however, some bishops (Kostar and Sarajevo dioceses) have had an increase in priestly vocations without having enough parishes in which to place their priests. They sought a solution of this problem by taking away a number of parishes from the Franciscans. This drew a swift, sometimes even violent, reaction from both the Franciscan fathers and their faithful. Only recently have these problems begun to approach a settlement. Some are quick to note that this is a direct result of the Blessed Virgin's invitation to peace during her alleged apparitions to some young girls and boys in the summer of 1981 in Medjugorje, Hercegovina.

Although these divisions are hurting the Church enormously and are definitely perceived by the faithful as scandalous, the attention of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia as a whole is presently focused in the relationship between the Church and the communist government. To the escalating attacks on the Church, which were mentioned earlier, the hierarchy responded once again through Franjo Kuharić, the Archbishop of Zagreb. The occasion was the anniversary of the death of Cardinal Stepinac. The Zagreb Cathedral and the square in front held about ten thousand who sensed that something decisive was about to happen. Kuharić's homily was that event. After expressing his hopes that, at some time in the
future, an impartial judgment would be passed on the role of the Catholic Church and its most famous representative Cardinal Stepinac during the war, the archbishop refuted one by one the standard government accusations of the late Cardinal and the Catholic Church. He pointed out that the documentation and the final speech of Cardinal Stepinac's defense lawyers has never been published in Yugoslavia, whereas the allegations of the prosecutor have been repeated over and over as proof of the Cardinal's criminal activity.

This speech did not gladden the Party policymakers. They forbade the publisher of the Catholic biweekly, Glas Koncila, to publish Kuharic's speech. The hierarchy, however, seemed to be fully behind the Archbishop of Zagreb. After their conference at Zagreb in the end of April 1981, they published a communique defending themselves against the customary accusation of meddling in politics. They also reasserted their responsibility to express moral judgment when human rights are in question, and to protect their faithful from aggressive government-sponsored atheism. They concluded by pointing out areas of civic life in which religious and human liberties are impaired.

Theologians, for their part, mostly do not say much. They seem to avoid quarrels with the official segment of the League of Communists. Instead, they engage in intellectual dialogue with the Marxist sociologists of religion which, for the most part, is innocuous and fairly ineffective. Often the writings of these scholars give the impression that they know their argumentations are useless because they cannot shape the concrete policies. Theologians affiliated with Crkanska sadaznost believe that the progressive elements in the League of Communists will eventually prevail and that they would then have a partner in dialogue. But they have to deal with the fact that such hopes have been too frequently unfilled.

A few words should be said about the ecumenical movement in Yugoslavia. The truth is that there is not much more than a few words to say. The various nations in Yugoslavia must first learn to live with each other. The historical ballast is too heavy to be easily disposed of; deep-seated mistrust is still too strong to allow the respective nations to come closer to each other. This is particularly the case with the Croatian and Serbian nations. Unlike anywhere else, ecumenism in Yugoslavia is politically colored and politically sensitive. There is still the feeling among Croatians that the Orthodox population in
Croatia is used by the Serbian hegemonists, represented by the Serbian Orthodox Church, to realize the unfulfilled dream of Great Serbia and conversely Serbians fear that ecumenism is a new attempt to turn them into "uniate" churches. Ecumenism could perhaps make faster progress if the Orthodox of Croatia establish their own autocephalous Orthodox Church. It is a fact, after all, that the Catholic Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church are engaged in a vigorous and fruitful dialogue, which is not the case between the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Nonetheless, ecumenism is by no means dead in Yugoslavia. For the most part, however, it is limited to the conversations between the theologians of various churches. Periodical get-togethers of the representatives of Catholic and Orthodox theology faculties have become a tradition. In the opinion of many Catholics, the Serbian Orthodox Church would like to engage in serious dialogue with the Catholic Church if the latter was kneeling. Conversely, many Orthodox feel that the Catholic Church has the same aspirations in regard to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

3. A Few Personal Propositions

This essay has centered on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the communist government in Yugoslavia. In the final section of this brief essay, I would like to suggest some ideas that might help clarify certain issues regarding the relationship between church and state.

The first point that appears to be crucial is that the church as a religious organization is not political in nature and, consequently, that it cannot have any political goals in the daily exercise of its mission. This must be said in spite of, and in face of the historical experience that Christian churches (as well as other organized religions) have engaged in political activity. This admission must be made in a spirit of confession and as a corrective to the future involvement of the church in the world.

To assert that the Christian church must not be a political organization does not mean, however, that it does not have political relevance. The Yugoslav government, like other communist regimes, has attempted to make religious organizations "sacristy organizations." It should not be forgotten that religion is a vision of life concerned with humanity's well-being and happiness. Inspired by the vision of human life brought about by Jesus of Nazareth, the Christian religion should oppose anything that diminishes the personal dignity of men and women and support everything that advances human welfare. In our time, this concern
for individual well-being has been expressed in terms of human rights, a concern which the church perceives as a reflection of its very being. The LCY should be aware of this new self-understanding of the church, realizing that it cannot be disposed of by repressive means. More importantly, the LCY should be aware that the church's concern for all that is human cannot hinder but can only assist the government's efforts for improving the economic, social, and political well-being of its citizens. The LCY should expect as well as accept the possibility that the organized church will, following the dictates of its own mission among men and women, be critical of some governmental policies and practices. The government can use this critical posture outside its own ranks as a welcome catalyst for the oft acknowledged need for self-criticism. This process may be the best substitute for a multi-party system—absolutely forbidden in Yugoslavia—without any threat to the political dominance of the Communist Party.

The church, for its part, should change some of its ways in regard to the government. It should become aware that it does not have absolute solutions for anything and that its critical posture toward the socio-political concreteness must at the same time be an equally critical posture toward itself, particularly toward its religiosity. Consequently, the church should take to heart the government's criticism and use it judiciously as a catalyst for the rather infrequently acknowledged need for self-criticism.

The uniting point between the Catholic Church and the League of Communists of Croatia must be the well-being of the Croatian people. The source of most, if not all difficulties in the area of relationship between the Church and Party in Croatia is the abandonment by both of promoting what is in the best interests of the people. In short, both the Party and the Church have been more involved with ideological battles than with the well-being of Croatian men and women living in the Yugoslav territory.

From the standpoint of the Croatian nation, both the Church and the Party have failed it. If both of these antagonistically positioned factors once realize the truth of their failure toward the people, perhaps this enlightenment might mark for them the beginning of a qualitatively different relationship. I suspect that the underlying element of many verbal fusillades between the Catholic Church and the League of Communists of Croatia is the implied mutual accusation of betrayal of the Croatian people. The paradox is that both of them are right. What is required now is an open admission of "guilt" by both, a
rededication and collaboration toward the common goal of promoting the interests of the Croatian people. The historical moment is critical; thus, the joining of efforts by the League of Communists and the Catholic Church is much more crucial than ever before.

NOTES

3. Ibid, pp. 95-120.
7. AKSA 17, 1981.