11-1983

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THE PAPAL VISIT AND PROTESTANTS IN POLAND

by Bill Yoder

Bill Yoder (Mennonite), born in Ohio in 1950, is a freelance church journalist and political science major studying in West Berlin. Yoder, who is a U.S. citizen and a graduate of Eastern Mennonite College, has lived in Europe since 1974. From 1977 until 1982 he was active as a Mennonite church representative relating to Protestant churches in the German Democratic Republic and Poland. From 1978 to 1980 he resided in Poland.

Polish Protestants make a disarmingly positive impression these days. During recent years Polish Baptists have averaged 100 baptisms annually. But during the crisis year of 1982 that number suddenly jumped to 207. This is the highest number ever in the 60-odd-year history of the Polish-speaking Baptist church. That record should be broken anew this year; Polish Baptists tentatively have 2,750 baptized members.

Warsaw pastor and Baptist vice-president Adam Piasecki describes present relations with the state as "very positive." "All recent changes have been for the better," he states categorically. The amount of printed matter is up, censorship is down, and building permits are readily granted. What Baptists most lack now is paper for their many publications.

At the beginning of this year, Protestant broadcasts were introduced to Polish radio for the very first time. Four Baptists services have been broadcast this year. This past March, it finally became possible to delegate Alexander Kircun, Jr., the former Baptist pastor of Wrocław, to full-time work with Radio Monte Carlo in Monaco. Adam Piasecki had produced Polish sermons on a part-time basis in recent years; it has long been possible for these foreign broadcasts to direct their listeners to addresses within Poland. Even the breakthrough to television has been made: On June 3, Billy Graham's film on the Polish evangelistic campaign of 1978 was shown on local television; it was followed a week later by an informative program on Polish Baptists.

The same phenomenon is evident in other Protestant churches.
Andrzej Bajeński, the pastor of a United Evangelical Congregation in Warsaw, has similar news: Two years ago his congregation numbered 98 members; today it boasts 50 additional ones. He reports that virtually all of these new members come from non-evangelical circles. The United Evangelical Church is a loosely knit grouping of four differing denominations, two of which are Pentecostal. The remaining two are the Russian-background "Evangelical Christians" as well as the "Church of Christ." Present membership has reached 12,000. The influx of new members unversed in the mores and customs of a once-exclusive evangelical subculture is cracking the hard shell of traditionalism. A new openness to wider Polish society results. Both Baptists and United Evangelicals announce the creation of new structures to cope with the challenge: Warsaw Baptists now offer weekly classes for interested outsiders. Joint Catholic-Baptist discussion groups formed in 1978 in Katowice, following Billy Graham's visit there, are still functioning. Both evangelical groups note increasing openness within grass-roots Catholic circles. In contrast to the past, Warsaw Baptists now enjoy a hearty relationship with a neighboring Catholic congregation.

The Methodist general-secretary, Witold Benedyktowicz, mentions an increase in Warsaw membership from 200 to 240 in the past two years with contributions up 400 percent. National membership has increased during the same period by 400 to approximately 6,000.

June 17, 1983, was a big day for Polish Protestantism. In Cardinal Josef Glemp's Warsaw residence, a Pope met with Polish Protestants for the first time in history. Unfortunately, the feelings of gratification were short-lived. During the ensuing mass in Warsaw's soccer stadium, the Pope's extended words of greeting avoided any mention of his invited non-Catholic guests. This was assuredly no accident, for the Polish episcopate has no interest in marring its portrayal of Poland as a monolithic Catholic nation. Yet Protestants have played a visible role in Poland ever since the 16th century. Reformed bishop Zdzislaw Tranda bemoaned the Pope's silence, for papal recognition of Protestant existence within Poland before the watching eyes of the entire nation would have had "an enormous psychological--others spoke of an 'educational'--effect."
The overextended initial conversation between Pope John Paul II and General Jaruzelski left only a half hour remaining for dialogue with the 30 delegates of the Polish Ecumenical Council. (Delegates from the minute Jewish and Muslim communities were also present.) The session therefore needed to be restricted to two short addresses delivered by the Pope and the Methodist professor Witold Benedyktowicz, honorary president of the Ecumenical Council. No time remained for an open discussion on the outstanding issues. Protestant satisfaction was therefore essentially limited to the fact that this historic meeting did take place at all.

The Pope's second visit to Poland occurred against a backdrop of continuing ecumenical tensions. During the late 1970s and until 1981, more than ten Lutheran-owned churches had been confiscated by zealous, space-hungry Catholics. Recently a Lutheran graveyard in the vicinity of Lodz was seized. Barbara Engholc-Narzyńska, the director of the Warsaw branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society, contends that this latest incursion was motivated by financial interests. The sale of graveyard plots is a lucrative business in present-day Poland. Andrzej Wojtowicz, the Lutheran official responsible for the foreign relations of the Ecumenical Council, described his very recent visit to the village of Szestno. The Lutheran church of Szestno had been taken over by Catholic squatters on October 9, 1981. In the meantime, a large cross with the inscription "Holy Missions 1982" has been placed before the church, which according to Wojtowicz refers to the "expulsion of Protestants." A new stone plaque on the history of the church makes no reference to its century-long existence as a Protestant one. Today, Szestno's 160 Lutheran communicants must travel to the neighboring town of Mragowo for services.

Contracts resulting in the sale or rental of eight expropriated churches were signed by Lutheran offices in 1981, negotiations on six further cases are now under way. Yet Szestno had to be excluded from these talks. Wojtowicz labels these Catholic actions as "attempts to forego negotiations." "One could also reason with us in an ecumenical spirit," he contends. Because of these incidents, Lutheran participation in joint Catholic-Protestant commissions was dropped two years ago. Yet,
if present plans hold, their participation will be resumed in the near future.

Professor Benedyktowicz warns against hasty condemnation: As heirs of the Polish Counter-Reformation, Catholics "have a difficult time understanding us small churches." They can therefore only react by attempting to bring Protestants back into the fold. Several Protestant leaders have admitted that some Lutheran pastors are not above anti-Catholic sentiment on their own part. Most of the confiscated churches were little-used by the dwindling number of Lutherans; all chapel expropriations in recent years have taken place in the once German northeastern region of the country.

Obviously, the sharp increase in the veneration of Mary by the Pope during his most recent visit can only have a negative effect on ecumenical relations. A recent article in the Reformed periodical "Jednota" [Unity] questioning the theological justification for the adulation of Mary resulted in a flurry of letters from irate Catholics. Since the Black Madonna of Czestochowa is deeply interwoven into the strains of Polish nationalism, her few local critics have no easy lot proving their Polishness. The emotional allure emanating from the "Lady of Jasna Góra" [Bright Mountain] may appear puzzling to the outsider, yet she most deeply personifies Polish love for the Motherland.

Andrzej Wojtowicz has pointed out that the waves of Catholic nationalism reach a peak during papal visits to Poland. Since even party members are often Catholic in their hearts, it is probably Polish Protestantism which experiences the least joy when a Polish Pope returns to home turf.

Patriotic Movement for National Rebirth

The election of Barbara Engholc-Narzyńska into the presidium of the state-supported "Patriotic Movement for National Rebirth" (PRON) has raised eyebrows. In April, her husband, the Lutheran bishop Janusz Narzyński, became the new president of the Ecumenical Council. (Lutheran membership in Poland may be as high as 100,000.) PRON, a "movement" brought into being by the state in May, 1982, attempts to form a platform for all "persons of good will" concerned about the moral and social regeneration of the nation. Mrs. Narzyńska's PRON career began
September 15, 1982, when, during a meeting of the Ecumenical Council with General Jaruzelski, he suggested Council participation within PRON as a means of strengthening its intended pluralistic thrust. Since Mrs. Narzyńska was the only non-cleric member of the Council's presidium, she was delegated to attend a meeting of PRON yet that same evening. On May 9, at PRON's first national congress, she was elected into its 40-member presidium. Strangely enough, the somewhat unwieldy Ecumenical Council--it represents eight Protestant, Old-Catholic and Orthodox churches--has no uniform understanding of its own official status within PRON. Mrs. Narzyńska contends that the Ecumenical Council enjoys formal membership in the same fashion as do numerous Catholic lay organizations; other Council spokesmen disagree. Crystal clear is the fact that no church belongs to PRON as a church.

Andrzej Wojtowicz contends that all gaps cropping up within the government's weak ruling structures have been quickly filled by the Catholic Church. He protests against the "increasing clericalism" of public life. He reacts sharply to the accusation that Protestants are attempting to curry state favor at Catholic expense through PRON involvement, and states "Catholics would be happiest if we stayed at home and did not even attempt to articulate ourselves in public life." Each papal visit demands extensive contacts between Catholic and government authorities, yet as soon as the Lutheran bishop meets once with Jaruzelski, "we're accused of 'collaboration'." Protestant cooperation with the PRON movement can be understood as a simple attempt to stay afloat within the rising waters of Polish Catholicism.

Although the Episcopate refuses to send official delegates to any PRON events, Mrs. Narzyńska still remains the only Protestant within the predominantly Catholic PRON presidium. Even Mrs. Narzyńska's supporters are disheartened by the selection of Jan Dobraczyński as chairman of PRON. Dobraczyński is a widely read but "arch-conservative" Catholic author. Wojtowicz portrays him as "hostile towards Protestants" and adds that "he would eagerly expel all Protestants from PRON." The director of the Warsaw Bible Society concedes that Dobraczyński "sees everything through a confining Catholic prism." For non-Catholics, his election runs counter to the movement's express desire for pluralistic broadness.
PRON's Protestant detractors are even less favorable regarding Dobraczyński. As a leader of the very Catholic and erstwhile Falangist Pax movement, he has nevertheless remained in the good graces of every Polish government since the early 1950s. In short, he hardly sports an unspotted past. These same Protestants view cooperation with PRON as assent to martial law. They were hardly elated by a TV appearance of Mrs. Narzyńska, in which she supposedly defended the introduction of martial law. During the Reformed Synod in May--the Reformed Church boast only 4,000 members in Poland--Bishop Tranda is said to have discouraged any involvement within PRON.

Barbara Engholec-Narzyńska nevertheless remains undaunted in her claim that something had to be done to "get us out of this social rut." According to her, PRON's openness for all those "of good will" may offer a real opportunity to break down the existing walls of hatred and mistrust. Within this movement, even "common, every-day people" can voice their complaints directly to the highest government officials. The honesty and openness of answers proffered by state ministers has made a lasting impression on her. A Protestant pastor has expressed surprise concerning the government initiative to found PRON: On public television a PRON spokesman had minced no words in lambasting the state authorities. He felt PRON could form the seed of a new movement similar to the "Solidarity" of yore.

United Evangelical pastor Andrzej Bajeński states categorically that he "would be afraid to live in a country governed by Solidarity." Wojtowicz accuses Solidarity leaders of "having forgotten their geography"; today descriptions of the labor union are peppered with adjectives such as "immature" and "radical." The much-vaunted demonstrations during the papal visit could hardly be described as impassioned. Some Americans claim to have observed the "Iranian phenomenon" outside Warsaw stadium on June 17: The chants and V-signs appeared largely restricted to those moments when the crowds knew themselves to be before Western TV cameras. When the lights turned green, the crowds surged across the thoroughfare, consistently leaving the protesting in the hands of those who remained further back.

On May 27, the first official reception of a strictly Lutheran
delegation by General Jaruzelski took place. Polish Lutherans readily point out that state president Henryk Jabłoński makes no secret of his own Lutheran ancestry. However, government openness to the non-Catholic churches places it in a considerable bind. It hopes to counter Catholic supremacy through increased recognition of Protestant existence; yet in doing so, it engenders the working relationship necessary between itself and the Episcopate.

The Protestant minority fears a return to the status of pre-War church-state relations. For obvious reasons they prefer a secular state. Frightening as well as encouraging clouds are approaching on the horizon; Professor Benedyktowicz notes that the government is increasingly taking on the shape of a coalition. Deputy Prime Minister Zenon Komender is also chairman of Pax; at least two government ministers—including the press speaker Jerzy Urban—are partyless. It still remains an open issue as to whether the government is moving towards true coalition, or whether the coalitioning will be restricted to Catholic organizations.

Obviously, Cardinal Glemp and General Jaruzelski are the primary benefactors of this papal visit. Both have been struggling with radicals in their ranks; both of these moderates have been strengthened through the successful completion of the papal pilgrimage. The unimaginable seems to be occurring: Despite multitudes of unsolved issues, Polish life does seem to be returning to its former state of mildly chaotic "normalcy." Pastor Bajęński states that "we no longer have any fear of the government." Apparently the events of 1981 have proven the government's mortality to many. Bajęński considers it his calling as a Christian to soothe those who still harbor aggressive feelings towards the government.

Mrs. Narzyńska is assuredly not alone in her regret for the implementation of U.S. government sanctions. She fears that they "may destroy the traditional bonds of friendship between our peoples." Many feel that they have been abandoned during their time of greatest need. "This should have a negative effect on the people of our nation," she warns.

A Warsaw friend perhaps came close to the truth in his description of the present situation in Poland. He stated: "As usual, it's not that
bad, and it's not that good. But it's always interesting."

**Spiritual Revival**

Bible sales are way up. The Bible Society's sales during 1982 were up 100 percent over the normal annual distribution of 100,000 copies. This year promises to be even better. The Bible Society has now become the principal customer of a state-owned printing firm in Warsaw. As a recipient of Western paper, the Bible Society enjoys the rare fortune of possessing a sufficient supply of paper. Most Bibles are purchased by Catholics, yet Catholic publishing houses have shown little interest in the production of Bibles. According to Mrs. Narzyńska, Catholic firms view Bible production from a strictly "mercantile" perspective. They realize that much higher profits can be attained through the printing of high-gloss material on the Cracovian Karol Wojtyla. During Luther festivities in the south Polish town of Cieszyn in early May, the first Lutheran bookstore in Poland was opened. This bookstore, as well as the state's elimination of a sales tax on Bibles, should help the sale of Bibles in the future. The United Evangelical Church states that all 5,000 Catholic-edition Bibles which they imported last year were swept from the shelves within three weeks.

Professor Benedyktowicz points out that in the weeks following the proclamation of martial law on December 13, 1981, churches were the sole leisure-time institutions open to the public. Yet a deeper source of spiritual awakening is to be found in the political uncertainties of that period. In addition, since the small Protestant denominations received far more aid per capita than the Catholic ones, they were forced to become deeply involved in aid distribution to the general populace. Protestant leaders all report that this service led to innumerable new and meaningful contacts with Catholic and state representatives. The present spiritual renewal is attributed to these new contacts as well as the political uncertainties of the recent past. Today, Polish food and consumer supplies are greatly improved. Andrzej Wojtowicz notes that "shipments were accepted with great thankfulness, yet in the long run, they lead to moral crises."

Incidentally, the issue of women pastors is presently a live one among Polish Lutheran and Reformed. Due to local ecumenical considera-
tions, the sole fully ordained female pastor in Poland is an elderly, retired Methodist. Lutherans presently have approximately eighteen young women theologians waiting in the wings.
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

The May 1983 issue of OPREE contains an article by Dr. Albert Rasker, entitled "Protestantism in Czechoslovakia." Permit me these observations to complement his stimulating and enlightening account of the political and religious developments and achievements in "the heart of Europe," and the well-deserved tribute paid to Dr. Joseph Hromádka.

Regarding Dr. Hromádka: The foundations for the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) were laid in October 1957, in Slovakia, when a small group of theologians, nearly all of them seminary professors, gathered in the town of Modra to ponder the depressing heritage of the Cold War. The effective early leadership and expansion of the CPC was, indeed, provided by Dr. Hromádka; as early as December 1957 the Ecumenical Council of Czechoslovakia (CSSR) met in Prague, and from that point the influence of Dr. Hromádka was instrumental in the success of the movement.

There is no intention here to detract from his tremendous contribution. My purpose in identifying the Slovak initiation of the CPC is occasioned by the absence of pertinent references, in the OPREE article, to Slovakia. These are considered necessary if the reader is to have adequate information on the "Other Churches" (as described on page 12, et seq).

The Silesian Evangelical Church AC is indeed in the Eastern portion of what was once identified as Silesia, but is approximately in center of the Czechoslovak Republic (East and West) and in the North (bordering on Poland) in the area of the city of Ostrava. The Slovak Republic (Slovakia) extends generally south and east from there, constituting the rest of the CSSR. The Silesian Church is a much smaller church than the Slovak Evangelical Church to "its own theological faculty in Bratislava" and to "relations with the Lutheran World Federation" apply correctly to the Slovak church, not the Silesian church.

The Slovak Evangelical Church has a theological faculty in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. Its Bishop is Dr. Jan Michalko, who also teaches there. The Rector of the Faculty is Dr. Karol Gabris. Students preparing for the ministry come there from the Silesian Church, as well as from Poland, Yugoslavia, and perhaps other countries in Eastern Europe (in all of which the Lutherans are a minority, and in many of which there are Slovaks). Incidentally, the largest single Slovak Lutheran congregation, anywhere, is in Backi Petrovac, Yugoslavia. (Ms. Alexander might have included that in her article in OPREE, Volume III-1.)

The Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession has 45,000 members in a total of 328 parishes. Its Faculty of Theology has a teaching staff of 10 members and about 50 students. The church's publishing house is in Liptovský Mikulas, where hymnals, periodicals (about 25,000 copies per month), and new editions of the Bible are issued.

Bishop Michalko is a distinguished clergyman. He was accorded the honor
of preaching (in German) in the Stadtkirche in Wittenberg on the occasion of
the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, an event that I witnessed. He
addressed the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) convention in Louisville this
past year, and stayed to participate in the Princeton dialogue of October
1982. He has been (may still be) a member of the Executive Committee of the
CPC and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and participated in the WCC in
Canada in the summer of 1983. Neither Bishop Kiedron of the Silesian
Evangelical Church, nor Bishop Struharik of the Yugoslav Slovak Evangelical
Church, have been thus prominently involved. Both are highly-respected
leaders, with whom I have shared experiences, but they do not have the same
"stature."

It may be of interest to know that there is a Slovak congregation in
Prague. It is at St. Michael's Church, and is part of the Slovak Evangelical
Church, serving the many Slovaks who came to Bohemia after World War II, as
well as those passing through. St. Michael's rector, Dr. Emanuel Varga, was
installed in 1972 on the 25th Anniversary of the creation of that Slovak
Lutheran congregation. St. Michael's contains portions of a Benedictine
romanesque Church dating back to the 2nd century. It was taken over by the
Hussities, then by the German Lutherans living in Prague. For a while, its
use as a church was forbidden (1787). Albert Schweizer gave a concert there.
After Schweizer gave a concert there, after World War II, it became the
present Slovak Lutheran Church, with a congregation of some 2000 members.

The "fruit of Biblical scholarship" (OPREE, page 15) might well have
included another reference--the new Slovak Bible. The new Slovak Bible is
surely also a very significant development in Protestantism in
Czechoslovakia. As this is being written, Bishop John Adam of the Slovak Zion
Synod, LCA, is in Slovakia discussing ongoing activities and relationships
with Bishop Michalko, following the successful "bridging" that led to the
exchange of pastors, and included the unprecedented tour of Slovak Lutheran
congregations by a delegation of three Zion Synod pastors, including the then
Bishop Paul Brndjar, in September 1978. All three preached at regular and
special services, in the Slovak language, to congregations in each of the
Church Districts and in nearly all of the 14 dioceses. It was an achievement
believed to be unique in East-West church relationship, made possible by the
existence of the Slovak Zion Synod, the only ethnic non-geographic synod in
the Lutheran Church of America (LCA). Official receptions (both by and for
Government cultural ministers) enabled Bishop Brndjar to establish the
"bridging" referred to above. Since then, Bishop Michalko, as well as some of
his clergy, attended a number of Zion Synod conventions and District meetings
in the U. S., with extensive preaching schedules, in both English and Slovak.

It is almost inevitable that the experiences and observations drawn from
visits to Prague, the capital of Bohemia as well as of the CSSR, will
emphasize the developments and conditions in Bohemia and Moravia, namely the
Czech lands. (These, with Silesia, were the "Crown lands of the Holy Roman
Empire.") Unless one makes similar contacts and efforts in Slovakia, through
its capital at Bratisava, a similar awareness of Protestantism in Slovakia is
not likely to be acquired. Furthermore, unless one knows the language, and
has good comprehension of the CSSR and its component parts, as well as of
their differing historical and cultural development and heritage, the present
realities of state/family/church/ etc. relationships are difficult to understand. Some highly-qualified and well-intentioned visitors have been misled in their efforts to report the situation; sometimes innocently, sometimes intentionally. But we should, by all means, keep trying to maintain and extend the bridges of understanding. To that end, Dr. Rasker has made an important contribution.

Respectfully yours,
Peter R. Prifti
Upper Montclair, N.J.

September 27, 1982

ADDENDA AND ERRATA

Dr. Rudolf Grulich (Roman Catholic) and author in our last issue, was born in 1944 in Runarz, Moravia, Czechoslovakia. He teaches Medieval and Modern Church History. He is a member of the founding Board of the International Institute for National Rights and Regionalism in Much, West Germany and is the secretary of its scholarly council. He resides in West Germany.

In Vol. III, No. 5

p. 24 - for "Weimer," read "Weimar."
pp. 33, 34 - for "Munster," read "Muntzer."
p. 33 - for "Weidervereinigung" read "Wiedervereinigung."