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THE GREAT CHANGE AND THE PROTESTANTS

By Bogdan Tranda

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The last years have been marked by the most radical changes that have occurred in Poland since the end of the Second World War. What happened was that our nation absolutely rejected the totalitarian system that for 45 years has tried by all means to bring every realm of human life under the control of the Communist Party. For about half a century people have lived under the pressure of indoctrination and lies. The destructive forces of the fallen system penetrated not only our economic and political structures and left unbelievable devastation, but they falsified history, destroyed social links, poisoned human relationships, corrupted the human soul, and left it sick. The churches, irrespective of denomination, are now faced with a huge program of work.

One of the most characteristic features of the Communist system was the play of colors, the lie designed to appear as truth. Nowadays one can hardly comprehend how it was possible for so many educated, intelligent people to take empty slogans and false theories for the truth. And this applies not only to people in Communist-dominated countries, but even more to a great many in the West.

It is important to realize that government policy towards church and religion was one element in that insidious game. Apart from a short period of bitter struggle against the church we did enjoy in Poland quite an area of liberty, which was however strictly controlled by special services, even in the case of a small community as the Polish Reformed Church. The comparatively wide margin of liberties was due to the strength of the Roman Catholic Church. It was this strength which forced the Communists to apply special methods. Their attitude towards the minority churches was also affected.

An impression might have been created that the minority churches enjoyed special favor with the party and state functionaries. It was true that they did not meet with so many obstacles, for instance in their work with children and young people. This was, however,
essentially an exercise in deception, and yet it did indeed deceive many Protestants, who believed that Communism really offered them equal rights. It deceived many Catholics as well, who saw Protestants as subordinate and totally subservient to the system. At that stage party and state functionaries saw the support of minorities as a temporary tactic in the fight against religion. They would support minorities in order to set them against the main enemy, the Roman Catholic Church. It was neither love nor approval of the special values presented by minorities which determined government policy, but simple and cold political calculation, sowing hostility among different groups in order to control and then fight them, an application of the old rule *divide et impera*.

In fact the true situation was to some extent the reverse: the situation of the Roman Catholic Church was in many respects privileged in comparison with that of minority Christians. One possible explanation is this: most functionaries, even party members, were really crypto-Catholics.

At an ecumenical meeting I heard a Catholic priest say, "Those Protestants! They just cower to the State Office for Church Affairs." It was easy for him to talk like that, but he was not taking into account the simple fact that the Catholic bishops and priests had the support of millions of farmers and workers. Who was on our side, though? Was the priest or his bishop prepared to defend us? If our churches had been closed down in reprisal for our opposition, would they have offered us a church or a chapel where we could have held our services? Protestants felt obliged to stay loyal; or subordinate, in order to survive. The same strategy was used by the Catholic bishops in the years before 1956. It was clear however, that functionaries were kind to you only as long as one was obedient and kept within the limits of permitted freedom.

Just one example. It happened a long time ago, when official relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches of the Polish Ecumenical Council did not yet exist; the state authorities were preventing any contact. I had nevertheless been invited, on the basis of a personal relationship, to preach in the Warsaw Dominican Church on the occasion of the Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I accepted the invitation and prepared myself, but on Saturday morning, the day before I was to preach, I received an order from the Office for Church Affairs stating that I was absolutely forbidden to preach there. I discussed this serious situation with the Dominican prior, and we decided that I would not appear in the pulpit but that my sermon would be read by someone else without mentioning my name as its author. The official functionary was furious when he realized what had happened. I was in a difficult situation. The whole affair cost me an opportunity to go the University of Glasgow to prepare my thesis there. From that time I was suspect and discriminated against as an enemy who plotted with Catholics. Many times I was refused a passport for foreign travel.
Some Christians however felt sincere gratitude to the Communists because it was the Communists who had granted their church legal recognition. One has to understand their feelings. Before the War they were not recognized as churches; at best they were acknowledged as associations, and they suffered discrimination if not persecution. When the Communists came to power they were officially granted equal rights. It is no wonder if some of them, like Polish National Catholic Church, held special services of thanks giving on 22 July, the official celebration of the People's Republic.

Nevertheless there were always those amongst us who saw through the deception, who did not let ourselves be deceived, and who therefore helped our community to preserve its reputation. It must be remembered that non-Catholic Christians total no more than two or three percent of the population, and if one adds to this the effect of traditional Catholic intolerance, it is quite understandable that minorities should suffer from phobias, complexes, and hostile attitudes. Amongst the minorities there are Protestants totalling only 120,000 - 150,000 individuals. In the context of the recent changes in Poland a strange phenomenon is becoming evident. There are large circles of people who fear Catholicism much more than Communism. They are actually more afraid of a Christian church than an atheist party which involves in its ideology the destruction of all religion! I would like my Catholic friends to consider that phenomenon and try to decide what the reasons are for it. In my view it is not only one side which is to blame.

It is true that the ecumenical movement has changed the atmosphere and reciprocal attitudes and has opened the way to better mutual understanding. More than two decades after the Second Vatican Council the Protestant minorities in Poland can see a considerable change in the Roman Catholic Church, and this is reflected in the situation of the Protestants themselves. However the old phobias have been revived after the recent political changes. On radio, on television one hears and sees Catholic priests. If there is a Solidarity meeting, it starts with a mass. If there is a national festival, the official program includes a mass. If a new party organizes a congress, it starts with the mass. If there is a military celebration, there is a mass in the program, and all the soldiers in their ranks with guns and bayonets receive communion one after another. Anyone who wants to achieve an important position in the country tries to get the support of a bishop, of the Primate or of the Pope, or at least tries to act together with a priest. On the insistence of the Bishops' Conference, religious instruction has been introduced in public schools and kindergartens without respecting legal procedure. The bishops require, and Catholic political parties force a penal bill concerning abortion. The President appears with his chaplain on the official occasions in the country and abroad, this is being called to question by many people, even devout Catholics. No doubt the Catholic church deserves to be present in the public life, but things should be done in the manner a bit more modest.
No wonder, then, that many Protestants feel threatened by the increasing clericalization of everyday life. Everywhere—in political parties, in trade unions, in schools, in the army, in the hospital—they have to explain why they do not go to mass, do not receive Catholic communion; they have to explain that they are Protestants and that Protestants are Christians. Many Protestants will tell that they honestly believe that nothing has in fact changed in the Roman Catholic Church and that the whole conciliar reform process is only a deceptive operation aimed at the Protestants.

The clericalization process described above shows how human beings, even in the church, are endangered by pride. This is why minorities do not need to be afraid; instead, they should see in this an opportunity to play a prophetic role, based on the doctrine of election. According to Biblical teaching any success in which we participate is not the result of our own strength and wisdom but of God’s will. We are a part of it because God has chosen us according to His free will and not because of our merits.

The place of Protestant minority should be considered against the historical background of Poland. From its very beginnings Poland was a pluralistic country. There was always Latin and Eastern Christianity, as well as Lutherans, Reformed believers and Czech Brethren since the 16th century. Jews, persecuted in Western Europe, found their shelter in Poland and were able to nurture their religion and culture. There were some Armenians and Muslims, too. From the ethnic point of view society was also varied. Besides Poles there were Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Germans, Jews, and Tartars living in Poland. The country was a melting-pot of nations and religions, where people lived largely in peace until the time of Counter-reformation, when under the kings of the Vasa dynasty Catholicism began to play an ideological role as the official religion. Even between the two world wars no more than 60% of the populations of the Republic of Poland were ethnic Poles.

It was the Yalta agreement, initiated by Stalin and supported by President Roosevelt, which created a monolithic nation. This meant an impoverishment of culture; Polish culture lost the creative power that came from being at a crossroads, where different traditions interpenetrated and inspired each other. Nevertheless there are people who fail to understand the meaning of diversity, and they glorify the new borders of Poland, which they see as ensuring that the nation is without foreign elements. This was an argument constantly used by Communist propaganda. Unfortunately, it was not only Communists who used that argument. Protestants cannot forget, for instance, that Cardinal Wyszynski, a great statesman in many ways, used to say at the shrine of Mary in Czestochowa, that Poland must become a completely Catholic country.

The inspirational role of the Protestants in this historical tradition is clear. They are a warning to the majority not to fall into pride and self-satisfaction. And this is more than just a theoretical possibility. Nowadays as a new social, economic, and political order is
evolving, noisy and active political parties have arisen which make use of, or rather abuse, nationalistic and Catholic slogans. A not inconsiderable number of priests and bishops have been attracted by these aberrations and support these parties.

Society needs the witness of small Protestant communities, with their particular traditions, knowledge of the Bible, specific ethical values, and a sense of community. They constitute a challenge to the traditional values represented by the majority. Of course, the minority, being part of society, has been corrupted as well as the others, and needs regeneration. Both sides need each other. Different values and ideas must encounter and cross-fertilize each other to bring forth new ideas. By its very existence a small Protestant community shows that no minority group, even the smallest, should be treated with contempt because those groups are sources of unique, enriching values.