

REPORT ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN EASTERN EUROPE

By **Joseph Loya**

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The nature of this effort is as a quick and low-level "fly-over" resulting in a reconnaissance report on the status of the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe. I begin with an excerpt from the keynote address of Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague, President of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, delivered at the Council's "Symposium on the Church in Pluralist Societies" in September of 1996:

We find ourselves once again facing the most decisive problem: is it possible for 'heaven' and 'earth' to be in communion? In many aspects of European life and culture, heaven appears 'closed', God seems far away and humanity feels lost and alone. On the other hand, many who search for the way to heaven embark on different paths - sectarian, agnostic or fundamentalist - which express yet again the problem and the question but do not provide the answer.

The euphoria over the fall of Communism is already but a dim memory for East European Catholics. The difficult and complex task of forging the communion of heaven and earth now asserts itself. The commonality of the question, "How do we wed committed discipleship and responsible citizenship?" that tests all Catholics in all the states should not mask the fact that solutions depend on the historical course of the faith's inculturation that is particular to each state. The most conspicuously diverse histories are that of Poland and the Czech Republic.

In Poland, the Church served as bearer of national identity, refuge in time of threat, provider of moral leaders in times when the nation had no legitimate political leaders, and manager of the link between the piety of the masses and the advanced thought of the Catholic intellectual elite. Prior to 1989, the Church stood its ground as political, cultural and moral antagonist of the state. The success of this role at building national consensus has caused difficulty in abandoning it for the role of a social partner with the state. Unlike Polish history, Czech history has been marked by a painful tension between national identity and Catholicism. The tension, dating back to the Hussite wars and the violent re-Catholicizing of the 17th century, was intensified by the nationalism of the last century. Czech communists yielded to the temptation of trying to accelerate the already promising process of secularization with an especially hard-line persecution of the church. As there is in the Czech psychology a penchant to identify with the oppressed, the Church's moral prestige rose to a degree unmatched in the whole of modern Czech history.

In November 1989, in the Prague Cathedral, to the thundering applause of believers and unbelievers alike, Cardinal Tomasek uttered the memorable words, "At this historic moment our history, I stand, as does the entire Catholic Church, on the side of the people." Since then many of "the people," and there are many Catholics among them, have chosen to disassociate themselves from the Church. The critical question is. "Why?" Tomas Halik provides valuable insight: "The flag of moral renewal in society, which the Church had hoist during the dramatic days of November 1989, was soon lost in a forest of other (mostly political and economic) banners. The moral flags even began to appear embarrassing, not only because the time of flag-waving had passed so quickly, but also because the Church itself was unable to hold its ranks together, and its words were not followed by sufficiently tangible and credible actions. After forty years of persecutions, the Church was in a markedly weak state when it

faced the mountain of new tasks in the new society, and it was not able to take advantage of its new possibilities. The believers and the sympathizers who expected inspiring personalities at key positions in the Church were disappointed by a procession of tired bureaucrats who lacked the magnanimity, vision, and creativity necessary to prepare the Church for the coming decade. A perfunctory patching-up of the institution of the Church began without any debate about the need to adapt to the changed conditions. Nor did the Church fully appreciate the role of the media in a free society, and soon- instead of a subject of inspiration or dialogue partner in the media - the Church became a curious object of marginal interest, occasional scandal, and, sometimes, a whipping boy."

To these remarks I would add that the Vatican did not gain for itself wide popular acclaim in the way it handled the regularization of the clergy of the "underground Church"-- some of them were married bishops and women--once these

servants of the persecuted Church surfaced and identified themselves to their proper ordinaries. Of ten clandestinely consecrated bishops, all of whose priestly ordinations were valid, six are celibate and are already working as priests. The four who are married cannot be taken into the Greek Catholic Church as it does not allow married bishops. According to a ruling of the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, the only way these four can continue to work in the Church is by signing a declaration renouncing their episcopal activities, after which, with the permission of the Vatican, they can function as married deacons. Of the fifty-three celibate priests clandestinely ordained in the Communist era, forty-five were now doing pastoral work. Cardinal Vlk said that in his diocese of Prague, six had been validly ordained abroad and five who had been ordained by the late Bishop Felix Davidek had agreed to sub conditione ordinations. Of the sixty-four married priests, one had been incorporated into the Greek Catholic Church (which has married priests) and twenty-three others had asked to be incorporated. Six widowers had been offered the possibility of working part-time. A further four married priests from Brno had asked for their names not to be published, as their wives did not know they were priests. Seventeen married priests who had been clandestinely ordained priests have "regrettably" rejected the offer of sub conditione ordination in the Greek Catholic Church. The ordinations of any and all women were declared void.

The Hungarian bishops have been applying their concern for the quality and duration of life on earth. The most recent governmental statistics showing a 5% fall in birth rate to the lowest level in a century, a death rate that is the highest per head in the Europe, a declining life expectancy age (64.8 years), the world's highest suicide rate, a doubled alcoholism rate (to 12% through the 1990s) and a doubling of the number of crimes committed in the time period since 1989 confirm their alarm. Fr. László Lukács, spokesman for the Hungarian bishop's conference, said that the bishops were also concerned about financial corruption and severe problems in areas ranging from the judicial system to women's rights. He thought the Church has taken a position that was well thought of by Hungarians, 66% of whom were recorded as Catholics in the 1993 census. A common concern for both the government and the Church is the Hungarian Catholic minority living in Slovakia; The Prime Minister of Hungary drew the Vatican's attention to the lack of even a suffragan bishop for these people, and the new law on Slovak language could endanger the freedom of this minority to worship and be educated in their native language.

In Slovakia, the hierarchy alienated the young progressives by being, in the latter's view, overly nationalistic, clerical, and meddling in the course of the establishment of Slovak sovereignty.

It was reported in January 1997 that Croatia (76% Catholic by a 1991 census) granted rights of the Catholic Church treaty-level protection, guaranteeing the Church's charitable and social activities, ensuring the recognition by the state of church marriages and schools, protection to church-owned monuments and access to Catholic chaplains to prisons, hospitals, and orphanages. The Church and State are henceforth to be independent and autonomous in their own spheres while obliged to "co-operate for the spiritual and material development of the person and common good." Croatia's Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Reformed churches announced the formation of an ecumenical committee as the first step towards a full national Council of Churches.

The Church in Slovenia, whose population is more than 70% Catholic, has been issuing complaints of frustration and victimization in the face of government bureaucracy and foot-dragging, especially over such delicate matters as restitution of properties confiscated by the former Communist rulers. The Slovenian Church seems unique in its ability to generate enthusiasm and support among the younger segment of believers. Last month Pope John Paul II received letters of credence from Albania's new ambassador. In his speech to the pope, Pjeter Pepa said his country was now experiencing a renewal of religion and moral reconstruction. The next day his government declared a state of emergency and was on its way to collapse. During the ensuing weeks of chaos, the apostolic

administrator, in solidarity with Orthodox and Muslim leaders, ignored danger and personal attacks in trying to promote calm and stability.

In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church continues to exhibit an atavistic suspicion of the Catholic Church, and an exaggerated fear of Eastern Catholics. After a period of progress in inter-church relations through the 70s and 80s, a severe rift developed near the end of the Gorbachev period when Rome appointed Catholic bishops on Russian territory, allegedly without prior consultation with the Moscow Patriarchate. The move may well have been insensitive, but the intention was to provide urgently needed pastoral care to the scattered Catholic flock, not to convert the Orthodox. The problem in Russia seems to be that despite the national constitution's guarantee of religious liberty to all, a third of the 89 administrative regions feel free to assert their own restrictive policies.

The Vatican is currently engaging the government of Byelarus in an attempt to forestall that regimes attempt to expel Catholic priests and nuns.

Catholic clergy ministering in Georgia are reporting they are better treated by the Muslims than by their co-religionists, the Eastern Orthodox.

Pope John Paul II untiringly explains the only will of the Catholic church is "to participate in the life of society as a witness to the Gospel." Inherent in this is the mission to speak out on matters of morality. In these times of increased secularization, it remains to be seen how many Eastern Europeans will be identifying themselves as willing and responsive listeners.