

THE U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS STATEMENT ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE USSR: SOBER OPTIMISM

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On the whole, the U.S. Catholic Bishops can be complimented for producing a balanced, honest assessment of the state of religious freedom in the East Bloc nations and the Soviet Union. They blend specifics with a delineation of basic principles, many of them rooted in II Vatican's historic document of religious liberty, in a way that renders their line of argument extremely compelling. They also place the issue of religious in a somewhat broader context, relating it to other critical social justice concerns such as the quest for world peace. I am not an expert on the conditions that have prevailed in each and every country included in the bishops' analysis. But for the ones I do know reasonably well -- Poland, Hungary, the USSR and the German Democratic Republic I find their descriptions of the situation fundamentally accurate.

The Catholic Bishops obviously took a major risk in releasing this statement when they did and with an abundance of details. There is no doubt that we are beginning to see potentially monumental changes occurring in the past couple of years in several of the countries involved with some spillover for Albania. This means that many of the concrete cases and the specific pieces of legislation cited by the bishops either have been abolished or significantly modified. Despite this difficulty I am convinced the U.S. bishops made the correct judgment in resisting pressure to table the document or to speak only in generic terms about religious liberty. As we hopefully move into a profoundly new era in church-state relations throughout Eastern Europe (and it is still only a hope, not a certainty), we need to be reminded of how bad the problem has been. For years many liberal churchpeople have turned a blind eye to many of these abuses, often in the name of arms control and disarmament. They tended to endorse, explicitly or through silence, the propaganda statements of certain Eastern churchpeople about religious liberty in the East bloc. While conditions were never uniformly as bad as some of the Western extremist critics charged, their excesses on the critical side were no worse than the excesses on the defense side. The bishops' document makes us sober about the long road that must be travelled in Eastern Europe before religious groups feel themselves secure and in a position to render a substantial contribution to the shaping of public order and public culture in their lands--the ultimate goal of religious freedom as defined by Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J., one of the principal architects of the Vatican II statement.

There is another area in which document strikes an important balance. It clearly links the struggle for religious liberty and other forms of human rights in Eastern Europe with the pursuit of disarmament between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. "They should not be held hostage to one another," says the statement. "Neither should one be pursued with indifference to the other." Without doubt one of the factors that tended to discourage participation on the part of many people in the churches in the effort to secure greater religious liberty in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was the blatant militarism of the advocacy groups. To these advocacy groups, many of them church-related, the bishops are sending a clear message--you must show an equal commitment to disarmament. Sometimes, as in the cases of the Ukrainian sailors who defected on the eve of sensitive arms control negotiations, difficult decisions have to be made that temporarily contravene our nation's commitments to human rights. But the bishops have also served warning to those in the churches who sometimes have relegated human rights, including religious liberty, to a minor concern in their legitimate quest for world peace. As a general principle, this is definitely unacceptable.

Perhaps the most serious weakness in the document is its inability to raise the issue of how much religious groups in Eastern Europe may have contributed to a certain social malaise to which Marxism was one response. While the shortcomings of the religious communities do not justify the repressive approach to religion adopted by all Eastern European states in some measure, this repression does not excuse religious institutions from a serious critique of their contribution to social injustice. It is true that no church document of which I am aware has been able to undertake such a critique. So in raising this

issue I want to say that this document's failure was commonplace. Yet, in my judgment, the churches will show a new maturity and will strengthen their voice in behalf of religious liberty only when they finally have the courage to combine their critique of nations in the area of religious freedom with some self-critique in which their activities and teachings may have done harm to the body politic and hence been a cause of the repression they now condemn.