

Translation of article from the Czech newspaper Lidov Noviny from 31 July, 1993, entitled "A Catholic Fortress" (Katolick pevnost), by Andrzej Szczypiorski. [Szczypiorski is a Polish novelist, author of Pocztek (published in the United States by Vintage as The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman). The Czech version of this article is a translation from an earlier, German version. It is possible that the German article was the original, according to Estera Sldkov, who translated the article into Czech.].

## A CATHOLIC FORTRESS

Poland is undergoing a revolution. A market economy is being set up, and an open society is coming into being on the wreckage of the egalitarian illusions of an earlier spiritual confusion and established custom. It is possible to overthrow the legal-institutional system of a state, or change it through legal means, in a matter of a few days. It takes years, however, to overcome old patterns of behavior and old ways of thinking. Today nearly everyone is searching for new paths, a new identity. Those who postpone this task, or who would prefer to see everything stay the way it was, cease to be reliable. This approach is becoming more anachronistic every day.

This is also the drama of the Polish church, which is presently undergoing what is perhaps the deepest crisis in its thousand-year history. The Church has a great tradition of struggling for the identity of the Polish nation, as well as attempting to spread the gospel values in the world of force, contempt and lies. Catholic existence in Poland has almost always involved the necessity of struggle. During the Partitions the Church was the only institution that could provide patronage to the persecuted Polish people. In the twentieth century it played an active part in the fight against the Nazi occupation. For fifty years during the Communist regime it was a spiritual guide for doubters, the guardian of national values for the lost, the preserver of moral principles for many millions of people-including those who did not believe in God, but who wanted to preserve some dignity and independence for themselves in a world that was demeaning and full of deceit.

It is understandable that, after centuries of this kind of experience, the Church would become a church that was more Polish than Catholic. Because it had to concentrate so much on social and national problems, its spiritual mission often suffered as a result. The Church [in Poland] did try to fulfill this role as well, but it did so with less success than in other Catholic countries of Europe.

Polish Catholicism, imbued with folk customs, manifested an agenda of fidelity to Polish identity, and to those models of behavior that conformed to the requirements of the liturgy. It was not characterized by a capacity for reflection in religious matters, nor for the kind of ardency that gives birth to great mystics, theologians, or even revolutionaries.

In Poland the conviction that discussion, especially polemics, could not be tolerated within the Church held sway for a long time. At the same time, there were many reasons for such discussions. Nonetheless, however, it was judged that within the besieged

fortress discussion about internal weaknesses could not be permitted, especially when the external threat seemed to be particularly acute, demanding heightened alertness.

In those years nonbelievers also found refuge in the fortress of Polish Catholicism. These were people searching for a place of spiritual asylum, for the intellectual freedom denied them by an external world controlled by the communist party. It was also said of the Polish Church at that time that it was not only the guardian of the values of the gospel and of patriotism, but also an institution of democracy and tolerance. As such, it also constituted a laboratory for the open society dreamed of by a majority of the nation.

In the last few decades, especially after Vatican II, a Catholic universalism grew up in Poland that played a deciding role in the spiritual confrontation with the communist system. This tendency, however, came increasingly into conflict with a majority of the clergy, and after a certain time the official church regarded it with suspicion, or even hatred. Before this time Catholic intellectuals could count on the friendly support and care of Primate Wyszyński, inasmuch as they had shown him greater loyalty during his most difficult years, when he had been imprisoned, than had the Church dignitaries. It is not fashionable to speak of this today.

At the same time, however, the legend of the unyielding leadership of the Church in the battle against communism does not correspond entirely to the truth. The Church dignitaries also displayed a lack of courage during the time from 1953 to 1956 when Wyszyński's great authority was missing. During this time the Church succumbed to pressure from the system, and the Episcopate willingly submitted to state authority. It was only the Catholic intellectuals who remained faithful to the imprisoned Primate and defended the remnants of freedom, for which they paid with persecution, poverty and isolation. When after 1956 the Church became a significant place for decision-making in Poland, Primate Wyszyński again and again appealed for the help and support of the intellectuals. The same thing can be said of the then archbishop of Cracow, Karol Wojtyła.

Wyszyński died in 1981, and the Polish pope is far away. Today the Catholic intellectuals--such as the former premier Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and the founder and long-time editor-in-chief of the weekly Tygodnik Powszechny, Jerzy Turowicz, for instance--are attempting to resist the megalomaniacal ambitions for power of the clergy. These intellectuals are substantially isolated within the official church, and are even brutally attacked more than before.

The Catholicism of most people has always been fairly superficial, something which holds to this day. It is rare that adherence to external forms is combined with intellectual contemplation, and it also cannot be said that the ethical principles and norms proclaimed by the Church are universally respected. Such contemplation and respect are obstructed by a strong individualism with anarchistic features and by a love for personal freedom. It is because of this that Polish Catholics rarely display those characteristics which the clergy so like in their flock, i.e., humility and blind obedience.

The Polish national character as formed over the centuries is such that, even when people in foreign countries may think otherwise, Poles gravitate to moderation and restraint. An uncompromising stance, or ideological, political and religious radicalism, are foreign to the Polish character. Poles prefer the imperfect form, and tend to regard their own mistakes and the imperfection of the world with a greater degree of sympathy than they do perfectionism--which, as such, can never achieve the state of real perfection.

Because of this the communist regime in Poland was easier to bear than that in East Germany, for example, and today the evil perpetrated by communism is regarded with greater tolerance in Poland than in the former East Germany. The notorious but primarily verbal Polish antisemitism never took on the criminal forms of the bloody pogroms in Russia or the German policy of total annihilation.

The outcome of this spiritual tradition is that a large part of the population categorically rejects the current efforts on the part of the clergy to make the Polish state into a confessional state, or at least into a polity that will accept the clergy meddling in public affairs. The Church perceives a conspiracy of the Left behind this resistance, or the harmful influence of Western liberalism. This diagnosis is misleading. The Left has no significant influence now, because of the fact that it is associated--although incorrectly--with the recent experiences of the communist system. Liberalism, on the other hand, seems attractive only to a narrow stratum of enterprising people willing to take risks, whereas the majority of people regard all liberal ideas with skepticism.

The opposition of a majority of Poles to the unwelcome advice of the Church, as well as to its attempts to gain ever increasing influence in public life, has its roots elsewhere. The Poles yearned for freedom for a long time, and now at last they feel free. They guard this freedom tenaciously, almost ferociously. Whoever would attempt to limit human and civil rights, to squeeze them into some kind of borders, would have to reckon with a loss of trust on the part of the society.

The Church, which until recently enjoyed the greatest confidence of the society, has in the meantime fallen to seventh place in all opinion polls, far behind the army, police and government. This negative trend has driven one part of the Episcopate and the clergy into a fortress mentality, to defend themselves against allegedly growing persecution. In reality the situation is quite different. The Church is continually attempting to increase its influence, and a weak parliament and no-less-weak government succumb to this pressure. This in turn increases the worry of many Poles that their country is on the way to becoming a confessional state.

We often complain that foreigners do not understand Polish problems. The same thing can be said, however, of the Polish bishops. In Germany religious education in the schools is taken for granted, and no one gets upset about it. In contrast to this experience the Poles reacted to the introduction of religious education in the schools with distrust and a lack of acceptance, even not infrequently with a boycott. This kind of reaction would have been unthinkable earlier, when the Church was organizing religious education classes outside of the schools. This is not the fault of some atheistic conspiracy,

as some members of the clergy assume, but reality: after the schools had been misused for communist indoctrination, many Poles fear that we now have to deal with a new form of indoctrination, this time Catholic. It is not religion, per se, that arouses this opposition, but the way in which religion is being used to control the state and the nation. A majority of Polish Catholics--in contrast to the Polish clergy--hold the view that religion is the personal concern of the individual.

In Poland it would be hard for us to find an advocate of abortions. On the other hand, a majority of Poles reject the fundamentalist understanding of morality which has the force of law, forced through by the Church. This is especially true of the uncompromising way in which the Church has demanded the punishment of the women. This position is considered to be unacceptable to more than eighty percent of the people. The maneuvering of the new politicians, who out of fear of the bishops want to pass this repressive law, is causing opposition to the clergy to grow. At the same time, parliament is losing its image; the citizens also hold the Church responsible for this phenomenon, as they accuse it of having a hunger for power.

Respect for the sovereignty of the human individual constitutes an integral part of Christian teaching. Respect for the freedom of the human person, with all of his or her frailties, provides a measure for Polish Catholics of their respect for the clergy.

There are many disappointed Catholics who until not long ago tied their greatest hopes for the renewal of their country to the Church. Today it is increasingly possible to hear the view that it is possible for a person to be a Catholic outside of the Church as well. This view is, of course, in error.

Catholicism without the clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy no doubt remains as Christianity, but it is no longer Catholicism.

The present situation is a consequence of the intellectual passivity of the clergy in the last few decades. Not that long ago it was still possible to succumb to the illusion that the Church in Poland is monolithic and has a large influence on public life. Among a large part of the clergy a kind of triumphalism appeared, combined with a spiritual idleness. It would seem that no one wanted to see that a lay morality has taken hold throughout in Poland in the last half-century, and that the participation of millions of people in church life was evidence more of their longing for civil liberties than of their piety.

In the last few years, in conditions of an open society, the clergy have behaved directly as if Poland was heavily indebted to the Church. Some priests complained about the ingratitude of the nation. Their wishes and teachings came into conflict with the expectations of the society.

Poland is now a democracy. The Church must learn how to coexist with a pluralist environment, one that does not recognize the monopoly of any exclusively valid truth. It took many decades for Catholicism to accept a democratic society. In the West this

process took over a hundred years, and more than once the process of adaptation required bitter self-denial of the Church.

The Church in Poland now has this experience before it as well.

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