

Polish Catholicism Flourishes Despite Oppression

By **ROBERT LERNER**
(NC News Service)

When I was in Poland a few years ago, I witnessed an incident that some may consider trivial but which is very revealing for anyone who wants to understand the Polish soul.

Through mere curiosity, I had entered a little church on the outskirts of Cracow. Suddenly a young student opened the door and knelt before a crucifix. After a moment's meditation, he went out without even suspecting my presence.

That brief incident told more about the intensity of Polish faith than even the sight of soldiers in uniform at High Mass on Sunday. The act of that lad reflected a deeply rooted piety that could only be the result of education received in the home, even though Poland has experienced a quarter of a century of communist rule.

On the streets of Polish cities, one notices an unusual number of priests in cassocks, of Sisters in habits and of young seminarians, the first external sign of a Catholicism different from that visible in other countries of Eastern Europe.

There is only a step from that to believing that the "freedom of religion" guaranteed by the Polish constitution is absolutely respected — but the truth is not so simple.

In this 25th year of "socialist" rule, the situation of Catholicism in Poland can be summed up in two propositions: on the one hand, the population is profoundly religious and practices its religion; on the other hand, the state is engaged in an unremitting struggle against religious beliefs.

This battle goes on in the background and the casual Western observer will notice nothing of it, unless he pours through the party newspapers and Catholic publications.

The only means sometimes used to put a brake on the Catholic press is withholding its quotas of paper. After complaints, the newspapers once again obtain their paper — with excuses "for this incomprehensible oversight. Such skirmishes are part of the game.

The little war of attrition that Gomulka and Stefan Cardinal Wyszynski of Warsaw carry on has its comic aspects. To

show their disdain for the authorities, for example, the clergy organize monstrous processions that paralyze all traffic in town or on the highways. In revenge, the authorities get rid of the loudspeakers that are to carry the sermon of Cardinal Wyszynski.

Nevertheless, taking into account the menacing nearness of the Soviet Union, the two opposing parties know that it is important not to push hostilities too far. For, if Gomulka is Polish before being communist, it could almost be said too that Cardinal Wyszynski is Polish before being Catholic.

The Polish government would like to regularize its relations with the Vatican, and for that reason it is not hostile to a visit by the Pope to Poland "on condition that he comes as an official guest" and not as an ordinary person making a pilgrimage. Such a visit would enhance the government's prestige among the people.

But an eventual visit of the Pope involves still another infinitely delicate point: the highest dignitary of the Catholic Church is also a head of state.

Among the conditions public-

ly set by the Polish bishops for an improvement of Church-state relations particularly noteworthy are the remarks concerning the state's confiscation of property that belonged to the Church before the war.

Other complaints of the Church are related to difficulties hindering the creation of new parishes, the bullying of Catholic workers because they assist at religious services, the restrictions imposed on the Catholic press.

The government has appeared very reserved recently in its responses to Catholic claims — a sign that there is no desire to embitter the situation.

This policy of tolerant silence practiced by Gomulka is not seen in all communist countries. In particular, Radio Tirana in Albania, faithful to the definition of religion given by Lenin, still speaks of the "opium of the people" and presents Gomulka as a traitor who wants to betray his country to the capitalists.

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