

Helsinki Group Gives Bad Marks to Soviet Bloc

By William D. Gertz
Religion Today

Madrid — All the Soviet-bloc countries except Hungary receive bad marks in a detailed 340-page report by the Helsinki Commission detailing compliance with the religious and other rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords.

Here are some of the findings:

Soviet Union: The Soviet leadership has "regressed — if not reneged" on its human rights obligations as set forth in the Final Act of the Helsinki Accords.

Since 1978, "Soviet authorities have imprisoned hundreds of human rights activists," including Nobel Peace Prize recipient Andrei Sakharov (banished to Gorki), and more recently, Russian Orthodox activist Father Gleb Yakunin.

The report describes the broad scope of the human rights movement in the Soviet Union including writers and publishers of some 30 samizdat or underground

publications, ethnic groups, unofficial labor unions and emigration movements.

Also stressed is the "struggle against an atheist state by 40 million Russian Orthodox, and 40 million Soviet Moslems, evangelical Protestants, Jews, and Catholics."

It also cites the increasing practice of charging human rights activists with "non-political provisions of the criminal codes, such as 'hooliganism' and 'parasitism.'"

Czechoslovakia: The report described Czechoslovakia's human rights record as "dismal," and called the state's repression of human rights activists as "unrelenting."

This repression was dramatized by the October 1979 "show trial" of six prominent members of the Charter '77 human rights movement. The Helsinki Commission called the authorities' control over religion "total" and said religious activists are "frequently harassed and imprisoned."

East Germany: Using "legal and psychological tactics" to silence dissent, East German authorities have instituted "stringent new laws" since 1979 designed to bring critics to heel.

Among the new repressive measures are house arrests, unlawful detentions and imprisonment, a tightening of censorship, unwarranted dismissals from employment, restrictions on travel, deprivation of parental rights, and forced emigration or exile.

The report estimates there are between 5,000 and 7,000 political prisoners in East Germany, more than half of whom were imprisoned for attempting to emigrate without official permission.

Poland: In Poland, widespread manifestations of popular discontent have been met with relative restraint on the part of Polish authorities. While the report came out prior to the recent labor unrest in the Baltic region, the authorities' handling of the crisis bears this out.

The report states that while the Polish Communists accept the existence of competing philosophical, social and religious elements in society, they are trying to reconcile that fact with the reality of being a client state of the Soviet Union. As a result, some measures against human rights activists have been severe.

While most activists live with unlawful 48-hour imprisonments, the report cites cases of "police brutality and the imposition of longer prison terms."

Romania: The report covers what is described as Romania's "two-sided" approach to human rights. Inside the country, human rights activists are severely repressed. On the other hand, the authorities appear to respond to human rights concerns raised by the West with cosmetic remedies and "limited accommodation."

The methods of repression in Romania include "extrajudicial harassment," police brutality, forced psychiatric confinement, and forced labor and imprisonment.

Major human rights figures face long prison terms while minor ones are expelled from the country. There have been

a number of moves against religious leaders, particularly in the last two years:

Bulgaria: The report cites "sparse" documentation on isolated Bulgaria's human rights violations. But again, what facts are available reveal

severe repression of dissent.

"The practice of religion beyond the strict limits set by authorities is punished," the report said, "and state atheism is vigorously promoted."

Hungary: Hungary was given good marks from the

Helsinki Commission as being one Communist-bloc nation that has shown "relative toleration toward diverse views." Some progress was made toward implementing the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords

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The Wedding: Can it Replace Marriage?

By Dolores Curran

I sit here with two pieces of paper in front of me. One is a letter to Ann Landers from a priest, who writes, "Twenty-five years ago I was pastor of a small Mexican-American parish. A couple of 16-year-olds ran off together. When they returned the parents practically gave me an ultimatum — marry them in the church or else. I could not find a good excuse for refusing, so I performed the ceremony."

"The wedding took place at 9 a.m. on Saturday the following week. At 4 p.m. on the day of the marriage, the couple had their first and last fight. They separated and never got together again. When I heard about it, I had a few sleepless nights. How could I put a stop to such senseless marriages?"

He went on to write that as a result he had set some rules on financial responsibility before teens could marry. Since that time, of course, most dioceses have set some stringent rules regarding age, readiness, and preparation for marriage which most parents welcome.

The other paper is the cover photo of a smiling bride and groom on a diocesan paper's wedding supplement, captioned in large letters, "The Happiest Day of Their Lives." I don't think the two clippings are unrelated.

In both cases, it's implied that the wedding is more important than the marriage. If a wedding day is the happiest day of one's life, then it follows that the rest of marriage is downhill — precisely the attitude we must fight. Yet, we find this kind of emphasis over and over again in our Church and culture. The wedding is glorified, the

marriage is incidental. The wedding is the day of glory, the marriage is payment for it.

We have to turn around some of our prevailing attitudes toward weddings and marriages. TV star Adrienne Barbeau, who played the daughter on "Maude," remarked in an interview, "I had to work to get myself to accept marriage. It was very hard for me. I looked at marriage as the end of my career, the end of youth, the end of romance."

The end of romance, for crying out loud. How did we get to that kind of thinking, so prevalent among the young today? I believe we adults are responsible for a lot of fears of marriage that unmarried couples exhibit today. We emphasize the difficulties and sacrifices. We mean well but we feel that if we publicize the negatives of marriage, we will let couples "know what they're in for" before they set the date for the "happiest day of their lives."

Instead, they are afraid to marry and set themselves up for a series of what they call meaningful relationships. Then the parents panic, do everything in their power to get the couple before the altar (regardless of their readiness for marriage), put pressure on the pastor, and wonder why, a few years later, there's a divorce.

A few years ago, I suggested that one reason for the priest vocation shortage was the lack of overtly contented models. I believe the same is true in marriage. As Church family, we marrieds need to stop using marriage as a joke or a scapegoat, always stressing what we've given up or what we could have been without it.

We have a God-given responsibility to serve as models to younger couples who are looking for a reason to marry. They're seeking adults who are witness to love, hope, and commitment after the wedding... long after it.

Dolores Curran



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