

Abortion stance weakens church in Poland

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

On Nov. 6, which also happened to be Election Day here in the United States, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story on the abortion issue in Poland.

Now that the Communist Party's grip on the country has been loosened, another strong hand is attempting to take hold of the political process.

According to the report in *The New York Times*, the Catholic Church is exerting heavy pressure on the Polish legislature to ban abortions. Although Poland is an overwhelmingly Catholic country, the practice of abortion is widespread; indeed, it is proportionately more widespread in Poland than it is even in the United States, where there are a million-and-a-half abortions a year.

In Poland, with a population of only 39 million, the annual rate of abortions is

estimated at 600,000 to one million.

As any reasonable person knows, women — American and Polish women alike — do not have abortions because they want to have them, or because they have some kind of killer-instinct.

Women have abortions because they have unwanted pregnancies, which they feel they cannot bring to term for health or economic reasons.

The surest way to prevent abortions is to prevent unwanted pregnancies. But in Poland both economic and medical circumstances make it difficult to do that.

Young married couples can't obtain adequate housing. During their early years of married life, young couples are forced either to live with their parents in exceedingly cramped circumstances or to eke out an existence in a tiny apartment. Having as many children "as God sends you" is simply out of the question.

On the other hand, Poles are denied the means of contraception widely in use in the economically developed part of the world. According to *The New York Times*, the pill, IUDs, condoms and diaphragms are in short supply and not readily available in Poland, and there is no sex education in the schools.

Alongside the rhythm method and coitus interruptus, abortion has become, by default, the contraceptive method of choice for some 600,000 to one million Poles every year.

And now Catholic Church authorities want the Polish legislature to make abortion a criminal offense, providing jail terms of up to two years for doctors who perform abortions.

The Polish Senate approved such a bill in September, but the lower house postponed action until after the Nov. 25 election.

Following senate approval of the bill,



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Pope John Paul II issued a statement saying that he was praying for the repeal of the existing abortion law, which he described as a vestige of totalitarianism.

U.S. Catholics have been through all this before and many of us can see trouble ahead for our fellow Catholics in Poland.

Given our own recent experience, the more the official church interferes with the political process on this issue, the more ground it will lose in Polish society — even among Catholics.

The signs are already there. Public opinion surveys are showing — for only the second time since World War II — a drop in approval ratings for the church.

Poles have only recently thrown off the yoke of heavy-handed Communist Party rule. They want, and need, some breathing space so that they can begin to experiment with their new freedom.

It is disturbing, therefore, to read that both presidential candidates, Lech Walesa and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, had taken the position that they, as politicians, could not oppose the moral views of the church on this issue.

But the decision is not only a moral one; it is also political. St. Thomas Aquinas himself conceded that the moral law can't always be translated into civic law. Good law has to be enforceable. And enforceable law requires a consensus.

Both Mazowiecki and Walesa believe that this new abortion legislation isn't good law because there's no real consensus in Polish society to make it enforceable (a recent poll disclosed that more than half are opposed).

Such a law won't stop abortions, but it could produce contempt for law and even a greater resentment toward the church.

Father Josef Tischner, a professor of ethics and a leading Solidarity adviser, has pointed to the 600,000-plus yearly abortion rate as a demonstration of "the poverty, the misery of Polish Catholicism. Now some priests," he continued, "want the law to help them in an area in which they have been defeated."

It sounds all too familiar.

Abortion is a serious moral problem, but there are effective and ineffective ways to deal with it. Trying to pressure, or even intimidate, Catholic politicians is a manifestly ineffective way.

Samuel receives a visit from a mysterious stranger

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

The next morning, Samuel kept the "CLOSED" sign on the front of "Samuel's Tailor Shop" a full hour later than usual. His head ached and he was in no mood for customers, conversation or work for that matter.

His mind was still sifting in vain through the peculiar events of this past day. First, there was his friend, Benjamin, who talked about the Messiah. Last night, there was the star that was so bright it seemed capable of changing night into day.

Samuel shuddered when he thought about the most bizarre occurrence of all. When he finally opened his door for business this morning, he bent over once again to examine the message scratched into the wood by the visitor. The markings were even more distinct in the daylight: Samuel, the kingdom of God is at hand.

He shook his head in disbelief and then he busied himself with his many tasks. Samuel was still bent over his work bench when the little bell over the front door sounded the arrival of his first customer.

He saw that the customer was empty-handed so he thought he must be there to pick something up. Samuel prided himself on a keen sense of memory. He had only to see a person once and he could match up



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the completed work with its owner when he returned for it.

Today, however, his memory went blank when he looked up and saw the stranger standing there.

"You are here to pick up something?" Samuel asked.

"No, to fix something," the stranger replied.

"Well, where is it then?" Samuel snapped with uncanny impatience.

"How can I fix what I cannot see?"

"Exactly right!" the stranger replied.

"It is you who are in need of repair."

"Me?" Samuel cried. "Yes, you are probably right. I am going crazy with all of the strange things happening to me. I should go and live in the lunatic colony!"

Samuel was so distressed that he probably would have gone on ranting for quite a bit longer. But something the stranger said stopped him abruptly. "What did you say?"

"Samuel, the kingdom of God is at hand," he repeated a second time.

"Did you ... last night ... on my front door?" Samuel asked.

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