

Solzhenitsyn's silence not surprising

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Ever since the first Russian Revolution of 1917, political conservatives and the Catholic Church have maintained a posture of firm opposition to communism.

For much of this period, in fact, the United States government was so anti-communist that it provided economic and military aid to blatantly oppressive regimes just because they were anti-communist, or said they were.

Few anti-communists ever paused to tell us what it was they would put in communism's place. But their actions spoke louder than any words.

Their alternative to the threat of communism in Spain was the Fascist dictator, Franco, whose sympathy with Adolf Hitler kept Spain out of World War II. All "good Catholics" in the late 1930s were expected to be on Franco's side.

The anti-communists' alternative to the freely elected Allende government in Chile in the early 1970s was an autocratic militarist, General Pinochet.

Rarely in those years did hard-line anti-communists support liberal democracies as an alternative to communism. They preferred instead authoritarian governments that would be more reliably supportive of U.S. policies and of the business interests of U.S. multinational corporations.

The fact that a number of these anti-communist regimes — in Spain, Chile, Argentina, the Philippines, South Korea and South Africa — denied basic human rights to their own people or engaged in torture and murder of dissidents was conveniently overlooked.

Fortunately, some people who opposed communism in those years did not follow such a cynical, self-serving course. Especially those who were inspired by Catholic social teachings worked to support liberal democratic movements as the only just alternative to communism. Theirs was a "seamless garment" approach to issues of social justice, human rights and peace.

I would suggest that anti-communists of this type are the most ecstatic over recent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In most of these countries, communist regimes have been replaced by governments that respect human rights; encourage freedom of the press and of thought; guarantee freedom of assembly and freedom of worship; and hold free elections of officeholders who are accountable to the electorate.

But this "new order" is not what some anti-communists had in mind as the most desirable alternative to communism. One suspects these people would have preferred replacing one form of authoritarianism with another.

Indeed, this is the argument of a recent

New York Times Op-ed article (Sept. 12) by Shlomo Avineri, professor of political science at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He raises a pointed question about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's remarkable silence about change in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Communist Party is in disarray, the KGB is in disgrace, and the whole system of repression that Solzhenitsyn so eloquently and so courageously condemned is being pulled down.

But not a word from Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize-winning writer who gave us *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *Gulag Archipelago*, and other powerful indictments of the cruelties and inhumanity of Stalinism.

Those who recall that Solzhenitsyn's condemnation of communism was often linked with equally severe criticisms of Western "decadence" and "materialism" should not be surprised, however.

"Is he disturbed," Professor Avineri asks, "that the 1991 revolution has been launched in the name of democracy, individual freedom and a call for a free-market economy — all ideas as anathema to him as communism?"

"Is he deeply disappointed to see that Russia's new leaders look to the West as a model rather than to the old Czarist Russia he so admires?"

The same kinds of questions could be asked of other anti-communists, inside as



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

well as outside of the Catholic Church.

Although they are undoubtedly very happy over the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet empire, they probably feel at least a twinge of sympathy for the defeated hard-liners.

They share their obsession with law and order. They are convinced that the media are often excessive in their criticism of accepted ideas, moral values and institutions, and that when they "go too far," they should be subject to censorship.

And they believe that society needs to have greater respect for authority — of the state and of the church especially — and much less "permissiveness," particularly where it touches freedom of thought and expression and the freedom to live one's own life without governmental (or ecclesiastical) interference.

Much of this ambivalence is still below the surface, but it will become increasingly evident in the months and years to come as the Catholic people of Eastern Europe mark out a more independent religious course for themselves.

That is already happening in Poland.

Followers must be willing to pay price

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 10:17-30; (R1) Wisdom 7:7-11; (R2) Hebrews 4:12-13.

The Gospel story is composed of three interconnected parts: the story of the rich man; Jesus' warning of the danger of riches; and the reward brought by renunciation for Jesus' sake.

The first reading tells us that the man in the Gospel lacked not riches but wisdom.

The man came running up to Jesus. St. Luke called him a ruler. (Perhaps he was chosen as the head of the local synagogue because of his rank and good character.) He came running up to Jesus and knelt down before Him. The man must have been young to be running and full of youthful enthusiasm to fall down at the feet of the penniless prophet from Nazareth.

"Good Teacher," he asked, "what

must I do to share in everlasting life?"

Jesus first set him straight on his calling Him "good." The term was used among the Jews only for God. The man had not yet acknowledged Jesus as God, so he should not have called him "good."

Then Jesus answered his question. He told the man that to share in everlasting life, he needed only to keep the commandments. Then Jesus quoted all the commandments that formed the basis for living a decent, respectable life. All of those commandments were negative — with the exception of honoring one's parents.

The man replied, "I have done all these things. I have never hurt anyone in all my life."

After looking on him with love, Jesus finally gave him the ultimate answer to his question. "If you want treasure in heaven," he said, "then sell what you have and give to the poor."

Respectability can come with *not doing*

things: not breaking the law, not harming one's neighbor, not acting in any unseemly fashion.

Yet, following Christ as His disciple consists of *doing* things: walking in his footsteps, just as the apostles did. "We have put aside everything to follow you."

The rich man did not do anything *against* his neighbor. But Jesus asked him to do something *for* his neighbor: to use his riches in a constructive, unselfish and generous fashion. He wanted to follow Jesus, but was unwilling to pay the price — the cost of discipleship.

All of us want to follow Jesus. But how strong is our desire? Do we want to follow Him to the point of renouncing all those things that can stand between Jesus and us? Are we willing to pay the price?

The visionaries at Medjugorje report that Mary gave an extremely urgent message to the world on Aug. 25, 1991. In part, that message stated: "Dear children, ... I call you to pray and fast still more



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

firmly ... I invite you to renunciation for nine days ... I want to save all souls."

Mary has asked us for renunciation for nine days. Renunciation was what Jesus asked of the man in the Gospel. Renunciation means to give up freely, often at the cost of a right, practice or a way of living.

Our Lady is asking for a novena of renunciation to give up something worldly: maybe alcohol, cigarettes or TV. She could also mean sacrificing some sleep to make daily Mass or not watching some pastime to pray the rosary. She also wants us to pray and fast for these nine days.

Pray 15 decades of the beads each day and observe the old canonical fast: one full meal, the other two together not exceeding the full meal, and no snacks between meals.

How about it? The man in the Gospel "went away sad." What about you?

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