

A dialogue that never ends in Poland

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Adam Michnik's *The Church and the Left* (University of Chicago, 1992) has been compared with Vaclav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*. Writer Stanislaw Baranczak observed: "If any book can be credited with precipitating the collapse of Communism in Central Europe, this is it."

Michnik makes an irenic argument. Although he is a Jewish liberal intellectual, his book criticizes some of his fellow intellectuals for their abiding suspicion of — and intransigent opposition to — the Catholic Church.

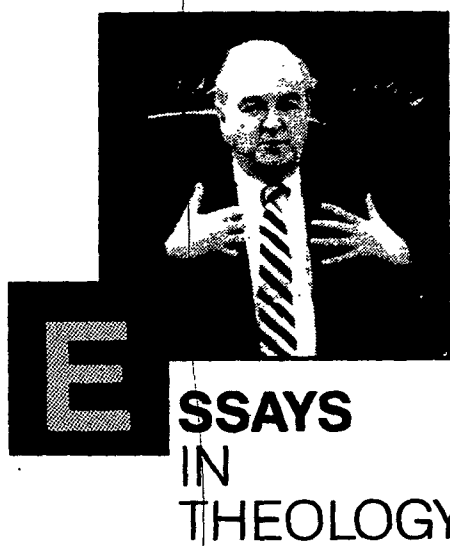
He calls for a dialogue between both sides, insisting that it is only through dialogue that a new democratic order can be put securely in place.

But he is also critical of the church's readiness to insert itself more deeply into the political sphere. He expresses a concern about the re-emergence of the so-called "Julianic Church."

The term is borrowed from the historian Bohdan Cywinski and refers to the period in Catholic history during the days of Julian the Apostate.

Julian decreed the separation of church and state just after Catholicism had finally been made the state religion by his predecessor, the Emperor Constantine.

The Julianic Church's defining characteristic was not that it lacked political power, but that — having just been



removed from power — it sought above all to get it back.

According to Cywinski, the Julianic Church pretends to be in solidarity with society against an oppressive state only because it wants to ride back into power on a wave of discontent with the state.

"No one," Michnik writes, "has expressed our fears with such clarity and precision," as Cywinski has done.

What can be done about the situation? Michnik at first tries to reassure non-Catholic and left-wing Poles that the church is far from achieving political domination. And even if it were close to doing so, the only way to counteract it is by forging an alliance

with the church.

A church that longs for power, he said, is not simply the result of once having tasted power, but it is also the "result of isolation."

Polish liberals, Michnik insisted, are at least partially responsible for that sense of isolation. Their hostility toward the church generated hostility in return. "By treating the Church as an enemy of modernity, the secular intelligentsia forced it to remain an enemy of modernity" (see David Ost's Introduction to the English edition).

Nevertheless, certain segments of Polish Catholicism showed a modern and liberal orientation. Michnik was impressed by this fact.

The only way to encourage these modern and liberal elements in the church, Michnik writes, is by removing the basis for the church's mistrust of the Left. Liberals must be prepared to work with the church, in spite of their reservations.

Michnik encountered worried opposition to his approach, even from within his own ranks. Some warned that cooperation with the church would only strengthen its fundamentalist wing. Others thought that gestures of good will would be interpreted as signs of weakness rather than friendship.

Professor Ost notes that the dispute was akin to the Western debate about detente with the Soviet Union. Would it actually strengthen or weaken the

Soviet hard liners? Would it send the wrong signals to the Soviet military?

Despite these and his own misgivings, Michnik pressed his argument. Hatred and fear breed only hatred and fear. The only way to break the vicious circle of opposition and hostility is through encounter, trust and dialogue.

But that was in 1976, when his book was first published. A little more than a decade later, he was counseling his intellectual allies to maintain their distance from the church (see the Afterword to the English edition of the book). He worried about an "Iranization" of Poland.

Under Primate Jozef Glemp, the church had become more nationalist and fundamentalist. By 1984, Michnik was certain of it. That year Cardinal Glemp provided an introduction to a new edition of Roman Dmowski's 1927 pamphlet, *Church, Nation, and State*, which advocated Catholicism as the state religion and contained a streak of violent anti-Semitism.

Despite the changes in his views from 1976-87, Michnik ends his Afterword in the same way that he ended his original book: with a plea for dialogue.

Those on both sides of the dialogue must recognize their own limits. Neither has all the answers. Each has to listen to the other and be prepared to learn from the other.

It is a process that always continues. It is a dialogue that never ends.

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