

PAX: 'PROGRESSIVE' CATHOLICS IN POLAND

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THE members of 'Pax' begin by accepting the Communist revolution as an accomplished and permanent fact. Nothing is going to alter that fact. The people of Poland, of whom more than 90 per cent profess the Catholic religion, will remain indefinitely under a Communist government. Can all these people so arrange their thoughts and behaviour as to be able to live Christian lives in a Marxist regime? The members of 'Pax' believe that such an arrangement is not only possible but eminently desirable. Catholics should do more than give acquiescence to the new society; they should be the willing, joyful, joint-creators of it. They should joyfully co-operate for three excellent reasons: because in such co-operation lies the Church's best chance of survival; because the Government's social and economic work is praiseworthy in itself and historically necessary; because co-operation in the new social order could be a sublime manifestation of true Christianity. In the past, Polish Catholicism had been narrow, a matter of personal experience, based on pietistic sentiment and the fear of Hell, without thought for one's neighbour, without social-conscience, without indignation against the evil conditions that were tolerated by the clergy. Here is a glorious opportunity to change all that.

To all the obvious objections they have shrewd answers. 'Without any doubt whatever', says one of their official documents, 'there is no room for the conception of God in the intellectual system of materialistic socialism.' But they make a careful distinction. There is an atheistic humanism which has always been in conflict with Christian humanism, and the conflict will probably endure until the end of time; it is a civilized argument which can be maintained by men who are friendly in every other respect and can agree about one another's sincerity. The real reason why the Communists are directly hostile to the Church is because so far the Church has appeared to identify herself with the forces of oppressive capitalism. As soon as they are convinced that Catholics

can be as progressive as anyone else, that Catholics deplore all the ills of the past and are anxious to see the triumph of social justice in Poland, all hostility will cease.

To the objection that their teaching seems out of harmony with Papal pronouncements on social problems, the 'Pax' people reply that these pronouncements were rules of conduct for Catholics in given conditions, for Catholics who were all living in a capitalist society and that these directives could never have been intended for men who live in a Communist state.

When one points out that the majority of the Polish Catholics do not agree with them and that many leading intellectuals boycott them, their reply is even more interesting. It was best expressed by Stefania Skwarczynska, an intelligent lady who has every appearance of sincerity. In a remarkable essay she made a public examination of the Polish conscience and she explained that the silence of many Catholics was a modern form of the capital sins. 'Is it not the sin of pride', she asks, 'which prompts them, with such dishonest eagerness, to pretend to don the martyr's crown and to extol the merit of laziness and indifference to the noble struggle that rages round us?' She also explained how they sinned by envy and sloth and that 'many of us have not yet reached the high level of spiritual maturity which the idea of communal ownership demands'.

Boleslaw Piasecki wrote a book about the basic principles of 'Pax' that was published last year and was almost immediately condemned by the Congregation of the Holy Office. The weekly journal with which Piasecki is associated was condemned by the same decree. The news of this double condemnation has been withheld from the Polish people and the journal is still appearing. When asked how he can equate all this with his expressions of obedience to the Holy See, Piasecki replied with smiling suavity that he could not regard himself as being bound by the decree because, until it has been formally published by the Polish Hierarchy, as is the canonical usage, he has no official knowledge of it. He has withdrawn from circulation the few unsold copies of the book and has asked to be told of the offending passages so that, if another edition were called for, he might delete or amend them. Since no reply has yet reached him, he claims that the matter is still *sub judice*.

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That religious sentiment in Poland is deeper and more widespread than before the war is a fact which 'Pax' always thrusts on the notice of the visitor. But there is no need to thrust it. The fact is clear. I have seen the crowded Masses in Warsaw, Lublin and Cracow; I went to a church in Cracow several minutes before Mass was due to begin—an ordinary low Mass on an ordinary Sunday in a city that has more churches than any other city of its size in the world—but the congregation was already so large that I had to assist on the pavement, four or five yards away from the front door. People go in their hundreds of thousands to the great shrine of Czestochowa, spending days on the pilgrimage and sleeping on the roadside. There are more vocations to the secular priesthood—though not, as will be explained later, to the religious orders—than at any time before.

But this quickening of religious fervour has nothing to do with 'Pax'. If this fervour has any significance, apart from the obvious religious one, it could be interpreted as a revolt against everything that 'Pax' stands for. Whatever blunders the Church may have committed in Poland, it always encouraged the people to resist the invader and the oppressor. The invaders and the oppressors have always been the Germans and the Russians. The Germans were thrown out eleven years ago leaving a record of horror which is without parallel in the history of man. Now the Russians are in occupation. It is said that many Poles whose faith is less than lukewarm attend Mass as a gesture of defiance to the new invaders. This may be true of a small minority. It is certainly true that many more returned to the religion of their fathers as soon as the new rulers took control, the rulers who hate the Church which for a thousand years has been the soul of Poland.

It would be false, nevertheless, to deny the achievements of 'Pax'. The most notable is their publication of books, papers and periodicals. Some months ago a distinguished Catholic lady on a visit to Russia felt able to refute the contention that there is no obstacle to religious practice in that country by showing that no edition of the Scriptures had been published for many years. She could not use the same argument in Poland. Dr Dabrowski's translation of the New Testament which was done seven years ago has sold more than half a million copies. There have been new editions of hymn books, prayer books and catechisms; translations of eight or nine contemporary Catholic authors,

original works by Polish writers; a daily newspaper, five weeklies, a monthly and a bi-monthly review. It is true that they are obliged to be discreet in their choice. When I was shown two translations of Graham Greene and suggested that they might publish *The Power and the Glory*, they replied: 'That's not possible at the moment.' In their newspapers they are equally selective and they use arguments and expressions that would shock the readers of the *Daily Herald*. But *some* Catholic news is published and *some* religious literature—by 'Pax' and only by 'Pax'.

And here again we come to the heart of the problem. Why is 'Pax' given this favoured position, given this monopoly, tolerated, probably encouraged, perhaps financed by the State? Why is 'Pax' able to invite visitors from abroad who can see and criticize what they see, and return to their own countries to make known their criticisms? Who is using whom?

The opponents of 'Pax' accuse them of being, at best, timid men, corrupt and time-serving, and at worst, of waging a deliberate, subtle campaign in this Catholic country to mislead the weak and the young, to make them Communists in the name of Christ.

Their defenders maintain that they are doing a necessary job, that they are tolerated by the Government because the Government has no choice in the matter and that the critics who condemn them are arid, inactive pessimists, whose only hope is the terrible hope of another war.

But even their ardent defenders cannot pretend that the 'Pax' people will solve the gravest problems that confront the Church in Poland; the problems of the youth, the religious orders, the jurisdiction of the Bishops and the imprisonment of the Cardinal Primate.

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Religious instruction used to be compulsory in all schools. It could have been Protestant, Jewish, Orthodox or Catholic. In the 1950 Agreement between Church and State it was stated: 'The Government has no intention of restricting the present state of religious teaching in schools'. This Agreement has not been honoured. Religion is taught only in primary schools (i.e. for children up to the age of thirteen) and even there, when the teachers retire or are removed they are not replaced, so that religious instruction is now given in probably less than half the primary schools.

Attempts are being made to arrange catechism lessons in churches. In the towns this is fairly easy, but in the countryside, where people are often obliged to travel several miles to church, and where there is scarcely any public transport, it is exceedingly difficult. And even that, bad as it is, is only half the story, the better half of the story. The other half is the immense effort to indoctrinate the youth in dialectical materialism. In all the higher schools, even in the Catholic University, the course in Marxism is obligatory for all students.

Next, there is the sustained attack on the religious orders. This is organized by the simple and most effective method of withdrawing their material means of livelihood. Schools, parishes, hospitals, farms, publishing houses have been taken from them. One result is that, although there are more theological students than there were in 1939, there are far fewer recruits to the regular orders.

Then there is the constant interference with the secular clergy. Police dossiers are kept about them, and even the most junior curate may not be transferred from one parish to another without the written consent of the local government authorities.

There is finally the case of Cardinal Wyszyński, Archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw, the Primate of Poland.

He was seized by the police on September 26th, 1953, and for more than two years there was no news of him. Towards the end of the 'Pax' Conference last October Bolesław Piasecki announced that he had been removed a few days earlier to a convent in Sanok, district of Rzeszów, in south-eastern Poland, fifty miles or so from the Russian frontier. This information, so far as I know, has not been published in Poland.

The members of 'Pax' are most reluctant to discuss the Cardinal. They seem most desperately anxious to minimize the problem. In 1954 they tried to sell me the idea that he was ('just between ourselves of course') a bit of a nuisance; a charming person, pious, even saintly, but oh! so very naive, who scarcely realized that a revolution had taken place, and whose holy simplicity had been so exploited by wicked men that, in all innocence and ignorance, the poor chap had become a very symbol of reaction. This story did not accord with the known facts. Far from being a guileless simpleton the Cardinal had the reputation of being a hard-headed intellectual who even before the war had made a close study of the

relations between capital and labour. Far from being a reactionary he had signed an agreement with the Government which many Western Catholics from their armchairs of comfort and freedom had most severely criticized. By October 1955, however, no one was repeating this story. It now seems that the Cardinal is indeed a nuisance—but a nuisance to the Government. They just don't know what to do with him.

Last summer he was offered his freedom on the condition that he left Poland. After listening most carefully to the police deputation that made this offer he calmly replied: 'Gentlemen, I will continue to pray for you *here*'.

Mr Piasecki denies all knowledge of this incident, the authenticity of which seems quite well established. He emphasized, indeed he rather over-emphasized, that the Cardinal had at no time been asked to leave Poland. He even expressed the personal opinion that when things became normal (by which he means when the Pope appoints bishops to the vacant sees in the western provinces and withdraws recognition from the émigré Ambassador to the Vatican) Cardinal Wyszynski will return in triumph to his diocese.

But these are matters over which 'Pax' has no control. There are so many matters over which 'Pax' has no control: all the matters which are of real importance.