

The Cardinal and the Party

BY H. H. MacKAY

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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This past summer he travelled in Poland as Dalhousie's delegate to the World University Service of Canada Seminar. In the second of three articles, the views expressed are those of the author and neither WUSC nor the Gazette assume any responsibility.

Mr. MacKay will be appearing Saturday evening at 9:30 on the CTV show "Scope" to discuss his trip.



One problem in Poland to which we Canadians paid special attention was the relation of Church and State. Of course, "Church" in a Polish context means only the Roman Catholic Church to which faith almost all Poles, exclusive of members of the United Workers (Communist) party, assert their devotion. This devotion, it seemed to me was a very active and real thing to the Polish people. In the churches, large and small, huge crowds overflowed the bodies of the churches and spilled over into the yards. Two occasions in particular, remain vivid in my memory.

The first occurred in Zakepane, the mountain resort in southern Poland, in pre-war days the haunt only of the wealthy tourist, now converted into a resort for productive and efficient workers. I was walking through the streets in the evening together with a Polish acquaintance, a member of the United Workers Party.

He had been speaking confidently of the decline of religion in Poland and of its pending disappearance. At this point we came upon a tiny village church, its white spire framed by the lofty peaks of the Carpathian mountains. In that atmosphere, my companion's words became very hollow indeed. For the church was simply bulging with the young, the old, the poor and the not-quite-so-poor. In the gravelled churchyard, I counted over 200 persons, all of them on their knees on the sharp stones, their faces uplifted in prayer.

A week later, the scene was repeated in slightly different surroundings in Warsaw itself. On the Square of The Three Crosses stands a large church to which access is had by a long flight of cement stairs. And on these stairs,

again were the faithful, again on their knees. This time, however, the backdrop was even more dramatic -- namely, the upper stories of the gigantic Communist Party headquarters situated only a few blocks away. In the distance, a jazz band, hired by the regime to play for Independence Day celebrations, beat out its ragged cacophony in an empty stadium.

Other signs of piety of the people are easy to see. In any hour of any day of the week, churches are busy places. Often, khaki-clad young men of the Polish armed forces are sitting in their pews. In the country, the roadsides are dotted with wooden crosses or other Christian shrines, usually decorated very recently in attractive floral garb. Often, too, a peasant woman may be seen in prayer before the cross in a public display of her faith. The high point in the assertion of faith is the August pilgrimage at Czestechowa, which this year attracted over a half a million persons.

All of this stands in sharp contrast to the situation in Czechoslovakia where most churches -- aside from the Communist-controlled "National Catholic Church," unrecognized by Rome --

have been closed and where religious faith is never a thing to be publicly shown. But in Poland the Church, under the effective leadership of Cardinal Wyshinsky, is strong. But so is its enemy.

The Communist Party in theory (and in Polish practice) is openly atheistic. It sees economic goals as the only moving force in the society and therefore it rejects any spiritual moving force as, in the Marxist phrase, "an opiate." Thus is joined the battle of the irresistible force and the immovable object. But what is the battle really about?

According to the Communists, it's simply a matter of keeping the Church within its proper bounds and of preventing its entry into politics. The Church, too, seems willing to draw some sort of line between politics and religion and to say that it will not oppose the regime in the political sphere. According to the Church, the real problem is to prevent State intervention into religion. I tend to accept the latter explanation; for, as was explained to us by a leading Communist official, all Party members must be atheists or their views will not fit into the Marxist materialistic framework. As a result, the Party has embarked on an active campaign for the minds of the Polish people -- a campaign designed to win converts for the religion whose God is the atheistic State.

The one million Party members in Poland are professed atheists. Some of them do not hesitate to be openly and mockingly anti-religious. For example, the paraphrase the same Communist official in his attempt to illustrate to us the "weak" position of the Church in Poland: "The Austrian and French-Canadian peasants believe first in their priests, and then in the organists of their churches and then in their God. But the Polish peasant believes first in his God, then in the Holy Mother and only lastly does he believe in his priest -- and then only if he doesn't charge too much for the funeral." If this sort of malicious thinking reveals the attitude of many senior Party officials, then it is easy to understand present Church misgivings in Poland.

There are signs indicating that this malicious attitude has been put into practice in recent years. For example, the 1956 revolution in Poland has witnessed the revival of religious education in the schools. In 1960, however, this was discontinued by the State. In addition, the State sponsors Sunday morning excursions designed to lure the young away from the Church and to preclude altogether their religious instruction.

Then, too, although it is difficult to document, it seems that the State, in order to forestall the

erection of new churches, exacts a tax of 65 percent of all funds collected for building purposes. In this regard, the actions of the State are somewhat ambiguous; for the government contributes heavily to the reconstruction of churches destroyed during the war. This help is given, though, not so as to erect new churches as such, but so as to preserve historic monuments of the nation.

The usual State desire to prevent church building has been demonstrated in the new "model city" of Nova Huta, erected near a great steel plant in southern Poland. There, some 100,000 persons live with but two churches to serve them. It seems, too, that

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