

The Vatican and Communism

from 'Divini Redemptoris' to Paul VI:

Part 2

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Pope Paul VI elected in the summer of 1963, after the first session of the Vatican Council, presided over a Church that was to continue and extend the new policies of detente and co-operation with the Communist world that were begun under the previous pontificate. Diplomatic agreements were reached with many Communist countries, notably Hungary in 1964 and Yugoslavia a year later. Meetings between the two sides were frequent: when the Pope visited the United Nations in 1965 (and incidentally seemed to favour the admission of China to the Assembly) he had a long talk with Gromyko afterwards. Paul met the President of the Soviet Union, Podgorny, in 1967 and 1968, and both the Rumanian Prime Minister and Tito in 1968 and later in the early 70's. In 1971 Casaroli became the first Vatican representative to visit Moscow since the Revolution, and the Vatican has had frequent contact with Polish government officials throughout the period. The Soviet authorities also allowed an increase in the contact between the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church which had previously been very limited.

The new Pope's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* issued in November 1964 tentatively suggested that Paul was thinking on more reserved but similar lines to his predecessor. One section was completely devoted to dialogue with the modern world. "Speaking generally of the dialogue which the Church of today must take up with a great renewal of fervour, we would say that it must be readily conducted with all men of good will ..." (p. 93 CTS translation). Paul goes on to point out that although dialogue is difficult with communism "we have today no preconceived intentions of cutting ourselves off from the adherents of these systems and regimes" (p. 102). He even suggests that Communism could be a form of secularized Christianity and he holds out the hope that one day Communists may be led "back to the Christian sources" (p. 104), which lie behind many of their actions. Finally Paul, like John wanted a dialogue in order that the Vatican could fulfil its mission for peace in the world: "a disinterested, objective and sincere dialogue is a circumstance in favour of a free and honourable peace" (p. 106).

Meanwhile, the Vatican Council had begun again and because time was running out, the third session began with a drastic reduction of all the planned topics for discussion, which resulted in the chapter on "materialism" (which would have probably contained a great deal on Communism) being dropped from the draft 'Decree on the Pastoral Duties of Bishops'. A slight mention was made in this Decree of those persecuted bishops "detained in prisons or prevented from exercising their ministry",¹ but this is not significant, and is the least that could have been said concerning the Church behind the iron curtain. The subject of communism re-emerged with the pastoral constitution on *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*. Many of the Fathers wanted a whole chapter on the errors of communism and materialism and were angry when this was not contained in the initial drafts. Consequently the document was modified to take account of atheism but there was still no mention of communism, which many Fathers believed was simply systematized atheism. Pressures mounted and in September 1965 the Council Fathers drew up a circular demanding an explicit denunciation and a clear statement concerning the incompatibility of Christianity and Communism: it was the conservatives last chance to turn the Council into a political instrument. However, although the petition was signed by over four hundred Council Fathers, it mysteriously never reached the drafting committee, and the Council never considered this amendment. The secretary of the Commission in question pleaded that he had "overlooked" the petition due simply to personal neglect: the conservatives at the Council suspected that they had been outmanoeuvred. In a footnote to the Constitution the commission explained that, despite the petitions to the contrary, it "judged that its references to atheism satisfied the wishes of the Council as a "whole", and there was therefore no need for an "explicit condemnation of Marxist atheistic communism".² The Council quite clearly did not want to issue a political statement and therefore refrained from using the word 'Communism' which over the years had become very emotionally charged and connected with all sorts of false connotations and prejudice. A denunciation of communism would clearly have been out of place in a decree that was viewed as a positive instrument, and would also be inconsistent with the whole spirit and orientation of the Council. In the final version of the document the Council again holds out an olive branch of reconciliation: "the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live. Such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue" (*Gaudium et Spes* p. 21). Later in this document the Council points out that the Catholic laity have a duty to become in-

volved in political life, and more significantly it recognizes "the legitimate multiplicity and diversity of Temporal options" and stresses that no Catholic has the right to claim that his own opinion is sanctioned by the authority of the Church. This seemed to give Catholics especially in Italy a far greater degree of political freedom than they had enjoyed previously. On a different level the decree showed further signs of a leaning towards socialism with its statement that it was the right of everyone "to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family". Many of the decree's paragraph headings could quite easily be found in any western socialist party manifesto: "The Interdependence of Person and Society", "Promoting the Common Good", "The Essential Equality of Men; and Social Justice", and, "More than individualistic ethic is required".

How did the Fathers come to take such a line? The world imagined the Council would be a very conservative body when Pope John had first announced his intention of summoning the Fathers of the Church to the Vatican. But by the election of Pope Paul the vast majority of the bishops were clearly taking a more progressive line. The conservative anti-Communist lobby, led by the reactionary Cardinal Ottaviani had been defeated and humiliated during the first two sessions of the Council leaving the way open for a more liberal approach to the modern world. This was partly due to the influence of progressive theologians, and on a broader level to a revolution in the communication system of the Church and a new spirit of openness and democracy. Experts and specialists from the universities and colleges of Western Europe and the United States – the 'periti' – had regular contact with the Fathers at weekly national and regional meetings, and often played a major role in devising and refashioning the schemata as well as actually holding refresher classes for the Fathers and speech writing. Consequently many of the bishops, inexperienced and perhaps a little bewildered by the activities of the Council, found ready advice and help which invariably pushed them in a 'progressive' direction. The need to reform the Church's internal structure was vital if Rome was to experience a long term change in its relations with Communism and the modern world in general. The Vatican Council introduced this reform with the realisation of the principle of collegiality. The essentially monarchical character of the Church was re-examined and greater power was devolved to the local bishops and to the Catholic laity. Furthermore, the Roman Curia, the Holy Office and the Vatican Secretariat of State, solidly Italian and thoroughly conservative were attacked by the progressives. The Council documents that were produced in this climate of reform, were partly responsible for a psychological change in the Church: the centralised and authoritarian atmosphere of the Vati-

can was replaced with a new openness and intellectual honesty that led to a critical and questioning attitude hitherto unknown in the official Church.

The response of the Soviet Union to the Vatican Council indicates its significance. The Russian press, hostile initially, realised the contribution of the Council towards peace, and gave the Fathers increasing attention and appreciative reviews, which at times became an embarrassment to the Vatican, searching as it was for a position of non-alignment. An example of the change in the official Soviet attitude can be found in a book by M. P. Mchedlov on the Vatican Council.³ The peaceful orientation of the Council and Paul VI's attempts to continue the dialogue with Communism are given special praise. The book is perhaps more significant however for its change of tone: it does not contain the prejudiced and stereotyped refrains of previous Marxist critics, who had dismissed the Church as a tool of Western capitalism, and reform as an attempt to exploit and regain political power. The reports on the Council are accurate and honest, and the author recognises the "personally honest and healthy attitude" of a "number of church leaders".

The changes that had occurred through Vatican II were apparent in Pope Paul's next encyclical letter, *Populorum Progressio*, published in March 1967. More socialistic than any previous Papal encyclical it called for wide changes in the balance of wealth to favour the developing nations. Liberal capitalism was firmly denounced: "... it is unfortunate that on these new conditions of society a system has been constructed which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligation. This unchecked liberalism leads to dictatorship rightly denounced by Pius XI as producing 'the international imperialism of money'. One cannot condemn such abuses too strongly ..." (CTS edition p. 26). Later in the encyclical Paul questions "the fundamental principle of 'liberalism'," (p. 58) and tells rich nations that they have a clear duty to share their wealth with the poor (p. 49). At the end of the document the Pope issues "A Final Appeal", in which he urges all Catholics to collaborate with all "men of good will" in order to relieve the plight of the developing nations. The capitalist press in the West was naturally a little taken aback by this new tone in the Papal encyclical, the *Wall Street Journal* described the document as "warmed-over Marxism", and *Time* said it had "the strident tone of an early twentieth century Marxist polemic".

The Pope gave further offence to the West when in July 1970 he received in audience three rebel leaders from Portuguese Africa: Neto of Angola, Cabral of Portuguese Guinea and M. Dos Santos

of Mozambique. It upset the Portuguese, but it was an event calculated to emphasise the growing independent and non-aligned position of the Vatican in world affairs, and an attempt to create a new image for the Holy See in the eyes of the Third World nations. The Pope was also clear and forthright in his denunciation of the war in Vietnam, which educed a warm response from the Soviet Union, and equally outspoken over torture in Latin America, particularly Brazil. Paul was clearly anxious for a greater role in international affairs and also for an increasing dialogue, "... the Church goes out to meet the oldest religions as well as the most recent ideologies".⁴

Paul's next major contribution to dialogue, *Octagesima Adveniens* (May 1971), was far more radical than *Populorum Progressio* and perhaps in view of this was not given the title encyclical, but Apostolic Letter. The change in title did not indicate a change in policy however. Paul finally abandoned the notion that there could be a universally valid Catholic social doctrine that would provide the alternative to Communism and the answer to all the modern world's problems. He talked of a diversity of situations which made it difficult for the Church "to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity" (CTS edition p. 4). Paul said that this was not the Vatican's mission anyway and that it was up to the local Catholic communities "in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed" (p. 4). A small part of the Apostolic Letter is devoted to socialist movements and Marxism, and Paul acknowledges the historical evolution of Marxism, hinting that "a certain splintering of Marxism, which until now showed itself to be a unitary ideology" (p. 32), could be a promising development for future dialogue. Just as the Vatican was recognising "a legitimate variety of possible options" (p. 50) in her own house, so many Communists were laying down "distinctions between Marxism's various levels of expression" (p. 32). In the next paragraph Paul writes that Marxism often presents itself as "a rigorous method of examining social and political reality", and can offer a "type of analysis", a "working tool", which some may find useful (p. 33). The Pope seemed to be hinting here that it might be possible to accept this scientific analysis and the struggle for a more just society, while rejecting the doctrine of the class struggle and the implicit atheism of classical Marxism. Paul had gone as far as he dared. He had skirted over many problems, and his passages on socialism and communism were vague and full of qualifications, in stark contrast to his uncompromising rejection of "the liberal ideology", which he viewed as the "erroneous affirmation of the

autonomy of the individual in his activity, his motivation and the exercise of his liberty" (p. 35). This Letter was perhaps the decisive moment for Paul as regards Vatican-Communist relations, for it clearly committed the Church to a position of non-alignment and finally broke the Vatican's taboo on socialism, leaving Catholics a political freedom they had never enjoyed before.

Throughout the 70's Paul was concerned to occupy the centre ground, and continue his unremitting search for any and all forms of dialogue. "We ... express publicly the pain which we carry in our hearts seeing that a vast portion of the world, governed by Marxist regimes, continues to remain closed, we do not say to understanding, but even to contacts with the apostolic See" (Address to the Sacred College, 21 June 1976). He expressed hope for the future however: "May our feelings find an echo which at the opportune moment, will open the way to encounter..." In the same speech Paul praised those who were engaged in dialogue and urged them to be honest and untiring in their work of reconciliation. In the same year, the Pope's Deputy Secretary of State proclaimed that "dialogue is always open on the part of the Church, vis-a-vis all men, whether or not atheists".⁵

The workings of the Vatican Council and the encyclicals and actions of Paul VI were clearly committing the Church to a continuation of the policies of John XXIII as regards the subject of communism. What were the other factors influencing this continuing extension and development of Vatican policy? As in John's pontificate, the Church was anxious on a practical level to lessen the persecution of its members in Communist nations, in fact it perceived a clear duty to negotiate through dialogue, a greater freedom for the iron curtain church. Agreements were reached with Soviet bloc states where the Vatican traded political silence for greater rights and freedom for the local church. The Vatican placed in office local bishops sympathetic to its policy of accepting Communism, thereby assuring the respective governments of their peaceful intentions, and in return for this loyalty the Church received basic rights of worship, publication and education. The Vatican's policy was becoming less idealistic, and it was often accused of 'selling out' to the Communist world. The Church however was looking to the future and hoping that man's need for religion would eventually lead him back to Rome, and also calculating that its very existence was a permanent contradiction of the Marxist theory that under the Communist state the Church would wither away. Once the Church had obtained the right to exist it could then work towards a position where it could exercise its mission.

These changes in the aims of Vatican diplomatic policy were encouraged by the changes that were taking place within Commun-

ism. The Soviet Union realised that a 'modus vivendi' with the Vatican could be very useful in stabilizing and maintaining control in Eastern Europe. In a hostile world any form of recognition is welcomed, and after this, the next step is full 'diplomatic relations'. The State would far rather talk directly to the Vatican through a diplomat, than argue with an often hostile local hierarchy.

Vatican policy was also influenced by the kind of outside pressures briefly touched upon in the previous article, which increased considerably during Paul's pontificate. Many Catholics turned in small but growing numbers to forms of Marxism in the 60's and 70's, convinced that their political beliefs could supplement and extend their Christianity. The 'Paulusgesellschaft' was born in 1965, a group of German speaking theologians who initiated the first public and international attempt at a Christian-Marxist dialogue holding three major conferences with Marxists. The Catholic 'New Left' sprang from such dialogue, urging the Church to cooperate with secular organizations and political groups including communists and socialists. Influential spokesmen like Paulo Freire, Girardi, and I. D. Illich, and groups like the 'Freres du Monde' in France and 'Slant' in Britain developed a new form of 'Marxism with a human face' and a political theology which called for an abandonment of the Church's links with the Establishment and 'the Right'. In this limited aim their pressure achieved a degree of success. Paul VI could not be justly described as "the Pope of the Atlantic Alliance" as was Pius XII, and Catholic social teaching as we have seen from the Pope's encyclicals, could no longer be accused of being merely a religious prop of the capitalist system. The Vatican when it compared the support it received from 'the Left' in these years with that from 'the Right', concluded that the latter were mostly insincere in their Catholicism, cynically viewing the Church as a useful instrument of social stability, and increasingly critical of the Vatican's new programmes for social change.

Furthermore, the goals of Catholics and Communists were becoming increasingly similar. It has been suggested that the two faiths, both highly centralized and autocratic, with a claim to embody complete and infallible Truth, are psychologically very similar. They both have similar attitudes of mind: both fear freedom (the former private judgment, the latter counter-revolution and capitalism), and both approach problems in the light of existing theoretical structures — fitting the facts to the theories rather than letting the experience of the world shape and mould existing pre-suppositions. It is certainly true that the brotherhood, humanity and quest for justice characteristic of many forms of Communism are similar to, and perhaps take their origins from, a Christian tradition. Catholics and Communists also agree that when the

State provides the basic requirements of the people they will be freed from alienation and thereby develop their intellectual and spiritual capacities.⁶ Both groups, especially in their designs for a more fraternal society, saw that they were working in many ways for the same ends. The Fides News Service had this to say about the gains made by Communism in China: "... an aspiration towards justice; the exaltation of a simple and frugal life; the raising up of the peasant masses, and the merging of social classes – such are the ideals towards which the China of today is orientated. But are not the very same ideals incomparably expressed in the encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum Progressio*?⁷ The growth of Euro-Communism proved to the Vatican that Marxism could have different faces. Communist leaders assured the Church their aims were similar and that Catholicism would be safeguarded in any future French or Italian Communist government. George Marchais of the French Communist Party was eager to declare that, "we ... will never declare war on religion! In none of our publications, in none of our steps has one been able for decades to find a trace of a resolution offensive to believers, to their Faith ... The Catholic Church ... will enjoy – in the France for which we fight – the liberties essential for their activity."⁸

As groups such as these pressurized the local episcopate, in turn the hierarchies put pressure on, and began to influence the Vatican. The view of Mgr Derouet was typical of many: "in reality, a doctrine of atheistic inspiration such as Marxism has been able to give impetus to actions in which people are engaged who do not accept this doctrine as such".⁹ Many went further, and sixteen Bishops of the Third World (including two Archbishops) put their name to a document which contained this very radical passage, "Christians have the duty to demonstrate 'that true socialism is a full Christian life that involves a just sharing of goods, and fundamental equality'. Far from sulking about it, let us be sure to embrace it gladly, as a form of social life better adapted to our times, more in keeping with the spirit of the Gospel. In this way we shall stop people confusing God and religion with the oppressors of the poor and of the workers, which is what the feudal, capitalist, and imperialist systems are".¹⁰

This kind of language was typical of a movement that had a great influence on the Church of the 70's, and whose philosophical underpinnings came to be known as the Theology of Liberation. It came to prominence at the 1968 meeting of the Latin American bishops of Medellin, where 'liberation' took on a new and powerful meaning for the Church: "God has sent his son so that in the flesh he may come to liberate all men from slavery which holds them subject, from sin, ignorance, hunger, misery, oppression ...". The theology of liberation drew freely from Marxism, asserting the

primacy of action or 'praxis', and accepting the Marxist system of analysis, even admitting that class conflict could be a positive instrument of change. It led to a clear 'option for socialism' which increasingly became the option of many Catholics in Latin America and other Third World regions, notably the Pacific islands. The anti-Communism which had characterised the Latin American Church for so long seemed to mellow, as the clergy began to face their responsibilities in the face of oppression and injustice: "I cannot be anti-Communist either as a Columbian, a sociologist, a Christian or a priest".¹¹ Bishops like Dom Hélder Câmara became international Catholic folk heroes, and the following attack on Curial attitudes was popular and influential: "There is no longer any rational reason, only fuzzy-mindedness, in branding as subversive and Communist anyone who hungers for justice and peace ... it is not Communism which is the gravest social problem in today's world, but ... the widening gap between the developed and the undeveloped worlds".¹²

Liberation theology was moulded into a practical political commitment with the official formation of 'Christians for Socialism' in Santiago, Chile in April 1972. In the Chilean situation, the group was formed to support the Allende government and to demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity and Communism. C.F.S. crossed the Atlantic and entered many European nations helping to prepare the ground for the support given by the Portuguese bishops to the Communist revolution in 1975: "we will exert ourselves, within the scope of our competence, in the building up of a social order founded on truth, justice, freedom, love and peace."¹³

Liberation theology and C.F.S. had a profound influence on Vatican policy regarding Communism. Many theologians of liberation had used John's encyclicals, the Vatican Council documents and principally *Populorum Progressio* as their starting points but such documents although they promise much and lay the theoretical framework for change, are difficult to put into practice. However, it is impossible to use lightly such words as 'liberation', 'development' and 'social justice', and such documents become symbolic rallying points for progressive thinkers and movements, who in turn pressurize their local episcopate, who in their turn influence Vatican policy. The circle of influence means in effect a slow drift to the left and an increasing dialogue with Communist ideologies. By the middle of the 1970's the Church in Latin America was arguing that the formation of a 'strategic alliance with Communism' was the only way to relieve the misery and exploitation of the sub-continent. It is significant that Paul VI took no steps to discourage or contain the search of his Latin American episcopate for justice and liberation. The Vatican had come a long way since *Divini Redemptoris*.

The Vatican and Communism – the Present and the Future

In the pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII the conflict between the Catholic Church and Communism was bitter and unmitigating: a barrage of Papal denunciations was countered with a careful and systematic persecution. Pius XII was the culmination of a long tradition of Papal teaching, extending back to Pius IX, which ended with the papacy of John XXIII and the Vatican Council. Changes were clearly approved and these were strengthened and extended in a more reserved but often more effective fashion by Paul VI. Where does the Church stand today after the turbulent events of 1978 – ‘the year of the three Popes’? Some groups are convinced that the Church has not changed fundamentally, and is still the ally of capitalism and a serious threat to the Communist world: the heavy handed intervention of the local hierarchies in the Italian elections of 1976 was used to show that the leopard had not really changed its spots. On the other side, many Catholics now argue that the ‘liberalisation’ of the Communist world that was partly responsible for the 60’s dialogue ended with the ’68 Czech invasion, and attempt to prove that since then Communism has renewed its persecution of the Church in a more subtle manner, giving the Church leadership a relative freedom while attacking the bases of the Church: the ordinary clergy and local congregations. Is the change then merely cosmetic, has it any deep roots or any long term future? The Vatican’s hostility to many of the philosophical tenets of Communism is still as severe, and the Church will never begin really to accept Communism until it clearly renounces its atheistic overtones and materialistic conception of life (which is not likely to happen). It has however, increasingly come to bless much of the modern socialistic ideology and many of the aspirations and aims of Communism, while often rejecting the methods of realising these common goals. Consequently the 70’s witnessed a new phase of Vatican diplomacy based on dialogue rather than denunciation, and the visits of John Paul II to Latin America and Poland are signs that this policy is to continue in the future. Furthermore outside movements continue to grow, exerting considerable pressure on the Vatican, and these groups, often set in motion by the words of the magisterium, are coming to dominate the Third World Church. 1978 saw the election of a Pope from behind the iron curtain and although his arrival in Rome throws up new uncertainties about the future, in the only paragraph devoted to the political situation in John Paul II’s first encyclical he states in plain and clear language that, “The Church must in no way be confused with the political community, nor bound to any political system” (*Redemptor Hominis*, CTS edition p 13). This characterises a Vatican outlook far removed from the Church of *Divini Redemptoris* and the excommunication order of 1949. It is too

early to say whether the policies of John and Paul will be continued under the Polish Pope, but changes have taken place in the Vatican which are almost irreversible, and any great departure would be difficult, unpopular and highly unlikely.

- 1 'Decree on the Pastoral Duties of Bishops', W. M. Abbott and J. Gallagher (eds), *The Documents of Vatican II*, London 1966 p. 7.
- 2 Footnote 46 in 'Gaudium et Spes', W. M. Abbott and J. Gallagher, op. cit.
- 3 M. P. Mchedlov, *The Evolution of Modern Catholicism*. State publishing house book, written by the correspondent of the Soviet news agencies in Rome.
- 4 Paul VI, speech to the College of Cardinals (1970).
- 5 Mgr Benelli, Deputy Secretary of State, Discussion held in Vienna, Austria. (4.5.76) D.C. 1699, 6.6.76, pp. 5130516.
- 6 For Paul VI's view on this see especially *Populorum Progressio*.
- 7 Fides News Service, (4 April 1973), published by the Vatican's Congregation for Evangelisation.
- 8 G. Marchais, Secretary-General of the French Communist Party, speech in Lyon, (10 June 1976).
- 9 Mgr Derouet, Bishop of Sees. Article in 'Eglise dans P'Orne, (20 Feb 1976). D.C. 1695, 4.4.76, p. 347.
- 10 Sixteen Third World bishops, document entitled 'Gospel and Revolution', published in *New Blackfriars*, (Dec 1967). Originally published in 'Temoignage Chretien' (31 August 1967).
- 11 C. Torres, quoted in J. Gerassi (ed), *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Works and Messages of Camilo Torres*.
- 12 Dom Helder Camara, *Revolution Through Peace*, New York 1971, p. 52.
- 13 Episcopal Conference – pastoral note (14 June 1975). D.C. 1679, 6.7.75 pp. 624-626. The bishops later withdrew support from the Communist government when it began to veer from the promises it made in the early days of revolution.