

THE CHURCH OF THE DIASPORA IN GERMANY

JOHN FITZSIMONS

IT is welcome news that the United States has agreed to consider the possibility of allowing East German refugees to enter America as immigrants, and that the Canadian Government has given an assurance that it will assist in giving East German farmers in particular new homes and places of work. For the problem of the twelve million refugees, swollen every month by thousands of fresh arrivals from the Russian Zone, is still one of the most important of all European questions. The plight of the D.P.s¹ is perhaps even worse, for there are still between 150,000 and 200,000 of the old, weak, infirm and unemployables in D.P. camps in Germany.

The unprecedented migration that followed the Potsdam agreement—when in the winter of 1945-6 fifteen million people were moved out of Eastern Germany and neighbouring territories to make way for Poles and Russians—has provided an unprecedented responsibility for the Church in Germany. Only twelve million finally arrived in Western Germany—three million died or were directed eastward—but nearly half of them were Catholic, coming from the almost completely Catholic areas of Upper Silesia and the Sudeten territory, as well as from Lower Silesia, East Prussia and Pomerania. Up to the last war the Catholic and Protestant majorities in Germany could be delimited almost exactly by the boundaries set up by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 on the principle ‘*cujus regio ejus religio*’. Unfortunately the Catholic refugees did not for the most part arrive in Catholic regions in Western Germany: as France did not take part in the decisions made at Yalta and

¹ The distinction between refugees and D.P.s was made by the International Refugee Organisation. The former are the Germans who were displaced by the Potsdam agreement. The latter is a category created to designate all the non-Germans deported to Germany during the war who were not repatriated immediately after the war, and who do not now wish or are not able to return for various reasons, the principal one being that there are totalitarian governments in their homelands.

Potsdam she refused for a long time to allow refugees into the predominantly Catholic French Zone, while the Rhineland and Westphalia had been so devastated and were so overpopulated that they were equally closed to them. Consequently they had to settle in Saxony and Thuringia, and although some found their way to Bavaria, many of them are in the Protestant sector covered by the dioceses of Bamberg, Eichstätt, Regensburg and Würzburg. In all, something like three-quarters of the Catholic refugees, or over four million, found themselves in regions which were overwhelmingly non-Catholic and very largely dechristianised. The result was to put an intolerable strain on the resources of the Church in these regions.

Because of the fewness of Catholics, parishes in country districts—and most of these reception regions are predominantly rural—covered a wide area but numbered only a few hundred Catholics. Almost overnight the number of Catholics in such parishes has been multiplied by ten or by twenty or more. Thus the parish of Nidda in Hesse which formerly had five hundred Catholics spread through fifty-six villages now has ten thousand Catholics in the same parish boundaries. A further difficulty was created by refugee Catholics settling in villages where formerly there had been no Catholics. So that in an area where before there had been a handful of Catholics in a few places, there are now thousands spread over twenty, thirty, even a hundred different localities. One parish near Nuremberg with a complement of three priests has Catholics spread over one hundred and eighteen villages.

In general one may say that the problems created have been of two orders, one psychological, the other physical. The refugees were not welcomed by the population generally because they were seen not as fellow Germans in distress but as competitors in the labour market, as charges on the local taxes and as public burdens generally. They were not welcomed by the Protestant population because of their Catholicism. Advances have been made since these early days, and in many places where there is no Catholic church, through the co-operation of Protestant pastors Mass has been offered in pre-Reformation churches for the first time since the

Reform. But at first the refugees were treated with a cold and sullen suspicion as a 'Catholic invasion'. Nor did they meet with much more understanding from their fellow Catholics. One can best seize the situation by imagining what would have happened in the middle of the last century if the thousands of Irish immigrants who came into this country had all gone to the rural areas of England instead of staying in the large industrial towns.

The refugees had come from a part of the country where there was a traditional and open piety, where their religious feasts and customs were part of the life and folklore of the country, and above all where there were many beautiful churches. Suddenly they found themselves among the Catholics of the Diaspora whose religion was personal, where there were no parish organisations and no parish life, and more often than not no church at all. (Literally thousands of their children are at present being prepared for their first Confession and Communion without ever having seen the inside of a Catholic church. The confessional, altar rails, etc. must all be described to them.) There was a tension between their Catholicism, with its background of a homogeneous milieu, and that of the inturned religion of the Diaspora. There has been a gradual integration, but the widespread nature of the parishes, and the fact that parishes, neighbourhood units and even families have been dispersed make this almost impossible.

The worst situation of all is that of the 300,000 who are still in camps where existence is of the most primitive and where they have the feeling of being abandoned by everybody. They have no joy in the present and no hope in the future. *Ich bin zu müde* is their refrain. One step in the right direction to helping them is the 'missions' which go at Christmas and in the summer to the most abandoned of these camps in the north, at Flensburg, Lübeck, Kiel and the Isle of Sylt. Each mission is carried out by a team consisting of five or six young people, a priest (non-German) and if possible some Germans. The team lives in the camp, sharing the life of the refugees, offering them friendship, organising a liturgical life, helping the young people to occupy themselves, but bringing no material aid. The result

is that many of the refugees for the first time since they arrived are being asked for something by fellow Catholics, assistance in their life in the camp, friendship, co-operation in leisure activities. They begin to feel needed and to live again. This is of supreme importance, for their psychological needs are far greater than their material distress. It is a situation where for the visitor it is truly more blessed to receive than to give.

In the order of physical needs, the great lack is of priests and churches. In the territories that were forcibly evacuated in 1945 there were some six thousand priests, but of these there are now only two thousand eight hundred in Western Germany, and eighteen hundred of them are over fifty years of age. Their task is superhuman. Despite the fact that most of them say five Masses every Sunday, there are many people who only hear Mass once a month; despite their constant travels (they are known as the *Rucksackpriesters*) too many as yet of their flock die without the Last Sacraments. To help them there has been set up the *Secours aux Prêtres Expulsés de l'Est* (known in Holland and Flanders as *Oostpriesterhulp*) which is organised in Belgium, Holland, Germany and Ireland. The object of this organisation is to solicit spiritual help for the Church of the Diaspora, to organise personal contact with it for Catholics of the West and to arouse Christian consciences to the urgency of the problem. Through this organisation all the priests of the Diaspora have been adopted by parishes, schools, groups and individuals, and receive from them a food parcel each month. S.P.E. has also provided them with nearly one hundred and fifty Volkswagen to increase their mobility and has put seventeen motor chapels on the road. It also provides and keeps supplied Mass kits for the priests, and all forms of material aid, food and clothing, for the refugees themselves.

Nor has the future been forgotten. S.P.E. plays a large part in supporting the seminary at Königstein where four hundred and fifty seminarists are being trained for work among the refugees. As for the churches, already four hundred have been built mainly through the efforts of local Catholic organisations, helped by S.P.E. But at least another eighteen hundred are needed. Already groups of young

people from France, Holland and Belgium have been going in the summer to work on building sites, and this year S.P.E. is organising teams of Belgian youth to go and help build churches in the diocese of Rottenberg.

In his political testament published in *Hochland* in 1947 Paul Simon wrote: 'One need not be a prophet to say that from now on the presence of the refugees from the East in our Western territories is the decisive factor which will determine all the development of the political situation for years to come. . . . The future of these millions of people who have come from the East, discontented and desperate, will determine the mentality of the parties. . . . The refugees from the East will even decide the future of the Church and the future of Christianity in Germany.' It is still too soon to say that the danger is past—the future is still in the balance. Either hundreds of thousands of Catholics will be lost and the territories nearest to the frontier between East and West will be, spiritually speaking, a vacuum, or there will be a great spiritual revival which must include in its apostolic sweep the non-Catholics of these areas. There is far more at stake than the faith of four million Catholics, there is the hope and the possibility of a glowing, growing apostolic Church at the very heart of Europe.