

PAX: 'PROGRESSIVE' CATHOLICS IN POLAND

I

HUGH DELARGY, M.P.

THE journey from Warsaw to Wloclawek was depressing: eighty-five miles of uneven road through flat featureless country, through villages poor and dirty beyond description, ankle-deep in mud and manure, the people dressed in layers of assorted garments, standing at the doors of their decrepit shanties, staring intently at our smart British car which belonged to my hosts. They had no other vehicle to stare at except long, narrow, wooden carts drawn by horses.

The journey back was more than depressing; it was frightening. For three-quarters of the way we were in thick fog, and the idea of spending the night in the car on the side of the road in that strange land was less alarming than the prospect of seeking shelter in one of the primitive villages. So we went steadily on, hardly faster than the wooden carts that sometimes trundled through the darkness. I was chilled, tired, hungry and very angry. The journey had been a waste of time and a mockery.

The day before, I was delighted to hear that my request to meet one of the bishops had been granted. The prelate I had named was Mgr Klepacz, Bishop of Lodz. Although the next day was to be my last in Poland and all my careful arrangements had to be altered, I was pleased with the thought of meeting the Chairman of the Conference of Bishops and the close friend of Cardinal Wyszyński. Then, when all these adjustments had been made, I was told that I was being escorted not to Lodz but to Wloclawek, not to see Bishop Klepacz but Bishop Pawlowski, the one bishop in Poland who agrees to, or is allowed to, receive foreigners, the one bishop of them all who is suspected of finding favour with the government. I did not disclose this knowledge or my disappointment. If it did no good, the interview could now do no harm.

The Bishop is a small, neat, gentle person, about fifty years old. He received us most kindly, conducted us round his palace, knelt with us in his chapel, showed us photographs of his recent episcopal visit, gave us cakes and coffee and wine, inquired about

Cardinal Griffin, whose visit to Poland in 1947 is vividly remembered. It seemed pathetic as well as pointless to ask leading questions. So, for most of the time we exchanged small talk, pretending to each other that everything around us was comfortably normal. Only twice did I drop the pretence. What has become of the hundreds of nuns, I said, who were dragged from their convents in Silesia and dropped in central Poland and told to continue living as best they could? And what would be his own reaction if he heard that the Cardinal Primate was to return to his see in Warsaw? His answers were slow, brief and evasive. I gave up.

It was close on midnight when we returned to Warsaw; too late to keep an appointment with a parish priest, a scholarly and charming man who had profoundly impressed me during my previous visit. And when they told me that our plane was leaving at eight in the morning instead of one o'clock in the afternoon, as we had been previously notified, I realized that I would be unable to see him at all. I was thrown miserably back into sadness and suspicion. Perhaps I was wrong. It may have been a chain of accident and coincidence. But there had been other occasions.

A few days before, I had visited the University of Lublin, the only Catholic University in eastern Europe. I spent most of my time with the students who are taking English. They were obviously excited to see us, to talk English, to hear the accents of the first Englishman they had ever seen, and they laughed with delight when I explained that their accent was more classically correct than mine which was acquired in my native Manchester. But just as obviously they were apprehensive; apprehensive of our guides. They chose not to understand my questions about politics and local conditions. We, the visitors, were known to be Catholics. The guides were also Catholics, practising Catholics whom I had seen at Mass and Holy Communion. The fear was real. It was not the product of my morbid imagination. When I complained to our escorts they made no denial of it but said that the students probably came from families that were stubborn and reactionary. I argued that these students who were hardly born when the war began, who had no knowledge of any government except the one under which they lived and who had already completed the exhaustive course in Marxism which is

obligatory, could not be described in any language as reactionary or capitalist or feudal. But the guides would not take up the argument. They were charming, they were kind, they gave long explanations, they answered questions, but they seldom argued.

Two men ventured to visit me privately. They did not disclose their names. They had read in the paper that I was in Poland as a guest of the 'Pax' Organisation and they took the considerable risk of seeing me to explain that there were other Catholics in Poland besides the 'Pax' people, Catholics who had chosen the way of poverty and silence, the silent Catholics who are the majority.

In all this morass of suspicion and doubt and whisperings and clandestine visits the traveller from England has difficulty in keeping his feet. My report therefore may be wide of the mark. But no outsider, I think, has seen more of the 'Pax' people than I have. I met some of them when I was in Poland in September 1954 and I wrote about them sympathetically. In November 1955 I attended their Conference in Warsaw and spent fourteen days in their company. It is unlikely that my present knowledge will be increased.

'Pax' is the title of the organisation of 'the socially progressive Catholics of Poland'. They accept the communist regime as a fact. And the fact that the most Catholic country in the world has a Communist government brings consequences hitherto unknown. There is no precedent for it. No rules of conduct have ever been drafted. The Vatican, they complain, instead of giving guidance to Catholics behind the Iron Curtain, has written them off, has gone into mourning for them, and only uses the example of their plight to strengthen the faith and determination of Catholics who live in happier countries. But the Catholics in Poland must live; the Church must survive. The best chance of survival, says 'Pax', is to work with the government in its social and economic endeavours, proving that Christians can be as progressive as anyone else and, at the same time, to promote an intense cultural Catholic life.

They are organized in a sort of multiform co-operative. They own a publishing firm which has produced missals and prayer books, a new translation of the New Testament which has sold more than half a million copies, translations of works by several European Catholics and original works by Polish writers. They publish a daily newspaper in Warsaw, five weekly reviews in

Wroclaw, Cracow, Opole, Stalinogrod and Warsaw, a monthly and a bi-monthly magazine. They manufacture and sell in their own shops, statues, rosary beads and holy pictures. They have several private schools. Besides the revenue from the sale of books, newspapers, and objects of piety they have other sources of income: numerous small factories, employing about two thousand workers, that make all sorts of things—neckties, boot polish, children's toys, fishing tackle and other merchandise.

'Pax' does not recruit members. It is not a mass organisation but a small group of not more than two hundred who direct all these undertakings and of whom eight form the central executive committee: Piasecki, Horodynski, Ketrzynski, Lubienski, Hogmajer, Przetakiewicz, Reiff and Micewski. They are all comparatively young men; the oldest Lubienski, is forty-five. Not one of them comes from the working people; some of them belong to the old nobility, and the rest to the professional classes.

Boleslaw Piasecki, the powerful leader of 'Pax', reminds me of some giant fox. He is long and lean and lithe; his thick hair and slight moustache are ginger; his eyes are hot and restless; his voice is soft. He has a curious affection for bears, and displays photographs of them in all his rooms. Many people think he himself is more deadly than the most vicious bear. Before the war, when he was still in his early twenties, his brand of Fascism seemed extreme even to the reactionary government of that time. He was interned in the concentration camp that had been built by the Polish authorities near Lwow. When the Germans invaded Poland he was arrested, and then, after being released at the request of Mussolini, enlisted as 'chef de brigade' to harass and destroy the red partisans beyond the river Bug. So well did he carry out this job that when the Russians in their turn over-ran Poland he was again arrested and condemned to death. He is still alive and, as I was able to see for myself, in the conference hall, in his home, in his office, at meat and drink, he is in excellent health and spirits. For all that, no insurance firm would regard him as a good risk. This is the strange man who is the leader of the 'progressive Catholics' of Poland. This is the man about whom a leading Catholic intellectual said: 'He is not only our leader; he is our conscience.'

Dominik Horodynski, the deputy leader, has the looks, the smile, the manner and, I think, the temperament of a film idol.

His past is simple and more tragic than Piasecki's. He is the sole survivor of a family of more than thirty—parents, brothers, sisters, cousins—of whom twenty-nine were butchered in one night by the Germans. Unlike Piasecki, who has not left Poland since before the war (Paris and Rome are the only foreign capitals he has visited), Horodynski has been on parliamentary delegations to France and the United States.

So has Konstanty Lubienski, who spent four or five months abroad last year. He has an appealing simplicity and downright candour which makes him seem less complicated than his colleagues. Of Lubienski's personal integrity I have no doubt. He is of ancient family that has given archbishops and generals to Poland, but no member of the family behaved with greater courage than he did during the last war, when he was imprisoned by the Germans and the Russians. He is an economist and formerly worked at the Ministry of Finance. With four other members of 'Pax' he is now a deputy in the Polish Parliament.

Wojciech Ketrzynski, an earnest and persuasive man, son of a distinguished historian, is the group's secretary for international relations. It was he who issued the invitations to the recent Conference. Last year he visited North Vietnam and arranged for four delegates, including two priests, to attend the conference and to remain in Poland for three months.

Of the other members—Jerzy Hogmajer, a surgeon, Ryszard Reiff, Andrzej Micewski and Zygmunt Przetakiewicz, who are associated with the group's publications—I saw too little to be able to form a firm impression.

With these eight men, who direct all the undertaking of 'Pax', are another twenty persons, three or four of them women, who form a general advisory council.

NOTE: In a second article Mr Delargy will discuss the policy and aims of 'Pax'.