

Comment

In last October's issue of *New Blackfriars* we noted in the Comment that Pope John Paul in *Laborem Exercens* gave his support to the Polish workers' independent union *Solidarity* with some encouraging pats-on-the-back. It was hard to imagine then that scarcely two months later the Polish workers would be the victims of such a ruthless and efficient stab in the back from their communist government.

Even though the Polish economy was rushing to ruins, (stemming largely it seems from the corrupt and inept management of party hacks), from the point of view of 'socialising' (the Pope's word) socialism, everything seemed to be going well, the signs seemed to indicate that *Solidarity* had brought off the most exciting and creative breakthrough in the history of the communist bloc; the iron mould of state bureaucracy had been broken. The achievements of *Solidarity* were summed up in the December 1981 *Commonweal* by Mieczyslaw Maneli, (how sad the article now sounds!): for the first time in the history of communist regimes the government negotiated and compromised with groups of its own population represented by spontaneously and fully elected delegates; it legalised new freely organised trade unions which embraced nearly all the working population of the country; it admitted officially that the working masses in a socialist country need an organisation to protect their own interests against their socialist employers; it had to emend its censorship law to assure freedom for trades-union journals; existing labour laws changed; the government legalised the right to strike; and, perhaps most significant of all, the mood of the people changed from apathy and listlessness to energetic enthusiasm to co-operate in the building up of the community.

At the moment it is impossible to know or to predict how much, if any, of all that will survive, and to what source *Solidarity* and the Polish people in general can look for hope and help makes for gloomy brooding. They would do well to ignore the heartless propagandising of President Reagan and General Haigh along with the synthetic smouldering of their sycophantic supporters including Mrs Thatcher. The hand-wringing and the ah's, the sighs and the sobs from those quarters over the demise of freedom in Poland are on a level of insincerity and impertinence which is quite breathtaking. Appalling as the situation in Poland undoubtedly is, and tragic and depressing as it undoubtedly is, in some ways the events of the past six weeks there pale towards the petty in comparison with the murders, the brutalities and the oppression which have happened *and are still happening* in parts of Central and

South America whose regimes were instigated by, or are connived at, or are actively supported by the government of the USA, (who, after all, manipulated the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Allende in Chile and the installation of the present dictator Pinochet)? The agonies of countries like Guatemala and El Salvador beggar description. Thus Guatemala: "the most ruthlessly oppressive regime in Latin America. According to an Amnesty report published in February 1981, over three thousand people have been killed and another six hundred have simply disappeared since 1978, most of them victims of government-sponsored death squads". Thus El Salvador: "one of the world's most God-forsaken governments; In the last two years, the rate of killing carried out by the government armed forces exceeds that known anywhere else in the globe". (Both quotations from *Amnesty International. The Human Rights Story*, by Jonathan Power, Pergamon Press 1981).

The manifold insincerity and bloodied hands of the Super Powers both West and East leave them almost bereft of moral credibility, and they would do better to remain silent over Poland until they publicly repent of their own 'Polands' and much worse.

So whence can come help and hope for the likes of Poland, Guatemala and El Salvador? The Church? The signs are that that is the most plausible answer for many oppressed people, both West and East. To be sure, such an answer fifteen or twenty years ago would have seemed at best sardonic, when the Church was still preoccupied as far as Eastern Europe is concerned with the sterile battle for ideological supremacy over Marxist-Leninism, and scandalously giving theological respectability to the ruling classes in Latin America. Notwithstanding the lingering conservative and obsessively anti-marxist elements, those days are largely over, a new and repentant Church has been emerging. So much so that it is now clear that practically the only voice of protest on behalf of the killed and tortured and 'disappeared' in Latin America continues to be the Church. And how some of its members suffer for it: "What I saw and heard in Guatemala remains with me as an open wound. What the newspapers say about dozens of deaths daily in this country . . . cannot even begin to tell what it can mean to be a religious or priest in this country which is a victim of a blind and anarchical repressive regime", the Master of the Dominican Order, Vincent de Couesnongle remarked recently. The Church in Poland is strong enough and, (through its support of and collaboration with *Solidarity's* fight for democratic socialism) has earned sufficient credibility to be the voice of protest against oppression and the source of hope and encouragement as once again the Polish people face the grim uphill struggle for human freedom.

Alban Weston O P