

# Letters to the Editor

London, June 1973

Dear Sir,

Lucjan Blit's article on Church and State in Poland (*RCL*, Vol. I, No. 3) does well to remind us of the vital historical background which has so largely contributed to making the Roman Catholic Church there "the spiritual home of the nation". It is indeed astounding to a visitor from Western Europe to discover a people's Church in a sense that none of ours can any longer claim to be. The figures he quotes are useful too, though I would enter a caveat to the statement that "all forms of communication, . . . the publication of books and practically the whole press are Party-controlled". Registered by the Party, published only with severe limitations and checks by the Party, yes of course, but nevertheless there are papers, journals and books published by other agencies, among them groups within the Roman Catholic Church (e.g. the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* and the monthlies *Wież* and *Znak*, not to mention those of the fellow-travelling association Pax) and *Jednota*, the journal of the tiny Reformed Church. The *Znak* group have some possibilities of publishing books, including for instance an original biography by the late Anna Morawska of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – an anti-Nazi certainly, and possibly permitted in part because of that but still an uncomfortable person for any totalitarian regime to have known and studied.

More important, however, is what is left unsaid. "Fierce and stubborn battle rages" over such things as taxes, the position of the Catholic University at Lublin, the moral upbringing of the young : yes. "But both sides want to avoid the supreme crisis" and thus without thinking of capitulation in practice follow a policy of compromise without often saying so : yes again. This curious situation, of a certain shadow-boxing, can all too conveniently hide the reality of two basically conservative leadership groups each trying hard to retain an authoritarian, even monolithic grip on a people well aware of their national roots and their inevitable limitations, yet increasingly indifferent to what either leadership is thundering on about.

Maybe things on the Party side will have been loosening up a bit since Gierek came to power – it would be good if you could bring us an up to date impression – but a few years ago one could only come to the con-

clusion that it suited both leaderships to have the other as entrenched as it was. In the process the difficult issues could be resolutely ignored. The hierarchy could get away with suppressing, more or less, the findings of the Second Vatican Council except those which explicitly suited them, and with avoiding any real, committing dialogue with the small communities of Orthodox and Protestants inside the country. The Party leadership, all too similarly, could concentrate on the externals of the Church's situation without working at the renewal and integrity of their own intellectual and ideological tradition.

Poles are proud to consider their nation a model of tolerance. But in our day the tolerance which comes from passivity, from the refusal to encourage any sort of initiative, can only be deadening. That's what a visit to Poland left me worried about, not the noisy shadow-boxing but the sapping of all moral and spiritual vitality by an attachment to traditions all too largely out of touch with the newer realities. Is it not that vitality about which we Christians should be caring, wherever the jigsaw-puzzle of power politics has momentarily placed the official status of the Church as institution?

Yours,

MARTIN CONWAY

LUCJAN BLIT writes :

In 1971 (latest available figures) there were nearly 13 million radio and television sets in use in Poland. Since 1947 no religious person has been allowed to broadcast about his beliefs. As to the press the Poles can read 56 daily papers and 2,100 periodicals. Among the latter group Mr. Martin Conway states that there appear to be *one* weekly and *two* monthlies which are published by genuine Roman Catholics. The circulation of these three Catholic publications is limited to 60,000 copies. They undergo severe (Party) censorship before publication. The communist dailies and periodicals have a circulation of over 33 million copies (see pages 287 and 291 of the official *Concise Statistical Year-book* of Poland for the year 1972, published in Warsaw).