

Fighting for survival

PART ONE: FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

STALIN'S cynical question about how many divisions had the Pope is about to be answered by his successor, Mikhail Gorbachev: minds and hearts cannot be won with bayonets and bullets.

The meeting on December 1 between the two most charismatic men in Europe, Gorbachev and Pope John Paul II, promises to see some major outstanding problems settled, leading even to establishing permanent diplomatic representatives and a papal visit to the USSR.

Vatican discussions recently with the Soviet regime and the Russian Orthodox Church suggest that the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Uniate rite will be legalised after 40 years of repression, and so open an entirely new era in Catholic-Soviet relations. DeStente has undermined the Stalinist Empire.

The Catholic Church had been discriminated against under the Czar and in 1917 looked forward to better times as the Provisional Government legalised the Byzantine rite for Catholics.

The communist government after the October revolution initially did not move against the Catholics. But as civil war spread, so did the Red terror against the Orthodox churches in which many were still sympathetic to the Czar.

Last week's historic meeting between Pope John Paul II and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev may settle "some major outstanding problems," writes Redemptorist priest Father Bruce Duncan. Dr Duncan lectures in history and social ethics at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne. This is the first in a two part series on what could prove to be one of the most significant diplomatic initiatives of our time.

Catholics suffered with other believers. Archbishop Ropp was sentenced to death, but exchanged for the Polish communist, Karl Radek. The Vatican pleaded not just for

Russian-ruled territories dropped from six million to 1.6 million. So the Catholic presence in the USSR was quite small, and located in pockets.

The Holy See continued its diplomatic efforts to come to some accommodation with the communist regime, and maximised its humanitarian aid to famine areas in the early 1920s. In June 1923 it was feeding 158,000 people in Russia daily.

Because of its relief missions the Vatican was repeatedly attacked by exiled White Russians for being too accommodating with the Reds. The Soviet regime made continuation of the relief mission conditional on the Vatican recognising it as the legitimate government, which the Vatican would not do; so the mission was forced to leave in 1924.

Against the increasingly severe repression of Catholics in Russia, Pope Pius XI protest-

ed firmly but did not embark on a "crusade" against communism. When 15 bishops and priests and one layman were tried in March 1923, one

of whom, after brutal torture, was immediately executed, Vatican reaction was remarkably restrained. Such severe anti-religious repression eased from 1924 to 1928. Even though all the bishops were in prison or exile, the Vatican installed other bishops and apostolic administrators in secret. These too were eventually arrested.

The leading Vatican trouble-shooter and adviser on Russian affairs was Bishop D'Herbigny, head of the Pontifical Russian Institute in Rome. He told this remarkable story about Lenin.

A French friend of Lenin's, who had become a priest, went to visit the Russian leader on his deathbed. Lenin first welcomed him warmly, but then was furious when he heard the Frenchman had become a priest.

Hostility

On the second and third visits, Lenin dropped his hostility, and even said that if he had his time over again, he would have tried to become the Russian St Francis of Assisi. "In a 100 years there would have been only two forces — Bolshevism and the Catholic Church," he was reported as saying.

Whether the story is true or not, D'Herbigny certainly believed it, and it illustrates



□ Two priests hear confessions from workers at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk. "how many divisions has the Pope," may find its answer here.

offered a solemn mass of expiation at the tomb of St Peter in 1930 and ordered all the bells in Italy to be tolled. Stalin protested at this "clerical crusade" while Molotov later accused Catholic priests of being agents of capitalism and imperialism. The president of the militant League of the Godless boasted that he had demolished six big churches in response.

By 1934, all that remained publicly functioning of the seven Catholic dioceses and 912 priests and monks were three churches and 10 clergy serving foreign diplomats in Moscow.

If the Catholic Church appeared almost totally suppressed, the Orthodox Church was heading the same way, with 28 bishops, 1,200 priests and many more lay people killed in the short period 1917-23. The Orthodox were repressed in 1941 when Stalin was forced to turn to them for support against Hitler.

Persecution

The Catholic press worldwide kept a close watch on the persecution in Russia and on communist influence elsewhere, but it was the Spanish Civil War which mobilised Catholic mass movements into militant forms of anti-communism, and even in Australia helped shape the mentality of Catholic activists. Reacting against the widespread burning of churches and the killing of clergy and religious personnel, with the apparent connivance of the Republican Government in 1936, Catholics tended to interpret the Nationalist revolt as a defence of the Church and human rights.

The savagery and horrors of the war reinforced some Catholic rhetoric which often painted it in black and white terms of Good versus Evil, as the forces of God against those of Satan. Conservative figures of the number of clergy and religious killed came to 7,534.

A "crusading" mentality spread throughout Catholic

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□ BELOW: Pope Pius XI.



□ Mikhail Gorbachev

Catholics in 1919 but for the religious liberties of the Orthodox especially.

The Treaty of Riga in 1921 gave independence to some Eastern European countries which had been absorbed into the Russian Empire, and the number of Catholics in



ed firmly but did not embark on a "crusade" against communism. When 15 bishops and priests and one layman were tried in March 1923, one

something of his attitude to the Bolsheviks. The communist world was like the Roman Empire in which there would be persecution for a time, but the blood of martyrs would prepare the way for a re-evangelisation of the Soviet Union.

It was the policy of Pius XI, who was a determined and courageous man, to maintain the efforts at conciliation, certainly not out of weakness, but in the hope of improving conditions for believers. Three times between 1921 and 1927, the Vatican tried to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. As late as May 1929, Pius said that if he could help save souls, "We feel the courage to treat with the devil in person." This did not mean any lessening of Vatican doctrinal opposition to communism; but the Vatican was not so concerned with a regime's ideology as long as some agreement could be reached to guarantee human and religious rights.

In 1929 Stalin determined on a new persecution which all but eliminated the Catholic Church in Russia. To draw world attention to the ferocious persecution, Pius XI

ets: Agreeing to Disagree



rd in Gdansk during a 1988 mass celebrated for strikers. Stalin's

the Holy Office
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mass movements, despite the protests of men like Jaques Maritain, Father Luigi Sturzo and George Bernanos. Maritain denounced the portrayal by many in the Church, especially in Spain, of the war as a crusade or "holy war." Sturzo insisted that if there was a religious element in the war, it should be eliminated from it as soon as possible. This crusading mentality became an important element in the thinking of the "integralist" clergy in Rome, who saw the Church locked into an apocalyptic struggle with the most virulent form of secularism, Marxism-Leninism.

Exaggerated

Integralism was a mentality which exaggerated the authority of the Church over secular and political movements, as well as over science and culture, and looked to a romanticised view of the medieval world as a model for the reconstruction of Christian civilisation. It was authoritarian and clerical, and inimical to the political pluralism of western democracies.

Though Pius XI denounced the "satanic enterprise" occurring in Spain and continued to repeat his condemnation of communist doctrine and atrocities, the papacy did not adopt this "crusading" mentality; despite intense provocation it had adopted a conciliatory policy to the Spanish Republic before the revolt of the generals.

Later Franco three times tried unsuccessfully to win Vatican recognition for his regime; this was not given till August 1937, and it took another year for a full papal nuncio to be sent. Though fearful of a communist victory, the papacy distrusted Franco because of his Fascist and Nazi connections.

The Vatican remained firmly anti-communist on ideological and pragmatic grounds, of course. Under pressure from events in Spain and in Mexico, and to clarify the question

of a "united front" in France, Pius XI in 1937 issued his encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* in which he said that "Communism is intrinsically wrong and no one who would save Christian civilisation may give it assistance in any undertaking whatsoever." He called on Catholics to give top priority to the defence of their countries against communist subversion. Though the encyclical also condemned abuses under capitalism, which was still struggling out of the Great Depression, *Divini Redemptoris* remained the key charter of anti-communism in the Catholic mass movements, and was particularly used to reinforce Catholic opposition to communist "united front" tactics.

Struggle

During the Second World War, the common struggle in the European resistance movements established deep bonds of friendship between previously polarised groups of Catholics and communists. Pope Pius XII said that he had been careful to preserve Vatican neutrality during the war, and had firmly resisted German and Italian efforts to have him declare the war against Russia a holy war against communism. In a statement in 1952, which prefigured John XXIII's opening to dialogue with the communist world, he said he rejected communism but not erring individuals.

Throughout the war there were rumors of diplomatic contact between the Vatican and Russia, and during the post-war thaw the Vatican again tried to establish better relations with Moscow. At the time it seemed not impossible that the war-time alliance between Russia and the western powers might lead to a modification of Soviet ideology and practice.

In Italy the communists had voted to ratify the Lateran treaties in 1946, while in France the largely Catholic *Mouvement Republicain Populaire* for a time formed a government in coalition with the socialists and communists. The changed conditions of Europe had modified *Divini Redemptoris'* opposition to co-operation with communists. It was thus accepted by many that tactical alliances might be permissible and did not necessarily mean approval of communist ideology.

Dramatised

However, Stalin again launched into religious persecution, not so much against the Orthodox to whom he had appealed during the German invasion, but particularly against Catholics and others. The sham trials of leading ecclesiastics in Eastern Europe from 1948 dramatised and personified the persecution.

Cardinals Slippi in the Ukraine (he spent 18 years in prison before his release into exile), Mindszenty in Hungary, Stepinac in Yugoslavia, and Beran of Prague (destined to spend 15 years in gaol before allowed to find exile in Rome) became powerful symbols of Catholic resistance and reinforced the determination of many Catholics, not least in Australia, to oppose the

spread of Stalinist communism. (Slippi later became a strong opponent of the Vatican's more moderate policy towards communist countries.)

In 1948 in Italy, at the first free elections since the rise of Mussolini, many Catholics were alarmed that the communists might outpoll the Christian Democrats.

The integralists feared civil violence as in Spain, and with the support of Pius XII and

in these years he supported some of the tactics of the integralists in the Vatican.

In 1952, the conflict between the integralists and their more liberal opponents came to a head when Gedda tried to force an alliance between the Christian Democrats and a neo-Fascist party to forestall the election of a communist mayor in Rome. The Christian Democrat leader, De Gasperi, refused to co-operate with Gedda, since this would

Faced with determined opposition from the Christian Democrat leaders, however, Pius XII was forced to abandon Gedda's plan.

The Pope showed his displeasure with De Gasperi by refusing to receive his family on the occasions of their marriage anniversary and of the profession of their daughter as a nun.

He did not adopt the intransigent position: he asked that bridges not be cut, and that mutual relations be maintained but through official channels, not private ones.

Pius did not live to see détente or major improvements in relations between the Vatican and the Soviet bloc, but his successor, Pope John XXIII, was to break through the ideological and political barriers and suggest a new approach, opening the way to dialogue with communists and even co-operation in morally good projects.

□ Next week: Pope John changes the Church's response to communism.



□ Josef Stalin

under the direction of Professor Luigi Gedda, formed national civic committees to mobilise Catholics to vote against the communists. Gedda's aims at this time were limited and the committees did not intend to take over policy-making or control of the Christian Democrats.

In July 1949, the Holy Office issued a decree forbidding Catholics to belong to the Communist Party, or co-operating in its teaching or publications, under penalty of denial of the sacraments or excommunication. Even so, Pius XII still talked of the conditions for "any honorable coexistence" between the Church and communist regimes, and this remained the long-term goal of Vatican policy.

Nevertheless, the pressure of events had forced the Vatican away from attempts at rapprochement with the USSR, and reinforced the position of those in Italy and elsewhere who favored a policy of intransigence or thorough-going and total opposition to all things communist.

Mistaken

The influential French Cardinal Suhard thought such anathemas were mistaken and only polarised positions further. Though he died in May 1949, before the decree was issued, he had had a strong influence on Archbishop Montini, later Pope Paul VI, who was at the time one of two Under-secretaries of State to Pius XII and wrote many of his speeches. Montini was also strongly influenced by the political and democratic thinking of Maritain, and opposed to the integralist crusading mentality against communism. He and Pius XII even had misgivings about Italy joining Nato until the Christian Democrat leader, De Gasperi, pressed the issue.

However popular perception of Pius XII at the height of the Cold War saw him as a great spiritual leader lending moral legitimacy to the western anti-communist alliance. Though his position was generally more sophisticated,

have destroyed his attempts to form a strong centre party independent of Church direction.

He strongly opposed alliances with the remnants of the Fascist elements to the right, and worked for a new arrangement with reformed and democratic groups on the left. The anti-communist crusader, Father Riccardo Lombardi, SJ, in vain tried to convince De Gasperi's wife to talk her husband into supporting the plan.

Montini lamented that Pius and his advisers thought that only Gedda's civic committees could stand up to communism and that they wanted to destroy the Christian Democrats.