

# Pope John's shift on communism led to new approach

## PART TWO: POPE JOHN CHANGES THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO COMMUNISM

POPE JOHN XXIII was to bring about a decisive shift in the Church's response to communism, eventually moving right away from the intransigent policies pursued by the Vatican in the last days of Pius XII.

Initially as Pope, however, John had signed a Holy Office decree in April 1959 opposing the "opening to the left," and his first encyclical, *Ad Petri Cathedram* (June 29, 1959) also warned against communism.

Vatican policy was largely in the hands of entrenched integralist anti-communists, who had consolidated their power in the Italian Church in Pius XII's declining years, especially Cardinal Ottaviani in the Holy Office, Cardinal Siri as head of the Italian bishops, Cardinal Ruffini in Sicily, and activists such as Father Riccardo Lombardi SJ, who

The historic meeting between Pope John Paul II and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev could prove to be one of the most significant diplomatic initiatives of our time.

In last week's issue Dr Bruce Duncan CSsR outlined the Church's historical response to communism. In this, the second and final article, Dr Duncan argues that Pope John XXIII sowed the seeds for the present rapprochement by changing the Church's traditional attitude to communism.

based his anti-communism on the premise that communism formed a whole in which it was impossible to make distinctions between ideology, programs and tactics.

It was just such distinctions which Pope John was to make in *Peace on Earth*. John also wanted to withdraw the Italian bishops from such direct involvement in Italian politics.

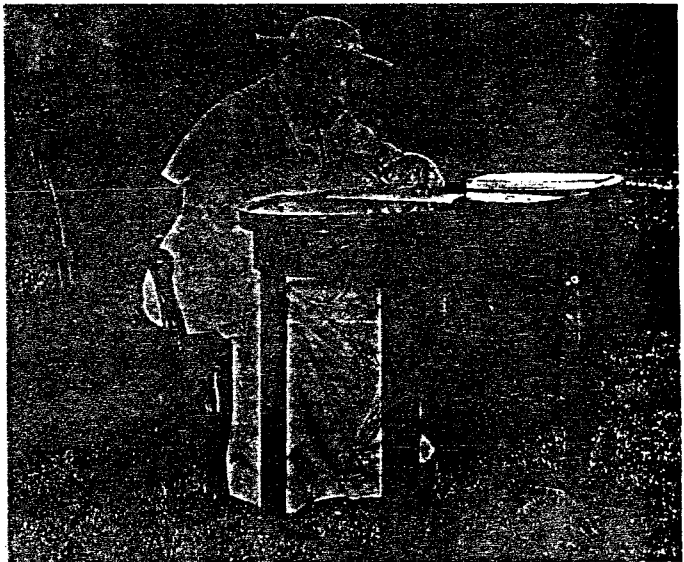
### The integralist attempt to steam-roller John

On May 18, 1960, the integralists published an article in the Vatican paper, *Osservatore Romano*, called *Punti Fermi* ("Here we stand"). The work of Siri, Ottaviani and

Archbishop Tardini (who was joint Undersecretary of State with Montini in the Vatican), it rejected Maritain's political distinctions and the independence of the laity in politics.

It said it was absurd to distinguish "between a man's conscience as a Catholic and his conscience as a citizen," and stressed that the hierarchy could give instructions over every aspect of a Catholic's life.

The document was reacting to the visit to Moscow of the leader of the Christian Democrat's left wing, Gronchi, and feared that the Christian Democrats would form an alliance with the left in Italy. *Punti Fermi* therefore held that the bishops alone could



□ Pope John XXIII at work in the garden at Castel Gandolfo. The Pope distanced himself from the intransigent policies on communism pursued by the Vatican before his pontificate.

decide the question of electoral alliances, and that questions of collaboration could not be decided by individuals (ie the Christian Democrats themselves).

It said that there was "an insurmountable opposition between Christian dogma and the Marxist system," and Catholics were forbidden to "belong to, support in any way collaborate with those who adopt and follow the Marxist ideology and its application."

### Aldo Moro's defence

Aldo Moro vigorously defended the Christian Democrat policy to form an electoral alliance with parties of the left, and distinguished it from the caricature in *Osservatore Romano*. He wanted to stop the drift to the right in Italian politics and restore the Christian Democrat commitment to social justice programs. Moro was attacked by the integralists as a traitor. When the clerical editor of the Milan *Italia* also attacked Moro, his mentor and lifelong friend, Archbishop Montini, then archbishop there, defended Moro by sacking its editor. Moro wrote a memorandum to Pope John on the dispute, who responded in a carefully diplomatic way to show his support for him. Moro became known as the leading Catholic advocate for the "historic compromise" between the Christian Democrats and the parties of the left.

Thus John had taken a stand against the integralists, and began to spell out his alternative in his encyclical of May 15, 1961, *Mater et Magistra*. It broke with the tone of the Cold War rhetoric and addressed itself warmly and encouragingly to work for social justice, particularly to eradicate the desperate poverty of the third world.

### John against the integralists

In 1962, Siri continued his attacks on Moro. He wrote to the Pope that the Christian Democrats, by proposing the nationalisation of the electricity industry, had abandoned Catholic social teaching and were preferring one class over another.

By implication he threatened to split the Christian

Democrats and form an alliance with the right. John, however, pointedly granted an audience to Moro, not to Siri's allies. Siri's rhetoric reached such a point that *Osservatore Romano* on December 12 warned against a "climate of extremism, of intolerance and of false zeal which is weakening and discouraging." It called for reasonable concessions and avoidance of unnecessary dissensions, a clear rebuke to Siri and the integralists.

### John opens contact with Soviet leaders

In late 1962, Pope John had initiated a carefully engineered exchange of messages with Khrushchev. When the Soviet leader sent an 80th birthday telegram to the Pope, Ottaviani was enraged and refused to let it appear in *Osservatore Romano* for three weeks. Nevertheless, this first thaw in relations between Khrushchev and the Pope allowed John to play a key role in the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962.

In the preparations for the Second Vatican Council, the integralists insisted that communism be again condemned, even though this would have made it more difficult for the bishops from the communist countries to attend or for the Council decisions to be implemented in their countries afterwards.

John also wanted observers from the Orthodox churches, some of whom would only be allowed to come if the Soviet regime knew they would not attack or condemn communism. The problem was that with many Christians still in prison, notably Slipji, Mindszenty and Beran, not unnaturally it could seem disloyal not to protest their imprisonment.

The answer was to have them set free and to win greater toleration for believers from the Soviet regime. The Russian observers helped the Vatican's efforts to have the bishops released from prison. Increasingly warm messages passed between Khrushchev and the Pope, until eventually Khrushchev, at considerable political risk to himself, according to Pope John, ordered the release of Slipji in February 1963. Here was some proof that communist policies could be moderated.

As a further indication of warming relations with the communist world, Pope John was awarded the Balzan Peace Prize which, on the advice of Montini, he decided to accept. John also gave an audience to Khrushchev's daughter and son-in-law, Alexis Adzubei, on March 7, against the advice of Ottaviani. John wanted the record of the meeting published to dispel rumors that he was being naive or indiscreet, but the Secretariat of State refused. This refusal seemed to suggest that secret talks were taking place or that there was something to hide, and hence threw John's action under suspicion.

Instead of publishing the conversation, curial officials reiterated the hard line against communism. Vatican Radio said that Pope John condemned communism as had his predecessors; nothing had changed. John was greatly upset about these integralist moves, and three days before *Peace on Earth* went to the printers wrote that he forgave his opponents these "unspeakable manoeuvres" and disobedience.

With the Italian elections just weeks away, it was not only the Italian bishops who were concerned that the Christian Democrat line against communism would break and the communists would win power. However, John decided to push ahead with the new directions in his encyclical.

### Peace on Earth

Concerned that he would not live to see the Council finished and that he needed to make a clear statement of his views while he could, John asked a small team headed by Monsignor Pietro Pavan to prepare an encyclical on world peace. Pavan had been an anti-Fascist and a follower of the political thought of Maritain, and so a strong opponent of the integralists. John instructed him that it was to contain no confrontational attack on communism.

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# Vatican 'soft' line helped the oppressed

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Thus, in his encyclical *Peace on Earth* (April 12, 1963), without explicitly mentioning communism, John distinguished between false philosophical theories and their political and economic programs. Co-operation with these need not mean endorsing the philosophical errors.

John wanted to draw out the distinction between a crusading Marxism intent on crushing all opposition and a philosophical Marxism with which there could be coexistence and agreement to differ, as with the Marxist-influenced Social Democratic parties in Europe. John believed that forms of co-operation had to be found if problems such as the arms race and the threat of war were to be settled.

John also distinguished be-

tween the error and the people who erred, as had Pius XII, and said that God might enlighten erring minds to come to the truth. He encouraged meetings and dialogue between believers and communists for mutual understanding and attempts to discover the truth.

In the Italian elections, the Christian Democrats indeed lost four million votes, mostly to the moderate Saragat socialists, but this could not simply be attributed to the encyclical. John himself seemed surprised by the result, but despite warnings from the CIA, he decided to continue his course.

## Accommodation in Poland

The most successful instance of Catholic resistance to communism, of course, has

been in Poland. Some commentators put this down to intransigent resistance, and contrasted this with the alleged weakness of Vatican policy. Such an argument is badly informed. Cardinal Wyszynski and the Polish bishops refused to allow the Vatican to dictate policy in Poland, and instead of intransigence, adopted a skilful policy of *firmness with accommodation*. Pius XII - in fact regarded Wyszynski's dealings with the communist government as "total compromise." When Wyszynski went to Rome in 1956 to see the Pope, Pius XII kept him waiting several days to show his disapproval.

## John Paul II

Pope John Paul II is clearly in the Polish tradition which combined firmness with practical accommodation, and has continued the *Ostpolitik* to its present encouraging developments. Portrayal of this Polish Pope as a champion of "crusading" anti-communism during the Reagan years has been mistaken. Despite the assassination attempt on him, which was almost certainly directed by Moscow through Bulgaria, the Pope has taken pains to support the reformers within communist countries. He has rejected the intransigent position, and because of his impeccable anti-communist credentials has been able to be more daring than his predecessors. As the U.S. bishops said in their document on Marxism in 1980, the Pope has even worked key Marxist concepts such as "alienation" into his social encyclicals.

## Restoring the Ukrainian Catholic Church

The question of the Ukrainian Uniate Catholic Church remains the main outstanding problem. In 1596, under pressure from Polish rulers, the bishops of the western Ukraine voted to return to the Roman communion, but kept their Byzantine-rite liturgy, and customs such as married clergy. By 1939 there were four million Ukrainian Uniate-rite Catholics who suffered increasingly under Soviet occupation.

When the Russians reoccupied the Ukraine in 1944, Stalin began to resume the persecution. The Soviet regime and the surviving leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, who had been reduced to subservience, denounced the Pope and the Uniates as Fascists, and the Catholic Uniates were forcibly incorporated into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 1946.

Great numbers of Ukrainians were deported to Siberia. In 1980, Cardinal Slipji, then in Rome, said that 10 bishops, more than 1,400 priests and 800 nuns had been killed for their faith, along with tens of thousands of lay people. Despite the savage persecution in the Ukraine, the Church survived underground and strong popular movements for its legalisation have surfaced recently. Unprecedented demonstrations of perhaps 100,000 people have rallied in the Ukraine to demand religious freedom for Ukrainian Catholics.

The Vatican well understands that detente is necessary not only to secure world peace but also as a precondition for religious toleration and liberalisation within the USSR. Gorbachev's visit to the Pope demonstrates the wisdom of Vatican policy in seeking an accommodation with the communist regimes. The present Pope has revealed himself not as a Cold War crusader against communism but as a firm supporter of accommodation, without any sacrifice

of moral principle, to promote gradual changes in communist regimes till they embody more satisfactorily the demands of social justice.

Recent Vatican policy is consistent with the earlier years and, under the guiding hand of Cardinal Casaroli, Pope John Paul II has continued in the steps of his predecessors. The communist persecution has failed, and religious belief may have emerged stronger and more purified by its ordeal.