
The Commissar's Road to Rome

Not least among the momentous events of late 1989 was the meeting of the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, with Pope John Paul II.

The background to that event is sketched here by Dr BRUCE DUNCAN, a priest of the Redemptorist congregation who lectures in history and social ethics at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne.

The visit of the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, to Pope John Paul II promises to close an era of such severe religious persecution as to be only comparable with that of the early Christians under the Roman emperors.

Extensive negotiations have been under way between the Vatican and Soviet officials to resolve some outstanding problems - notably to legalise the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Uniate rite - and to approve a papal visit to the Soviet Union in the near future. The two states also hope to exchange diplomatic representatives.

The present successes of this *Ostpolitik*, as it is called, have vindicated the efforts of the Vatican since 1917 to normalise relations with the Soviet regime. They have also borne out the judgment of Pope John XXIII that a condemnatory policy against communism was counter-productive. John's decision to adopt a more conciliatory approach to the communist countries, though fiercely contested in the Vatican and elsewhere then and since, favoured political detente between East and West, and helped establish the pre-conditions to settle the religious question.

Vatican efforts to reach a satisfactory accommodation with the Soviet regime stem from the first days of communist rule. Even with the arrests, imprisonment and execution of clergy and laity during and after the civil war period, the Vatican continued to work for a settlement. Exiled White Russians accused the Vatican of being too accommodating to the Reds with its famine relief missions in the USSR, which in June 1923 were feeding over 150,000 people daily.

Three times between 1921 and 1927, the Vatican tried to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Pius XI in May 1929 said that he was prepared to "treat with the devil in person" if it would help

Catholics and other Christians under Soviet rule.

When Stalin decided on a renewed and more systematic persecution in 1929, all seemed lost. By 1934, in the whole of the Soviet Union, only a handful of Catholic clergy remained publicly functioning - in Moscow, for the diplomatic corps. Stalin was also intent on the complete extinction of the Orthodox, until the 1941 Nazi invasion forced him to appeal to the Orthodox for support.

Popular Catholic attitudes to communism were deeply affected by the Spanish Civil War and gave rise to an attitude of "crusading" anti-communism, which saw communism in demonic terms, and made the fight against communism, sometimes using communist methods, into a holy war of overwhelming significance.

In Europe, some Catholics, notably Jacques Maritain and Fr Luigi Sturzo, denounced this "crusading" mentality as too simplistic and as overriding the complexity of political events and moral issues.

Despite the clerical views in Spain and Italy, the papacy itself carefully avoided such "crusading" views, without abandoning its criticism and opposition to communism.

It was *not* inevitable that Catholics and communists should have entered into such profound conflict in Russia for such a long period. Much of the responsibility for this rests on the personal views of Lenin who, according to the Vatican's chief adviser on communism, Mgr D'Herbigny, regretted his policy on religion at the end of his life, and more particularly on Stalin. Had Stalin so decided, the more lenient years of 1924-1928 might have led to an accommodation with religious groups.

The Vatican hoped that improved relations between communists and Catholics which resulted from the joint struggle against the Nazis, particularly in the European resistance movements, might have led to a change in Soviet policies towards religion. The outbreak of the Cold War, however, and the well publicised arrests of leading churchmen in Eastern Europe in 1948, led to a complete

impasse and renewed persecution.

In the Vatican itself, there were sharp divisions between those favouring intransigent opposition to communism in all forms, and others searching for ways to reduce tensions and open channels for dialogue.

In July 1949, the Holy Office forbade Catholics to belong to the communist party or co-operate in its teachings or publications. The eminent Cardinal Suhard thought such policies of condemnation of no help to Catholics in communist countries and made it harder for communists there to change their policies. Suhard strongly influenced Archbishop Montini, later Pope Paul VI, who at the time was one of two under secretaries of state to Pius XII.

Some of the Christian Democrats in Italy were also critical of such condemnations, since they feared that the intransigents in the Vatican would force them into an alliance with the neo-Fascists to avoid an electoral alliance with parties of the left.

Initially Pope John seemed to support the intransigent position of condemning communism, but in May 1960, the intransigents tried to

force his hand by printing in the Vatican newspaper an article claiming for the hierarchy the right to give the laity instructions over all aspects of Catholic life; it was again aimed at preventing the Christian Democrats forming an alliance with the left.

Aldo Moro, with the help of his close friend and supporter, Archbishop Montini, vigorously defended the political independence of the Christian Democrats and later became the leading exponent of the "historic compromise" between communism and Catholicism in Italy. Pope John favoured Moro against Cardinal Ottaviani of the Holy Office and Cardinal Siri, and determined to open contacts with Soviet leaders.

In late 1962, an exchange of messages between John XXIII and Khrushchev enraged Ottaviani, as did John's meeting with the daughter and son-in-law of Khrushchev, the record of which Ottaviani refused to allow to be published, seemingly so as to undermine public confidence in John's judgement. John was greatly upset with these "manoeuvres".

John's reply to the intransigents came in his 1963 encyclical, *Peace*

on Earth, which endorsed the policies of cooperation with people, even of opposing ideologies in practical programmes for the good of all. He also encouraged dialogue with communists, though there was no compromise on doctrinal or philosophical grounds of course. These policies were later endorsed by Paul VI.

The meagre results yielded by *Ostpolitik's* until recent years meant that it was easily criticised by those who favoured the condemnations of the intransigent approach; they sometimes accused John XXIII and Paul VI of weakness or betrayal of Catholics under communist regimes. Though John Paul II has continued the policies of his predecessors, his anti-communist credentials are so strong that few have attacked him on these grounds.

Following on political detente, the *Ostpolitik* has worked. The Pope from the East is now set to deal, not with the devil, but a political commissar repenting the deeds of his predecessors and bent on reforming communism.