

The Kremlin and the Vatican: Ostpolitik

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The Vatican has been attempting to work out a *modus vivendi* with the Kremlin and its East European satellites for nearly 13 years. This process, called *Ostpolitik*, surprised many observers since the Church and the communists had been the bitterest of enemies. Relations improved especially in July and August 1975, when the Vatican, through Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, endorsed and participated in the Soviet-sponsored European Conference on Security and Cooperation at Helsinki.¹ There is not space to review all the events involved in the Vatican-Communist *détente* or the background and personalities leading up to the new relationship.² Suffice it to say that the rapport began with Pope John XXIII and Nikita Khrushchev and that it has had the following results: first, the persecution of the Church in Poland, Hungary and East Germany has been reduced (this did not apply, however, to the Church in the USSR, Romania and Czechoslovakia); second, the Vatican's anti-communist propaganda has declined; third, a series of exchanges have taken place between papal and communist officials; fourth, Catholics under communist regimes have felt abandoned by the Vatican.

The Papacy became interested in reaching an understanding with the Soviet empire mainly because millions of Catholics, some with the strongest indigenous churches in the Catholic world, live under communist governments in Eastern Europe. Rome undoubtedly hopes that through such an understanding it will be able to improve its ministry towards these Catholics. Thus far, however, this hope has not been fulfilled.³ Many Catholics in Eastern Europe fear that the Papacy's compromises with the communists will hurt the Church rather than help it: the policy of *détente* has already created a cleavage between Rome and the East European bishops and, above all, confused the laity.⁴

Why do Moscow and its satellites want a *rapprochement* with Rome? The Church in Poland, the pivot of the Soviet empire in Europe, has a huge following amongst the masses. For example, in 1970 Edward Gierek (leader of the Communist Party in Poland) turned to the Church for help in restoring order after the Polish workers' riots along the Baltic.⁵ Within the USSR itself, the Lithuanian Catholic Church and the

Ukrainian Uniate Catholics (suppressed since 1946) are sources of instability⁶ and because of their isolation and continued persecution depend on the Vatican's sympathy and defence. So through détente with Rome, Moscow is trying to gain leverage over the Catholics in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland; it hopes to make the satellite governments more popular with the Catholic masses, and, finally, to atrophy and confuse Catholics, especially in the Ukraine and Lithuania.

Socialism and, in some instances, communism, have gained influence in some parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Roman Catholic Church, with a sizeable stake in these regions, has felt compelled to examine closely the various types of socialism, and, as part of this process, to develop closer relations with the Soviet orbit.⁷ From the Soviet vantage point, a *modus vivendi* with Rome would make communism more acceptable in Third World areas where the Church is still strong.⁸ For such a *modus vivendi* would enable communist leaders to argue that their political programme was not categorically condemned by the Catholic Church. Put more positively, the Kremlin could point to the willingness of the Vatican to work with communists as proof that communists do not persecute religion.

The Vatican presumably has been convinced, particularly since the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, that the Soviet Union will maintain its dominant position in Eastern Europe. The Soviet military machine and Soviet influence in the Middle East also have to be taken into account. So for the sake of West European security Rome has presumably decided that a dialogue would be better than conflict.⁹ In the past, too, the Church has worked with repressive governments and, in the Vatican's view, communication could ease East-West tension. The Kremlin, for its part, realizes that the Catholic Church is a substantial force in Western Europe, especially in Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, Belgium, and parts of West Germany.¹⁰ An understanding with the Vatican could influence Western Europe's acceptance of Soviet security goals, as exemplified in the Papacy's support of the recent Helsinki Conference, and it might even prepare the way for the "Finlandization" of Western Europe.

The Catholic-Communist dialogue has evolved also because both sides share at least two international goals: the prevention of nuclear war and the promotion of stability in Eastern Europe. But it is difficult for the Vatican to reconcile its desire to prevent nuclear war with the USSR's constant efforts to disrupt world stability. Furthermore, Rome does not find it easy to adjust its wish for stability in Eastern Europe with Soviet suppression of Eastern Europe's cultural heritage. For Moscow, of course, there are no problems: its actions to destabilize the world order do not aim at producing a nuclear holocaust but rather at spreading Soviet influence and Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe.

The Vatican has initiated the policy of *Ostpolitik* also, no doubt, in

the hope of eventually converting or, at least, neutralizing the communist atheists through contact with the Church. Rome, buoyed by its beliefs and interpretations of reality, is firmly convinced that its moral position is superior to that of the communists and that this will eventually prevail.¹¹ But perhaps the communists are counting on Rome adopting their modes of thinking and acting. Indeed, they have grounds for optimism considering the Vatican's neglect of the Lithuanian Catholics and the Ukrainian Uniate Catholics and its treatment of Cardinals Slipyi and Mindszenty.¹²

The Papacy also apparently believes that some socialist principles and goals are commendable. In a number of encyclicals and missives, Pope Paul VI has expressed sympathy for some socialist ideas and decried the evils of unchecked capitalism. In his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), the Pope denounced the imbalance in the production and distribution of the world's goods, the tendency to place private property above the "fundamental exigencies of the common good", and the tendency for colonialism. The Pope also sanctioned violence "where there is manifest longstanding tyranny which would do the greatest damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good". The communists have yet to find any ideas and institutions in Catholicism worth keeping once the "classless society" has been fashioned, but they do appreciate the Vatican's support for their ideas and its attacks upon capitalism.¹³ Since the Vatican has gone more than half-way to meet the communists, Moscow can argue that its position was right from the beginning and that its persecution of believers has been a progressive policy.

The Vatican would have been isolated if it had not followed a policy of détente with the communist powers. The papal diplomats may have felt that it was time for Rome to adjust to the changing realities of international politics: after all the American and West European governments had attempted to put the Cold War behind them, and in Italy, the Italian Communist Party had been growing in strength throughout the 1960s and 1970s. At all events, it is to be hoped that, during the process of adjustment, the Church has not sacrificed her moral principles.

¹¹ For the Vatican's position on the future of Europe, see Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, "La Santa Sede e l'Europa", *Civiltà Cattolica*, 19 February 1972, pp. 367-81.

¹² For recent surveys of Catholic-Communist relations in Eastern Europe, see Hansjakob Stehle, *Die Ostpolitik des Vatikans*, Munich, 1975; Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour*, London, 1974; Wilfried Daim, *The Vatican and Eastern Europe*, New York, 1970 and Munich, 1967; Gerhard Simon, "The Catholic Church and the Communist State in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe", in Bohdan R. Bociurkiw and John W. Strong (eds.), *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, London, 1975; and this writer's "Communist-Catholic Détente: Its Origins and Evolution", in Bernard Eissenstat (ed.), *The Soviet Union: The Seventies and Beyond*, Lexington, Mass., 1975, pp. 121-40, and "Papal-Communist Détente", *Survey*, No. 99, Spring, 1976, pp. 140-154.

³ See Miklos Veto, "Kremlin and Vatican", *Survey*, July 1963, pp. 163-72.

⁴ Hansjakob Stehle, "Vatican Policy Towards Eastern Europe", *Survey*, No. 65, January 1968, p. 115; *Khronika Litovskoi Katolicheskoi Tserkvi*, No. 4, 1972, pp. 3-4, 10; No. 9, 1974, pp. 16-17.

⁵ Dunn, "Communist-Catholic Détente", p. 126.

⁶ See the following studies by Bohdan R. Bociurkiw: "Religious Dissent in the USSR: Lithuanian Catholics", in James Scanlan and Richard DeGeorge (eds.), *Marxism and Religion*, Dordrecht-Holland, 1976 (in press); "Religious Dissent and the Soviet State", in Bociurkiw and Strong, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-73; and "Religious Situation in the Soviet Ukraine", *The Ukrainian Quarterly*, forthcoming.

⁷ Hansjakob Stehle, *Die Ostpolitik des Vatikans*, p. 402; Herve Leclerc, "L'Ostpolitik du Vatican: Le point de vue de Rome", *Est & Ouest*, 16-31 December 1971, pp. 508-9; Casaroli, "Santa Sede e l'Europa", pp. 370-74.

⁸ Soviet authors have recognized the Church as a Third World force. See, for example, M. V. Andreev, *Katolitsizm i problemy sovremennogo rabochego i natsionalno-osvoboditelnogo dvizheniya*, Moscow, 1968 and I. V. Lavretsky, "Nekotorye voprosy politiki vatikana v Afrike", *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma*, Vol. VI, Moscow, 1958, pp. 105-29.

⁹ *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19 January 1974; Leclerc, "L'Ostpolitik du Vatican", p. 507; Hansjakob Stehle, *Die Ostpolitik des Vatikans*, p. 402ff.

¹⁰ *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 27 August 1973, p. 4.

¹¹ Dunn, "Papal-Communist Détente", *Survey*, No. 99, Spring, 1976, pp. 140-154.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ I. M. Kichanova, "Problema cheloveka", *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, No. 6, Moscow, 1968, pp. 268-69.

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