

The *Ostpolitik* of the Vatican and the Polish Pope

HANSJAKOB STEHLE

“A diplomat of the Holy See is first and foremost a priest,” said Pope Paul VI while addressing graduates of the Pontifical Diplomatic Academy on 24 April 1978, shortly before the end of his life. This statement can more easily be believed since the disappearance of the old Papal States (in 1870) as, for the Roman Catholic Church, diplomacy is now no longer an instrument of temporal power. But the pastoral role of Vatican diplomacy is still called in question, particularly when papal diplomacy ignores the political boundaries between East and West and asserts rights upon “souls”, which a dictatorial state atheism claims for itself or, at best, for pragmatic reasons, shares with a “foreign” pontiff and his bishops. The Vatican’s *Ostpolitik* has been repeatedly questioned by believers themselves since the Roman Curia began its first tentative negotiations with Moscow at the beginning of the 1920s (these foundered in 1927). Such questioning continued through to the ’60s and ’70s when papal diplomacy laboriously and slowly began to clear away the ruins of the Church in Eastern Europe after the Stalin era, and to reclaim an independent basis for Catholic church life.¹

During the pontificate of Paul VI criticism within the Church of the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik* focused particularly on the following questions: whether diplomacy was a suitable and morally legitimate means of safeguarding church hierarchical structures; whether pastoral care, which should be concerned with the whole man, and not only with the salvation of his soul, needed (if at all) such structures; whether negotiations should not be left to the local bishops rather than to the distant Roman directorate; whether religious and church interests could, and indeed should, be separated from political and civil activity, be it in opposition to or in collaboration with the ruling government.

In the autumn of 1978 all these questions were seen in a new light when Karol Wojtyła, Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow, was elected Pope. Would this pontiff, filled with the strength of Polish Catholicism, be less defensive and diplomatic in relation to threatened church structures, but more aggressive as regards religious liberty and human rights? The choice of

diplomatic “transaction” or moral-religious “mission” had never existed before, since both had always (and while Paul VI was Pope) been closely intertwined in the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik*. This combined approach was clearly apparent when the Holy See actively participated in the drafting of the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Its “most significant aspect”, declared Mgr Achille Silvestrini, head of the Vatican delegation to the Belgrade CSCE review conference, on 7 October 1977, lay in the “impetus for a progressive and irreversible development towards greater freedom—even though this development is difficult and, for some nations, too slow”. Silvestrini mentioned several positive signs in Eastern Europe, but went on to deplore the continuing “curtailment of free pastoral activity”. He cited specific problems which the Holy See was trying to resolve by a “two-sided dialogue”, which had recently been intensified “thanks also to the more favourable climate created by the CSCE”.²

Without this climate the College of Cardinals of the Roman Church could scarcely have risked electing as Pope a bishop from a country within the Soviet bloc. During the Cold War such a step would only have exacerbated the already strained relations between Church and State and the repression of believers in the East; however, after the years of cautious pastoral diplomacy by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, the election of Cardinal Wojtyła could mean the start of a new era. On the day of his installation (22 October 1978) he appealed to the whole world, including the representatives of communist governments present at the ceremony,³ to open the “borders of States, and economic and political systems” to Christ. Pope John Paul II thus expressed his wish to continue the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik* “in the spirit of the dialogue which was begun by my great predecessors, whose name I bear” (a telegram from the Pope, 17 October 1978, to Poland’s state and Party leaders). This *continuity* and its new *momentum* were confirmed above all by two striking events:

1. The appointment of Agostino Casaroli, the “architect” of Paul VI’s *Ostpolitik*, as Cardinal Secretary of State, and of Achille Silvestrini, Casaroli’s closest associate, as his successor as Secretary of the “Council for Public Relations of the Church” (the ministry of foreign affairs of the Roman Curia).

2. The Pope’s journey through Poland (2-9 June 1979), an event with unforeseeable and long-term effects on the future of religion in Eastern Europe, on East-West relations, and on the Vatican’s diplomatic relations with the East (which are always dependent on general East-West relations).

Pope John Paul II drafted jointly with Casaroli both his address to the Polish Party leader, Edward Gierek, at the beginning of his journey in Warsaw, and the address to the head of State, Henryk Jablonski, on his departure from Krakow. The programmatic formulations contained in

these speeches were chosen in full awareness of the "signal effect" that could emanate from Poland:⁴

When the Church establishes religious contact with a person it strengthens him in his natural social obligations . . . This is a result of the fundamental mission of the Church, which at all times and in all places endeavours to better a person, to make him more aware of his worth, and to encourage him in the fulfilment of his family, social and patriotic duties . . . The Church does not demand any privileges for its activities in this respect but only what is essential for its mission. This is the direction in which the episcopate is moving in Poland . . . If the Holy See is seeking an agreement (*porozumienie*) with the state authorities in this area, it is aware that this agreement, apart from helping to create conditions favourable for the total activity of the Church, concurs with the *raison d'être* of a nation whose sons and daughters are for the most part sons and daughters of the Catholic Church (address of 2 June 1979).

The visit of a Pope to Poland is certainly an event without precedent, not only in this century but in the whole millennium . . . This event was undoubtedly an act of true courage on both sides. In our time, however, just such an act of courage is needed. Sometimes one has to dare to move in a direction which nobody else has taken before. There is a tremendous need in our time for a testimony like this, which voices the desire for a *rapprochement* between nations and systems as an essential *condition for peace in the world* [stressed in the original]. Our times demand of us that we should not confine ourselves within any rigid frontiers when the good of mankind is at stake . . . (address of 8 June 1979).

During his first meetings with the diplomatic corps of the Holy See (20 October 1978 and 12 January 1979) the Pope had already declared his determination to employ—as he emphasized—the "proven means" of diplomacy and negotiation to achieve such *rapprochement*. Diplomatic relations "as a sign of courtesy, discretion and loyalty", he said, are "not necessarily an expression of approval of all their actions", but rather they indicate a "willingness to talk" with political leaders. In doing this, the Holy See in no way intended exceeding its pastoral duties, which consisted in safeguarding the "religious cult" and also the believers' "access as loyal citizens to full participation in social life".⁵ The Holy See, he declared, was "willing to be open to any country or regime" and also "to take into account the historical changes that have taken place as well as the changed social conceptions of various States". He emphasized that he wished to receive more diplomatic representatives: "I am thinking here especially of the nations which can be considered Catholic, but also of others." Vatican diplomacy seeks to promote the right to religious freedom and freedom of

conscience, attempting to do so "with the agreement of the respective bishops, clergy and believers". Indeed, there are now "to a great extent satisfactory results, but it is difficult not to mention certain regional churches, certain rites, the situation of which as regards religious freedom leaves much to be desired, and could be described as altogether deplorable".⁶

This is the kind of balanced, differentiated view which has marked the first year of Pope John Paul II's *Ostpolitik*.

German Democratic Republic

The first official visitor to be received by the Pope from the Soviet bloc was the East German foreign minister, Oskar Fischer (28 October 1978). The new pontiff was pleased that he had not been bombarded with requests from his visitor and also that he had no great grievances to discuss on this occasion. While the prestige interest of the East German government in setting up proper bishoprics and appointing resident bishops⁷ has abated somewhat in recent years, it has been growing among the East Berlin Conference of Bishops. In the GDR, the only Warsaw Pact country where the appointment of bishops does not require state approval, the situation of the Church is relatively speaking so good that it seems desirable, from a pastoral point of view, to guarantee this status by formal agreement rather than by permanently linking it to the complicated relations between East and West Germany. One pointer towards such formal recognition was the appointment in October 1979 of Klaus Gysi (for many years the East German ambassador in Rome and valued by Casaroli as a partner in dialogue) as State Secretary for Church Affairs in East Berlin. However, negotiations will probably have to wait because more serious problems in the East are claiming the Curia's attention.

Hungary

In two series of successful negotiations in Budapest (the beginning of December 1978 and mid-March 1979), Archbishop Luigi Poggi, the papal nuncio, facilitated the appointment of four bishops who were acceptable to both the Church and the government. Thus the Hungarian hierarchy was completed on 4 April 1979. In a letter from the Pope to Cardinal László Lékai, the Hungarian Primate (2 December 1978), Archbishop Luigi Poggi was described as the "interpreter of our pastoral care"—a function of Vatican diplomacy which seemed all the more important to the Pope since the weaknesses (historically caused) of Hungarian Catholicism make its institutional link with the Roman directorate more necessary than in other countries. The papal letter to Lékai which (according to a critical comment from Cardinal König in Vienna⁸) the western Catholic media wrongly "distorted into a letter of warning and reproach", was in fact an exhortation to "pastoral zeal" and contained a greeting "to the

whole Hungarian nation". Lékai afterwards took part in the Pope's visit to Poland; on 4 June he was publicly honoured in Czestochowa by John Paul II as a symbol of Polish-Hungarian "brotherhood".

Bulgaria

On 15 December 1978 the Vatican published an address given by the Pope the previous day in a private audience with Petar Mladenov, the Bulgarian foreign minister. This was quite unexpected and contrary to normal protocol. In his address John Paul II recalled the visit made by Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian Party leader and head of State, on 11 July 1975 to Paul VI. At that time "a mutual and not unfruitful search began for a solution to various problems in the relations between Church and State in Bulgaria". Zhivkov had, in fact, approved the appointment of two bishops (one has meanwhile died) for the 70,000 Catholics in Bulgaria. "I am glad," said the Pope to Mladenov, "that the Catholics are not only loyal to their Church but also set an example in the fulfilment of their civic duties". "You know, Minister," he added, "that the Catholic Church—in Bulgaria as well—is not seeking any privileges, but needs, as it does everywhere, a little *Lebensraum* (living space) in order to fulfil its religious mission . . ."⁹ Six months later, on 13 May 1979, the Pope's wish to set up a diocese in southern Bulgaria (Plovdiv) and appoint a new bishop for northern Bulgaria (Nikopoli) was granted. To everyone's surprise the Bulgarian government accepted both the Vatican's candidates, Bogdan Stefanov Dobranov and Samuel Serafimov Dzhundrin. The former had been secretly ordained bishop in 1959 and for that reason had been under severe pressure from the regime, and the latter, a priest trained at the Catholic University of Lyon, had been sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment in 1952 as a "French spy" and "counter-revolutionary on account of his hate for the Soviet Union".¹⁰ The Pope himself consecrated Dzhundrin in Rome on 27 May, and Archbishop Luigi Poggi travelled to Bulgaria on 18 October 1979 for Dzhundrin's installation and for negotiations with the government.

The Soviet Union

When Pope John Paul II received Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister, on 24 January 1979 for an audience lasting almost two hours (the longest of Gromyko's five visits to the Vatican since 1966), he knew how critical such a meeting could be. Since "Catholic" and "Polish" have always been identical in Russian eyes—for the Soviet communist State as for the Tsarist Orthodox empire—and have implied a "security risk", the election of a Pole as Pope must have aroused serious concern in Moscow. Although the new Pope spoke more candidly and directly than any of his predecessors about the problems of the five million or so Catholics in the Soviet Union (even of the Poles living there), he made a favourable

impression on Gromyko—he was “sensible, balanced”, in Gromyko’s own words.

Above all else the Pope successfully made clear that he knows how to distinguish patriotism from nationalism, strength of principles from intolerance, and that he sees human rights, including religious liberty, preserved only in a peaceful world, not in a world torn by conflicts. Now that a Pole is ruling in the Vatican there is “no longer a Russian complex” —this was the reason given by the Pope in a private conversation at the beginning of May for his determination to continue with renewed vigour the *Ostpolitik* of Paul VI and Casaroli. He was referring to a “complex” of a dual nature: on the one hand, Poland had always—and particularly since the 19th century—frustrated papal efforts to achieve a *modus vivendi* with the Russian imperium for the Church’s pastoral policies; and on the other hand, the Polish people and the Polish Church had feared that Rome might seek an agreement with Russia that would not be in Poland’s national interest. A Polish Pope, who sees his duties to the *whole* Church, can in fact disregard all such constraints.

On 20 November 1978 Pope John Paul II held his first meeting with the Ukrainian Cardinal, Josyf Slipyi, Archbishop of Lviv (who has been living in the Vatican since his release from exile in Siberia in 1963). On 3 November 1978 Slipyi had asked the Pope to revise the “dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church which was based on false foundations” and to form a “Ukrainian Patriarchate” (for the Catholic Uniates of Byzantine rite who were forcibly incorporated into the Orthodox Church in 1946).¹¹ On 20 November the Pope refused both of the Cardinal’s requests—as had his predecessors—since, if granted, they would harm all Eastern European Catholics, and would also end the links with the “West” which the Russian Orthodox Church has been able to forge over the last 15 years. John Paul II does not wish to open wounds which have scarcely healed, but at the same time he will not allow them to be forgotten. Thus on 19 March 1979 he wrote Slipyi a letter¹² in which, with all due respect for “the suffering and wrongs” which the Cardinal had had to endure, he appealed to the “ecumenical spirit” which had to animate the Catholic Ukrainians as well as the Orthodox (“whose traditions and forms of piety the Holy See views with the highest respect”). In September 1979, contrary to the wishes of Cardinal Slipyi, the Pope appointed Miroslav Lubachivsky as new Metropolitan of the Ukrainian Uniates in Philadelphia (USA). Lubachivsky emigrated from the Ukraine in 1947 and had never been involved in the opposition to the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik*. Despite further protests from émigré circles, the Pope himself on 13 November consecrated Lubachivsky bishop in Rome, concelebrating with Slipyi. Thus the Pope again honoured the sufferings of the Cardinal, but also recalled the “commitment to mutual loyalty” and gave an assurance that he wished “with all his might to alleviate the hardships of those who suffer because of their loyalty”.¹³

Moscow at any rate seemed to value the Pope's discretion, for almost simultaneously the Hungarian Primate, Cardinal Lékai, was able to visit Russia, the Ukraine and Lithuania at the invitation of Patriarch Pimen (and with a message from the Vatican). By this time, of course, the Pope had already visited Poland and had behind him the most important test of his *Ostpolitik*.

Poland

Without a "Russian complex", yet at the same time the "first Slav Pope" who would act as a voice for all the nations in the East "who have so often been forgotten in the West", a Pope who would bring to light "the spiritual unity of Christian Europe" and the "great traditions of West and East" (sermon in Gniezno, 3 June 1979)—this is how John Paul II set out on his journey to Poland. The risks involved in such a journey were increased by the emotions which were bound to overwhelm him on his "return home", and by his patriotic missionary zeal.* Time and again the Pope was careful to amplify and add revisions to his speeches to avoid misunderstandings: for example, he emphasized before millions of believers in Krakow on 9 June that "There is no imperialism of the Church"; on 7 June he showed deep respect in Auschwitz for the people "of various ideologies, not only believers" who had suffered there; and he recalled the part which the Russian people had played "in the last terrible war for the freedom of the nations" and called on his fellow Poles to treat all people and all nations as brothers.¹⁴

The ideological challenge to Moscow posed by his visit to Poland could not, however, be avoided, and for this very reason the Pope staked everything on the "Polish card". For if it is at all possible to prove to Moscow that religion can be a stabilizing factor, a "stimulant" not an "opium", if it is only left in peace, then Catholic communist-ruled Poland would have to do this; and demonstrate that the Church "is willing to reach mutual agreements with any system of labour" as long as it is permitted "to speak to people about Christ" (sermon to workers of the Lenin steelworks in Mogiła, Nowa Huta, 9 June).

When the Pope addressed the Polish episcopate in Czestochowa on 5 June,¹⁵ he called upon the bishops of his homeland to make their own contribution to the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*. If the Polish episcopate and its Primate, Cardinal Wyszyński, had formerly tended to doubt Rome's competence in the East and to consider church-state relations in Poland as primarily their own affair, here now was a Pope whose knowledge of Poland could not be disputed, who was relying on his primacy and emphasizing the decisive significance of the Roman Church's "hierarchical constitution and structure". Throughout the centuries, he said, the Church

*This is partly influenced by the historical "Messianism" which became a substitute for Poland's loss of national independence in the 19th century. HS.

in Poland had been indebted to the Roman Church and its "universal dimension" for its own strength, inner unity and closeness to the nation. "Only if we bear in mind this correct picture of the Church and, in its organic wholeness, that of the Holy See," the Pope taught the bishops, "can we gauge rightly the significance of something which for a number of years has been acquiring new meaning in Poland, namely the normalization of church-state relations." Then with detailed quotations from his address to the Vatican's diplomatic corps on 12 January 1979 (see above), the Pope stressed the importance of Vatican diplomacy which wished to stand "at the centre" of international agreement and be "open to every country and every regime". Poland's episcopate had already done a great deal in this direction, he commented; it was "not to stop taking up these initiatives which are so important for the Church today".

But what does "normalization" mean? Does it mean an "agreement" (*porozumienie*) only? This was the word used to describe the agreements accepted by Cardinal Wyszyński without consulting the Vatican in 1950 and 1956. This word was also used by Pope John Paul II to describe one of the goals of his visit when he addressed the Party leader, Edward Gierek (see above, p. 15). Certainly, neither side means a classical concordat. The day before the Pope's visit to Poland (29 May), Gierek and Cardinal Wyszyński issued a communiqué which expressed a greater degree of harmony than was achieved at any of their previous meetings. The communiqué spoke of "new impulses for co-operation (*wspoldziałania*) between Church and State and a further development of the relations between Poland and the Holy See". The particular problems which have not yet been resolved, however, are overshadowed by the major issue: can the Church—within the framework of real separation of Church and State—achieve "permanent" legal status in Poland? The Vatican could act here as the negotiator, without being itself a party to the agreement. (In this way, for example, a "statute" for the Catholic Church in Romania was prepared during Archbishop Poggi's negotiations in Bucharest on 9 and 19 June 1979. But the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia¹⁶ have so far not been willing to discuss such matters.)

*

*

*

The "true dialogue" which John Paul II offered in Poland concerns the *de facto* application of religious liberty, which is guaranteed in all Eastern European Constitutions yet so often restricted in practice. "We are aware that this dialogue will not be easy because it has to take place between two diametrically opposed worldviews, but it must be possible . . .", said the Pope in Czestochowa. Does this mean that he is seeking an "ideological" (Marxist-Catholic) dialogue, which Vatican diplomacy has so far deliberately and realistically avoided? The present pragmatic level of the talks should certainly not be given up. Such talks aim always at institutional

protection which is essential for a hierarchical Church such as the Catholic Church, in which the sacraments necessary for salvation require an intermediary (bishops and priests) and a guaranteed public existence. But "Europe's ideological disunity" impedes the achieving of such institutional protection. Pope John Paul II deplors this disunity and would like to overcome it with Christian humanism. Some observers have called this aim of papal diplomacy "utopian"; however, unlike "secular" diplomacy, papal diplomacy has a spiritual motivation and is not under the same "pressure to succeed".

¹For a full discussion of the problem and historical background see H. Stehle, *Die Ostpolitik des Vatikans 1917-1975*, Munich, 1975. (Expanded English edition: *The Eastern Politics of the Vatican 1917-1979*, Athens/Ohio, 1980.)

²Full text in *Osservatore Romano*, 18 October 1977.

³For the first time, all Eastern European States (except Romania and Albania) sent government delegations or their Italian ambassadors to the ceremony.

⁴Full Polish text in *Osservatore Romano*, 4 June 1979, and *Trybuna Ludu*, 11 June 1979.

⁵Full French text in *Osservatore Romano*, 19 October 1978.

⁶Full French text in *Osservatore Romano*, 13 January 1979.

⁷On 23 July 1973 the Vatican (using the Basic Treaty between Bonn and East Berlin) appointed Apostolic Administrators "*permanentemente costituiti*" in Erfurt, Magdeburg and Schwerin and released these pastoral districts from their former West German dioceses without, however, transforming them into new bishoprics (in consideration for the still open national question of Germany). But on 25 September 1976 the Vatican approved the formation of an autonomous (East) "Berlin Conference of Bishops" in the GDR.

⁸Cf. statement of Cardinal Franz König to *Kathpress* (Vienna), 23 February 1979. Latin text of the Pope's letter in *Osservatore Romano*, 14 January 1979; Hungarian in *Uj Ember* (Budapest), January 1979.

⁹French text in *Osservatore Romano*, 15 December 1978.

¹⁰Cf. *Rabotnichesko Delo* (Sofia), 21 and 30 September, 3 and 4 October 1952.

¹¹Text of Slipyi's statement in a Polish translation authorized "by the chancellery of the Patriarch" (sic) was published in *Kultura* (Paris), No. 12, 1978.

¹²This letter, written in preparation for the millennial anniversary of the christianization of Ukraine (1888), was only published after the Pope's visit to Poland in *Osservatore Romano*, 17 June 1979.

¹³Full Ukrainian text in *Osservatore Romano*, 14 November 1979.

¹⁴Full Polish text with all improvised additions in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Krakow), 17 June 1979.

¹⁵Polish text in *Osservatore Romano*, 7 June 1979.

¹⁶On 28 October 1979 the Pope stated that he could "not remain indifferent" in the face of the reaction which the trial in Prague (of dissidents) had aroused: "This is a country which is especially close to my heart. For that reason I would like news from there always to command respect and recognition from everyone."