

Vatican by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

Catholics in the Russian empire

One year after the meeting between Cardinal Casaroli and Mikhail Gorbachov, it is time to take stock.

One year has passed since the historic encounter at the Kremlin between Communist Party boss Mikhail Gorbachov and Vatican Secretary of State Agostino Casaroli, and it is time to take stock of the successes attained by the Catholic Church in its long and laborious march to win freedom of conscience and faith in the countries of Eastern Europe.

It is correct to speak of the Catholic Church and not of the Holy See, because if results have been obtained and religious freedoms have been recognized, this has occurred thanks to the faith, the tenacity, and the courage of the faithful, the clergy, and the Catholic hierarchies in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, who, encouraged by the pontificate of John Paul II, have demanded their rights with renewed energy, defying dangers and persecutions.

If we take a quick overview we can observe clear signs of progress:

In *Hungary*, a new law is being prepared on freedom of worship, and there is talk of a rehabilitation of the heroic Cardinal Mindszenty and of an upcoming journey of the Pope to that country.

In *Czechoslovakia*, the naming of several titular archbishops of dioceses has partially alleviated the drama of ten vacant dioceses.

On July 25, Father D'Ercole, one of the press spokesmen for the Vatican, announced that for the first time in 63 years, the Pope has been able to name a bishop in Russia, for the town of Minsk.

The bishop was appointed "directly under the authority of the Holy See,"

according to the spokesman, who added that that "the Russian and Belorussian authorities have been informed of the decision of the Holy Father. In the new spirit of the Soviet government, they have communicated to the Pope that they have no problem with this nomination."

The last bishop of Minsk was Monsignor Sloskans, named by Pope Pius XI in 1926. He was jailed by the Soviet authorities in 1927, and exiled soon afterward.

The new bishop, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, 43, has degrees in mathematics, architecture, theology, and canon law. The Pope gave him the title of Bishop of Hippo (the African city whose bishop was St. Augustine) and has put him in charge of the pastoral guidance of all the Catholics of Belorussia.

In *Lithuania*, there have been decisive improvements and we are witnessing greater religious freedom.

Of course, the most advanced situation is the one in *Poland*, where the Church, which already enjoyed a certain freedom, now has its own actual juridical status. That does not prevent the murder of priests who are against the regime, as demonstrated in the barbarous and obscure execution of Father Sylwester Zych, the 39-year-old priest who was close to the opposition; but undoubtedly it ensures greater constitutional guarantees to the Church to be able to function.

The most important new element is the reopening of diplomatic relations recently announced in a joint communiqué between the People's Republic of Poland and the Holy See.

Given the particularly delicate situation of that country, which is moving toward political democracy to an important degree—but a fragile democracy because it corresponds to no change in the structure of economic policy—the renewal of diplomatic relations with the Vatican is one guarantee. It is a subtle but solid link to the West which will reveal itself to be crucial in the coming period, when there is a very real threat of a sudden shift into reverse.

The truly great unresolved problem is that of the Catholics of Eastern rite in the *Ukraine*, a problem which is becoming more and more urgent, as was demonstrated by the hunger strikes of brave Ukrainian women in front of the Ministry for Religious Affairs in Moscow, and the protest demonstrations which are occurring regularly in the Ukraine itself.

The position of the Soviet regime and of the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy toward the Ukrainian Catholics remains a hard and intransigent line; and even the powerful chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Soviet Union, Kostantin Kharchev, recently paid the price for this, when he was dismissed in silence from his post, for having shown too soft an attitude toward the problem.

Kharchev had been the major architect of recent "rapprochements" between the Vatican and the Kremlin and had been the one who prepared Agostino Cardinal Casaroli's trip to Moscow.

One is reminded of the pungent reply of Soviet dissident Zinoviev in a recent interview (*EIR*, Aug. 11, 1989, p. 43) when he was asked about the status of religious freedom in the U.S.S.R.: "There is nothing but the Russian Orthodox Church, which is an imitation of a church . . . a branch of the offices of the Communist Party."