

History made as Pope, Gorbachov meet

by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

Much has been written and more will be written on the historic meeting in the Vatican between the secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and President of the U.S.S.R., Mikhail Gorbachov, and Pope John Paul II, which occurred on Dec. 1. The only precedent for this was the encounter of Jan. 30, 1967 between Paul VI and then President of the Supreme Soviet, Nikolai Podgorny. An anecdote has been handed down of that meeting, which, albeit measured and diplomatic, marked the first thaw in relations between the Holy See and Moscow: Podgorny, a chain smoker, was very worried about the idea of not being able to smoke in front of the Pope. Paul VI, to put his guest at ease, asked him politely before they began to converse, "Your excellency, would you care for a cigarette?"

But undoubtedly the visit by Gorbachov to the first Slavic Pope, stood out for its unequivocal historic meaning: The leader of the world's most important Communist power crossed the threshold of the Bronze Portal to render honor to Christ's vicar on Earth.

This brings us to the most important aspect of the talks: the issue of religious freedom, the problem of recognition of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholics, and the definition of diplomatic ties between the Holy See and the U.S.S.R. On the first point the Pope recalled in his speech "the well known events of past decades and the painful tests to which so many citizens were put, because of their faith," and expressed his hope that the new law on freedom of conscience, soon to be approved in the U.S.S.R., will contribute to resolving this problem.

On the Uniate Catholics of Ukraine, the Pope said, "My thoughts turn particularly to those Christians who live in the Soviet Union, in full communion with the Apostolic See. For all of them, whether they be of Latin rite, of Byzantine rite, or of Armenian rite, I make vows that they may freely practice their religious life."

How deeply the Pontiff feels about this problem emerged from his reply, via the Vatican press office, to Gorbachov's invitation to him to visit the Soviet Union. The Soviet President, when he finished reading his official speech, added off the cuff, "I wish to announce that, in the course of our colloquium with the Holy Father, we also spoke of a future visit of the Roman Pope to the Soviet Union." Shortly thereafter, the Vatican press office put out a release: "The Holy Father cordially thanks [him] for the invitation, hoping that

developments in the situation will make it possible for him to accept." In other words, first the Ukrainian Church must be legalized, and then a papal trip to the U.S.S.R. can be discussed.

As to diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the U.S.S.R., full agreement was reached to set them up as soon as possible, and it will be up to the two diplomatic corps to define the forms.

Superpowers' duties

The Pope stressed in his speech the needed commitment of the two superpowers toward developing countries. The stronger nations, said the Pope, "overcoming all types of imperialisms and intentions to preserve their own hegemony . . . must feel themselves morally responsible for the others, such that a true international system be established, which shall be based on the foundation of equality of all peoples and on the necessary respect for their legitimate differences."

In the light of such historic resonances, details of course take on particular symbolic meaning. The Kremlin leader was visibly moved after his talk with the Pope, and in introducing his wife Raisa to the Pope he said, "We are aware that we are dealing with the world's highest religious authority, who moreover is also a Slav." The Pope, with smiling eyes, with great naturalness and ease, offered his hospitality to these rather burdensome guests, who even if only for a moment were clearly struck by the grace and power of God.

It fell to Raisa Gorbachova to show the other face of Russia, that of an empire which throughout its millennial history has shown a certain intolerance, if not outright hostility, toward submitting even spiritually to Rome and to the Pope. Thus Mrs. Gorbachova, breaking a custom by which ladies visiting the Pope generally wear black and cover their heads, was dressed in a flaming red suit and looked rather annoyed. During the brief tour of the *Logge* and *Stanze*, of the celebrated Renaissance painter Raphael, guided by Prof. Carlo Pietrangeli, the director of the Vatican Museums, and medieval and modern art expert Fabrizio Mancinelli, Raisa Gorbachova did not appear to have much appreciation for the Italian master. In the room of "The Fire in the Borgo," decorated with several of Raphael's most famous historical murals, she admired instead the gilded ceiling, saying that "this gold reminds me of our religious art of icons."

But John Paul II had a thought even for her, and during the exchange of gifts Raisa received as a present a mother-of-pearl and gold rosary, quite a surprise for the ex-teacher of Marxist ideology, who was unprepared and at first turned up her nose, but then skillfully masked her reaction. To Gorbachov the Pope gave a mosaic reproduction of the Early Christian image of Christ which is on the tomb of St. Peter, with the Gospel open to the inscription, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Whosoever believeth in me shall have life everlasting." As his present, John Paul II received two volumes of the 14th-century Kiev Psalter.