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POLAND/14

11 May 1971

OFFICIAL TALKS BETWEEN WARSAW AND THE VATICAN

Summary: The very first talks between official representatives of the Polish government and the Vatican took place in Rome at the end of April. Thus, a period of initial hesitation and semiofficial approaches was ended, and direct negotiations were opened between Warsaw and the Vatican. Meanwhile, the much advertised normalization (or "regularization") of relations between the Church and the state inside Poland does not seem to be proceeding smoothly. A couple of days after the Vatican and Warsaw had announced the conclusion of the talks, a communiqué was issued in Czestochowa in which the Polish bishops complain about obstructionist tactics against regularization applied by the middle and lower party apparat,

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In the last week of April, official representatives of the Polish People's Republic met, for the very first time, with official representatives of the Vatican to discuss "questions of interest to the two sides." On May 3 at noon, identical communiqués were simultaneously released in Rome and in Warsaw stating:

From 27 to 30 April 1971, there took place in Rome between representatives of the government of the Polish People's Republic and representatives of the Apostolic See, an exchange of views on questions that interest the two sides.

The delegation of the Polish People's Republic, which was headed by Aleksander Skarzynski, deputy minister and director of the Office of Religious Denominations, included Stefan Staniszewski, department director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The delegation of the Apostolic See, which was headed by His Excellency Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, secretary of the Council for Public Affairs of the Church, included Bishop Gabriele Montalvo, counselor of the nunciature.

The two delegations agreed to resume talks at a date to be agreed upon.

For both the Vatican and Poland, the opening of an era of negotiations is of historic importance. As far as Poland is concerned, this possible beginning of a new era must be examined from two points of view: that of the communist government, and that of the Church. The history of the last 25 years has more than once clearly demonstrated that the interests of these two bodies are seldom identical or parallel. In this respect, there is only one exception of major importance: the issue of the Western and Northern Territories, i.e., the problem of Church administration on the territories which -- up to the end of World War II -- were German. Here both the Church and the state seem to be in almost total agreement on the point of establishing a regular Polish Church administration.

Church and State Under Gomulka

The conflict of interests between the Church and state in Poland made virtually impossible any approach between the representatives of the Vatican and those of the Polish communist regime. Gomulka's initial concessions to the Church at the end of 1956 were soon taken back, thus dispelling any possible illusions in the Vatican as to the feasibility of any diplomatic approach, be it secret and semiofficial. It was only during the aggiornamento introduced by Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) that a new climate was created for possible talks between Warsaw and the Vatican. However, while openly praising the Vatican Council's "renewal," the Polish regime made it clear that the Vatican should start normalizing relations with Poland by recognizing full Polish sovereignty over the former German territories, a condition the Vatican could not accept in the given situation. The second condition of the Polish state,

not clearly pronounced but sufficiently evident, was the elimination of Cardinal Wyszynski from any Warsaw-Vatican negotiations and the curbing of his ecclesiastical power by the Vatican.

An audience (late in 1964) granted by Pope Paul VI to the Catholic Sejm deputy and State Council member, (the late) Jerzy Zawieyski, can be considered the first attempt at an approach to the Vatican. On that occasion, the Pope "made clear" to Zawieyski (and thus to Gomulka) that no agreement between the Polish state and the Vatican could be either negotiated or concluded "over the head of Cardinal Wyszynski." (1)

The Polish regime's dissatisfaction with both the Vatican and the Polish episcopate was intensified by the famous letter of the Polish bishops to their German brethren in November 1965. There is no doubt that Gomulka viewed this initiative as interference by Cardinal Wyszynski in the foreign policy of the Polish state. The sharp conflict between the state and the Church reached its peak during the millennium festivities in 1966, when the Polish communist government refused to permit Pope Paul VI to visit Poland.

In spite of the lack of a proper climate, the regime did not cease to make unofficial approaches to the Vatican. For instance, in connection with Kliszko's trip to Rome in January 1966 -- officially as the head of a Polish delegation to the Italian CP congress -- there was speculation that he had made approaches to the Holy See. (2) Another attempt, clearly aimed at "neutralizing" Cardinal Wyszynski, was a visit to the Vatican by a delegation of lay Polish Catholics in June of 1966. (3) On the other hand, in April 1967, while on an official visit to Rome at the invitation of the Italian head of state, State Council Chairman Edward Ochab ~~was unsuccessful in his efforts to obtain an audience with the Pope.~~

Failed to seek

- (1) See Polish Situation Report, Radio Free Europe Research (EERA), 3 December 1964.
- (2) See Polish SR, RFER (EERA), 24 January 1966.
- (3) See Polish SRs, RFER (EERA), 30 June and 5 December 1966.

Whenever a Vatican dignitary visited Poland, he did so as a Church official on ecclesiastical business, and as a matter of courtesy always paid a visit to Cardinal Wyszynski -- as, for instance, did Bishop Franco Costa, "a close confidant of the Pope," (4) in 1966, and Archbishop Casaroli, who traveled extensively in Poland in 1967, also ostensibly on a purely "ecclesiastical mission." During that time he may have made a number of "courtesy calls" on Polish state officials, even though -- as he assured a press conference on February 17 -- no "formal negotiations" were involved.

As late as mid-1969, Jesuit Father General Pedro Arrupe made a tour of Jesuit monasteries and seminaries in Poland, and on this occasion paid an official visit to Skarzynski. (6)

The First Round of Talks

Whatever was arranged during possible earlier contacts between Polish and Vatican officials did not seem to augur much change as long as Gomulka was in power. At that time, both Warsaw-Vatican and Church-state relations seemed to be in a state of stalemate. It was only the December 1970 change at the top of the Polish leadership that made progress in both these respects possible. However, as far as Warsaw-Vatican relations are concerned, for months there was no evidence of any direct or indirect contact. It was only the Polish press which drastically changed the tone to one most conciliatory to the Vatican, although not always particularly friendly to Cardinal Wyszynski. (7)

(4) See Polish Sr, RFER (EERA), 5 December 1966.

(5) See Polish SR, RFER (EERA), 16 February 1967.

(6) See Polish SR/45, RFER (EERA), 4 June 1969.

(7) See Polish SR/27, RFER (EERA), 3 May 1971, Item 3.

It seems that the latest move in preparation for what can be called the first round of Warsaw-Vatican talks was the appointment, on April 24, of Skarzynski as vice-minister, (8) so as to give him -- at least to some extent -- a rank approaching that of Archbishop Casaroli. As for Staniszewski, the second official sent to the Vatican to accompany Skarzynski, he is the director of a Foreign Ministry department dealing with "questions concerning Europe." For several years (1963-1969), Staniszewski was groomed in the diplomatic service in Paris -- as embassy secretary, then chargé d'affaires -- becoming (early in 1970) departmental director at the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw. Thus far, there has been no evidence that he has ever dealt with religious problems, but it cannot be discounted that he has played a part in the -- rather discreet, if not secret -- approaches to the Vatican.

News of the first Warsaw-Vatican negotiations leaked out in Rome as early as May 1, and foreign correspondents, although they could not get official confirmation from the Vatican, knew even more than the subsequent bulletin revealed. They knew that, at the same time, there was present at the Vatican Bishop Bronislaw Dabrowski, secretary of the Polish episcopate. He arrived in Rome (on April 27) at the invitation of Archbishop Casaroli, to act as his advisor and probably as an observer for the Polish Episcopal Conference, thus demonstrating that the Vatican is not willing to bypass Cardinal Wyszynski. The talks on the Vatican part were partly conducted solely by Bishop Montalvo, "an authority on Polish religious matters," since Archbishop Casaroli "has been unwell these past few days." (9) Later, a Reuter dispatch (10) reported that Archbishop Casaroli contracted fever "last week end" (Friday, April 30, being the last day of the talks). In any case, by May 5 the latter was still in a Rome clinic. Rather surprisingly Bishop Dabrowski was also in Rome on that date, although earlier reports had indicated that he would be returning to Warsaw by May 4 at the latest. It cannot be excluded that Bishop Dabrowski had further talks with Archbishop Casaroli despite the latter's illness.

(8) Ibid., Items 3 and 7.

(9) RFE Special/Rome, May 1.

(10) May 5.

Bishop Dabrowski was received in audience by the Pope on May 3. The next day, in Poland, a bishops' conference was scheduled in Czestochwa, originally planned to last for two days. However, in view of the absence of Bishop Dabrowski, who most probably was expected to brief the conference on the results of the Warsaw-Vatican talks, the meeting was limited to one day, May 4 only. The communiqué issued after the bishops' conference did not contain any reference to the talks in Rome, except a mention that "Bishop Bronislaw Dabrowski has been in Rome since April 27 at the invitation of the Vatican Secretariat of State."

On the latter subject, "Vatican sources" said that the discussion had centered on the question of Church administration in Western Poland. (11) There were, of course, recurrent and denied rumors about the possibility of a Papal visit to Poland, and even information that subjects such as taxation of the Church in Poland, facilities for building new churches, and licensing the Catholic press were subjects of the discussion. An opinion expressed by Father Pedro Arrupe, father general of the Jesuits, who, while in New York, "characterized the over-all situation of the Church in Poland as 'not normal,'" probably was also not voiced by pure coincidence. (12)

On the other hand, Polish information media seem to be satisfied with the results and appear to be full of expectations of future developments. This can be seen in the comment by Dominik Horodynski, Rome correspondent of the Agencja Robotnicza, (13) and above all in the comments of Radio Warsaw's Rome correspondent, Zdzislaw Morawski. He said that "representatives of the Polish clergy in the Vatican do not hesitate to describe the talks as historic," although he realizes that these talks will take a long time and "nobody in the Vatican thinks that one should expect conclusions to be reached shortly." But Morawski laid greatest stress on the fact that "it is pointed out that, if a useful dialogue has now been established, this has been possible, not only because the policy of normalization is being put into effect in Poland, but also because immense changes have been taking place in the Vatican's attitude toward the socialist countries." (14)

(11) UPI, May 3.

(12) RFE Special/New York, May 4.

(13) Radio Warsaw, May 4.

(14) Radio Warsaw, May 5.

Regarding the change in the Vatican, Morawski elaborated as follows:

Now this stand is realistic in its essential lines, recognizing the permanent character of the socialist system, noting the role of our camp in the struggle for peace and détente, and basing its assessment of the situation of the Church and believers in the socialist countries on facts.

The Czestochowa Communiqué

The communiqué published in Czestochowa at the end of the latest bishops' conference revealed substantial differences between the regime's approach toward the Vatican and that toward the local Polish clergy. The latter point was expressly reflected in the following passages of the Czestochowa communiqué:

The bishops stated that local administrative authorities have still been acting according to the policy of the former period, which has been expressed in a negative handling of the motions forwarded to them by Church authorities concerning the construction of churches in new districts of the cities and in establishing parishes.

The conference expressed the hope that the top state authorities will issue new regulations to the officials which will take into account the needs of the Church and of the society of believers. It is indispensable to calm down society, especially where efforts have been made for several years to get permission. (15)

It is difficult not to see in the last sentence of the above passage a serious warning to the regime. That the Church does not intend to limit itself to purely religious matters is also indicated by the following passage in the communiqué:

The conference was acquainted with the draft bill concerning the suppression and prevention of social

(15) UPI, May 6, partial text.

parasitism, and suggested the secretary of the episcopate send its remarks on this bill to the parliamentary commission on justice.

This controversial bill was introduced at the Sejm on March 19 and -- after a first reading -- has become the subject of public discussion. (16)

The problem of church construction is not the only open question for the Church in Poland. With the possible exception of the ownership of Church property in the Western and Northern Territories, no progress has been registered on a number of other issues still awaiting settlement. Among these are:

- 1) The taxation of the clergy, Church institutions, and the Catholic University in Lublin;
- 2) The policy of issuing permits for building new churches; and
- 3) The state's demand that a full inventory of Church property (including furniture and liturgical vessels and vestments) be made and kept always ready for state inspection.

Also still outstanding is the question of the religious instruction of children, which, apart from the setback suffered by the Church when such instruction was banned from schools and school curriculums, comprises an entire range of problems such as:

- (a) Registration of classes with the educational authorities;
- (b) Inspection of these purely religious classes by lay inspectors, who might be (and in practice mostly have been) party members and/or atheists;
- (c) Making available lists of the pupils' names to the authorities;
- (d) Exclusion of monks and nuns from those permitted to teach religion.

(16) See Polish SR/20, RFER (EERA), 26 March 1971, Item 1.

Finally, there is the problem of theological seminaries. This again involves numerous problems, including:

- (a) Military service by the clergy;
- (b) Taxation of seminaries;
- (c) Attempts to close some higher (priests') seminaries;
- (d) Closing of all, or almost all, lower seminaries.

While extensive, this list does not, in fact, include all Church grievances, but only the ones that have been kept alive. (17)

On the face of it, the Czestochowa communiqué seems to suggest that an immediate end to the "tangible" problems of the Church is of primary importance to the Polish episcopate. As compared with the optimistic press comments on the Vatican communiqué, the Czestochowa statement seems to stress that the much advertised "regularization" of Church-state relations inside the country is a task on which hardly any progress at the ground level has yet been made.

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(17) See Polish SR/4, RFER (EERA), 20 January 1971, Item 2.