

Society and Church transformation processes in postsoviet countries

Rev. Dr. Capt. Virginijus Veilentas, Air Force chaplain

Dear conference participants,

When talking about changes in Church and society in postsoviet countries (by the way, these processes are very similar in all Eastern and Central European countries that were satellites of Soviet Union), first of all one should define the period when the changes took place. Both Church and State as living communities of living people undergo permanent change. Yet, during the period of last two decades, the changes in the postsoviet countries have been particularly profound and radical. In order that AMI would be effective, the transformation process and its' consequences can not be neglected.

Church role, widely known as *Ostpolitik*, in rapid changes of society has to be mentioned in the first place. *Ostpolitik* that started during Pontificate of John XXIII resulted collapse of communist system during Pontificate of the recently deceased Pope John Paul II. In 1978, after death of Pope Paul VI and after Pontificate of John Paul I that lasted only one month, Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtylo – Pope John Paul II began his Pontificate. His *Ostpolitik* – the stand of the Holy See towards Eastern and Central Europe – became some kind of catalyst of rapid changes of societies, and also of the Church, in those countries.

Before being elected Pope, Cardinal Wojtylo was considered not only the most prominent figure of Polish Catholics but also a symbol of entire so called “silent Church”. When he became Pope, his voice became voice of all “silent Church” – the Church in Lithuania, the Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and other countries that were under rule of Soviet Union or were considered its' satellites.

Already at the very beginning of Pontificate of John Paul II, *Ostpolitik* of John XXIII and Paul VI experienced essential changes.

While before Pontificate of Wojtylo division of Europe, resulted by Yalta conference after WWII, was considered self-understandable and the Holy See communicated with countries controlled by communist regimes as sovereign political subjects and avoided use of mediation of local church hierarchy, right from the first months of Pontificate of John Paul II *Ostpolitik* started to change, reflecting personal Pope's convictions.

Yalta agreements seemed like moral catastrophe to John Paul II. We can easily guess that from his numerous works and documents signed by him. In Yalta hypocrisy and inhuman realism triumphed over moral engagements of allies to the victims of Nazi aggression. Victory of allies in WWII was supposed to return freedom and restore rights of the enslaved nations. Unfortunately it hasn't achieved these goals. Due to Yalta agreements communist totalitarianism became firmly established in major part of Europe.

Well known changes in societies of European countries that belonged to communist block were settled by the attitude of John Paul II – the Church had to raise moral unacceptance of the agreements that had been approved in Yalta. And not directly in political level, like attempts during Pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII, but by defending basic human rights. Namely the Church with the voice of John Paul II spoke out first about the necessity to abolish artificial division of Europe to East and West. By declaring Slavic apostles Cyril and Metody along with St. Benedict patrons of Europe, already in 1980 Pope compared Europe with human body that must breathe with both lungs.

Led by John Paul II, policy of the Holy See did not consider totalitarian regimes in Eastern and Central Europe *condition sine qua non* any longer. On the other hand, cautious negotiation policy of Pontificate of Paul VI was maintained. Moreover, this kind of policy was even strengthened at the same time constantly emphasizing publicly the issues related to human rights in the soviet sphere of influence.

Originality of John Paul II, when we compare him with previous Popes, was his good knowledge of the “system”. He perceived it not just as a state system but also as a way of thinking, that provided with achievement of certain results. His predecessors – John XXIII and Paul VI – never managed to comprehend the communist system completely and therefore lived with illusions that it is possible to find some kind of *modus vivendi*, based on international agreements that would be respected by both sides. The Church, though, had no means to bring any pressure that would make to respect signed agreements. Meanwhile compromise in spiritual and moral dimensions could only weaken Church’s authority on the whole. To put in fewer words, I’d like to take a quick look at the reality that I know best. Let’s take a look at Lithuania, which often is still labeled as a postsoviet state. Many even in Lithuania itself are convinced that essential changes in our country’s life started with public movement *Sąjūdis*, after Gorbachev’s *perestroika* had started. In my firm belief, the first steps towards changes were indeed made in Rome, in Vatican in 1984, when 500 years anniversary the death of the only saint of Lithuania, St. Kazimieras, and 600 years anniversary of Lithuania’s Christianisation were commemorated. Then Pope invited representatives of European Bishop Conference as well as diplomatic corps accredited by the Holy See to the solemn reception on the occasion of the above mentioned commemoration and spoke out loudly about the problems of Lithuania that was under yoke of occupation and about Kremlin’s prohibition for him to visit Lithuania personally.

In 1995, in commemoration of 50 years anniversary of the end of war in Europe, in his letter John Paul noted, that in 1989, during 50 years commemoration of the beginning of the war, in East and Central Europe contemporary social and political situation in most of these countries enabled quick fall of communist regime. This fulfilled freedom and democracy aspirations of European nations – the fulfillment of which was rightfully expected in 1945. Some nations had lost their ability to decide for themselves and were restricted by intentions of totalitarian empire. Not only were their religious traditions threatened but also their historical memory and millennial cultural identity. For those nations WW II ended only in 1989.

The changes that took place in postsoviet countries now are evident to everyone. Yet the process of transformation has been neither simple nor painless. Already at the beginning of the process the Church and Christian society understood that it has to face issues that require awareness, unselfish engagement, and new creativity. After setting itself free from clutches of totalitarian and antichristian state, faith has experienced even more insidious ordeal. The essence of this ordeal appears to be model of secularized and hedonistic life that is widely common in economically developed countries. Some ethical problems, unfortunately common to entire world (from family crisis to depreciation of life), are also showing themselves up in Lithuania. In specifically religious dimension, the faith is tested by proliferated sects.

Evaluating the changes of recent decades, today Catholic society and Church hierarchy in Lithuania understand as a blessing all new experiences that come from church

movements inspired by the Holy Spirit. Such movements bring life to the Church after the Second Vatican Council. Being in full unity with Shepherds they can make an important contribution to the growth of Christian life. And Lithuanian Christendom will for sure use its skills to unite “new and old” evaluating what is the best in its’ tradition and at the same time opening itself up to the novelties awoken by the Holy Spirit. AMI is to be considered one of such movements. We, chaplains of Lithuanian military, will try to put AMI principles as basis for our work with soldiers and officers, thus confirming once again that the transformation process that has taken place in postsoviet countries is irreversible.