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AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE WALLS

Msgr. Franc RODE, C.M.

In 1927 Sigmund Freud published a work called *The Future of an Illusion*. The illusion in question was obviously religion, this "*collective neurosis of humanity*". His predictions mirrored the solid optimism of a non-believer: religious illusion would disappear as soon as humanity freed itself from its anxieties and its frustrations and found out the truth about itself.

In 1995 the French historian François Furet published a book with the evocative title *The Past of an Illusion*, where he outlines the reasons for the collapse of communist regimes in central and eastern Europe and for the death of marxist ideology among intellectuals in the Western world.

Enormous differences exist between the thought of Freud and that of Marx. However one fundamental point unites them: both considered religion as an illusion, a false refuge, sought, according to Freud, to cover up inhibitions of a sexual kind, and, according to Marx, to console oneself for social injustices. For one as for the other, religion is an alienation which will disappear as soon as social injustices are abolished and the true causes of human frustration are revealed.

Let us leave Freudianism aside. It is enough to say that it did not have the success that some foretold. As far as Marxism is concerned, it suffered a sharp defeat in every domain: political, economic, social and above all spiritual. In this regard we can indeed talk of the "*past of an illusion*".

Communism first experienced a political defeat. It had presented itself as a liberation movement for the socially oppressed and exploited classes. In fact it created one of the most merciless dictatorships known to history, establishing a totalitarian and tyrannical regime everywhere.

Social failure. Communism promised to eliminate social divisions between opposed classes, abolishing social inequalities. In fact it produced a "*new class*", a red "*nomenclature*", with all the privileges of the dominant classes, identified with the State and dominating society.

Bitter defeat in the economic field. It had given itself the goal of destroying the roots of exploitation of man by man, by suppressing private property and nationalizing the means of production, assuming an unheard-of jump forward. In fact, it resulted in a productivity that remained always frail and deficient, in weak money and in endemic lack of the most elementary of consumer goods.

But the failure of communism shows itself most in the spiritual domain. Marxism-Leninism presented itself as a new *Weltanschauung* which was to change the world, as well as history and mankind. To arrive at this it was to liberate mankind from its alienations, and in first place from God who keeps mankind in slavery. It thus saw itself in radical antagonism with Christianity. A huge struggle developed between communism and Christianity, a struggle that was not mainly political or economic, but spiritual and religious. It produced an incalculable number of martyrs and ended with the spiritual defeat of communism. This failed in

its most ambitious project: the creation of a new world, of a new society, of a new mankind under the sign of an atheistic humanism. Not only did it not create a new world and a new mankind; it succeeded only in producing a world where human dignity was mocked, a world against man, an inhuman world.

What remains after communism? What spiritual landscape has it left behind? And what pastoral action is required after its collapse?

1. In the post-communist societies there are first of all faithful believers who, in spite of discrimination and humiliations of all kinds, remained attached to the Church and supported it with their offerings. They were for the most part simple people who did not let themselves be intimidated by the hostility of public opinion and who showed their faith publicly, sending their children to catechism. How many are they? Without any doubt the majority in Poland and in Slovakia, a little less in Croatia, at most half in Hungary and Slovenia. The Catholics of Ukraine and of Rumania, forced in practice to live in secret, especially those of the oriental rite, constitute a special case.

With the exception of the Catholics in Poland, all were forced to live their faith as a "private affair", within the family or in little groupings of fervent Christians. They were rarely involved in the pastoral work of the Church as lay collaborators, and hence the whole weight of mission rested on the shoulders of the clergy.

The results of this semi-secret existence last even today. In fact it is difficult for the clergy to find collaborators willing to involve themselves in the activities of the Church, to organize them into apostolic movements, or to promote youth organizations. Besides, the ravages produced by marxist schooling are still evident, even among believers: a lack of sense of responsibility and of a sense of work, a tendency to duplicity, the use of "influence" on many levels. Nevertheless, it is by depending on such groups of the faithful that the Church has to build the future.

2. As opposed to faithful believers, one finds the group of the ex-communists. The number of members of the communist party varied between 10 and 15%. In the higher ranks it included men and women who had done higher studies and occupied practically all the positions of responsibility in the State and in society. Side by side with them the ordinary communist had more modest responsibilities in the factory, in the city hall or on the collective farm, with a quite precise task: to be the eye and ear of the party among one's work companions. Because the party had to be aware of everything.

How did they live the falling apart of communism? Without major crisis. Because for a long time they had no longer believed in the salvific character of marxist ideology. Besides, they quickly realized that the "velvet revolutions" did not really threaten their material interests or their position in political and social life. Forgetting with astonishing ease what they were still proclaiming yesterday about private property as the source of all evils, they have quietly bought up, often for derisory figures, what they themselves nationalized 45 years before. Thus, the last

communists are becoming the first capitalists of the societies emerging from communism.

They have operated the same right about turn in the political domain, changing the name of the communist party to socialist party, social-democratic or other titles. In this way or else belonging to parties of newer formation they can influence the politics of the State in the direction of their projects for the future.

Their attitude towards the Church has not changed substantially. If, yesterday, they fought it in the name of marxist-leninist ideology, today they struggle against its influence in the name of freedom of opinion, of expression and of ethical choices which the Church threatens. Moreover they engage in violent campaigns to limit its presence in the schools, the media, cultural institutions etc. It is the politics of the Western parties of the left and of the extreme left, but with more money.

3. The third group of the population is made up of the great mass of those who swing or hesitate between the true God and Mammon. Practising occasionally, they participate in the life of the Church for the big feasts: Christmas, Easter, national pilgrimages, first masses, etc. Their private life is often marked by materialism and hedonism. At a distance of six years after the fall of communism, we could put it thus: it is in this section of the population that the long totalitarian period has produced its most serious damage: loss of christian values, trivialization of sexuality and of love, with as a result a weakening of family links, superficial living, absolutizing the "*hic et nunc*" with a frenetic search for money and pleasure. The Czech theologian Joseph Zverina has spoken, in this respect, of a "Chernobyl of souls".

To this one must add, after the fall of the walls, the increasing influence of the West, especially of the more unbelieving and secularized West, whose ideology was immediately taken over by the ex-communists who thus became its chorus leaders. Moreover a wave of secularism spreads without difficulty in our countries, affecting mostly the masses of the uncertain. With a mania of blind imitation, they accept all that comes from the West, with its aura of the prestige of modernity and progress. Ah, how people had hoped to find, behind the fallen barriers, a solid Christianity, rooted in the faith and in values that had made Christianity great. Alas, that is not the case, and the example of the West is more damaging for us than a source of inspiration for the life of faith.

A hopeless situation? Far from it. Besides there are no hopeless situations for the Church. Never.

A basic fact, and one I believe to be irreversible, is that we can ground our christian optimism on the freedom which the Church now enjoys. With the coming of democracy, the Church has full liberty to proclaim the Gospel "*in season and out of season*", with freedom to create lay movements and youth organizations. Certainly she cannot depend on much space in the media, especially on television, but she can commit herself to seek to expand this and to create her own media. She has huge possibilities in the world of the press, the only limit being a lack of financial means and of competent journalists. Indeed one of the priorities must be

the formation of journalists and of television presenters of high professional standards.

At the same time, the Church could reinforce her presence in the political domain, forming a class of competent christian politicians, in ways inconceivable under the old regime.

Another positive fact that gives much hope for the future lies in the priestly and religious vocations in our countries. Without being over abundant, they are nonetheless sufficient, and they are tending to increase. In this respect we are far from the tragic crisis known in some western countries.

Another trait of our countries is that the Church is a unified community, without internal conflicts. This is due no doubt to fifty years of persecution, when the faithful closed ranks around their pastors, but also to the fact that the innovations of the Second Vatican Council arrived in our world gradually and without being dressed up in questionable ways by the Western media. This unity is still a reality. While in Western countries there is often a passionate opposition between progressives and conservatives, between traditionalists and "conciliarists" which remind one of a kind of class struggle within the Church, in our countries the priests and the faithful accept in a spirit of faith the orientations of the Pope and the bishops. We thus avoid wasting our energies in struggles and tensions that are not very evangelical, in order to direct them towards the construction of the Church and the reinforcing of her presence in society. If there is tension and competition in the Church, this should show itself in the field of sanctity, and not elsewhere. It matters little whether one is of the right or of the left, what matters is to direct oneself towards sanctity with all one's soul.

Gaudium er Spes, luctus et angor - all this exists in our Churches, and, I believe, there is more joy and hope than sadness and anxiety.

The Congregation of the Mission is called to accomplish its task in these conditions. It need change nothing concerning its double aim. It is only a matter of adapting and expanding it, according to the needs of the actual situation of our societies.

Evangelization of the poor, certainly, provided one does not have too narrow an idea of this and thus exclude the real poor of today. And among these one must count the intellectuals who struggle with doubt and scepticism and who diffuse largely materialism and hedonism. It is these who, in the last analysis, shape the decisive directions of a society. Or, as Cardinal Newman used to say, "*it is more important to struggle against basic deviations of thought than to make a few conversions*". This is obvious, but it is important to admit it, in spite of our traditional anti-intellectualism.

Then there are the good christian people that our missionaries have continued to evangelize through popular missions, wherever that has been possible. While continuing this work which keeps all its importance, one must now foster lay associations, such as the conferences of St Vincent de Paul, or others, which concern themselves with handicapped, drug addicts, refugees, etc. A vast effort of mobilization is called for which would call laity

out of their state of lethargy into which they were plunged by communism, and thus restore to them the taste of freedom and of christian creativity.

The other aspect of our mission - the formation of clergy - is equally important in this moment of the life of the Church. Traditionally, our provinces have not had the direction of major seminaries, except in Poland, but many confreres have contributed to the formation of the clergy through retreats and spiritual direction. It is a demanding work which for love of the Church we must continue. Because the ideal of the priest for St Vincent and the French school, and which prevailed in the Church for three centuries, is still relevant and responds perfectly to the needs of the world and of the Church today.