

Eastern Europe 1997–2000: a Review of Church Life¹

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A decade after the collapse of communist rule, Christian life in Eastern Europe continues to be a complex mixture of satisfaction and disappointment. This survey of the last four years illustrates the recent successes and failures, and sets out to highlight the many challenges which still await effective responses.

1997: a Year of Contrasts

By 1997 the rule of law had been reestablished in most postcommunist countries, along with the institutions of parliamentary democracy and a market economy. Levels of stability and prosperity nevertheless varied, as did the general prospects facing the region's churches.

In predominantly Roman Catholic Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the shortage of priests was an acute problem. Low church attendance rates in all three countries – often reaching negligible levels in the towns – suggested that the post-communist religious revival, insofar as it had occurred, was now dissipating. Poland remained the perennial exception, but there were problems here too. Opinion surveys suggested that Roman Catholic priests were still considered one of the country's richest social groups, yet clerical salaries were now well below the national average, leaving many clergy facing problems meeting tax and heating bills. Police data showed that violent attacks on parish presbyteries had tripled in 1995, while church thefts had also increased. At the same time, priests were warned to abide by the law, after several were charged with illegally importing and selling cars under tax exemptions. Three-quarters of Poles had still declared trust in the Roman Catholic Church in an October 1996 survey. Although three-fifths believed its public role was too great, half nevertheless believed that the state authorities should be 'guided by church social teaching'. Slovakia's statistical office had given the church a 53 per cent confidence rating in a March 1996 survey, well behind the country's army, state radio and local governments. By contrast, only 32 per cent of Czechs had claimed to 'trust' the church in another 1996 survey, compared to 54 per cent voicing opposition.

Some problems had regional dimensions. Not all countries had reintroduced the right to religious education – Bulgaria became the latest to do so in October 1997. Meanwhile, seminaries were hampered by a lack of training facilities. Some countries, including Lithuania and the Czech Republic, had particular trouble replacing sick or elderly priests, as well as in deepening the formation of younger clergy

who had been hurriedly trained under communism. Although most Roman Catholic dioceses now had their own training facilities, many relied on additional support from the Polish church, which had 38 diocesan and 48 order seminaries, each admitting up to 60 new candidates yearly. A total of 3078 Polish priests, 12 per cent of national total, were working abroad in 92 countries in January 1997, 482 of them in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This created some tensions. In July Fr Rein Ounapu, the only native priest in Estonia, where Catholics numbered just one per cent of 1.6 million inhabitants, told Poland's *Tygodnik Powszechny* Catholic weekly that foreign priests had failed to grasp the complexity of local conditions.

Attitudes also varied to the teachings and reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Although western-style theological dissent remained rare in postcommunist Eastern Europe, occasional cases caused negative publicity, such as when a 15-year church ban was lifted in October on Hungary's 78-year-old veteran pacifist, Fr György Bulányi. Bulányi had been suspended in 1982 for opposing the country's Catholic bishops and questioning aspects of church order, including clerical celibacy. Even now, some Catholics doubted whether he had genuinely recanted his views.

The year opened with expectations of fuller democratic change in Eastern Europe's predominantly Orthodox countries following the election of practising Christians as heads of state in Romania and Bulgaria. In Romania, where President Emil Constantinescu swore his inauguration oath on the Bible, local Christians responded hopefully but uncertainly. With 80 per cent of Romanians already living below the poverty line, however, a harsh economic restructuring programme launched by Victor Ciorbea's government in February soon raised prospects of social unrest. In Bulgaria, the December resignation of the socialist premier Zhan Videnov triggered month-long opposition rallies in Sofia, which forced an agreement on early elections that April. President Petur Stoyanov's first acts included an invitation to the pope. Yet his powers were also limited by harsh economic conditions. In Yugoslavia, similar protest rallies ended in February, when the regime of Slobodan Milošević reluctantly agreed to recognise opposition victories in the previous November's local elections. Yet it was questionable whether the main motor of discontent was a concern for liberal democratic reform, or hostility to Milošević's role in the 1995 Dayton accords which had ended the war in neighbouring Bosnia. In December the Serbian Orthodox Church had declared support for the protests, while bitterly denouncing the president for 'selling out Serbian interests'.

Meanwhile, protests erupted in nearby Albania when a series of high-interest 'pyramid schemes' collapsed, depriving a quarter of inhabitants of their savings. By late February the conflict had collapsed into anarchy, mainly in the poorer south. President Sali Berisha accused former communists of provoking an armed uprising and on 3 March the Tirana parliament declared a state of emergency, a curfew and a ban on gatherings, warning that anyone carrying firearms would be shot on sight. Re-elected head of state by parliament at the height of the crisis, Berisha was forced to step down in June, when the elections were won by Fatos Nano's Socialist Party. Although the anarchy was curbed with western help, violent incidents continued. Albania's inflation rate had been cut to 7 per cent, and national income boosted annually by 7–10 per cent, but the country remained Europe's poorest, with infant mortality running at 8 per cent and unemployment at 50 per cent in the towns.

Tensions of a very different order were still very evident in Poland, where a November 1996 pastoral letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference had warned of a 'persistent resort to totalitarian state practices' by the governing Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* (SLD)). Even when Poland's 43-

year-old president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, paid his first visit to the Vatican in April, Cardinal Józef Glemp of Warsaw insisted that the diplomatic niceties would have ‘no influence’ on internal church-state relations.

Eight years after the return of democracy, Poland was the only Eastern European country, besides Yugoslavia and Bosnia, still using a communist constitution (enacted in 1952). A final 243-article compromise text was approved overwhelmingly by the Polish Sejm in April after an agreement between the SLD and two Solidarity-linked parties. Its preamble, drafted by Catholic ex-premier Tadeusz Mazowiecki, noted that Poles would be guided by ‘responsibility before God or their own consciences’, and that church-state ties would be shaped by ‘respect for autonomy, independence and cooperation for the common good’, a formulation taken from the Catholic Church’s pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. Poland’s largest opposition coalition, Solidarity Election Action (*Akcja Wyborcza Solidarności* (AWS)), nevertheless vigorously opposed the constitution after seeing its own draft rejected by an all-party commission. Meanwhile, a May pastoral letter from the Bishops’ Conference warned that the compromise text still gave rise to ‘serious moral doubts’. In the event, the church’s objections were not heeded. Only 42.8 per cent of Poland’s 28 million eligible voters bothered to turn out for the ensuing 25 May referendum and those who did narrowly approved the constitution by 52 per cent to 46 per cent, in what was seen by some commentators as a self-inflicted church humiliation.

By contrast, the pope’s 31 May–10 June homecoming, his fifth full-scale pilgrimage, was remarkable for a near-total absence of political accents. During a tour of a dozen southern cities, which significantly avoided Warsaw, John Paul II urged citizens to build a ‘just Poland’ capable of ‘uniting around common goals and values’ and was applauded equally by politicians of Left and Right. His speeches during the visit, which began with the closing session of the 46th International Eucharistic Congress at Wrocław, contained no reference to Poland’s disputed 1993 concordat with the Vatican, which remained unratified, and only general reaffirmations of the church’s position on abortion and religious education. Instead, the pope highlighted the harsh economic and social conditions now prevailing in Poland, and delivered a stern reprimand to those responsible, urging measures to curb unemployment and the ‘exploitation’ of human labour. He also acknowledged public disillusionment with the church, noting that it was a ‘human reality’ which contained ‘all the limits and imperfections of human beings’. ‘In the previous system, the church created a space where the individual and nation could defend their rights’, he told the Bishops’ Conference at Częstochowa.

In the current situation, there are many cases in which we cannot count on such recognition. We have to deal with criticism, and perhaps something even worse. So discernment must be exercised: on the one hand, accepting what is correct in this criticism; on the other, not forgetting that Christ will always be a ‘sign of contradiction’.

Despite the conciliatory tone of the pope’s words, SLD parliamentarians again voted in late June to postpone debate on ratification of the concordat and unsuccessfully campaigned for a referendum on abortion in the run-up to parliamentary elections in September. It was, however, a wholly unexpected turn of events which did most to rupture the SLD’s public standing. Over 200,000 people were made homeless and 55 drowned when the River Oder broke its banks in July, leaving 1358 towns and 1.6 million acres of land under water. Hundreds of Catholic and Protestant churches,

cemeteries and archives were devastated by the floodwaters, which also swamped parts of neighbouring Germany and the Czech Republic. Government figures put total damage costs at US\$4 billion. The disaster brought massive donations from mostly Polish parishes from the USA to Kazakhstan. However, slow and inadequate government handling of the crisis, including a failure to cooperate with voluntary aid agencies, was severely criticised by church and opposition leaders.

By then the SLD's support had been eroded by other pre-election developments. In March police had clashed violently with Solidarity-led demonstrators in Warsaw and Gdańsk protesting against the government's proposed closure of the Baltic port city's fabled shipyards with the loss of 3800 jobs. In an Angelus message in Rome the pope called the shipyard the 'symbol of a historic struggle' and told protesters he was with them in their 'struggle for survival'. SLD plans to nominate new controllers of the state television and radio and to appoint extra judges to the Constitutional Court were attacked by opponents as a crude attempt to institutionalise ex-communist power. Voters also disliked the SLD's election campaign, which was characterised by personal attacks. Although Poland's annual GNP growth rate had risen from 3.8 per cent to 6 per cent in the four years of SLD-led government, the former communists were said to have alienated key social groups, by neglecting much-needed reforms in agriculture, heavy industry, health, education and social security.

The mood of discontent helped consolidate the AWS, which by the middle of the year had overtaken the SLD in pre-election voter intention surveys. Its programme declared natural law, including the right to life from conception, to be Poland's 'basic order', pledged greater state help for large families, and called for swift ratification of the stalled concordat. With virtually every area of church life subject to bitter conflict since 1993, the Polish bishops made no secret of their preferences, accusing SLD politicians in an August communiqué of allowing 'party interests' to take priority over 'concern for the common good and respect for elementary democratic principles'. However, church leaders turned down an early summer proposal by the AWS to have Christ proclaimed 'King of Poland' and adopted a low-key approach to the elections. During the country's 1993 and 1995 elections evidence had suggested that, far from shying away from disputes with the church, SLD politicians had used church hostility to unify their 30-odd component groups and portray themselves as westernisers and modernisers. This time too, there were signs that SLD politicians expected to gain votes from church hostility.

Even when the AWS emerged victorious in the 21 September election, capturing 201 places in the 460-seat Sejm lower house compared to the SLD's 164, most church leaders made it clear that they would keep their distance. The election appeared to confirm that Poland had become dominated by centre-right and centre-left forces, whose practical decisions were likely to be guided increasingly by political rather than ideological considerations. However, although AWS support was evenly balanced socially and economically, it was also concentrated in Poland's more traditional eastern and southern regions – a pattern repeated from previous elections. Meanwhile, with the AWS's 33.8 per cent of votes separated from the SLD's 27.1 per cent by just 900,000 on a turnout of less than half, this was not enough to claim a substantial or lasting swing in the public mood. Though united in opposition to the SLD, not all the AWS's component factions were committed to a traditional Catholic society. Several church leaders urged caution on emotional issues such as abortion, in apparent acknowledgment that the AWS could fracture if pro-church groups attempted to dictate its policies.

Poland was not the only country in which the Roman Catholic Church scored

successes. In December 1996 Croatia had become the first postcommunist country after Poland to give church rights treaty-level protection in three accords with the Vatican. These covered a range of areas, from Catholic social and charitable activities to Catholic schools and associations. Like Poland's constitution, they noted that church and state were 'independent and autonomous in their own spheres', while also cooperating for the 'spiritual and material welfare of the person and the common good'.

In May 1997 Hungary became the second, with a full-scale treaty on funding church activities. Under its complex provisions, most churches and sacral buildings confiscated by Hungary's communist regime after 1948 would be returned by the year 2011, with compensation provided for the rest. The country's 200 Catholic schools, whose 37,000 pupils totalled three per cent of the national total, would be entitled to the same subsidies as state schools, while Catholics would also be permitted to assign one per cent of taxes to the church. The Bishops' Conference spokesman, Fr László Lukács, conceded that the treaty signified 'an interesting change of attitudes'; but the church's financial gains remained uncertain, Lukács added, and the treaty's value would depend on the 'keeping of promises'. The Hungarian bishops believed they had been justified in circulating a 1996 pastoral letter urging action to stem poverty and corruption. New Year figures confirmed a population decrease and growing crisis in welfare, health, culture and education. 'The combination of Marxist indoctrination and liberal capitalist thinking has generated a kind of double atheism, even though secularisation was occurring long before 1989', Fr Lukács commented in January. 'For the first time, the church has taken a position which is highly esteemed by society. We hope this is the starting-point for a new era of cooperation between the two.'

By now, 28 former communist states had diplomatic relations with the Holy See, while Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia and Lithuania were also negotiating their own treaties.

The Czech Republic's Roman Catholic bishops accused the liberal-led government of Václav Klaus in January of viewing the church 'in communist categories'. A government offer of limited church land restitutions had been voted down in October 1996 by opposition Communists and Social Democrats. However, the government had failed anyway to find a formula to separate church finances from the state budget. The church's 1997 grant of 400 million crowns was 52 million down on the previous year because of government refusals to index-link, and all Czech dioceses were heavily in debt. In August the Bishops' Conference spokesman, Fr Daniel Herman, threatened to take the Czech disputes to the European Court of Justice.

Klaus unexpectedly agreed a month later to negotiate a church–state agreement with the Vatican, a decision attributed by the Czech press to fear that the Christian Democrats would pull out of his coalition. But when the premier resigned on 30 November, amid corruption allegations, Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague made no secret of his satisfaction. He would not 'downplay the services' performed by Klaus to the Czech Republic's development, the church leader said, but his government had shown 'no interest' in the spiritual values needed for Czech society's recovery after 40 years of communism, and had made a 'great mistake' in stressing 'naked pragmatism and economism'. Church–state talks had been repeatedly interrupted, despite government assurances, and Klaus had 'knowingly pushed aside' the church's many resulting problems. Vlk added that he had warned European politicians about the liberal premier 'gradually forfeiting his credit of trust'. President Havel, whose personal enmity for Klaus was well known, told the Czech National

Assembly that the government's fall offered a 'chance for national rebirth' after five years which had 'deepened Czech provincialism'. 'Citizens have a right to know why there is a suspicion that they have been governed by cheats, and why they are living in a country where speculation and lies pay more than honest work', the president added.

In Romania, a postcommunist 'Law on Cults' had been delayed by persistent revisions since being first drafted in 1993. Government sources had rejected rumours that the new law would declare Orthodoxy the 'state church'. But they had also admitted that no solution had been found to problems facing the country's 17 recognised minority faiths. Against this background, the head of Romania's formerly outlawed Greek Catholic Church, Archbishop Lucian Mureşan, welcomed President Constantinescu's election as signifying his country's 'return to God', but warned that minority faiths would expect fuller protection of their rights. 'Having turned our faces east and west, our wish and prayer now is that the state leadership will at last turn its face to God', the archbishop added. 'We expect reinstatement of the truth which the communists eliminated from political and social life, from school textbooks, laws and institutions, and from interpersonal relations.' Constantinescu reciprocated the gesture, calling at his inauguration for a 'fertile dialogue' between Catholics and Orthodox. The Greek Catholic Church had its origins 'deep in Romanian history', the new president added. It had helped preserve the nation's 'true Latin identity'.

In Belarus', where President Alyaksandr Lukashenka had dismissed a democratically elected parliament and appointed his own instead after a disputed November 1996 referendum, minority churches had similarly complained that the Orthodox Church was treated preferentially. The republic's Roman Catholic leader, Cardinal Kazimierz Świątek, announced that the government had agreed to give fresh one-year visas to the 130 foreign Catholic priests already *in situ*, but not to foreign nuns or to newly arriving priests. Though no one had actually been deported, Świątek added, visiting clergy faced 'strong psychological pressure to leave'. Meanwhile, the blanket denial of work permits to nuns had placed religious orders 'in a blind alley'. There were sporadic incidents. A Catholic church was torched by unknown attackers in Grodno, while the authorities were accused of attempting to ransack a sixteenth-century church in Nesviz. The 83-year-old cardinal resolutely denied that a campaign was being waged against his church. In July, however, when government-opposition talks opened with European Union representatives, the head of the Belarusian Popular Front, Zenon Pazniak, accused Lukashenka of provoking Catholic-Orthodox conflicts and the Orthodox Church of allowing itself to be used as a 'new state ideology'.

Parallel grievances were heard in Russia. In June the Duma had approved the first draft of a new 'Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations', severely restricting minority faiths. After protests from the US Senate and the European Union (EU), President Yel'tsin vetoed the law, claiming it violated the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights and no fewer than 16 clauses of Russia's constitution, and would 'fuel religious conflicts' unless 'fundamentally rewritten'. However, when the bill was passed again in September, Yel'tsin signed it within a week on 26 September.

The new text listed Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism as Russia's 'traditional faiths', while acknowledging the presence of others. It also reaffirmed constitutional safeguards and noted that religious groups enjoyed 'legal protection' even if not officially registered. However, its 27 articles required churches to have

been ‘active on a legal basis’ for 50 years to qualify as ‘Russian’ organisations, and obliged local church groups to have government confirmation of 15 years’ legal activity before conducting religious activities or owning property. Meanwhile, Article 13 stated that ‘foreign religious groups’ could open a ‘representative body’ in Russia, but added, in apparent contradiction, that they ‘may not engage in liturgical or other religious activities’.

The law reflected pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and nationalist groups. In an October interview with Russia’s *Profil* magazine Patriarch Aleksii II denied that it had a ‘discriminatory character’ and insisted it gave ‘equal rights’ to all faiths. ‘Catholicism is not a traditional religion in Russia’, Aleksii added. ‘To obtain citizenship in Germany, you have to have lived there 15 years, and in Switzerland for 30 years’, he noted. ‘With religion, matters are even more complex, since religion is a type of ideology which influences thinking.’ However, the law faced Orthodox criticisms too. One prominent Moscow-based Orthodox priest, Fr Aleksandr Borisov, warned that it would ‘impede proclamation of the Gospel’, and affect public attitudes by ‘dividing citizens into better and worse categories according to religious criteria’. He added that the country’s ecumenical Bible Society had protested to President Yel’tsin against the new curbs. Yet Patriarch Aleksii was not personally to blame, Fr Borisov stressed.

The Russian law exemplified the obstacles still facing religious freedom throughout postcommunist Eastern Europe. When the 54-state Organization on Security and Co-operation in Europe met in November to review humanitarian safeguards, its concluding report acknowledged the progress achieved towards safeguarding ‘freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief’. However, established churches were being ‘favouritised’, the report added, while minorities were targeted for ‘government interference’. This applied to Western Europe too, where governments were under growing pressure to clamp down on new religious movements. Human rights groups voiced concern about growing agitation by Islamic militants in the Central Asian republics, where the number of mosques in Uzbekistan alone had increased from 80 to 5000 since 1991. However, they also pledged to monitor the Russian law, fearing it was being used by the Orthodox Church ‘to strike a blow at other churches’.

The latest controversy called in question the Russian Orthodox Church’s commitment to ecumenism. In August the Russian Holy Synod gave cautious approval to a 1993 Catholic-Orthodox document, drawn up at Balamand in Lebanon, calling for an end to disputes over Greek Catholics, and conceded that Russian publications had deliberately ‘cut and distorted’ it. However, it added that further work was needed to clarify clauses in the text, including the term ‘sister-churches’, which had been used emotionally ‘in the style of atheist propaganda from the Soviet period’. The method of ‘Uniatism’ was a ‘dangerous and unacceptable way of achieving unity’, the Synod noted; but the Greek Catholic communities could ‘coexist’ with other mainstream churches. ‘While repudiating Uniatism as a method, churches do not reject people’, the statement continued. ‘Greek Catholic communities, existing today with legal rights like any other religious organisations, should cease to be a source of division and conflict between Orthodox and Catholics. To serve this purpose, rules should be worked out to regulate coexistence.’

In Ukraine, some church leaders had begun to make common cause. Orthodox and Greek Catholic bishops in the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk formed an ecumenical council in January to resolve ‘interconfessional conflicts and misunderstandings’. In March leaders of both churches in Kiev jointly demanded a ban on

sects, as well as the return of school religion and army chaplains. In July leaders of Ukraine's 15 registered churches signed a joint memorandum pledging them to avoid 'forceful acts' and to resolve disputes 'in a Christian way' through mutual respect and tolerance. 'No one can be called a Christian who raises his hand against the priests and faithful of other confessions, invoking the name of God or state interests', the memorandum concluded. Teams from the Vatican and the Moscow Patriarchate, headed by Cardinal Edward Cassidy and Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk, announced after a May meeting in Bari that they were setting up a working group to tackle interchurch disputes in Ukraine. The joint communiqué said that both churches had concurred on the need to solve problems without 'intervention by outside parties which often ignore principles of religious freedom'. It added that relieving tensions in Ukraine would have a 'special significance' for the normalisation of Catholic-Orthodox ties internationally.

Meanwhile Romania's Greek Catholic bishops welcomed a conciliatory March letter from Patriarch Teoctist admitting that both sides had been 'prone to local and confessional subjectivism' and urging Orthodox clergy and laypeople to pursue 'reconciliation and unity of faith' with Greek Catholics. Despite this promising start, relations soon deteriorated when the Romanian Senate narrowly accepted a bill in mid-June requiring Orthodox parishes to hand back some of the Greek Catholic churches confiscated by the communist regime. The Greek Catholic archdiocese of Alba Iulia voiced 'profound gratitude', and urged Orthodox clergy to 'react calmly in a spirit of justice'. However, Patriarch Teoctist branded the bill a 'diktat', adding that it signified 'inadmissible state interference' in interchurch relations and a 'purposeful disregard' of Vatican-Orthodox agreements. Romanian government officials said that they believed property issues were best settled by interchurch dialogue, and warned that the bill, sponsored by a Greek Catholic senator, Matei Boila, could trigger fresh disputes. However, they denied reports that new interchurch conflicts had forced the government to withdraw its invitation to the pope, recently renewed during foreign minister Adrian Severin's April Vatican visit.

In October Romanian Orthodox leaders offered to help to fund the building of new Greek Catholic churches. However, they also urged parliamentarians to reject the controversial bill. 'We will do our utmost to ensure that, when Greek Catholics do not have a suitable place of their own, they are able to have a church built according to their plans and requirements', said Orthodox bishops and archbishops from Romania's Transylvania region.

But we are justifiably worried by the anti-Orthodox offensive which the Catholic Church of the Eastern Rite is fuelling in Romania's parliament. The amazing ease with which Senate members, completely uninformed or even misinformed, agreed to this bill clearly demonstrates the Greek Catholic ability to deal a surprise blow against Romanian Orthodoxy after a long period of feigning dialogue.

Pope John Paul had received invitations from predominantly Orthodox Bulgaria and Georgia. Yet the chances of a pilgrimage anywhere had been set back by the cancellation of the meeting planned for 21 June in Vienna between the pope and two patriarchs, Aleksii of Russia and Bartholomaios of Constantinople, during the Second European Ecumenical Assembly. The circumstances were unclear. Patriarch Bartholomaios blamed the Vatican for announcing the meeting prematurely, while the Russian Orthodox Synod claimed that 'quite a number of conditions' had been absent. The Synod added that the Russian Church remained committed to 'bilateral

dialogue' with Catholics. However, Patriarch Aleksii criticised Eastern Europe's post-communist 'invasion by foreign missionaries' in his later speech to the Graz Assembly, which was attended by 10,000 delegates from 150 churches. In its final statement, the Assembly admitted that there were no 'simple solutions' on offer to the 'scandal' of Christian divisions. However, it committed all churches 'to the unflinching pursuit of the goal of visible unity', as well 'to initiate the process of the healing of memories in a spirit of historical truth; to foster cooperation in all fields including mission; to open dialogue; and, while respecting mutual freedom of conscience, to avoid destructive competition.'

Despite the Assembly's commitments, the fractious nature of interchurch relations had wider implications. Speaking in Hungary the following November, the Dutch head of the 22,000-strong Jesuit order, Fr Hans Peter Kolvenbach, warned that a breakdown in ecumenical relations would create a 'new Iron Curtain' in Europe. The pope had delivered a similar warning in Gniezno on 3 June, at a pontifical mass commemorating the thousandth anniversary of the martyrdom of St Wojciech (956–997), celebrated in the presence of seven Eastern European heads of state. His previous visit to this western Polish see in 1979, John Paul said, had launched a 'new evangelisation', as well as 'great transformations'. However, European unity remained a 'still distant goal' 18 years later. Although the Berlin Wall had fallen, it had been replaced by another 'invisible wall' – of 'fear and aggressiveness, lack of understanding for people of different origins, different colour, different religious convictions, a wall of political and economic selfishness, of weakening sensitivity to the values of human life'.

The eastwards extension of the European Union was now on the agenda of most European states. So was Eastern European membership of NATO – an option supported by over 85 per cent of Hungarians on a turnout of half in a November referendum. At its Madrid summit on 8 July NATO confirmed plans to admit Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, while also improving links with 27 other former communist countries now participating in its 'Partnerships for Peace' programme. Roman Catholic church leaders supported the decision, while in June Romania's Orthodox Patriarchate also described integration with 'Euro-Atlantic structures' as a 'natural and necessary process', and fervently denied standing against Romania's own NATO candidacy.

The EU was a different matter, since it concerned complex social and economic issues, as well as deeper questions of national culture, identity and religion. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty on closer union had said nothing about the role of churches and religions in Europe's future. Although a brief clause acknowledging their place had been added to a new document at the EU's Amsterdam summit in June, even this had required lengthy negotiation. In early November, however, a delegation of Polish bishops returned from Brussels full of enthusiasm after extensive talks with EU and European Parliament officials. The secretary-general of the Bishops' Conference, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, pledged that the church would henceforth actively support Poland's EU admission, as well as combating past 'misunderstandings and stereotypes' through its pastoral programmes. The church-owned Catholic Information Agency (KAI) said the unprecedented four-day tour had taken place at a 'key moment', when attempts were being made to find 'an ethical model for a new unity'. It added optimistically that the visit had signified EU recognition of the 'great role of the church in Poland and the great strength of its social impact'.

Besides adapting their laws and institutions, aspiring EU member states were required to meet exacting economic criteria, as well as rigorous standards in the areas

of democracy and civil rights. There were incidents which impeded this. Yet there were also positive developments. In January the Czech Republic and Germany had signed a long-awaited joint declaration, which drew heavily on reconciliatory work by churches. Besides a German acknowledgement of responsibility for events leading to Czechoslovakia's 'destruction and occupation' in 1938–39, it included the first formal Czech admission that crimes had been committed against German civilians after the Second World War.

Meanwhile, where ethnic strife had been greatest, in the Balkans, the year brought further progress, punctuated by the pope's spectacular two-day visit to Sarajevo in April. Death threats and bomb attacks had continued until the last moment, and all Catholic churches in the city had been under 24-hour police surveillance for six weeks. In his homily at Sarajevo's Kosevo stadium the pope called the city a 'symbol of the twentieth century', from the outbreak of war in 1914 to the suspension of hostilities in 1995. Now was the time, he added, for the city to begin the 'difficult but essential pilgrimage of forgiveness which leads to deep renewal'. The visit, postponed since 1994, included talks with Bosnia's Serbian Orthodox metropolitan and Muslim rais-ul-ulema, as well as with Jewish leaders. The stress on forgiveness was warmly welcomed by international officials.

In neighbouring Croatia, UN peacekeeping forces accepted a request by Bishop Marin Sračić of Djakovo-Srijem and allowed the first Assumption Day pilgrimages to Roman Catholic shrines in Serb-occupied Eastern Slavonia. The region's official handover had been postponed from June 1997 to January 1998. In October Croatia's returning Serbian Orthodox metropolitan, Jovan Pavlović, was promised 'full freedom of religious activities' at a meeting with Zagreb government officials.

1998: a Year of Anxieties

During his 1997 Polish pilgrimage the pope had warned that his own homeland needed a 'profound new evangelisation', and should prove 'capable of uniting around common goals and the values fundamental for every man and woman'. The country's new premier, Jerzy Buzek, a former underground Solidarity activist, was the first head of government to belong to Poland's 92,000-member Lutheran Church. However, in an interview with the Catholic Information Agency (KAI), Buzek pledged to abide by Catholic teaching, pointing out that he had coauthored the election promises of the victorious Solidarity Election Action (AWS), which gave 'great weight' to Catholicism.

There would be problems in fulfilling this promise. The AWS had promised a 'pro-family tax policy'. However, the reappointment of Leszek Balcerowicz, the author of Poland's post-1989 shock therapy economic reforms, as finance minister, placed this goal in question. By the end of 1997 an initial round of fuel and energy price rises had already sparked accusations of AWS backtracking.

There were, however, immediate developments on other fronts. On 8 January the new Polish Sejm voted to ratify the disputed 1993 concordat, in a breakthrough welcomed by church leaders as heralding a 'new era' in church-state relations. Minority churches in Poland said that they expected the same rights and welcomed the formation of a government commission to handle ties with the Polish Ecumenical Council. Addressing the Council at its Warsaw offices in January, the Lutheran Buzek pledged that state relations with its seven member-churches would be guided by the principles of 'equal rights, autonomy, cooperation and sovereignty'.

Approval of the concordat, which was signed into force by President Kwaśniewski

on 23 February, was the church's second triumph in three weeks. In May 1997 Poland's Constitutional Tribunal had ruled that a 1996 liberalisation of the abortion law had violated Poland's constitution by using 'imprecise criteria'. On 17 December, to the applause of pro-life campaigners, the AWS-dominated Sejm duly voted to uphold the ruling. No issue had proved as politically divisive. Fears of how eventual admission to the EU could affect pro-life values were widespread in Eastern Europe.

Formal talks on EU membership opened in March with Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia and Slovenia, and were expected to last five years. During that period, the role of churches would be crucial in calming fears and fostering hopes.

In a May survey by the European Commission's Eurobarometer agency, 63 per cent of Poles said they favoured EU admission, while only 6 per cent declared they would vote against, but support had fallen since previous surveys and a fifth remained undecided. Hungarians and Slovenes were even more sceptical, while Czechs and Estonians also voiced serious doubts; this suggested that enthusiasm had waned as awareness of the burdens of change had increased.

To incorporate the *acquis communautaire*, the EU's body of regulations and procedures, tens of thousands of Eastern European legal provisions required adjustment, covering everything from border controls to textile production limits. Meanwhile, the five countries also had to meet stringent inflation, interest rate, budget deficit and currency goals. Poland's unemployment rate (10.8 per cent) and inflation level (13.4 per cent) were higher than the Western European average. Although its expected GNP growth of 6.1 per cent in 1998 was more than twice the total forecast for the EU, average earnings in Poland were less than a tenth of neighbouring Germany's, while Poland's 1997 gross national product of 90.2 billion ECUs (US\$100 billion) was over 20 times smaller.

Church leaders were concerned chiefly about the likely impact of integration on social and moral habits. Four decades before, some Christians pointed out, when the first all-European bodies had been formed, the churches of Spain and Italy had been as full as Poland's were today, while the Dutch Roman Catholic Church had sent more priests abroad as missionaries than it employed at home. Any lingering notion of a 'spiritual East' and a 'materialist West' deserved to be discarded. Although at least 95 per cent of Polish citizens were baptised Catholics, with a third attending church regularly, neighbouring eastern Germany and Czech Bohemia were believed to be Europe's least religious areas. There were differences within the West too: up to a quarter of Germans practised their faith, twice as many as in France, while 54 per cent of children were born illegitimate in Sweden, compared to 3 per cent in Italy. Yet the overall trend in western church affiliation had been unmistakably downwards.

The EU Commission chairman, Jacques Santer, had spoken of the need for a deeper spiritual dimension to European life. The eventual admission to the EU of predominantly Catholic Poland, with its assertive, tightly disciplined church, seemed certain to tilt the balance in this direction. Yet scepticism remained widespread. 'Losing Polish sovereignty, surrendering land to foreign hands, cutting a swathe of unemployment, significantly reducing our young people's levels of education, universally killing unborn children – this is all too high a price for being together with the West', reported *Nasz Dziennik*, a daily newspaper owned by Poland's Catholic Radio Maryja station, on 21 May. 'A wave of garbage, a postmodernist, liberal slush of pseudo-values – this is all Europe can offer us today.' Such extreme

views were not representative, however. Although a third of surveyed Polish citizens had predicted that EU membership would erode religious belief, more than half had believed that it would be unaffected or even strengthened. Meanwhile, in an unprecedented March survey of 600 Polish priests by the Warsaw-based CBOS agency, 84 per cent had supported their country's EU accession. Well over a third had concurred that EU institutions should be doing more to 'support churches and religious life'; but two-thirds felt confident that EU membership would not affect the church's position either way.

In February a delegation of Bosnian religious leaders visited Brussels to outline their plans for reconciliation. In May the 16-member Czech Bishops' Conference became the second after Poland's to make a full-scale tour of EU headquarters. The visit followed an exchange of letters between Santer and Cardinal Vlk, in which the Commission chairman promised to take account of Catholic church grievances during negotiations with the Czech Republic. The Czech bishops came away convinced, like the Poles before them, after being assured by EU officials that Catholic traditions and interests would be 'fully respected' in a united Europe.

Without an institutional framework, religious leaders could hardly hope to influence EU decision-making. At a mid-June meeting with Santer in Brussels the German chairman of the Commission of EU Catholic Bishops' Conferences (COMECE), Bishop Josef Homeyer, called for formal annual meetings with EU officials, as well as a series of joint working groups. COMECE teams visited several Orthodox patriarchates to enlist interest in EU issues and underline the importance of an Orthodox presence in a united Europe.

Wider ecumenical relations still remained in a trough. In December 1997 representatives of twelve Orthodox churches had met in Istanbul to discuss restarting the theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, stalled since the Balamand meeting of 1993. However, they reiterated that they would not accept a 'universal Roman jurisdiction', and said that any talks must include an 'attentive and watchful study in order not to move away from the truth'. The 'serious confrontations' of the early 1990s in Ukraine, Russia and Slovakia had now ended, Patriarch Bartholomaios concurred in a January interview with *La Libre Belgique*; but the Catholic Church was still guilty of 'expansionism'. 'The Catholic Church must give the Orthodox a satisfactory response regarding Uniatism if we are really to return to the themes of dialogue', said the patriarch. 'Despite mutual visits, common prayers and evident goodwill, 17 years have elapsed since our theological dialogue began; yet we have not achieved the hoped-for progress and will be ending the second millennium without regaining unity.'

Vatican and Moscow Patriarchate delegations, again headed by Cardinal Cassidy and Metropolitan Kirill, failed to make progress at talks held in the same month. A Russian Orthodox statement explained that there had been 'no improvement' in the situation in Ukraine; Ukraine's Greek Catholic bishops objected, saying that the new Catholic-Orthodox commission promised at Bari in 1997 had failed to meet to discuss their problems.

In March Patriarch Aleksii said he was still ready to meet the pope, if Catholic 'proselytism' ended. A Russian Orthodox official, Fr Ilarion Alfeyev, stressed that the precondition for a meeting remained an end to Greek Catholic 'violence'. 'We will declare our position once this situation changes', Alfeyev added. 'Imagine if the patriarch meets the pope, they sign a joint communiqué and talk together. And then more churches are grabbed in Ukraine and Orthodox bishops driven out of their homes.' A January survey showed that more than two-thirds of Russians believed a

meeting was 'desirable', while 38 per cent favoured closer Catholic-Orthodox ties. In June, however, Cardinal Glemp of Poland emerged 'depressed' from a meeting with the usually conciliatory Metropolitan Vladimir of St Petersburg.

Interchurch relations plummeted further in the run-up to the 50th anniversary assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Harare in December. Orthodox leaders accused the WCC of being dominated by Protestants, whose pet agendas – women pastors, sexual minorities, 'inclusive language' – reflected narrow western preoccupations. In May 1997 the Georgian Orthodox Church had become the first to announce its formal withdrawal from the WCC. Bulgaria's followed suit in July 1998, while other churches confirmed that they would also be scaling down their involvement after debating the issue at May meetings in Thessaloniki and Damascus. In the event, the Harare Assembly ended with an agreement to set up a new commission to discuss structural reforms which would make the WCC more acceptable to Orthodox churches. Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox Church suspended its participation in the WCC's Central Committee.

The deadlock in ecumenical relations had knock-on effects throughout the region. In Russia executive decrees were being prepared for the enforcement of the controversial 1997 law on religion. In a Christmas message President Yel'tsin told minority church leaders that he believed they would 'continue contributing to the development of state-confessional ties' and 'ensuring constitutional rights to freedom of conscience and strengthening peace and agreement in Russia'. However, the head of Russia's Roman Catholic Church, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, told Poland's KAI agency that the new law had already opened up 'additional religious divisions in an already divided society'. Yel'tsin was conciliatory about the prospects of a papal pilgrimage to Russia during his second meeting with the pope in Rome on 10 February. He confirmed that he had issued a fresh invitation and held talks with Patriarch Aleksii soon after his return to Moscow. A month later, the pope appointed two new bishops, Jerzy Mazur and Clemens Pickel, for Siberia and southern Russia. In May Kondrusiewicz's apostolic administration was accepted as a 'centralised Russian religious organisation' by the Justice Ministry, the highest category of recognition under the 1997 law, while the first Russian-trained deacons were ordained in St Petersburg's newly reopened Catholic seminary, a short distance from the Orthodox basilica where Tsar Nicholas II and his family were buried in July.

Once again, however, the optimism was shortlived. In an August statement the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that all foreign priests would be required to apply for fresh visas at quarterly intervals at consulates abroad, in place of the renewable yearly permits granted previously. The Ministry insisted that the new measures had been taken to comply with the 1997 law. However, the latest restrictions contradicted previous guarantees, such as those agreed during July talks between the Vatican's Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran and the Russian foreign minister Yevgeni Primakov.

Fears for the future of minority denominations increased when Primakov, a former KGB chief, became Russian premier in September. Addressing the State Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations in late November, Russia's deputy justice minister, Yevgeni Sidorenko, said he believed that additional restrictions on foreign church activities, introduced at local level during the 1990s, were mostly incompatible with the federal constitution and would have to be amended. However, only a selection of minority parishes and associations had been reregistered by the year's end, raising fears that many could miss the 1997 law's deadline of 31 December 1999.

In Ukraine, where new 1996 regulations had reduced the authorised period of stay for foreign clergy from three years to six months, a visiting Polish nun unsuccessfully sued the authorities after being ordered out. The incident, which sparked church protests, came one week before a visit by the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano. Besides holding talks with President Kuchma, Sodano also met Ukraine's new premier, Valeri Pustovoitenko, who had taken over after the Communist Party's March election landslide. Pustovoitenko discussed Ukraine's continuing religious conflicts with the pope during a December trip to the Vatican.

In neighbouring Belarus', Cardinal Świątek remained staunchly optimistic about the future of the Catholic Church. He had talked directly with President Lukashenka on 4 March at the Catholic seminary in Grodno, in what he insisted had been a 'friendly meeting' with no criticisms of the Catholic clergy. State television later gave extensive coverage to Catholic Easter celebrations, while in April the cardinal said he now hoped for a 'concrete and permanent dialogue' after a 'working meeting' with government officials in Minsk. The situation was more complicated, however. On 22 March 50 opposition supporters had been arrested during a demonstration in Minsk marking the 80th anniversary of Belarusian independence. In an April address to his State Assembly, Lukashenka hit out at the 'anti-Belarusian activities' of western governments, as well as at NATO's planned expansion into Poland.

The prospects for Catholics remained uncertain elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. In Lithuania the Jesuit Archbishop Sigitas Tamkevičius of Kaunas used the 80th anniversary of national independence in February to urge citizens to make better use of their 'gift of freedom' by upholding 'justice and Christian mercy' and showing greater concern for the poor. When the former communist Algirdas Brazauskas handed over to the newly-elected president Valdas Adamkus on 25 February the secretary-general of Lithuania's Bishops' Conference, Bishop Jonas Boruta, confirmed that the Catholic Church had viewed his term as head of state 'positively', in contrast to the less accommodating 1992–97 government of Lithuania's Democratic Labour Party, which Brazauskas had also led. The former Soviet boss, who made his communion and confession when leaving office, also received a letter from the pope praising his role in building an independent state.

President Adamkus, a practising Catholic, was optimistic after a mid-May visit to the Vatican, but church life in Lithuania was in a parlous state. Mass attendance had fallen to around ten per cent of the population, while the Bishops' Conference had introduced a mandatory three-month course for marrying couples in a bid to lower the country's 60 per cent divorce rate. Meanwhile, a third of parishes were without priests and most of Lithuania's 700 churches needed long-term renovation. Property issues remained unresolved pending a treaty with the Vatican, the text of which still had to be finalised by a church-state commission. The church's media presence had declined sharply and some school directors were still refusing to provide religious education.

In nearby Latvia, Archbishop Jānis Pujats of Riga appealed for an end to Russian sanctions, which were imposed in March following amendments to a 1994 citizenship law delaying the right of non-Latvians to seek naturalisation as citizens. After criticism from western governments, the Latvian government promised in mid-April to modify the law, which would have particularly affected the ethnic Russians who made up a third of the country's 2.56 million inhabitants, but several other former Soviet states had also claimed the right to screen Russian minorities, pointing out that they had been artificially expanded under Soviet rule to weaken the identity of national communities. Government officials blamed groups attempting to discredit

the country internationally for bomb explosions at Riga's Jewish synagogue and Russian Embassy in early April.

The head of Moldavia's mostly ethnic Polish Catholic minority, Fr Anton Coşa, appealed for more priests and nuns, as well as for more prayer books and liturgical material. In 1997 Moldavia's Appeal Court had branded the government of Andrei Sangheli guilty of violating the republic's 1994 constitution by refusing to recognise the breakaway Orthodox 'Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia'. The leader of Moldavia's larger Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Vladimir, who remained loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate, warned of a 'war between Orthodox Christians' if the court failed to withdraw its ruling. The Moscow-linked church's governing synod claimed in an August petition to President Petr Lucinschi that attempts were being made to use the dispute to stoke political and ethnic conflicts.

Further afield, in Kyrgyzstan the Vatican set up a *sui iuris* mission in January, paralleling similar missions established a year earlier in the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Although much criticised for its religious rights record, the Uzbek government agreed in March, after negotiations, to return a Catholic church in Samarkand, which had been used as a sports hall under Soviet rule.

Ironically, it was the predominantly Muslim neighbouring Kazakhstan which on 24 September became the first former Soviet state to complete a formal treaty with the Vatican. The document, guaranteeing the rights of Kazakhstan's 336,000 Catholics, was signed at Castelgandolfo during a visit by President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Meanwhile, a six-year Orthodox schism in Bulgaria was formally closed in October after three days of round-table talks with seven foreign patriarchs and 20 metropolitans. President Stoyanov had threatened in February to exclude Orthodox leaders from state ceremonies after failing in an attempt to mediate an end to the feud. The 2 October agreement confirmed the disputed leadership of Patriarch Maksim, but also provided for reinstatement of his excommunicated rival, 92-year-old Pimen, and the acceptance of his twelve rival bishops as synod members with titular rights. Orthodox leaders welcomed the deal as a possible example for settling parallel Orthodox disputes in Ukraine, Estonia and Macedonia. However, they also cautioned that reconciliation still had to be achieved at local level in Bulgaria.

Romania's Greek Catholic leaders continued to urge President Constantinescu to take more decisive steps to protect their rights. In a January letter to the parliament chairman, Ion Diaconescu, the Romanian Orthodox Synod urged parliamentarians to reject the 'unconstitutional and unjust' 1997 bill ordering a share of rural churches to be returned to Greek Catholics and warned of 'unpredictable consequences' if it was enacted. Yet Catholics urged the government to intervene to resolve property disputes. Romania's independent *Editura tradiție* bulletin reported that the new Christian Democrat premier, Radu Vasile, had discussed the possibility of 'more substantial financial support' for Greek Catholics after his nomination on 2 April. However, a government communiqué the same day reiterated that an 'equitable resolution' would be found only via 'direct, sincere and fertile dialogue at local level between the communities concerned, with involvement by both church leaderships and mediation by local state bodies'. In a May report, the Vatican's Bucharest nunciature said that the Greek Catholic Church had grown threefold in five years to six per cent of the population, but that so far fewer than 100 eastern-rite churches had been handed back. In March fist fights broke out when Greek Catholics tried to reclaim possession of the Transfiguration cathedral in Cluj. Romania's Orthodox

leader, Patriarch Teoctist, blamed Catholics for rejecting his church's 'call to dialogue', but the Greek Catholic bishopric of Cluj-Gherla said that its ownership of the cathedral had been recognised by a court order and accused Orthodox objectors of 'manifestly disregarding the laws and authority of the state'. Up to 2500 Orthodox priests protested about the incident at a rally in Cluj a week later. However, a Greek Catholic senator who was present at the cathedral clash warned that 'Orthodox injustices' had created similarly explosive situations in 200 other communities.

Despite the deadlock, Catholic-Orthodox relations showed signs of an upturn. In a May-June exchange of letters with the Greek Catholic Metropolitan Lucian Mureşan, Patriarch Teoctist agreed that Catholic and Orthodox representatives would begin discussing the disputes with a Vatican observer from September. A month later, the Orthodox synod said it had decided to ask the pope to visit Romania, following a fresh invitation from premier Vasile during a Vatican audience on 7 July.

In October the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches confirmed that they were relaunching joint commissions on property and jurisdictional issues after an eight-year impasse. A communiqué from the Bucharest Patriarchate said that both sides had pledged to stop forcibly reoccupying disputed churches and seeking legal injunctions. It added that the 15 bishops and archbishops participating in the talks, co-chaired by Muresan and Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea, had recognised the difficulty of translating top-level accords into practical action, but had vowed to ensure 'sincerity, mutual respect and brotherhood' in future contacts. Visiting the Vatican in November, the state secretary for cults, Gheorghe Anghelescu, said the two churches were now 'fully willing' to create 'wholesome conditions' for a papal pilgrimage in May 1999. It would be John Paul II's first to a predominantly Orthodox country.

In the Czech Republic, Catholic church leaders said that the new premier, Josef Tuszovsky, had proved 'more open' to the church since taking over from the ousted Václav Klaus at the end of 1997. A church statement said that Cardinal Vlk had agreed with the new premier at an 'exceptionally friendly' first meeting that 'no immediate solution' could be expected to church-state disputes in view of the new government's 'limited mandate'. It added that both leaders concurred that future church-government talks should form one aspect of 'a general improvement in the state's legal system'. 'The church is not demanding privileges for itself', Cardinal Vlk explained. 'For us, it is only a question of being treated as an equally valued part of the state's structure. We would like to cooperate, and not just be placed in a corner through the so-called separation of church and state.'

With opinion surveys showing the Czech Social Democrats enjoying a strong lead over Klaus' now-divided Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská Demokratická Strana* (ODS)) in the run-up to the national elections on 20 June, some Catholics feared that a new government might prove even more hostile to the church. In a pastoral letter the 16-member Bishops' Conference urged citizens to overcome their 'dislike of politics' and consider the readiness of candidates to subject 'private and group interests to the common good'. This intervention failed to dent the victory of the Social Democrats, however, who formed the Czech Republic's first avowedly left-wing government after a convincing June victory. Although the new premier, Mílos Zeman, agreed to set up a property commission with church leaders, talks broke down in November when church leaders objected to the presence of former communists on the government team. The Czech culture minister, Pavel Dostal, pledged that 'non-partisan' negotiators would be appointed after mediation talks hosted by President Havel in November. In December the Zeman government said it

would increase the salaries paid to the Czech Republic's priests and ministers by 15 per cent from 1 January. Although representing a net rise against 8.5 per cent inflation, the move still placed priests' earnings well below the national average.

Hungary's 1997 treaty with the Vatican on church properties and finances had been ratified by parliament in December, with a promise that the country's 77 other registered denominations and faiths would be assured similar rights. According to government figures, claims had been submitted since 1991 to 7000 confiscated church buildings, of which 200 had been accepted and a similar number rejected. When Hungary's centre-right Fidesz party emerged victorious in parliamentary elections on 24 May, church leaders nevertheless welcomed promises of improved relations.

In neighbouring Slovakia, a September election victory by the centre-right Slovak Democratic Coalition (*Slovenská Demokratická Koalícia* (SDK)) ousted premier Vladimír Mečiar after six years in power. The new head of government, Mikuláš Dzurinda, immediately set about restoring market economy practices and improving relations with minority groups. In December the new parliament voted overwhelmingly to support Slovakia's eventual integration into the EU. Hopes were high for an improvement in the church's position too. Talks on a concordat, launched in June 1997, had broken down in the spring over the Mečiar government's demand for a say in the nomination of bishops. Meanwhile, nine out of 14 Catholic bishops had signed a letter in May deploring government attempts to control the media and Slovakia's growing international isolation.

Further south, Slovenia's Roman Catholic Church accused the government of Janez Drnovšek of failing to honour an agreement on property restitutions reached with Archbishop Franc Rode of Ljubljana in July 1997, even after extending the deadline to the end of the year. In a pastoral letter Slovenia's Catholic bishops confirmed that a planned national synod of the republic's three dioceses of Ljubljana, Maribor and Postojna would help 'create a society of orderliness and solidarity'. They added that the synod, for which the planning committees were set up before a 1996 visit by the pope, would also attempt to heal 'wounds inflicted by the totalitarian regime', as well as encouraging a state of law, freedom of speech and democratisation in 'all spheres of life'.

In neighbouring Croatia, the year was dominated by a three-day October visit by the pope. Its highlight was the beatification of Yugoslavia's best-known communist-era martyr, Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac (1896–1960), at the national shrine of Marija Bistrica. Besides Zagreb, Pope John Paul visited Split and Solin, where he urged 'authentic reconciliation of all ethnic, religious and political groups, and greater democratisation in society'. Meanwhile he also appealed for peace in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, where violence had been brewing through the year.

The Kosovo Liberation Front (UCK) had launched its military campaign in 1996, the year the Yugoslav government had refused to allow the reopening of Albanian schools and cultural associations. The general mobilisation was in part a reaction to the conciliatory policies of Ibrahim Rugova, who had been elected president of Kosovo in 1992, three years after Belgrade's withdrawal of the province's autonomy. By early 1998 UCK fighters had captured a third of Kosovo in a series of strategic attacks, only to lose it again to a Serb counteroffensive. By then, reports of savagery had mounted. In late February and early March Yugoslav police and army detachments massacred 90 villagers, a quarter of them children, in Kosovo's northwestern Drenica district. Yugoslavia's Serb majority voted overwhelmingly not to accept international mediation in an April referendum. In an apparent change of stance, this

was criticised by some Serbian Orthodox leaders. The Orthodox bishop of Kosovo, Artemije Radosavljević of Raško-Prizren, was refused a meeting with Serbia's President Milan Milutinović the same month, after demanding equal rights for all citizens and warning that Serbs would suffer if the Belgrade government's 'undemocratic policy' continued.

Under a peace deal on 13 October, brokered by US envoy Richard Holbrooke, the Belgrade government agreed to withdraw at least two thirds of its 25,000 troops as part of a NATO-monitored ceasefire, but there were doubts whether the deal would last and whether President Slobodan Milošević could be trusted. The Organization on Security and Co-operation in Europe, which helped arrange the peace, reported that most provisions were being implemented. But President Rugova insisted that 'significant Serb forces' were still in place, a finding backed up by most independent observers. Pessimists believed that war was certain in Kosovo if compromises were not hatched out to allow longer-term evolutionary solutions. Albanians already made up 20 per cent of rump Yugoslavia's population and had Europe's highest birth rate. Sooner or later Serbs and Albanians would have to find ways of living and sharing together. Meanwhile, with the pope, Patriarch Aleksii of Russia and other church leaders all urging peaceful and just solutions, events were certain to show how much practical influence, if any, religious communities could bring to bear.

The Kosovo crisis had a dramatic impact on events in adjoining Albania, which mobilised troops and appealed to the international community to protect fellow Albanians across the border, as well as to provide help for a growing influx of refugees. The country had internal preoccupations of its own. The new premier, Fatos Nano, resigned in September, and was replaced by a fellow socialist, Pandela Majko. Meanwhile the opposition attempted to boycott and sabotage a planned referendum on the new socialist-drafted constitution, and the autumn was marked by rival demonstrations and shootings. However, the constitution was approved in November by 90 per cent of citizens. It declared Albania a democratic state of law and a market economy, with guarantees for minority rights and confessional freedoms.

Throughout Eastern Europe concern was mounting at the new social and moral disorders which had multiplied since the collapse of communist rule. There was no equivalent anywhere to the economic chaos prevailing in Russia, where the rouble collapsed in the spring amid a collage of rocketing prices, unpaid state salaries, collapsing industries and diminishing welfare protection. Primakov's September approval as premier by the Duma with a mandate to control the crisis was welcomed by Patriarch Aleksii, who had warned of civil war the same month, but the social and economic morass was as wide as ever.

Several Roman Catholic Bishops' Conferences took steps to combat growing racist tensions. The Czech bishops condemned violence against the Roma minority in a March pastoral letter, and backed a government decision to restore confiscated properties to the country's Jewish minority. In Hungary, where the new Fidesz-led government agreed in June to pay US\$28 million in annuities to Jews as compensation for nationalised properties, the late archabbot of Pannonhalma monastery, Chrysostomos Kelemen, became the most senior Catholic church leader to be awarded Israel's Righteous among Nations medal for saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

Popular antisemitism remained a particular problem in Poland: it was regularly given free rein by the powerful Redemptorist-owned Radio Maryja, which was regularly listened to by 17 per cent of the country's 39 million citizens, placing it

fifth in national ratings. In a December 1997 letter to the head of the Redemptorist order Cardinal Glemp had criticised Radio Maryja's 'politicised broadcasts' and urged its director, Fr Tadeusz Rydzyk, not to 'demand privileges and stand above the law'. Meanwhile, the secretary-general of the Bishops' Conference, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, accused the Catholic radio of 'broadcasting obscenities' and condemned its 'often unchristian and dishonest language'.

Pieronek's feud with Radio Maryja was one reason why, at its May plenary, the Bishops' Conference voted not to reappoint him to a further five-year term. It was not the only reason. He had also been criticised for his openness to left-wing politicians and his extensive media contacts. However, Pieronek had sympathisers too. Within days of his dismissal, the pope named him head of a new Church Concordat Commission, charged with implementing the newly ratified 1993 Vatican treaty. Press commentators said that the specially-created post was a sign of papal backing for Pieronek, who was also elected rector of the Papal Theology Academy in Kraków.

In an outspoken interview Pieronek accused Polish church members of being 'selective and inconsistent' towards the Catholic faith. He added that some preferred to use 'methods of intimidation' rather than to instil hope, and looked 'for external enemies rather than fault within themselves'. 'Let's say it plainly – not many are aware of their faith and its consequences', the bishop told Poland's *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily. 'Consciously selecting truths of faith means a Catholic feels himself wiser than God. This means haughtiness and inconsistency.'

These were not isolated criticisms. In a June report to the Bishops' Conference, meeting at Pelplin, another bishop, Kazimierz Romaniuk of Warsaw-Praga, said that research suggested that Polish priests fully respected the church's authorities and rarely posed disciplinary problems. However, he added that many were being attracted to 'consumption-oriented lifestyles', and preferred to spend spare time watching television rather than in socially or spiritually useful activities. In his Easter message Cardinal Glemp had urged priests to cooperate more closely with lay Catholics, adding that the church's contacts with young people and families would suffer without a 'correcting of consciences'.

The case of young people was particularly worrying. Although three-quarters of pupils at top Polish schools had called themselves religious in a 1997 survey, only one in 10 had described their faith as strong, while a mere fraction had said they would go to a priest about their problems. According to a January World Health Organisation report, 60 per cent of Polish boys and 20 per cent of girls had had sex by the age of 18, while every sixth Polish child was born to a teenager and illegitimate births were rising fast. Material cravings, fashions and TV violence were new to postcommunist Poland. So was the decline in education, thanks in part to budget cuts which had produced one of Europe's lowest percentages of higher education. Meanwhile, a third of those affected by unemployment, running nationally at 15 per cent, were under 24, and the proportion was steadily increasing.

Legal experts blamed youth aggressiveness for a dramatic increase in gang warfare and crimes of violence, including a doubling in armed robberies between 1993 and 1995. However, critics claimed that premier Buzek's Solidarity-led government had done little to help young people.

1999–2000: the Millennium and Beyond

In most countries, problems still remained over the legal status of churches. In a

special report in early 1999 the Vienna-based International Helsinki Federation recalled that the 54 countries belonging to the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe had renewed earlier pledges, made in 1994, to ensure freedom of conscience and 'foster a climate of mutual tolerance'. However, it added that many had since taken steps to curb new religious movements. With violations cited in Austria, France, Germany, Greece and other countries, religious rights should no longer be seen as an issue affecting only postcommunist countries, the report added.

There appear to be clear attempts on the part of EU governments to adopt legal provisions to 'protect' individuals from 'new religions'. ... While western governments and human rights groups have typically focused attention on restrictions in the East, little or no attention has been paid to similar developments in Western Europe. A high proportion of OSCE governments have either clearly violated the 1994 declaration or contributed to increasing religious intolerance. Minority religions have been publicly marginalised and stigmatised, and there have been attempts to hinder their activities. Against this background, a manifold pattern of virtual persecution has developed.

In the Czech Republic, President Václav Havel attempted to mediate between the government and the Roman Catholic Church when talks again broke down in January 1999 over the inclusion of former Communist Party officials in a new joint commission. The Bishops' Conference insisted that its negotiators would not sit alongside representatives of a 'criminal organisation' which had been 'fully responsible for one of the twentieth century's most brutal persecutions of the church'. A remodelled commission was agreed to in February at talks between premier Miloš Zeman and Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, although church leaders cautioned that substantial agreements could still take several years.

In Russia, where minority denominations were feeling the effects of the restrictive 1997 law on religion, only 50 per cent of religious organisations had been re-registered, as required, by the deadline of 31 December 1999. Meanwhile in neighbouring Belarus' Cardinal Świątek conceded in June 1999 that the government still hoped to restrict the number of visiting foreign priests, but insisted that no attempts were being made to impede church activities. However, in April 2000 a Polish priest, Fr Zbigniew Karolak, barricaded himself into his parish church in Brest in defiance of an expulsion order from the local authorities. The priest finally left in June, in what the auxiliary bishop of Pinsk, Kazimierz Wielikosielec, branded a case of discrimination by the Belarusian 'postcommunist atheist authorities'.

Quite apart from the legal question, there remained the deeper problem of anchoring the presence of the churches in fractious postcommunist societies now undergoing profound changes. In January 1999 an Austrian sociologist, Fr Paul Zulehner, confirmed that surveys in Croatia, the Czech Republic, eastern Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine had indicated an average 15 per cent decline in religious practices since 1991. He added that professed atheists ranged from zero in Romania to 40 per cent in former East Germany, compared to a European average of 5 per cent, and argued that these figures refuted claims that religiosity was uniform and widespread in Eastern Europe.

Poland remained the exception, with at least a third of citizens claiming to attend church regularly, and 95.6 per cent listed as Catholics by the central statistics office. In other countries, hopes of a postcommunist Catholic revival seemed to have vanished for good. Up to 70 per cent of neighbouring Slovaks were regarded by the

church as nominal Catholics. However, attendance at mass ranged here from 80 per cent in villages to three per cent in the towns. Meanwhile, 40 per cent of the Czech Republic's 10.5 million citizens declared themselves Catholics in a survey conducted by the church's *Katolický týdeník* weekly in late 1999; but only five per cent said they attended mass, while church sources estimated that no more than one in ten were even Christians. 'Filling the great space of freedom has created problems in all postcommunist countries', explained Fr Daniel Herman, spokesman for the Czech Bishops' Conference. 'The church expected more people to identify with it, but its priorities were sometimes mistaken. Today, we're still busy evaluating the role of religion in our national life.'

These words summed up the basic challenge to the churches regionwide. In early 1999 a Polish church synod warned priests to avoid politics and 'luxurious lifestyles' in a series of 15 reports on bringing church practices into line with the Second Vatican Council. It reiterated that the church did not 'identify with any party' and that no party had 'a right to represent it'. However, it called on lay Catholics to be active politically and defended the right of priests and bishops to set out 'Catholic criteria' for public life. 'The laity are directly called to participate in political life, since politics has become a significant way of promoting human dignity', continued the text. 'But priests should avoid any appearance of taking sides and maintain a cautious distance from political institutions and actions. This also means parties which draw inspiration from church teaching in their programmes.'

In Russia, the challenge was more acute. In a January 2000 survey only 1.9 per cent of Russian citizens said that they believed that religion was an important life component, placing it in ninth place behind health, work, family life and other values. By then, fighting was raging again in the southern republic of Chechnya, where the Russian army had stormed Grozny in retaliation for the death of over 200 civilians in a series of apartment block blasts in Moscow and other cities. In January 2000 Patriarch Aleksii appealed for the continuation of the Russian offensive to 'defeat international terrorism'. Russia's acting president, Vladimir Putin, another former KGB agent, received the patriarch's blessing during the 7 January Orthodox Christmas, a week after taking over following the resignation of Boris Yel'tsin, and made the Chechnya campaign a major feature of his successful campaign for the country's spring presidential election.

In October the atmosphere at the Roman Catholic Church's Second Synod of Bishops on Europe contrasted markedly with the optimism of its 1991 forerunner. In his opening address the pope admitted that 'the enthusiasm touched off by the overthrow of ideological barriers and peaceful revolutions of 1989 appears to have been extinguished in a clash with political and economic egoism'. Disappointment was expressed at the Synod over the lack of religious renewal in Eastern Europe, as well as over laicisation, the crisis in vocations and continent-wide moral dissoluteness.

The mood in Eastern Europe was affected, as before, by events in the Balkans. When talks on a Serb–Albanian peace plan for Kosovo broke down at Rambouillet, NATO finally responded with an air offensive, which lasted from the evening of 24 March until a new peace deal on 3 June. Although the bombing of a traditionally Orthodox country brought a show of solidarity for Serbia from Orthodox churches, religious leaders denied taking sides.

The Vatican's nuncio in Belgrade, Archbishop Santos Abril Castello, said that a plan for suspending hostilities during the western Easter, tabled by the Vatican's secretary for relations with states Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran on 1 April, had been 'well received' by the Yugoslav government, adding that he had also obtained 'very

good cooperation' from Serbian Orthodox leaders. Meanwhile in a 26 April appeal on behalf of the Council of Catholic Bishops of Europe (CCEE) Cardinal Miloslav Vlk condemned the 'atrocious acts of violence' inflicted on Albanians from Kosovo and described their expulsion as a crime. However, he added that European bishops' compassion extended to 'all innocent victims of the war', including 'inhabitants of Yugoslavia living under the shock of constant bombardments'.

By contrast, the visiting Patriarch Aleksii of Russia accused NATO during a late April open-air 'solidarity service' in Belgrade of imposing a 'dictatorship of brute force'. However, other Orthodox leaders, while backing Serbia's retention of Kosovo, stressed that peace presupposed equal recognition of Serb and Albanian rights. Marin Varbanov, a spokesman for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, explained:

It is one thing for the Orthodox commonwealth to intervene on behalf of a sovereign country, but quite another to contemplate the vicious way the ex-communist Milošević behaves towards the population of the Balkans, creating problems between Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Albania. The most prophetic voices are calling on people to stop committing crimes against each other, irrespective of whichever side they are on. But the Serbian government's attitude towards its citizens of Albanian origin is particularly sensitive here in the Balkans. Orthodox churches are not blindly following any ideological slogan.

The conflict left an estimated Albanian death toll of 10,000. Meanwhile, the remorseless NATO raids against Belgrade and other towns also brought a change of stance by the Serbian Orthodox Church's ruling Synod, which finally called on 15 June for Milošević's resignation.

Under the June peace accord, Yugoslav forces in Kosovo were to be replaced by UN peacekeepers, KFOR, with the task of protecting Serb civilians from reprisals and ensuring the safe return of refugees. Violent incidents nevertheless continued over the next year. By early 2000 the pope and other Catholic church leaders had come out against the maintenance of economic sanctions against Yugoslavia, arguing that they were merely punishing the poorest and weakest. In April 2000, in a sign of interfaith reconciliation, a religious council was set up in Kosovo, bringing together Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim leaders and modelled on a similar body now functioning in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Despite the tensions, the Kosovo conflict failed to derail wider Catholic-Orthodox relations, which were dominated during 1999 by the pope's visit to Romania, the first by a reigning pontiff to a predominantly Orthodox country. The visit, from 7 to 9 May, followed an agreement by Romania's long-feuding Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches to resolve their disputes through a series of diocesan commissions. The government confirmed that its invitation had been made possible by the 'easing of tensions', and the visit was judged a success by all sides. In June Patriarch Teoctist and the bedridden Greek Catholic leader, Cardinal Alexandru Todea, were awarded Romania's highest state honours by President Emil Constantinescu for their contributions to national reconciliation, while in May 2000 the patriarch made an unprecedented gesture by visiting Todea at his Reghin home, and praising him as a 'martyr cardinal' and 'great personality'. However, detailed interchurch agreements were expected to take some time.

A month after his Romanian triumph, the pope announced plans to visit Armenia, to pay his respects to the Apostolic Church's dying Catholicos Karekin I. The initiative was called off at the last moment because of Karekin's poor condition, but on

8–9 September, on his way back from India, the pope stopped off in Tbilisi, to visit Georgia's Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II and President Eduard Shevardnadze, and to say mass for the Catholic minority in this former Soviet republic, currently put at 100,000 out of a population of 5.5 million.

The pope held state invitations to Bulgaria and Macedonia, as well as to Ukraine, whose President Leonid Kuchma had relented on his previous hesitation and had sent an invitation to the pope via premier Vitali Pustovoitenko who visited the Vatican in January 1999. Ironically, in a June interview with Germany's *Focus* weekly Patriarch Aleksii had cited tensions in Ukraine to rule out a visit to Russia. In July, however, Cardinal Glemp of Poland found the patriarch in a conciliatory mood, noting that he had made no mention of 'proselytism' during their Moscow talks. During the same month, the Orthodox Church of Greece rejected discreet Vatican requests for the pope to be allowed to make a stopover in Athens, insisting that the Catholic Church should first apologise for its past misdeeds.

Talk of a possible meeting between the pope and Patriarch Aleksii had resurfaced by January 2000, when 13 Orthodox patriarchs and metropolitans met in Jerusalem for the eastern Christmas, accompanied by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Georgia, Belarus', Bulgaria and Greece. Plans were confirmed, after 40 years of preparation, for an international Orthodox synod – although the ten-point agenda, which will include ties with Catholics, remained under negotiation.

The conciliatory atmosphere was shortlived, however. Addressing the Polish Sejm on 24 January, at the close of a four-day visit to Poland, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios provoked angry Catholic reactions by describing Uniatism, or Greek Catholicism, as 'an artificial creation, called into being in the name of proselytism'. In July, when the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox met in Baltimore for its first plenary since the Balamand session in 1993, the two sides failed to reach agreement on the topic 'the ecclesiological and canonical implications of Uniatism'. A brief communiqué confirmed that documents prepared on the subject had been met with 'reserve and even outright opposition' and said that negotiators had agreed that further studies were needed of various issues arising from the 'exceptionally thorny question of Uniatism'.

The top-level deadlock did not prevent Catholic and Orthodox leaders from cooperating locally. In Ukraine in October 1999 leaders from various denominations attended a mass funeral in L'viv for exhumed victims of communism, while the August 2000 millennium of the creation of a Christian state in Hungary was marked by an unprecedented gesture, when Patriarch Bartholomaios announced that the national patron, St Stephen (975–1038), had become the first western saint to be similarly recognised by Orthodoxy.

Ecumenical ties between Catholics and Protestants also achieved local successes, helped by a *Common Declaration on Justification* signed by Catholic and Lutheran leaders in Augsburg on 31 October. In January 2000 Poland's Bishops' Conference agreed to a joint recognition of baptisms with the country's seven largest minority churches, while in March Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders regretted their past misdeeds at an ecumenical service attended by five European presidents in Gniezno. In the neighbouring Czech Republic, Catholic representatives attended the consecration of the Hussite Church's first woman bishop, while at an ecumenical symposium in Rome the pope voiced 'great regret' over the martyrdom of the early Czech reformer Jan Hus (1368–1415). Orthodox and Protestant Christians were conspicuous among 70,000 who attended a December 1999 youth meeting of the

ecumenical Taizé community in Warsaw.

Meanwhile, Europe's Bishops' Conferences pledged to step up 'practical and thematic cooperation' with non-Catholic denominations in a set of 26 guidelines issued in February 2000 at a joint Prague committee meeting of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) and Conference of European Churches (CEC). A press statement said that the text, signed by CCEE and CEC presidents Cardinal Miloslav Vlk and Orthodox Metropolitan Jérémie of Paris, was the 'fruit of decades of practical and shared experience' and would be used to prepare a European Ecumenical Encounter in Strasbourg at Easter 2001.

European unity remained high on the agenda of the Catholic Church and was highlighted when the pope made Saints Edith Stein, Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena co-patrons of Europe at the October 1999 Rome Synod. The admission of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to NATO on 12 March 1999 made membership of the EU the next logical step. Scepticism remained widespread about the economic wisdom of EU integration for countries whose economies remained trouble-prone and uncompetitive. In February, however, an ecumenical delegation from Hungary became the latest to tour the EU's Brussels HQ, returning fully convinced of the need to support integration. When the EU Commission resigned en masse a month later, accused of corruption, the appointment of Italy's Roman Catholic ex-premier Romano Prodi as new Commission chairman raised hopes of closer cooperation with churches.

The path looked certain to be long and tortuous. In October 1999 a Commission report suggested that Poland's slow adaptation of its laws to EU norms had made it ill prepared for membership. There was talk of inviting Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia, and perhaps Romania and Bulgaria, to open negotiations too. Public support for EU admission fell to below half in Poland during the same month. When the CCEE met in Athens in November to discuss the results of the Rome Synod, however, its 34 Bishops' Conferences agreed that priority should be given to building up the 'European awareness' of local churches. Among other initiatives, the Commission of EU Bishops' Conferences (COMECE) had published a declaration in March 1999 on the need for a European peace based on 'truth, memory and reconciliation'. It was also working on an Ecumenical Charter, for release in 2001, and filed its own draft for an EU Charter of Basic Rights in March 2000.

Themes like these were at the forefront when the pope began a 13-day tour of his native Poland, his eighth and longest, on 5 June 1999. 'Solidarity opened the doors of freedom to countries enslaved by the totalitarian system, tore down the Berlin Wall and contributed to the unity of Europe after the divisions which followed the Second World War', he told an audience of 700,000 in the Gdańsk hippodrome a few hours after arriving. 'At that time I heard you say in Gdańsk, "There is no freedom without solidarity". Today we need to say, "There is no solidarity without love".'

That message – solidarity through love – became a theme of the record-breaking pilgrimage, which took the pope to 16 Catholic dioceses and 22 Polish cities. Preaching in the northeastern town of Elk, where joblessness ran at 26 per cent, he urged listeners not to 'harden their hearts to the poor'. 'The poor are in our midst, those forgotten by their own families and by society, the degraded and humiliated', the pope told a congregation of 400,000. 'We need people who are poor in spirit – people open to truth and grace, open to the great things of God. There is a need for great-hearted people who do not let themselves be deceived by the splendour of this world's riches.'

Martyrs were in the pope's mind when he celebrated mass for a million people on

13 June in Warsaw, against a backdrop of city-centre hotels, department stores and office blocks. He beatified 108, all victims of Poland's 1939–45 Nazi occupation, including 15 from the Auschwitz concentration camp and 43 from the death camp at Dachau. Addressing the Polish parliament two days earlier, his first ever speech to a national legislature, the pope said that the Vatican had supported Poland's western integration 'from the beginning'. However, there was an 'urgent need for new initiatives', he added, to ward off new divisions and conflicts.

Events ten years ago in Poland created a historic opportunity for Europe, having abandoned ideological barriers once and for all, to find again the path towards unity. If we wish Europe's new unity to last, we must build on the basis of the spiritual values which were once its foundation, keeping in mind the wealth and diversity of the cultures and traditions of individual nations. This must be a great European Community of the Spirit.

As far as the pope's own church was concerned, the rebuilding process was certainly continuing. In 1999 alone, Russia had gained a formally constituted Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference, as well as its first three native-trained priests, a Council of Lay Catholics and an edition of Second Vatican Council documents. Moscow's Polish-built Immaculate Conception church had become the country's second Roman Catholic cathedral after that of Novosibirsk, dedicated in August 1997, while a third would be inaugurated the following August at Irkutsk for the new Roman Catholic see of Eastern Siberia. In Central Asia three new apostolic administrations were established at Alma Ata, Astana and Atyrau in Kazakhstan, while Bishop Paweł Lenga's administration at Karaganda was upgraded to a full diocese.

In early 2000 Lithuania regulated the Catholic Church's status with a series of agreements with the Holy See, while Ukraine despatched its first Vatican ambassador, Nina Kovats'ka, and Belarus' had eleven Polish-born nuns beatified as martyrs. Slovakia's Catholic Church was planning the world's first Roma diocese, while in the Czech Republic a tentative accord was reached on the future of priests and bishops ordained without church authorisation under communism. In Albania the pope set up four new apostolic administrations at Lezhë, Pult, Rrëshen and Sapë, while the thousandth anniversary of Hungarian statehood had produced an unprecedented show of closeness between church and state leaders.

There were ugly incidents to be tackled as well. In Poland police and army units had intervened in May 1999 to remove over 300 crosses from the former Auschwitz concentration camp, installed by Catholic nationalists in protest against exclusive Jewish claims to the site. The recriminations nevertheless continued. In January 2000 the protest leader, Kazimierz Świton, received a suspended sentence for inciting racial hatred and insulting Poland's state authorities. In Slovakia Jewish groups protested against acts of commemoration of Mgr Josef Tiso, the wartime president hanged for alleged war crimes in 1947, while elsewhere in Eastern Europe, encouraged by the election successes of Jörg Haider's far-right Freedom Party in Austria, nationalist and right-wing groups continued to make regular use of religious justifications.

For all the tensions, the Catholic Church was aware of the challenges facing it in the new millennium and was ready to admit that its own record had been far from spotless over the previous decade. In Poland in May 2000 Cardinal Glemp became the latest Catholic leader to apologise for the 'sins and failures' of church members,

accusing citizens of moving too easily from ‘the sins of communism to the sins of capitalism’, while singling out antisemitism and communist-era collaboration among his country’s Catholic clergy. Lithuania’s Catholic bishops had taken similar steps a month earlier, with a pastoral letter marking a ‘Day of Penance and Regret’ on 15 April. The letter listed the church’s ‘involvement in nationalist conflicts’, as well as its failure to react adequately when ‘national egoism was placed above values proclaimed by the Gospel’. ‘Although the church was faithful to the mission entrusted to it by Jesus Christ, it did not avoid mistakes caused by its members’ weakness’, the letter conceded. ‘We are sorry its children sometimes resorted to unworthy methods in spreading and defending the faith, forgetting that God is Love. The violence and hatred used in violation of the Gospel are a burden on the church’s memory.’

The pope had called for the millennium to be a time for examining consciences. His summons to penance and reflection encountered some mixed responses, especially among church leaders with a keen awareness of communist-era hardships. Yet it was also a reminder that great challenges still lay ahead in clearing the debris of the past and ensuring a secure future for Christian life.

Note

- ¹ Please note that previous articles by Jonathan Luxmoore in *RSS* have covered religious developments in Eastern Europe in 1994 (*RSS*, vol. 23, no. 2, June 1995, pp. 213–18), 1995 (*RSS*, vol. 24, no. 4, December 1996, pp. 357–65) and 1996 (*RSS*, vol. 25, no. 1, March 1997, pp. 89–101).

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