

# Vatican saw gains in Eastern Europe

by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

In drawing up the balance of the activities of the Holy See in 1989, we can say that this was the year of the resurgence of the Roman Catholic Church in the countries of Eastern Europe: from Poland, to Czechoslovakia, to the Soviet Union, Ukraine, Belorussia, and the Baltic countries.

In the present phase of historical acceleration, while the walls are falling and the Russian empire is entering a deep crisis, the believers, the clergy, and the Catholic hierarchy in the Iron Curtain countries, encouraged by the papacy of John Paul II, have gone down into the streets, defying dangers and persecution to demand their rights with courage and determination.

In Poland, the most advanced situation, where the Church already enjoyed a certain liberty, it now has a true juridical status, and official diplomatic relations have been reestablished between the Warsaw government and the Holy See.

In Hungary, a new law is being prepared on freedom of religion. The figure of the heroic Cardinal Mindszenty has been rehabilitated, and the details are being worked out for a papal visit to that country.

In Czechoslovakia, the Holy See has been able to proceed to name some titular bishops of dioceses. In Lithuania, the Church practically enjoys total freedom. Religious instruction has been reintroduced into the schools.

The great problem of Soviet recognition of the Catholic Church of Eastern rite in Ukraine—the so-called Uniates—promised by Kremlin leader Mikhail Gorbachov to the Pope during his recent visit to the Vatican, is in the process of being resolved.

The historic meeting between Gorbachov and John Paul II, which took place at the Vatican on Dec. 1, will of course be remembered as one of 1989's most significant events. Without detracting in any way from the extraordinary nature of this event, it is necessary, however, to make it clear that the Pope and the Vatican diplomats were very aware that they faced the leader of an empire in deep crisis, whose *perestroika* is continuing to fail and who is therefore desperately seeking diplomatic and propagandistic successes which he can play as cards internally and abroad.

## Internal life of the Church

In terms of the Church's internal affairs there were two important encounters between the Pope, the Roman Curia,

and two bishops' conferences: that of the United States and that of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The meeting with the U.S. bishops which took place last March was the occasion for an in-depth critical reflection on the so-called American Way of Catholicism and the ideology of U.S. society. Noteworthy was the speech given by John Cardinal O'Connor, the archbishop of New York, who gave a very precise overview of the traits of American society: "Three of these," he said, "are structurally hostile to the Church's teachings. They are: pragmatism, utilitarianism, and Social Darwinism."

The meeting with the German bishops took place in November and dealt with the relationship between papal teachings and theology in the countries of German language. This is not an easy topic, given the well-known "Cologne Declaration" signed by 163 theologians, which contested the central role of the Roman Church and the style of government of the present Pontiff.

Analogous initiatives followed the Cologne Declaration in France, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. The span and the timing of the attacks on the Pope, headed, among others, by well-known dissidents like Hans Küng and Eduard Schillebeeckx, betray the characteristics of a pre-arranged action whose purpose seems to be to undermine the Catholic Church.

## Plea for economic justice

Among John Paul's numerous pastoral visits to various parts of the world, we recall his trip to Africa, the fifth of his pontificate, last May. In visiting poor countries like Madagascar, Réunion, Zambia, and Malawi, the Pope renewed his pressing appeal for the creation of a world of greater justice: "On many occasions I made an appeal for a new economic order that would allow the peoples in developing countries to guide their own destinies and to guarantee resources for employment for the active population. . . . Now is the time for a new and courageous international solidarity that is not based on one's own selfish interests, but which is inspired and guided by an authentic concern for human beings."

## Concern over growth of cults

To conclude this brief roundup of the Church's initiatives, let us glance at the activities of the commissions, congregations, and councils of the Holy See, and mention the growing concern of the Church over the expansion and spread of religious cults. According to a study of last October by the Pontifical Council on the Ministry to Migrants and Itinerants, in the United States several million Hispanics, who are traditionally Catholic, went over to cults. In Africa there are more than 10,000 sects.

In Ibero-America, 20% of the population has left Catholicism for cults. In Argentina alone, 2,000 religions are recognized. In the Philippines more than 1 million Catholics have joined sects.