

# The Pope and Poland



**T**HE POPE'S visit to Poland in June raised hopes that the Christian church might be able to redirect the development of communist societies.

There is no doubt that, following John Paul II's visit to his homeland, the Vatican regards itself as strongly-placed to assume the leadership of the Polish masses.<sup>1</sup> But what kind of leadership can the people expect? In what ways would their condition be improved if the god-less leaders of the Communist Party were supplanted by the holy man from Rome?

When he visited Latin America in February, the Pope spoke about human dignity in terms which were indeed challenging to the military dictatorships of the continent.

"This dignity is infringed on the individual level when due regard is not had for values such as freedom, the right to profess one's religion, physical and mental integrity, the right to essential goods, to life . . . It is infringed on the social and political level when man cannot exercise his right of participation, or when he is subjected to unjust and unlawful coercion, or submitted to physical and mental torture . . ." declared the Pope.<sup>2</sup>

All of which sounds revolutionary, but is not. The essential ingredient of the Pope's message is that values expressed in contemporary Western society—with some peripheral amendments, no doubt—are what he advocates. This is revealed in particular on the question of property rights, which determine political liberties and economic well-being.

**W**HEN he dealt with the question of land ownership, in a speech in Poland, he was confronting the single most important issue for the majority of people on earth, who are peasants.

He referred to the inalienable right of man "to land,"<sup>3</sup> by which he meant individual proprietary rights.

That may sound like a statement designed to create a head-on conflict between church and state in a society apparently dedicated to collective ownership of the means of production. If this were so, it would certainly place the Pope in direct opposition to the present regime, and present them with a choice of clear alternatives.

The difficulty with trying to perceive the Pope's views as a challenge to the Communists, however, is that in Poland 80% of the land is in fact privately owned!

The Polish Communist Party, when it assumed power, interpreted Marx's statement that land was not part of the means of production to mean that it was not vital to nationalise all land.<sup>4</sup>

Using the Agrarian Reform Act 1944 to take away the holdings of large landlords, the Communist leaders merely redistributed the land to a larger number of peasants. The result: land was fragmented to uneconomically small units, which proved to be obstacles to the modernisation of the agricultural sector.<sup>5</sup>

The Pope's model of an alternative system, based on a long tradition of defending private property rights in

land—and the dispensation of charity to those consequently forced into penury (through private rather than state sources)—would yield the same kind of results.

**T**HE OFFICIAL line taken by the Catholic Church was authoritatively summarised by Pope Leo XIII in 1881 in his Encyclical letter on *The Condition of Labour*.

Pope Leo noted "the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor." And then he launched his attack on the socialist remedy.

For private property in land, he asserted, must be defended. If a person "lives sparingly, saves money, and invests his savings, for greater security, in land, the land in such a case is only his wages in another form; and consequently, a working-man's little estate thus purchased should be as completely at his own disposal as the wages he receives for his labour . . . to say that God has given the earth to the use and enjoyment of the universal human race is not to deny that there can be private property. For God has granted the earth to mankind in general; not in the sense that all without distinction can deal with it as they please, but rather that no part of it has been assigned to any one in particular, and that the limits of private possession have been left to be fixed by man's own industry and the laws of individual peoples . . ."

All of which sounds plausibly

● Cont. over

## Will Marxists discover the market?

**THE WASTE** of natural resources in Russia has been phenomenal. This is not surprising, for land has no value. Well, not for Marxists, anyway. According to the labour theory of value, only those things which have labour time buried in them have value. Raw land, therefore, cannot be objectively valued. Consequently, there has been little check on the way it has been used relative to other factors of production.

There are signs, however, that official thinking may be changing towards what one Russian economist calls the more rational use of land resources.\* Academician Khachaturov maintains: "Along with improvement in the planning of land resources, stimulation of economical use is also of considerable significance."

The big breakthrough is buried in this sentence:

"In our opinion, one way of doing this is to set prices for the land." But since he resists the idea that "state property in the USSR, would be put up for sale"—implying the heretical recourse to the market framework—he has to concoct a formula for valuing land according to criteria acceptable to Marxist planners.

Recommendations include the need to compile a land register, and the valuation of individual plots to ensure its "thrifty" use. These are useful advances in ideological thinking, the end result of which will be—later, if not sooner—a recourse to the much-despised market valuations, since even the bureaucratic planners will one day realise that these are the best "stimulation of economical use".

\*T. Khachaturov, *The Economy of the Soviet Union Today*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.