

Catholic Intellectuals and Constitutional Change in Poland

ROMAN SLOWACKI

Since the Polish "spring" of October 1956, Polish Catholics have been able to play a modest role in national life. Intellectuals were grouped in clubs in the major cities – Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan, Torun and Wroclaw – with a total of 3,500 members. There are also reviews and publishing houses run by Polish Catholics. The most important are *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Universal Weekly) which prints 40,000 copies; *Znak* (Sign), a philosophical and theological monthly which prints 5,000 copies; *Wież* (Link), a monthly review of "personalist" inspiration which prints 5,500 copies. *Znak* also publishes about 20 books a year, *Wież* is responsible for three or four books, while the small publishing house *Odnowa* (Renewal) also puts out three or four new titles. *Wież* publishes a monthly bulletin of documentation, *Chrzescijanin w Swiecie* (Christian in the World), which has a print order of 3,000. These different groups and activities constituted together the movement known as *Znak*, which had five members in the Polish Parliament (out of 458) and enjoyed good relations with the Polish bishops. *Znak* has been largely responsible for contacts with Catholic international movements. The Clubs of Catholic Intellectuals are affiliated to *Pax Romana*, and M. Skwarnicki, a member of the editorial board of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, is vice-president of *Pax Romana*.

A major concern of the *Znak* movement has been to implement and promote in Poland the renewal of the Church proclaimed by Vatican II. Though relatively small in numbers and working in extremely unfavourable conditions (advance censorship, rationing of paper stocks, ban on modern methods of production, complete exclusion from the mass-media), *Znak* has nevertheless managed to exert a considerable influence on the religious life of the country largely through its contacts with Catholic élites (young priests, intelligentsia, parish groups). In close touch with the episcopate, it has been a catalyst in the discussions and controversies of the post-conciliar period. Essentially a federation of diverse tendencies, *Znak* has not always managed to avoid internal tensions, but its sincerity and dedication have not been questioned.

But Znak has not merely been concerned with the inner life of the Church. It has tried to play a part in the social life of the country. This involved it in dialogue with the communist authorities. Znak's aim was to achieve a broader base for the civic formation of the people, and to make them aware of their role as active agents in social and economic life. The Znak members of Parliament and the leaders of the movement stressed the need for unity and self-restraint. This was mere prudence, since to suggest stirring up antagonism against the apparatus of power would have been counter-productive. A small group could hope to survive and continue working in a communist and totalitarian State only if it built on a solid alliance with the Church and proclaimed solid moral values. Political "compromise" or "opportunism" would not in any case be effective, since no intelligent communist leader could permit the Church to be used as the power-base for a political movement. Only one movement is allowed to play a serious part in political life. This is the pseudo-Catholic movement called Pax which has endless resources at its disposal and has never won the approval of the bishops.

Yet Znak has tried to represent an independent public opinion. Its success can be gauged by the sanctions which the Party has imposed on it from time to time, such as freezing its assets, reducing the print orders of magazines and banning meetings.

However, the existence of the Znak group in the Sejm (Parliament) was tolerated by the Party. Znak holds an important place in Polish public opinion, and it has many links with Catholics in other countries. This provided the Party with a useful alibi whenever it wished to point to the democratic liberties which existed within the communist regime. But the Party, condemned reluctantly to tolerate the Znak group, had arbitrary and exclusive power to decide who could stand for election and thus could change the composition of the Znak group. This was how the most outspoken and courageous deputies quickly lost their seats. Makarczyk and Kisielewski were early examples. At the time of the demonstrations in May 1968, when the students proclaimed the need for respect for the law in public and cultural life, only to be treated by the press as hooligans and beaten up by police who arrived at the University of Warsaw in tourist coaches, the Znak group moved a motion of censure on the government. Jerzy Zawieyski, at that date a member of the Council of State, made speeches defending the students and the writers who were also under attack. He was removed from the Council of State and not subsequently allowed to stand for election.

The crisis within Polish Catholicism deepened from that date. During the 1972 elections, the Party not only rejected some of the candidates put forward by the Znak group, but insisted on replacing Mazowiecki, editor of the review *Wież*, who was considered to be too uncompromising, by Auleytnier, secretary of the Club of Catholic Intellectuals in

Warsaw. In this way a man with something to say had to give way to a less talented but more amenable character. Personal rivalries and natural ambition were exploited to weaken the Znak group. At the same time one of the Znak deputies, Zablocki, tried increasingly to politicize the movement. He organized big international conferences to which many Catholics from abroad were invited. The conference held at Nieborow near Warsaw was the most important. These moves aroused mistrust in the rest of the movement: the speeches at the conference were filled with boring platitudes – as indeed they had to be if they were to receive the Party's authorization.

The decisive test came with the changes in the Constitution announced by the Party at its sixth congress in 1972 and laid before the public in January 1976. Three proposals in particular aroused concern: the principle of the "leading role of the Party" was to be firmly asserted; the "unshakeable and firm bond" with the Soviet Union was to be built into the Constitution; and it was stated that "citizens' rights are inseparably linked with the honest fulfilment of their duties". These three proposals unleashed an avalanche of complaints and protests which came mainly from writers and intellectuals. Here we are concerned, however, with those made by the Church. For example, Cardinal Wyszynski stressed the dangers of the changes on 25 November and Cardinal Wojtyla of Krakow made a statement on 6 January 1976. Then three days later the Polish bishops addressed a memorandum to the government. When some slight concessions made to public opinion proved unsatisfactory, the Polish bishops issued another statement on 25 January 1976, which aimed at defending not only the rights of the Church but also the rights of man.

On 17 January 1976 the presidents of the Clubs of Catholic Intellectuals, the editors of the five principal reviews and the Znak deputies all met in Warsaw. The purpose of the meeting was to draft a letter to the special parliamentary commission entrusted with the constitutional changes. The document which they prepared was written in the Christian spirit. The signatories expressed their concern about the civic aspect of the proposals. They found it hard to reconcile the principle of the equality of all citizens with the leading role of the Party. While recognizing the importance and the *de facto* necessity of the alliance with the Soviet Union, they thought the consecration of this principle in a constitutional document would be a grave blow to Polish sovereignty. And they expressed their deep disquiet at the idea that the rights of citizens should depend upon the "fulfilment of their duties".

Two of those present withheld their signatures: the above-mentioned Zablocki and the President of the Club of Catholic Intellectuals in Poznan, Ozdowski. The following signed the letter: the presidents of the Clubs of Catholic Intellectuals, Andrzej Swiecicki (Warsaw), Stefan Wilkanowicz (Krakow), Kasimierz Czaplinski (Wroclaw), Andrzej Tyc

(Torun); three editors, Jerzy Turowicz (*Tygodnik Powszechny*), Bodgan Cywinski (*Znak*) and Tadeusz Mazowiecki (*Wież*); and the head of the *Znak* publishing house, Jacek Wozniakowski. All of them, including those who did not sign, were received by Cardinal Wyszyński who urged them to remain united at such a critical time.

But they did not remain united. The *Znak* movement has been split. On 10 February Parliament assembled to vote for the new draft Constitution. Of its 458 members, only one abstained*, Stanislaw Stomma, president of the *Znak* group in the Sejm. The other four *Znak* deputies approved a text that the Polish bishops as well as Catholic public opinion had found unacceptable. The next day Stomma was eliminated from the list of candidates for the elections, which were to follow three weeks later.

A conclusion and a question arise out of the events described. The new group of *Znak* deputies in Parliament, it may be concluded, no longer represents the Catholic movement in Poland. In a sense, the situation has been clarified. Polish Catholics are now not represented in the Sejm, and this might be considered "normal" in the circumstances. There is now no question of collaboration. But the unity of Polish Catholicism has not been broken; on the contrary the new *Znak* deputies are isolated, and those who have gone through the long trial of strength with the government have found a still deeper unity.

As for the question posed by this situation, it is a purely formal one, and therefore not very serious. Will the new group in the Sejm continue to call itself *Znak*?† It no longer has the right to do so. Public opinion will decide, provided it knows what has happened.

There is a more general lesson to be drawn. The resolution of the constitutional crisis is paradoxical like so much in Poland. The Party may possibly have made a mistake in assuming that it could go ahead with its constitutional changes without regard for Polish opinion. This could be the new *felix culpa* which might lead to another manifestation of public opinion before which, as in 1970, the Party would have to give way. Indeed, this has already happened in a sense: for the text "approved" on 10 February (its rejection would have been unthinkable) was different in detail from the one originally proposed.

* Another deputy was absent. Professor Groszkowski, who did not represent any party, handed in his resignation from the Sejm the day before the vote.

† Since this article went to press the new group has in fact annexed the name of *Znak*.