

Pope John Paul II

The conventional view of John Paul II is that he is a reactionary pope who has undermined the *perestroika* of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). On forty international trips he has reasserted hard-line Catholic doctrine on contraception, abortion and homosexuality. Of his US trip someone said: 'The Pope got it upside down - he kissed the ground and trampled on the woman.'

But the roots of these conservative attitudes lie in Poland. And the key to understanding him is that he has a visceral detestation of communism. Since his election as pope 10 years ago John Paul has become a 'transnational actor.' He has been unable to shed his instinctive Polish reactions; his pontificate looks eastwards and has been dominated by its *Ostpolitik*.

In the 'era of stagnation' John Paul burst on the international scene with a powerful surprise effect. He was young, 58, unexpected (the first non-Italian Pope for 455 years) and richly talented.

He seized the initiative. Vatican Radio stepped up its Polish service, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's house-organ, started a Polish edition. The Pope claimed religious freedom for the four million Catholics of the Ukrainian Catholic Church - officially abolished and forcibly converted to Orthodoxy in 1946.

The high point of this first period was the visit to Poland in June 1979. It was not the 'cause' of Solidarnosc: but it laid bare the discrepancy between the *pays legal* and the *pays reel* of which Solidarnosc was the expression. John Paul acted as a tribune of the people.

Just two months before the suppression of Solidarnosc, he stole marxist clothes by cheekily asserting the superiority of labour over capital. He claimed this was the content of Catholic social doctrine.

Brezhnev died November 10, 1982. Under Yuri Andropov

and Konstantin Chernenko the ideological conflict between the Kremlin and the Vatican sharpened. It was not totally mad to think that the Bulgarian secret service - and therefore Andropov - had been behind Mehmet Ali Agca's attempt on the Pope's life on May 13, 1981. The Pope recovered and launched a crusade to save Latin America from the perils of marxism.

On his visit to Nicaragua in March 1983, John Paul first invented and then excommunicated the 'popular church' which allied itself with the Sandinistas. He was particularly harsh on the three priests who were ministers in the Sandinista government.

In 1984 came a document on 'liberation theology' that was the equivalent of Ronald Reagan's 'evil empire' speech. 'This shame of our time,' the Pope thundered, 'cannot be ignored: while claiming to bring them freedom, these totalitarian and atheistic regimes keep whole nations in conditions of servitude which are unworthy of mankind.'

John Paul kept up this relentlessly Manichaean language till 1987. The idea that there was something different about Mikhail Gorbachev came slowly.

John Paul at first maintained his aggressive approach. He invited himself to Lithuania and Czechoslovakia for various anniversaries, knowing that he would be refused.

A more positive response to Gorbachev began to come in the autumn of 1987. The Vatican realised that the celebrations of the millennium of Christianity in the lands of Rus', due the following year, would provide an opportunity to gain a foothold in the Soviet Union. The ultimate prize would be the restoration of the Church in the Ukraine and Lithuania.

But some preliminary steps had to be taken. First the Ukrainian Catholic Church, swallowing hard,



The Pope: Unable to shed his instinctive Polish reactions

was instructed to 'forgive' the Russian Orthodox Church for abolishing it. Then the Pope evenhandedly condemned 'imperialism' whether of the collectivist (ie communist) or the 'liberal' (ie capitalist) variety.

That infuriated the American Right and enabled the Vatican to send a delegation of no less than 10 cardinals to Moscow and Zagorsk for the millenium celebrations last June.

The Pope's top diplomat, Agostino Casaroli, had a private meeting with Gorbachev during which they discussed the Ukraine and Lithuania. Casaroli thought Gorbachev's position 'solid', and said that religious freedom in the USSR would come in the context of 'an overall progress in freedom.' This was a departure from the Vatican Radio line that religious liberty is the touchstone of all liberty.

What does John Paul think about *perestroika*? After the 19th Party Congress he said to a Soviet journalist: 'This

democratisation, this greater participation of the citizens in social and political life, fulfils the expectations not only of the Eastern countries but also corresponds to the social teaching of the Church.'

That could merely mean that the Pope feels he has been vindicated. 'We think in centuries here' is a Vatican slogan. But even if the remark were merely tactical and diplomatic, it is a far cry from 'this shame of our time.' And it has already borne fruit.

On October 22 the Catholic cathedral in Vilnius, Lithuania, for many years used as an art gallery, was restored for worship by popular demand. Will John Paul be prepared to help Gorbachev restrain the separatist elements in Lithuania? And would that be a good thing? Tony Benn once said that if the Kremlin and the Vatican acted together, then the result could be the worst tyranny the world had ever known. • *Peter Hebblethwaite*