

Prosecution of Clergy Justified in Tito's Mind

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Athens, Nov. 17.—The sharpest active clash between any European state and the Roman Catholic Church is now taking place in Yugoslav Slovenia and Croatia.

Marshal Tito's view on this question is that religion is fully permitted within Yugoslavia, but that "certain leading clergymen have adopted a reactionary attitude toward aspirations of the people before the war, during the war and even now," and that "the Catholic Church has shown to the full extent its hostile attitude toward the spirit of the new Yugoslavia."

The government says it believes the Roman Church is directly responsible for organization of armed bands in Croatia called "krizhari," or crusaders, and that it is fully justified in prosecuting anti-national elements, whether clerical or lay.

Certainly, it is obvious from the Vatican's traditional viewpoint that it has no use for communism, and likewise it is known that Moscow considers the Vatican as the centre of anti-Soviet fulminations. The present battle was therefore a logical development.

The trial and conviction of Archbishop Stepinac was merely the most dramatic in a series of moves by the government against the Catholic clergy. Many lesser priests have already been tried and imprisoned or have fled the country.

In each process the public prosecutor has sought to demonstrate a connection between the Catholic clergy and fascist or terrorist or axis organizations. In a trial at Maribor, witnesses swore that Bishop Vicar Serich urged treasonable activities upon his flock and that fascist organizations were formed by former Slovene clerical party leaders, like Miho Krek. During the Stepinac trial the public prosecutor contended the Archbishop was a servant of "imperialism and international reaction."

While the church had the advantage of a centuries old tradition of strong Catholicism in Northern Yugoslavia, in its counterattack against the regime it is pretty well muzzled. The Catholic attitude is perhaps best demonstrated in a secret memorandum Stepinac prepared shortly before his arrest, which said:

"The real reason for this long and stubborn struggle of the present regime against the Zagreb archbishop is that . . . to remove the archbishop would be to give Catholicism its heaviest blow, to pierce the heart of the Croatian soul and to leave clear the road which leads to the inner organization of the Church, in order to subdue the Church to the will of the regime, which today, according to admissions of its leaders, is internationally known as the most faithful disciple of the Soviet regime in the Balkans.

"In fact it represents a clash between communism and Catholicism, which are today the most opposed concepts of life in the world. It does not like to lead an open fight against religion because of world opinion. Therefore it attempts to carry the fight on political grounds."

Those who support Stepinac claim he never took an oath of allegiance to the Pavelic Government and assert that the president of tribunal trying him did so himself. They claim Pavelic sought Stepinac's removal three times and that the archbishop only a year ago had warned his clergy to "avoid every word that could be interpreted as having a purely political character."

Catholics claim the trial was grossly unfair and that Stepinac's defense was unable to introduce much of its evidence.

Curiously enough, despite the drive by the government against the Church there have been various local manifestations of mystical religious feeling and "miracles," such as belief by the peasants of Srop-ska Moravica that the Holy Virgin appeared there a few weeks ago.

Certainly the Church and remnants of Matchek's Croatian Peasant Party are the two greatest organized opposition machines in Croatia, where most regime opponents want to create an independent state. The regime is out to reduce influence of both. In this, it must be admitted, even opposition Serbs demonstrate apathy because of their detestation for both Croats and Roman Catholicism.

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