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Quo Vadis? The Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic

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Introduction

From the beginning of Christianity until the present time the Catholic Church has played a highly influential role in the life and development of the Czech lands. As in the other Eastern European countries, the current position of the Church in the Czech Republic is complicated by the fact that the past is firmly intertwined with the present and plays a key role in defining future relations between church, state and society, via legal, economic, cultural and political legacies.¹ Like the other churches, the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic has to face numerous external as well as internal problems. Some of the most serious issues are the restitution of its property, the fate of the former 'underground' male and female priests (including married clergy), the alleged or real cooperation of some still active members of its clergy with the communist secret service, the challenge coming from the sects and new churches, and the necessity of dealing with the attitudes of state and society, which are often strongly influenced by the traditional Czech habit of connecting religious and secular affairs. The Catholic Church has not only to find solutions to the above-mentioned issues which will be acceptable to all participants, but also to take a new stance to meet future challenges.

Although the adoption of Christianity helped the Czechs to enter the western world and to benefit from its culture, as an import from Germany the new religion was widely feared for its possible germanising effect. Christianity therefore gained a foothold among the Czechs only very slowly, but it would be safe to say that in the twelfth century, although some remnants of paganism survived, the decisive majority of Czechs ceased to regard Catholicism as a foreign-implemented phenomenon and willingly and consciously adhered to the Catholic Church and its teachings.

The original financial dependence of the Church and religious orders on the landowning towns and nobility changed during the fourteenth century, when thanks to extensive endowments of the land as well as other tangible gifts the Church and its orders came to own approximately 30 per cent of the territory of today's Czech Republic and became one of the wealthiest classes of society.² The church-initiated trial and execution in 1415 of Jan Hus, the Catholic priest and rector of the Charles University in Prague who called for the reform of the Church, was accompanied by mass conversion of the Czech people to Protestantism. The militant Hussite movement led to the Hussite wars and later to the Thirty Years' War in Europe. These wars damaged or destroyed most of the property of the Catholic Church and of the

orders, much of it of irreplaceable artistic value, and reduced their land holdings to just 10 per cent of their original extent.³ The Catholic Church and its orders were again dependent on the good will of their patrons, who were now Protestants.

The fateful collision between Catholicism and Protestantism was decided for the Czechs at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620. Resulting emigration, famine and disease reduced Bohemia's population from about 1,700,000 to less than one million,⁴ and the territory was now firmly incorporated into the Habsburg Empire. Despite the loyal behaviour of the Catholic Church, the Catholic victors forced it to relinquish its claims for the restitution of its property, and to depend on alternative sources.

The Counter-Reformation was in part a tool for the Habsburg attempts to germanise the Czech lands. The Church was given resources to recatholicise the country, but the Czechs were highly suspicious about its influence and wealth. In reality, however, the power of the Church was diminished by the centralising efforts of Maria Theresa, and governmental interference in the affairs of the Church was even more pronounced during the rule of Joseph II. In order to forge a diverse realm into a modern unified state the Josephan reforms prohibited the Catholic Church to acquire any additional assets, and its existing property was placed under strict state control. The Church's ownership of agricultural land shrank to some five per cent of the territory of today's Czech Republic.⁵ All monasteries not directly involved in education, science or health care were closed and their property was secularised 'for the benefit of religion and love for one's neighbour';⁶ in reality however mainly in order to finance the objectives of the state.

The anticatholic sentiments of the state were shared by many Czech politicians and scholars who 'rediscovered Hussitism and Protestantism, and declared them to be the true expression of the Czech national genius, rejecting at the same time Catholicism as a false doctrine foisted on [the Czechs] by the alien Habsburg dynasty'.⁷ Many Catholic priests and believers who were sincerely engaged in the cause of the Czech national revival were suspected of promoting the interests of the Catholic Church and hence of the Habsburgs.

After the 1918 defeat and dissolution of the Habsburg Empire the Czechoslovak government incorporated the 1874 Habsburg law on state control of church affairs into the legal code of the Czechoslovak Republic. The 1919 land reform further reduced the land holdings of the Catholic Church to just 2 per cent of today's Czech territory.⁸ The needs of the Church were provided for by additional taxation of the believers and of the profit and non-profit organisations within the individual parishes. To compensate for regional differences the state made a financial contribution through the so-called *congrua*.

The situation of the Church was further complicated by internal rifts. The new government-sponsored Hussite Church (founded in 1920) called on the Czech people to join it as the national branch of the Catholic Church, but over 80 per cent of Catholics remained loyal to the Roman Catholic Church.⁹ The anti-Roman Catholic sentiments of the state and of part of the public were held in check only because both feared further alienation of the Catholic Slovaks, who were already dissatisfied with some of the new governmental policies, and because of negative changes in the European political climate: anticlerical propaganda lost its appeal, when state and society faced the loss of the Sudetenland and the possible occupation of the rest of the country.

During the Nazi occupation the Catholic Church somewhat redeemed its reputation, because the majority of the Catholic clergy called for and participated in the

anti-Nazi resistance movement. They were among the first persecuted, tried, jailed, sent to concentration camps and executed. The collaboration of some members of clergy with the Germans was later however cleverly used by the communists against the ordained and lay communities. After the 1948 communist *putsch* the Communist Party aimed at smashing the Church's infrastructure, seizing control of its surviving institutions, launching a concerted atheisation campaign in schools and public life, and dividing the Catholic Church from other churches and the hierarchy from the lower clergy.¹⁰ The following confiscation of church-owned property made the Catholic Church and its orders almost entirely dependent on the state.

The position of religious orders was somewhat different from that of the rest of the Catholic Church. According to an undisclosed agreement between the Czechoslovak communist government and the Vatican the religious orders existing within the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic could theoretically keep their structure and exist as a Conference because of the signed statutes between the Czechoslovak state and the Holy See. Although legally they continued to exist the religious orders were however banned in 1950, their members dispersed or jailed and their property nationalised.

All successive communist regimes forcibly exercised their control over the property of the Church and over the religious orders and other religious associations and institutions. Despite some cosmetic directives about the preservation of national monuments the church-owned property that was distributed among governmental and party organisations was often intentionally used for the most unsuitable purposes, seriously damaging or even destroying objects of artistic value.

The new *Ostpolitik* of the Polish Pope John Paul II fostered the activities of those involved in 'underground' religious and secular dissent, and this helped to 'foment and shape the Revolution of 1989 in central and eastern Europe by preaching a revolution of conscience'.¹¹ After the 1989 revolution the state normalised its relations with the churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. The Czech Republic, established after the 1993 dissolution of the Czechoslovak Republic, is today a democratic state with approximately 10.5 million people.¹² Any faith aspiring to become a legally acknowledged entity in the Czech Republic has only to prove that it has more than 10,000 members.¹³ All churches are regulated by the 1991 Law on the Freedom of Religion and the Churches and by the 1991 Law on the Revision of Ownership Relations to Land and other Property.

The Ecumenical Movement

The Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches (Ekumenická rada církví) was set up in 1984. It brings together the Protestant, Orthodox and other non-Catholic Churches. The Ecumenical Council, a leading body of the Czech Ecumenical Conference (Česká ekumenická konference), is currently presided over by Pavel Smetana, who is also the head of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the second largest Christian Church in the country.

Most Christian churches registered in the Czech Republic are members of the Ecumenical Conference (see Table 1). The Czech Ecumenical Conference also includes as observers the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (7674 members), the Federation of Jewish Communities (1292) and the Anglican Church (100). The Salvation Army (80) is only freely associated with it.¹⁴

The original observer status of the Roman Catholic Church (with approximately 4 million believers) was changed at its own request: after a unanimous secret vote of

Table 1. Churches within the Czech Ecumenical Conference¹⁵

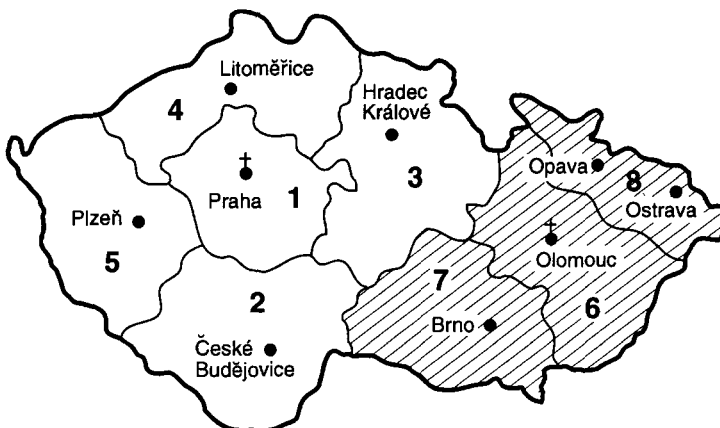
	Number of believers
(1) Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren	203,996
(2) Czechoslovak Hussite Church	178,036
(3) Silesian Evangelical Church	33,130
(4) Czech Orthodox Church	19,354
(5) Evangelical Church in Czech Lands	4151
(6) Evangelical Methodist Church	2855
(7) Brethren Church	2759
(8) Czech Old Catholic Church	2725
(9) Union of Baptist Brethren	2544
(10) Union of Brethren	2269
(11) Apostolic Church	1485
Total	453,304

the permanent members of the Ecumenical Council, in February 1996 the Catholic Church became an associate member of the Council. Although associate membership does not give the Catholic Church the right to vote, it allows it to take part in all other activities of the Ecumenical Conference. Church representatives welcomed the change as inspired by papal documents as well as by contemporary ecumenical developments in the Czech Republic, and also as 'a result of long-lasting cooperation and a positive step towards the desirable unity of all Christian Churches'.¹⁶

The Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is not only the largest and the most influential but also the most controversial religious association in the Czech Republic. For the administrative purposes of the Church the territory of the Czech Republic is divided into the Czech province, headed by the archbishop of Prague, Miloslav Cardinal Vlk, and the Moravian province, headed by the archbishop of Olomouc, Jan Cardinal Graubner (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Czech and Moravian provinces and bishoprics (Czech – light; Moravian – cross-hatched).¹⁷



Some statistical data about the individual bishoprics are given in Table 2:

Table 2. Catholic Believers in the Czech Republic in 1997, Divided by Bishoprics¹⁸

Bishopric	Bishops	Catholic adherents	No. of priests
<i>Czech:</i>			
(1) Prague	Škarvada, Malý, Paďour	604,000	240
(2) České Budějovice	Liška	400,000	147
(3) Hradec Králové	Otčenášek, Kajnek	470,000	187
(4) Litoměřice	Koukl	280,000	123
(5) Plzeň	Radkovský	242,000	88
<i>Moravian:</i>			
(1) Olomouc	Hrdlička	750,000	357
(2) Brno	Cirkle	750,000	341
(3) Ostrava/Opava	Lobkowicz	600,000	197
Totals 8	11	4,096,000	1680

Catholic Religious Orders

According to their rules religious orders expect their members to live in poverty, chastity and obedience, and to focus on service to the Church and the needy. Priests belonging to religious orders live under rules or *regulae* and are called the *regular* clergy, while those ordained for ministry in a province or a diocese belong to the *diocesan* or *secular* clergy. The Czech Republic today hosts 30 male and 49 female orders (see Table 3 for the largest of these). Of these the Jesuits have the most controversial reputation. They are remembered mainly for burning *libri prohibiti* (forbidden books, some of which were written in Czech) during the time of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Although the Jesuits can point to many positive contributions they have made to Czech culture and to their suffering under various

Table 3. The Most Numerous Religious Orders in the Czech Republic, 1 January 1995²⁰

Male orders	No. of members	Female orders	No. of members
1. Salesians	293	1. Sisters of Mercy of St Charles Borromeo	2101
2. Praemonstratensians	128	2. Sisters of Notre Dame	228
3. Jesuits	115	3. Sisters of the Cross	223
4. Dominicans	110	4. Franciscan Sisters (Opava diocese)	163
5. Franciscans	73	5. Franciscan Sisters of the Holy Family	144
6. Capuchins	64	6. Dominican Sisters	128
7. Redemptorists	45	7. Franciscan School Sisters	123
8. Benedictines	28	8. Sisters of Cyril and Methodius	99
9. Franciscans-Minorites	27	9. 'Grey' Sisters	87
10. Carmelites	24	10. Franciscan Nuns of the Most Blessed Sacrament	76
Total	907	Total	3372

totalitarian governments, the majority of the Czech public remains highly suspicious of these old 'enemies of the Czech people and nation'.¹⁹

Property

The economic and financial relations between the Church and the newly established democratic state are now based on the above-mentioned laws of 1991, which also acknowledge the *Catholic Church as such* as a juridical person, but unfortunately do not fully clarify the scope of its legal status. Irregularities in the legal standing of the Church are often exploited by the opponents of the restitution of property to the Catholic Church. The laws also originally applied only to individuals and 'only to the property confiscated between 25 February 1948, the date of the communist takeover, and 1 January 1990',²¹ and excluded all political parties and churches in the Czech Republic. The state was later willing to reconsider its position and to deal with the restitution of property previously belonging to secular and religious organisations, including the Catholic Church.

The stance of the churches in the Czech Republic on the restitution of their property, approved and supported by the Catholic Church, is summarised in the following excerpt from a document adopted by the Ecumenical Conference of Churches at its 1993 Annual Conference in Prague:

- 1 Although the churches are interested in the return of all property confiscated after 25 February 1948, they are eventually willing to accept a list of the non-returned property, with an enclosed satisfactory explanation as to whom and for which purpose the property would serve.
- 2 As a matter of principle, the churches demand that the last ties of their current economic dependence on the state for covering their expenses be severed within a maximum of ten years.
- 3 The churches hope to be able to cover their direct expenses by using the voluntary gifts of their various sponsors, tax assignations [by individual taxpayers], tax concessions [by the state], and also financial help from churches, religious institutions and organisations abroad.
- 4 The churches also expect that the state will participate in financing religious activities which serve the whole of society, namely in the spheres of education, culture and health care, and which are financially supported when provided by secular organisations.²²

The least troublesome claimants of previously church-owned property seem to be the Protestant churches. They insist that they are not part of the heated dispute about restitution; this is because the value of their past assets is negligible, and they are therefore unhappy with the state's financial support and gladly settle for the return of only a few of their previously-owned buildings.

Although the majority of the Czech political leaders believe that the return of Jewish property is a moral imperative, this is a very thorny issue. The Federation of Jewish Communities points out that the cut-off date set for the restitution of confiscated property virtually excludes all Jewish claims. According to the Federation the existing restitution laws also avoid dealing with the property of Jewish communities and individuals confiscated by the Nazis, and with that of émigrés. The Czech state is willing to consider some of the Federation's criticism, but any shift of the date to include the period before the Second World War is non-negotiable. It would open the door to additional demands from currently excluded nationals and organisations, and

in particular from some three million expelled Sudeten Germans. The Czech Constitutional Court will decide the constitutionality of 'limiting the return of property only to people whose property was seized on racial grounds, while excluding those whose property was seized for reasons of political persecution'.²³

As noted above, despite the fact that the religious orders in Czechoslovakia were *de facto* banned in 1950 an agreement between the Czechoslovak communist government and the Holy See provided them with continuing legal standing. After 1989 the orders could therefore immediately enter into negotiations with the new Czechoslovak government, while the Catholic Church itself had first to be recognised by the state as a juridical person. The restitution of property to religious orders, according to the official spokesman for all orders, Dominik Duka, should not be a problem, because their restitution claims differ considerably from those of the dioceses and parishes.

Most urban-based orders will probably not demand the restitution of any land suitable for agriculture and grazing. They plan to generate income by renting or selling some of the returned buildings. The remaining property will have to support itself by providing educational and charitable services to the public. All living expenses and the expenses for repairs and maintenance of their property not covered by profits will have to be financed from alternative sources, for example, savings or financial compensations for unlawful imprisonment of the members of the religious orders as well as possible financial help from religious institutions and orders at home and abroad.

The situation of the 'rural' religious orders, which in the past used the profits from agricultural activities to cover their expenses, is somewhat different. Renting or selling their property can be difficult because it is often in an unfavourable geographical location, which makes it unattractive to prospective renters or buyers, including the state. Until improved transport and widely computerised communications eliminate the need for investors to be close to big cities these religious institutions will have to be provided either with the land or with some other economic basis to ensure their existence and their ability to carry out their educational and charitable activities.

All orders will also ask the state to participate financially in maintaining national monuments they own and other property used for orphanages and care facilities. They deny any claims that the restitution of property currently used as orphanages and homes for the disabled and senior citizens will result in a change of use, or that the residents will be submitted to undue religious influence. They point out that, with the exception of a few buildings to house the members of their orders, all buildings so far returned are being used for religious, educational and charitable purposes. They also point out that, because of a shortage of people able and willing to care for the disadvantaged, the members of religious orders worked in orphanages and other institutions even during communist times.

In order to resolve endless disputes about church property the state and the Catholic Church will have to agree on some model of property ownership and financing based on that used in countries where the separation of church and state is complete. The Czech state would prefer the French system, whereby the state owns and maintains all churches and other religious buildings and allows their rent-free use by the (poor and non-influential) Catholic Church. Donations and gifts account for 75 per cent of the financing; the rest is covered by collections designated for the maintenance of clergy. To make ends meet priests often have to have second jobs.²⁴

Although the Church is expected to ask for the return of at least some additional

property, it is willing to consider the system used in Italy. The Italian state allows every taxpayer to decide the specific purpose of 0.8 per cent of his or her taxes designated to support government or religious social and humanitarian activities. The state itself participates in financing the Church's activities in the sphere of culture, health care and so on. Expenses for the maintenance of religious historical monuments are jointly covered and coordinated by the Church and by the local and state authorities.²⁵

The Czech government is also under increasing pressure from Pope John Paul II, who is urging all involved parties to conclude this controversial issue. Despite their statements, Czech government officials hesitate to solve the problem of the restitution of church property by signing a bilateral agreement between the Czech Republic and the Holy See because this would also make the real separation of church and state final.

What began as 'the most ambitious restitution programme in East Central Europe has gradually turned into a legal and political nightmare, as [those] excluded from the process challenge the barriers to the return of their property'.²⁶ Unfortunately, the restitution process does not simply involve the turn of property, but also forces the Czech government and Czech people to face some unpleasant historical realities.

Underground Clergy

The Catholic Church is also expected to solve the knotty issue of the 'underground', 'silent' or 'catacomb' Church, which involves not only the problem of possible cooperation by some members of the official Catholic Church with the communist state security agency, but also the much thornier problems of celibacy and of women in the Catholic clerical hierarchy.

The existence of an underground priesthood was a result of the Czechoslovak communist regime's repressive policies that subjected the Catholic Church to state control and persecution. Many members of the regular and secular clergy and lay activist groups were interned and dispatched to join other members of the Church already experiencing 'reeducation in prisons and labor camps with an appalling death rate due to malnutrition, overwork, and diseases'.²⁷ Because of fear or weakness, a small percentage of the Catholic clergy voluntarily cooperated with the Czechoslovak secret police. Governmental control of the Church also included the close supervision of the remaining seminaries in Litoměřice and Bratislava, allegedly infiltrated by agents of the StB (*Státní bezpečnost*, the communist secret police). Teaching at those institutions was regulated by a strictly enforced state-censured curriculum.

Despite these difficulties, there were still many who demonstrated courage and the possibility of 'living within the truth' in the face of pressure and threats from the communist regime. The work of regular and secular clergy was supplemented by the activities of the underground Church, made up of legally ordained priests forbidden to perform religious services, priests secretly ordained abroad, and priests secretly ordained by underground bishops at home. Despite their suffering, the members both of the official and of the former 'silent' Church refuse to be labelled 'as martyrs-confessors' although 'according to the ancient tradition of the Church, it is precisely what they were'.²⁸

Married Clergy

Some of those who were ordained as underground priests were already married;

some married after becoming priests; and some of them were women. Reasons offered for this state of affairs include the lack of available candidates and the need to acquire coverage to fend off the suspicious communist apparatus.²⁹ The married priests were considered biritualists, ordained to perform the Roman Catholic as well as Greek Catholic rites, and some even became underground bishops, because the very existence of the catacomb Church depended on having at least one bishop able and authorised to ordain other members of the underground clergy. Many members of the former 'underground' clergy today insist that during the period of communist rule they were authorised by the Vatican to ordain priests and to consecrate bishops. They also argue that their actions in ordaining women and married men were not intended to challenge the rules of the Roman Catholic Church but because 'extraordinary times required extraordinary action'.³⁰

While acknowledging some of their claims, the Catholic Church's representatives point out the irregularities in the process, which 'favored quantity and not quality, and the priestly status was often debased for no obvious reason'.³¹ According to the highly critical statement of the office of the archbishop of Prague, the clandestine group had become 'a Church within a Church, a state within a state, an enclave operating according to its own rules and laws'. In his 1992 letter the archbishop of Prague thanked all 260 priests and 16 bishops for their work and asked them 'to make a final sacrifice by agreeing to the solution of the Church ... we must respect the normal conditions under which the Church works'.³² According to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by Cardinal Ratzinger, all underground priests and bishops had to report to the officially appointed church bodies or bishops by 12 April 1992, or be considered illegally ordained.

The Church's official position is that upon the fulfilment of some additional requirements male priests who remain celibate are eligible to continue in their religious service. The 60–80 priests and four bishops who are married and wish to remain a part of the Church have either to stop functioning as Roman Catholic priests or to join the Greek Catholic Church. To accommodate those who agree to be transferred, the Czech Church leaders propose to establish a new independent Greek Catholic diocese for the Czech Republic, because the only currently existing diocese is in Slovakia. The priests who refuse to become a part of the Greek Catholic Church can be relicensed, and can work as deacons or in some other lay position within the Catholic Church.

Female Clergy

One of the underground bishops, Felix Davídek, also ordained several women to perform the Catholic rite for the imprisoned female members of religious orders and for others sharing their fate. He claimed that the exclusion of women from the priesthood had no basis in theological dogma because 'all are equal in Jesus Christ'.³³ The Church directed that women were to be stripped of their ordination immediately; they have been informed that they will not be allowed to become Roman Catholic clergy under any circumstances. According to the statement of the 1995 Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, approved by Pope John Paul II, the decision about the ban on women priests is infallible. The only 'legitimate' opening for women in the 'inner circle' of the Roman Catholic Church is to become members of female religious orders. Otherwise they can work in some lay positions, or join the Old Catholic Church, which currently has two ordained women.

Solutions

The radical stance of the Catholic Church on the status of the underground clergy, together with the indifference of the general public, have resulted in considerable bitterness, resistance and even defiance on the part of some members of the former underground Church. Many of the unmarried ex-catacomb priests refuse to submit to additional requirements to validate their previous ordination. They argue that after so many years of active service the request to be reordained degrades not only them and their lifetime accomplishments but also the very substance of ordination and thus the Church itself. Their feelings are shared by many of the married clergy, unwilling to give up either their position or their families. Their cause, according to their leader the married Bishop Fridolín Zahradník, is a just one because 'there is someone else supervising us, the Lord, and not the Bishops' Conference'.³⁴

The transfer of married priests to the Greek Catholic Church, which is a part of the Catholic Church and differs from the Roman Catholic Church only in that it uses the Eastern rite and has married clergy, is apparently a reasonable solution, but many members of the former underground Church would prefer to work independently 'as they did during the times of repression ... among the common people, taking care of the Roma, immigrants, homeless and drug users, and teaching the Gospel'.³⁵ According to the leaders of the Catholic Church, the idea of the Bishops' Conference of the Catacomb Church that the establishing of an independent Catholic Church might be one possible solution is out of the question.

StB Agents in the Church

Many of the former underground priests refuse to accept the official position of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of some members of clergy with the *Státní bezpečnost* (StB). They point out that the same Church which is refusing to integrate those who fought against the communist regime is slow to investigate the allegations of clergy collaboration with the StB and to deny priestly status to those found guilty. The 'undergrounders' also claim that some former StB agents can be found among the faculty members of the Department of Theology at the Charles University in Prague, where they are expected to manifest the dedication of the Catholic Church to the Christian ideals of truth and justice. Some insiders allege that the department tries to get rid of open-minded staff members. Among those who have been forced to leave are such prominent members of the former religious dissent as Josef Šplíchal and Tomáš Halík, who label the school 'an ulcer on the body of the Church'.³⁶ They also allege that the department employs only staunch conservatives, and that it blocked the nomination of such anticommunist resistance figures and exceptional scholars as Josef Zvěřina and Oto Mádr for the post of chairman of the department. According to Dr Odil Štampach, fired in November 1996, the department is now made up mainly of those who 'before 1990 taught in Litoměřice, at the only institution for religious instruction in the Czech lands allowed by the communists to exist'.³⁷ Most of the teaching staff in the department claim that it is necessary to protect the Catholic faith from undesirable influences by 'inventing an enemy: the rest of the world, current western theology, etc.',³⁸ but in reality, say their critics, they are masking their own fears. Opposing any change in the traditional establishment of the Catholic Church, they force their way of thinking on their students, who are in the future expected to represent the Catholic Church in society at large. Thanks to this educational environment, many students may become narrow-minded bigots,

unable and unwilling to face current realities and unprepared to meet new challenges. If not reformed, the Catholic Church, according to Dr Štampach, may become an insignificant little group of eccentrics, if not a sect.

Attitudes

The conversion of a nation which until the middle of the seventeenth century had been 90 per cent Protestant³⁹ was the high point of the Church's effort at recatholicisation; but this very success only strengthened the already existing ambivalent feelings of the Czechs toward the Catholic faith. The Czechs became an almost exclusively Catholic nation, but they never forgave the Catholic Church for this. Many Czechs still feel that belonging to the Catholic Church is to be distinguished from belonging to the Czech nation; that is one is Catholic despite being a Czech. This separation of identities as 'a limiting factor in the undesirable mixing of the temporal and the eternal'⁴⁰ might be welcomed by the Church if it did not include a dangerous perception of the Church as just one of many institutions. The government tries to mould public opinion in line with its own ideology, and it is usually not above misrepresenting or twisting the facts about the Church and its activities past and present.

Restitution of Property

Participants in the restitution process are divided over just how many and which of the Catholic Church's approximately '1,500 buildings (including 100 hospitals), 160,000 hectares of forests and 47,000 hectares of agricultural land'⁴¹ should be returned. The Church's demands are often justified, but its sometimes clumsy attempts to promote its cause seem not only to irritate the Czech government but also to arouse old suspicions among the Czech people about threats from the 'clerical Hydra'.

According to opponents of the restitution of church property any claims about the legal duty to return 'stolen property' are not only pointless but also misleading. Until 1991 the Catholic Church lacked any legal status and to include its institutions, as religious orders, in the initial restitution process was 'a serious mistake, because the Church *as a whole* did not represent an independent identity, which could become an object of a civil law, and because the property could not be transferred to a non-existent juridical person'.⁴²

Some opponents of the restitution of property to the Church also argue that the allegedly incomplete separation of church and state allows financing of religion by the taxpayers. Others fear that restitution might transform the Catholic Church into a dangerously powerful political player. These concerns are voiced by some members of the government belonging to the ruling parties, Česká strana sociálně demokratická (ČSSD, or Czech Social Democratic Party), led by the prime minister Miloš Zeman, and Občanská demokratická strana (ODS, or Civic Democratic Party), led by Václav Klaus, the current speaker of parliament. It can be expected that Klaus will continue his policy of opposing any large-scale restitution to the Catholic Church in order to attract more supporters for his future political ambitions. The Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (KSČM, or Communist Party of the Czech Lands and Moravia) is opposed to religion as such, and while grudgingly accepting reality stands firmly against the restitution of property to the Churches.

Calls for the Roman Catholic Church to live according to its own teachings and be

Table 4. Percentages of Czech Public Supporting the Restitution of Property to the Churches⁴³

	1993	1996	1997
(1) Return the property owned			
(a) during the First Republic	5	7	8
(b) before February 1948	16	17	19
(2) Return only some of that property	21	27	29
(3) Return nothing more	43	36	32
(4) Don't know	15	13	12
Total	100	100	100

'barefoot and humble' are frequently heard from some members of Catholic clergy, notably Fr Oto Mádr. According to Fr Mádr everybody should own only as much property as is necessary to fulfill his or her calling. The lack of worldly possessions frees the Church to focus on service to the needy and to God.

The supporters of the restitution of church property maintain that many of the arguments used by the opponents are motivated by a typically Czech suspicion of anybody with extensive private property, a suspicion strengthened during decades of communist egalitarian ideology. They use the findings of the official polls to support their pro-restitution position (see Table 4).

According to the supporters of restitution the history of ownership relations between the state and the Church clearly proves that *de facto* the Church had juridical personality, and that in 1991 the state simply confirmed this. They also point out that their opponents' resistance to the idea that 'what was stolen should be returned' is untenable. Former premier Klaus and his ODS, the state and the general public, so concerned about the power of the Church, do not object to the often suspicious restitution of property to other institutions and its privatisation by them.

The allegedly incomplete nature of the separation of church and state is open to doubt as well, they argue. Any misunderstanding here is caused by the state, unwilling to relinquish its power over the internal and external affairs of the churches, and especially over the Catholic Church. Criticism about the impropriety of financing the churches from the state budget, they say, is unjustly aimed at the Catholic Church. All other churches registered in the Czech Republic are eligible for and receive some financial contribution from the state. Since the question of returning property to the Roman Catholic Church is not yet solved, and since the Church provides many social, educational and cultural services not restricted to its religious community, it would be unjust to expect Catholics alone to bear the burden of financial support for the activities of their Church. The supporters of restitution also regard any claim that the Catholic Church's economic potential could endanger the political strength of the state as ridiculous. Up to 1997 the Czech state had returned only 175 buildings out of a promised total of 800; and although the government recommended the return of an additional 232 buildings during the year 1997, none of these were actually handed over.⁴⁴ Considering that the total cost of renovation is estimated at approximately 30 billion korún (\$12 billion),⁴⁵ even if all property claimed by the Church were returned it would be in no shape to buy the access to political power that it allegedly seeks.

The fears of Mádr and other opponents that the restitution of property to the Church might 'hinder its development toward better forms of public and religious

service within the new, democratic framework⁴⁶ and have a negative impact on the still fragile legitimacy and reputation of the Church are dismissed by the supporters of restitution. To fulfill its calling to serve believers as well as the rest of society the Catholic Church needs some economic basis. According to Archbishop Miloslav Vlk, who supports restitution, the arguments used by its opponents are also dangerous because they use reasoning reminiscent of that of the communist regime, the consequence of which will be to prevent the correction of the crimes of communism. Archbishop Vlk also argues that scheming to deny the return of property to the Church is 'at odds with human rights and with the constitution, which guarantees the defence of the rights of ownership'.⁴⁷

The Underground Clergy

While the question of the restitution of property is highly emotionally charged, this is not the case with many other issues, especially those concerning the inner reforms of the Catholic Church. Arguments about the status and role of the priest and the Church, hotly debated abroad, leave the Czechs largely unmoved. This is partly because the Czechs have ambivalent feelings about the Church, and partly because they have a limited understanding of the problem and are distracted by current economic, social and political pressures.

There is a general indifference about the fate of female priests; and this is shared by the majority of male members of the former underground Church. The possibility of reinstating the existing female priests now or in the future is hardly mentioned by any of them because the majority of single or married ex-underground priests are fearful of the comparatively strong Christian democracy movement, led by Josef Lux, which approves of the directives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as well as the conclusions of the papacy on the position of women and married clergy in the Catholic Church. Hoping to win some support for their cause, the former underground male priests are distancing themselves from the plight of their former female allies.

Religious Education

Although political and social factors play an important role in producing indifferent or even negative attitudes toward the Church amongst the general public, another cause is the limited ability of the Catholic Church to provide adequate public access to coherent religious education or to adapt its theology to accommodate new challenges. Despite considerable interest among the Czech public, there is still a shortage of elementary parochial schools. Alongside the ordinary curriculum taught in all other schools, these schools are 'not afraid to present a moral view of life'⁴⁸ and to provide Christian moral education,⁴⁹ which is heavily criticised by some interest groups as interfering with diversity of opinion and lifestyles. The situation is much worse in the institutions of higher religious education. According to the current official church guidelines, only full-time students who are preparing for future careers as Catholic priests or members of Catholic male and female religious orders are allowed to register for the classes offered by the Department of Theology of the Charles University in Prague and other universities. All other applicants, even those who would simply like to sit in on these classes, are denied the opportunity to learn Catholic teachings at university level. The situation is aggravated by the fact that clergy are often inadequately prepared to serve in their parishes and to promote the cause of the Catholic Church among the rest of society. Many existing or potential

Catholic believers as well as parish councils also complain that the majority of priests are not responsive to their suggestions for improving the charitable, educational and religious services offered by the Church. The priests too often cling to the 'old school' methods when dealing with the religious and secular community and insist on deciding themselves what is the best for their parish and for the Church.

While there is widespread agreement, then, that in a rapidly changing world the Catholic Church can offer much-needed help to meet new challenges, many people are unable to change their often socially conditioned ambivalent attitudes toward the Roman Catholic Church because of inadequate exposure to Catholic religion and its teaching.

The Future

As it enters the next millennium, the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech Republic will have to adapt to the economic, political, social and cultural challenges connected with living in a democracy. The Church will also have to be more involved in the ecumenical movement to promote social justice, human rights and world peace.

Although the Church's claims for the restitution of its property are in many cases justified it will have to be careful to avoid accusations that it is seeking the return of property in order to strengthen its position and to promote its interests. It will have to manage its property in a way that will benefit not only the Church itself but also the Czech religious and secular communities. The Church will also have to be more involved in exerting pressure on the government to strike a balance between the external (technical-material) and internal (intellectual-moral) aspects of social and economic development. According to the Church the current crisis in Czech society is caused by too much focus on the former and neglect of the latter.

The Church's difficulties in combating secularism, even among Catholics, are demonstrated in Table 5. According to the Church the alarmingly low attendance at Sunday Mass is a result of the general tendency to focus primarily on the world while neglecting the spirit. Statistics also show that the Catholic Church is more vigorous among the Czech city-dwellers than among their rural counterparts. Membership of the Church is 'more as an expression of one's intellectual stance'⁵⁰ than a matter of faith.

As a result of increasing secularisation and consumerism both the regular and the secular priesthood in the Czech Republic are suffering from a chronic shortage of new blood. Some allege that the shortage is caused by the Church's restrictive rules, but many Catholic officials blame lack of interest among young men on the passing

Table 5. Attendance at Mass by Catholics in the Czech Republic⁵¹

Bishopric	Declared Catholics	Attending Sunday Mass
(1) Archbishopric of Prague	604,000	39,000
(2) Bishopric of České Budějovice	400,000	28,000
(3) Bishopric of Hradec Králové	470,000	45,000
(4) Bishopric of Litoměřice	280,000	11,000
(5) Bishopric of Plzeň	242,000	12,000
(6) Bishopric of Olomouc	750,000	120,000
(7) Bishopric of Brno	750,000	110,000
(8) Bishopric of Ostrava/Opava	600,000	75,000
Total	4,096,000	440,000

attractions of the world. Of the 70 future Jesuits who joined the order in 1989⁵² four-fifths have already left the seminaries to seek different careers. Meanwhile the closing of churches and the hiring or sharing of priests may well raise some serious doubts about the Church in the minds of believers as well as of the general public.

To stop and reverse these unfavourable developments the Catholic Church will have to expand and intensify its educational and missionary work among believers and in society at large. Establishing new schools and opening the classes offered by the departments of Theology at Czech universities to students not pursuing clerical careers will have to be high on the list of the Church's priorities. To accommodate those who are calling for greater cooperation between the Catholic Church and the laity Archbishop Vlk is asking all members of the clergy and the religious orders to work more closely with their local religious and secular communities. Although the Catholic Church refuses to admit that the New Testament presents cases of female and married priests in the early Christian Church and hence refuses to include female or married priests in the ranks of its regular or secular clergy, if current trends continue unabated the Church may either have to reconsider its position or find itself on the verge of extinction.

The Catholic Church in the Czech Republic will also have to reconsider some of its stances on the most controversial events in Czech history. It has already manifested a change of heart towards Jan Hus, regarding him not as a heretic but as 'a victim of the complex situation within the Catholic Church of that time',⁵³ and permitting the archbishop of Prague to attend the state-organised celebrations of that Czech national martyr in 1997. It would be beneficial if the Church's example here were followed by government initiatives to alter official perceptions. Cherished myths about the Hussite wars as a heroic struggle for freedom will have to be modified by the view that they offer 'terrible examples of the destructive effect of intolerance'.⁵⁴ Likewise the view of the Counter-Reformation as 'a most humiliating period in [Czech] national history ... the age of Darkness (*Temno*)'⁵⁵ will have to be modified to take account of the fact that this was the glorious period of the Czech Baroque that produced some of the best religious and secular works in poetry, literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture and science.

The involvement of the Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement has already led the World Council of Churches to announce in its policy draft for its 1998 Assembly in Zimbabwe that one of its main aims for the next millennium will be the unification of all Christian Churches under a single ecumenical umbrella. In view of the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of catholicity the chance of attaining this goal is very slim. The Catholic Church of the next century will however have to transform itself to offer alternatives to hatred, indifference and violence,⁵⁶ all increasing in the Czech Republic as elsewhere in the world. The Catholic Church will have to become an institution which 'will strive for the highest human values, for which [the Church is] responsible before God'.⁵⁷ In its defence and promotion of the most basic and generally acceptable values and of world peace the Church will have to subscribe to the neo-Kantian and liberal teaching that 'human rights, tolerance, and human freedom are among the most cherished values that must be protected in any social and political system'.⁵⁸

Notes and References

¹ Since the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Republic on 1 January 1993 the Slovak religious communities, including the Catholic Church, have formed their own hierarchical and

- administrative system, and they are therefore not the subject of this paper.
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- ³ *loc. cit.*
- ⁴ Josef Polišenský, *The Thirty Years War* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971), p. 245.
- ⁵ *Církev a majetek*, p. 17.
- ⁶ Ivo Kadlec, *Přehled českých církevních dějin* (České katolické nakladatelství, Prague, 1987), vol. 2, p. 163.
- ⁷ *East European Quarterly*, September 1981, p. 339.
- ⁸ *Církev a majetek*, p. 18.
- ⁹ Ivo Kadlec, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 243.
- ¹⁰ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1998), p. 126.
- ¹¹ George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: the Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1992), Preface.
- ¹² *The Europa World Year Book 1997* (Europa Publications, London, 1997), p. 1067.
- ¹³ *Lidové noviny*, 20 August 1997, p. 4.
- ¹⁴ *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁶ CTK National News Wire, 13 February 1996.
- ¹⁷ *Lidové noviny*, 20 August 1997, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁹ *Respekt*, 7–14 April 1997, p. 15.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ *RFE–RL Research Report*, 15 July 1994, p. 6.
- ²² *Církev a majetek*, p. 13.
- ²³ *ibid.*, p. 10.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 27.
- ²⁵ *Církev a majetek*, p. 26.
- ²⁶ *RFE–RL Research Report*, 15 July 1994, p. 6.
- ²⁷ Weigel, *op. cit.*, p. 168.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 171.
- ²⁹ *loc. cit.*
- ³⁰ *RFE–RL Research Report*, 17 July 1992, p. 64.
- ³¹ *loc. cit.*
- ³² *loc. cit.*
- ³³ Petr Fiala *et al.*, *Koinotes: Felix M. Davídek a skrytá církev* (Knižnice Revue Proglas, Prague, 1994), p. 104.
- ³⁴ *RFE–RL Research Report*, 17 July 1992, p. 64.
- ³⁵ *Lidové noviny*, 1 December 1995, p. 7.
- ³⁶ *Respekt*, 7–13 October 1996, p. 5.
- ³⁷ *op. cit.*
- ³⁸ *Respekt*, 14–20 April 1997, p. 16.
- ³⁹ Polišenský, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁴¹ *Lidové noviny*, 25 June 1993, p. 7.
- ⁴² *Listy*, 3 November 1995, p. 90.
- ⁴³ *Lidové noviny*, 20 August 1997, p. 4.
- ⁴⁴ *Lidové noviny*, 26 August 1997, p. 3.
- ⁴⁵ *RFE–RL Research Report*, 17 July 1992, p. 62.
- ⁴⁶ *Církev a majetek*, p. 126.
- ⁴⁷ CTK National News Wire, 19 July 1996.
- ⁴⁸ *America*, 1 June 1995, p. 594.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Lidové noviny*, 20 August 1997, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Respekt*, 7–13 April 1997, p. 15.

⁵² *Lidové noviny*, 20 August 1997, p. 4.

⁵³ *Respekt*, 7–13 April 1997, p. 15.

⁵⁴ *East European Quarterly*, September 1991, p. 169.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Tomáš Halík *et al.*, *Víra a kultura* (Zvon, České katolické nakladatelství, Prague, 1994), p. 126.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Whose Democracy?* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 1995), p. 16.