

Editorial

The Czechoslovak manifesto, *Charter 77*, demanded that in future the law and the Constitution should be observed. The *Charter* was publicized in the Western press in January this year and the full text was published in *The Times* on 11 February. It included a paragraph on religious discrimination.

A large cross-section of Czech society have supported the *Charter*, including a number of clergy. By the end of April, the Chartists (as they are called) had issued nine documents dealing with legal, political, educational, social and religious discrimination. "Document No. 9", which deals with the infringement of religious rights, is printed in full in this issue of *RCL* (pp. 158-161). It was handed to the Czechoslovak government on 25 April.

"Document No. 9" reveals the restrictions imposed by the authorities on believers. (See also Milena Kalinovska's article, pp. 148-157.) Pressure has been put on people to "abandon their outmoded religious views". Believers have not been allowed "freely to discuss and proclaim their views" or "freely to exercise and develop their spiritual and religious life". "Document No. 9" demands that believers should be granted freedom openly to receive and distribute religious literature. At present, to distribute the Bible is "considered practically a punishable offence and an anti-state act". Parents should be allowed to bring up their children according to their own convictions. "Document No. 9" demands that the Churches should be allowed freely to hold congresses and other meetings and to organize conferences and seminars for believers. They should also be allowed to maintain close contacts with Churches abroad and to send their theological students to study at foreign theological colleges. Finally, this document draws attention to those clergy who are prevented from exercising their ministry. Such disadvantages are slight in comparison with the difficulties of believers in some other communist countries, but in themselves they are grave.

The Churches in Czechoslovakia have faced difficulties for many years. The Roman Catholic Church, which claimed the adherence of 73.5 per

cent of the population in 1930, came into conflict with the State when its lands were confiscated and all its schools closed and when state commissars were appointed to administer the dioceses. The authorities tried to split the Church by supporting "progressive" Catholics. And what could not be achieved from inside the Church was gained through repressive legislation. In July 1949 financial control of the Church was established. In October 1949 the Government Bureau for Church Affairs was set up as the Communist Party's arm for controlling church life.

The various Protestant denominations initially welcomed the new regime, seeing many opportunities for cooperation in building a more just society. But during the '50s such hopes were dashed.

No denomination in Czechoslovakia was in a worse position than the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church. In 1948 there was one Uniate diocese, that of Prešov in Slovakia which contained 305,000 of Czechoslovakia's 350,000 Uniates. In 1950 the Uniates were forced to join the small Orthodox Church (numbering 35,000 in 1948). The Uniate priests had to give up their parishes and most of them, including the Bishop of Prešov, were imprisoned. Nevertheless, this Church continued to function in secret.

The "Prague Spring" of 1968 was a period of high hopes. The Communist Party began to promote reform within its own ranks as well as within Czech society. The Churches benefitted: many imprisoned members of the clergy and laity were released; it became easier to publish religious material and to discuss questions of belief; entry into theological faculties was less difficult. The Uniate Church was allowed to exist legally once more and many of its parishes, which had been forced to join the Orthodox Church, returned to their previous allegiance.

With the Soviet invasion in August 1968, all this came to an end. In a letter to Dr. Husak in the spring of 1975, the Czech playwright, Vaclav Havel claimed that the government had chosen "the path of inner decay", that Czech society had become immobile, paralysed by pervasive fear and corruption. And yet he saw a glimmer of hope: "Since life cannot be totally stilled and history forever suspended, a secret streamlet trickles on under the leaden lid of inertia, and slowly, imperceptibly, nibbles away at its very foundations. And so the lid is starting to crack . . ."

The *Charter 77* movement is supported in various ways. The refusal of many Christian denominations to condemn the *Charter* is a silent expression of solidarity. But whether the movement will now lead to reform is a question that is not yet answered.