

The Religious Situation in Czechoslovakia

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The human rights manifesto, *Charter 77*,¹ which was written and signed in Czechoslovakia, has revealed that the struggle for greater freedom in Eastern Europe is very much alive. The *Charter* was released to the Western press on 6 January this year. Although it is concerned with the violation of human rights in general in Czechoslovakia, the religious question forms part of the human rights movement there since religious freedom is a right which is constantly violated. In fact one paragraph of *Charter 77* is devoted to religious persecution.

Initially the *Charter* was signed by 241 people and amongst these were seven members of the clergy. (The present total stands at 750 including 20 Czech clergymen, according to a recent report from Czechoslovakia.) The clergymen also wrote an open letter last January which was entitled "Our Attitude to the Statements of *Charter 77*" (see pp. 161-162 for text). This statement was addressed to believers and in it the signatories explained why they had signed the manifesto:

Even though *Charter 77* does not speak about God or God's kingdom, it is fighting for freedom in religious matters, and in this it serves God's purposes. It calls attention to acute problems in our society and sees them in all their breadth and urgency. In this we glimpse the future universality of Christ's kingdom, to which countless people of all generations of the earth shall belong . . . We believe that Christians in our country and all over the world will support our efforts by prayer and action.

This document was circulated in Czechoslovakia in *samizdat* form.

Samizdat material of various kinds has been produced in Czechoslovakia for some time. *Edice Petlice*, known here as "Padlock Publications", was started in 1973, and by 1976 it had produced 50 titles, including short stories, novels, literary and historical studies. Those whose work has been reproduced by *Edice Petlice* include well known authors like Ludvík Vaculík - the author of *2,000 Words* (the manifesto of the "Prague Spring" in 1968) - who was a signatory and spokesman for

Charter 77; the Czech national poet, Jaroslav Seifert; playwrights, Pavel Kohout and Václav Havel; and Jan Patočka, a philosophy professor and leading spokesman for human rights activists.² At the beginning of 1976 a religious *samizdat* publication produced by Catholic-oriented writers and scholars appeared: it was called *231*, a title derived from the notorious law of the 1950s which helped destroy the intellectual opposition.³ Another example of Czech *samizdat* literature was the appeal from a group of Slovak Catholics.⁴ This leaflet protested against the treatment of believers and was distributed in 2,000 copies. Although to type such *samizdat* literature is not considered illegal and although those who produce it cannot be tried for doing this, the authorities nevertheless try by various means to discredit the authors of *samizdat* and to find legal grounds for silencing them.

After *Charter 77* was released to the Western press and extracts had been published on 7 January 1977, an hysterical campaign against the signatories and the aims of the *Charter* was launched in *Rudé Právo*, the communist daily, on 12 January 1977. True to their usual practice, Communist Party officials wanted the leaders of various social and political groups to produce denunciations. Church leaders were also called upon to add fuel to the flames. The manifesto itself, described as "too vile", has not been officially published in Czechoslovakia. On 15 January 1977 *Rudé Právo* stated that three religious bodies had denounced the signatories. These bodies were: the Czech Roman Catholic Ordinaries who were quoted as saying, "We calmly defend our position in this society and do not need any outside stimulus"; the employees of the Czech Catholic Caritas Society who stated that they "determinedly condemn the vile action of a handful of wretches"; and the Synod Council of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren which stressed that no official of this Church had signed the "defamatory pamphlet."⁵

The Church press responded to the *Charter* a fortnight later. *Kostnické Jiskry*, an inter-denominational weekly, published the following statement on 26 January:

The editorial board of *Kostnické Jiskry* considers that it has a duty to inform its readers about the position adopted by the Synod Council of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren: "Like other citizens of our State we learned yesterday from an article in *Rudé Právo* about the existence of a proclamation entitled *Charter 77*. At its meeting of 13 January, the Synod Council stated that it did not know the contents of this proclamation. None of its members or officials was asked to sign this proclamation, and none of them has signed it. The Synod Council stresses that together with the representatives of other Churches it has expressed its positive attitude towards our nation, State and system several times over the past months."⁶

The statement of the Synod Council did not in fact condemn the signatories, and in order to rectify the wrong impression created by *Rudé Právo* the Synod Council distributed the actual text of its statement to pastors in Bohemia and Moravia. Considerable pressure was then put on Dr. Václav Kejř, the Synod Elder who signed this statement; he was interrogated daily for some time and asked to expel from his Church the seven pastors who had signed the *Charter*. With great difficulty he explained that excommunication was not possible within the Evangelical Church. Subsequently, on 2 February, *Kostnické Jiskry* published further statements about *Charter 77* from the Churches in the Czech Socialist Republic. For example, the Council of the Church of the Brethren stated that its members "do not share the path chosen by the signatories of the so-called *Charter 77*". The Executive Council of Unitas Fratrum declared "that in the matter of the so-called *Charter 77* it is not among its signatories and that none of the Church's officials has any personal connection with them". The Patriarch of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church stated that he "condemns *Charter 77* and objects to any self-appointed individual misusing religion for his own dirty purposes". The Representatives of the Church of Seventh Day Adventists in the Czech Socialist Republic declared, "we do not agree with the signatories of *Charter 77* because their objectives and methods are not acceptable to us as believers". In addition *Kostnické Jiskry* claimed that other Churches and religious congregations had expressed similar attitudes towards the *Charter*. It cited the council of Jewish Religious Communities in the Czech Socialist Republic, the Religious Community of Czechoslovak Unitarians, the Orthodox Church, the Fraternal Union of Baptists, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Silesia, the Old-Catholic Church and the Christian Congregations.⁷ The monthly of the Slovak Evangelical Church, *Cirkevné Listy*, in its February issue published a statement by non-Catholic Churches, religious organizations and theological faculties in the Slovak Socialist Republic. This statement accused the signatories of *Charter 77* of slandering the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. On 23 January, the Catholic newspaper, *Katolické noviny*, published an anti-*Charter* declaration by Slovak bishops, although the bishops themselves had never signed such a statement. Apparently, the Slovak Minister of Culture, Miroslav Válek, had held a reception for the bishops on 17 January whereupon he asked them to condemn *Charter 77*. They refused. Nevertheless, the Czechoslovak press agency, ČTK, issued a statement the same day claiming that they had condemned the *Charter*.⁸

Clearly all the Churches were placed in a very difficult position. All they could do was affirm their positive attitude towards socialist society. A Czech citizen and church-member, now living in Britain, said recently (see pp. 162-163 for full text) after returning from Czechoslovakia :

During the last few weeks the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches have had pressure put on them to publish statements against the *Charter 77* movement. Some of the Churches were forced to re-write their statements several times before these were accepted by the authorities . . . Some clergy defend their capitulation by pointing out that they were threatened with having their churches closed if they failed to comply.

Many state organizations, institutions and factories also denounced the signatories of *Charter 77*. These denunciations were published in all the papers in Czechoslovakia. Many signed letters of condemnation without consulting the members of the body concerned. Others signed under pressure: some workers, for example, were threatened with the loss of their wages if they did not sign.⁹ Although the government organized mass meetings in factories all over the country to denounce the chartists, not all of them were successful. Workers of such factories as Tesla Electrical Goods in Prague, the locomotive works and the metal foundry in the ČKD plant in Prague, Avia Light Aircraft in Letnany, SONP steel works in Kladno, the cement factory in Radotín, all demanded to hear the full text of the *Charter* before deciding whether to denounce it.¹⁰ Their request was not granted.

The tone of some of the denunciations in the Czechoslovak press was violent. For example, the editorial in the paper *Pruboj* of 21 January, 1977, published by the Communist Party of Northern Bohemia, stated:

The signatories of *Charter 77* can clear off to where their greed impels them, to those who have bought them with Judas's groschen . . . No, nobody has such a bad memory as to forget how this élite of counter-revolutionary disruptors behaved in 1968-69. No one could forget the 2,000 *Words* (written by Vaculík) calling for violence against the active builders of socialism; no one could forget the reactionary Černý and his programme to hang communists from lamp posts . . . So now we know what kind of freedom these renegades want. They want the sort of freedom that SS cut-throats and war criminals want . . . when people with black skins have not got even the same rights as the dogs of a white man.¹¹

In addition to this denunciation, *Pruboj* printed a letter from Josef Babický, the minister of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in Litvínov, and a declaration by the Roman Catholic Priests of Most Vicariate who claimed that the signatories "injected hatred into the relationship between Church and State".¹² Compromising articles about the personal life of signatories have also appeared in the press. The fabricated crimes of 1948-50, disclosed as false in the 1960s, have been referred to as though the people concerned had never been rehabilitated.

What basis is there for the *Charter's* claim that religious freedom does not exist in Czechoslovakia? The Roman Catholic Church claims that it has not been able to administer its own affairs freely since 1949. Because of government interference, in the Czech lands alone two archbishoprics and four bishoprics do not have residential bishops or archbishops. Since June 1949, when Archbishop Josef Beran was interned in his palace, there has been no archbishop of Prague. On 10 March 1951 he was removed from his diocese; he was made a cardinal in 1965 but then had to leave for Rome where he died in 1969. The pro-regime priest Antonín Stehlík administered the diocese until 1965, and since then Cardinal Tomášek, secretly consecrated bishop in 1949, has been the Apostolic Administrator. The auxiliary bishop, Kajetán Matoušek, secretly consecrated in 1950, does not have the State's consent to exercise the office of bishop. The archbishopric of Olomouc has been vacant since 1950. There has been no bishop of České Budejovice since 1972, no bishop of Litomerice since the death of Cardinal Štěpán Trochta in 1974, no bishop of Hradec Králové since 1956, and no bishop of Brno since 1972. Of Slovakia's six Roman Catholic dioceses, only Banská Bystrica and Nitra have residential bishops. The diocese of Trnava has been vacant since 1969 and only recently the authorities approved the appointment of Dr. Julius Gabriš as Apostolic Administrator.¹³ The diocese of Rožnava has been vacant since 1972, the diocese of Košice since 1962, the diocese of Spiš since 1965. The Greek-Catholic (Uniate) bishopric at Prešov has been vacant since 1960 and the Old-Catholic bishopric at Varnsdorf is also vacant. Only two bishoprics in the whole of Czechoslovakia have residential bishops; two archbishoprics and two dioceses are administered by Apostolic Administrators. Four bishops are barred from exercising office: Dr. Karel Otčenášek, Kajetán Matoušek, Ladislav Hlad and the Old-Catholic Bishop Augustin Podolák. The Vatican continues to insist on its right to appoint bishops, but the Czechoslovak government refuses to accept the candidates chosen by the Church.

As well as refusing to appoint residential bishops, the government has prevented many priests from carrying out their ministry. In 1973, of the 3,500 priests in Czechoslovakia, more than 500 could not do their work and had to find employment, for example, as unskilled manual workers.¹⁴ A Slovak bishop, the Jesuit Jan Korec, now works as a stock-keeper in the chemical factory "Tatrachema" in Bratislava, despite his ill health. Bishop Jan Korec, born on 22 February 1924, was clandestinely ordained bishop in 1951 at the age of 27, after all diocesan seminaries of the Greek-Catholic Church had been dissolved in 1950 by administrative action. He continued his ministry in secret until 1960 when he was arrested and sentenced to nine years of imprisonment, of which eight were spent in a cell with hardened criminals. He constantly demanded rehabilitation. "I do not ask for mercy – I demand only truth, law and justice", he wrote

to the legal authorities in Bratislava. He was finally released in 1968 and fully rehabilitated in 1969. Pope Paul VI received him in Rome and formally invested him with the insignia of a bishop. At first he was allowed to look after some nuns in Bratislava but in 1974 the police began to watch him; he was repeatedly interrogated and now has to earn his living as a worker.¹⁵ Fr. Viktor Trstenský, a Slovak priest, can no longer carry out his ministry in Stara Lubovna in Western Slovakia because of his anti-atheist work. He has been forced to retire.¹⁶ On 6 January 1977 he wrote to the President, Dr. Gustav Husák, describing the persecution of believers in Stara Lubovna: his congregation had been secretly watched and more than 220 people had been interrogated. He asked the president of Czechoslovakia to grant him and his congregation the rights which should be theirs.¹⁷ Fr. Bartolomej Urbanec from Slovakia was recalled recently from his post and now works on a farm. The Jesuit priests, Fr. J. Sukop and Fr. B. Plaček from St. Ignác in Prague¹⁸ and Fr. Mýdl and Fr. Sedlák in Slovakia have been dismissed.¹⁹ The following Protestant ministers have recently been dismissed: Jirí Wébr, who now works as an ambulance driver; his colleague Jaromír Dus, who works as a liftboy in a hotel in Prague; Prof. Ladislav Hejránek, who works as a night watchman in a library; Jan Šimsa, who now works as a shepherd and Jan Dus who is employed in a factory warehouse in Plzen.²⁰ The Rev. Dr. Jaroslav Studený, a Roman Catholic priest, was sentenced to 4½ years in November 1972 in Ostrava for distributing religious literature without state authorization. He was released in June 1975 because of ill health and now works in a factory in Moravia.²¹ Fr. Štefan Javorský, a Silesian from Murán in Slovakia, was recalled from his post and sentenced to 18 months. He is 52 years old. He was imprisoned on 26 November 1975 for giving religious literature to university students, for encouraging them to listen to Vatican Radio and for speaking against the "interests of socialist society".²² On 26 January 1977 the regional court in Košice (Slovakia), after considering the social danger posed by the defendant and the consequences of his behaviour, increased the sentence from 18 months to two years of imprisonment.³ Fr. A. Tkáč, in Slovakia, was recalled from his post for refusing to participate in *Pacem in Terris*, a Roman Catholic organization sponsored by the regime.²⁴ Fr. František Jurečka, a Roman Catholic priest, serving a 15 months' sentence for religious activities, became seriously ill in September 1974 during his imprisonment. A stroke in 1975 left him half paralysed. He was released under the amnesty of 8 May 1975, but died in hospital in August 1975.²⁵

But not only have priests and church leaders suffered discrimination. Laymen, too, have had to face hardship. Václav Fabrici, a teacher from Košice, for example, was dismissed from his job as a teacher for going to church and sent a letter to Bishop Jozef Feranec on 6 March 1975, asking for his help.²⁶ A mathematician, Ivan Gróf, was arrested and held

for a short time because of the religious influence he had on young people. In Trnava (Slovakia) 25 students were interrogated by the police in connection with "the propagation of religion".²⁷ Ignác Jaruš, a theological student in Bratislava (Slovakia) was expelled in November 1975 from the 5th year of his theological studies because, it was alleged, he had brought religious literature from Poland to Czechoslovakia.²⁸ František Matula, a former theological student, was sentenced in June 1976 to two years imprisonment for refusing on grounds of conscience to do military service.²⁹ Pavol Čarnogurský, a 70-year-old journalist in Slovakia and a prominent Catholic, was arrested on 10 November 1976 because of letters which he had sent to the Slovak bishops. In them he had accused the authorities of violating the law on religion and discriminating against believers. (His letter to Bishop Jozef Feranec is printed on pp. 157-158.)³⁰ In July 1972, in Prague and Brno 46 people were tried on charges of subversion. Amongst them were three Protestants, a pastor and two laymen.³¹

Although the Czechoslovak Constitution (para. 32) guarantees religious freedom, many restrictions have been imposed on the Churches. Jiri Otava (pen-name of a Prague resident) states in his article, "Religious Freedom in Czechoslovakia"³² published in *Index*, that the state administration, according to its pronouncements, will neither interfere in the activities of the Church nor supervise the work and sermons of the clergy, so long as the latter confine themselves strictly to religious matters and refrain from commenting on public affairs. But in practice, should a clergyman for example analyse a biblical quotation and apply it to contemporary life, he could be dismissed for overstepping the limits. Furthermore, clergy are paid by the State according to the law of 1949 and the government has the right to approve ecclesiastical appointments. All the Churches can do is propose candidates. The assessment, appointment and dismissal of clergy rests in the hands of the Secretary for Church Affairs or the regional committee of the Communist Party. And should a member of the clergy wish to complain, such a complaint has to be submitted to the very body which dismissed him. Measures taken by the authorities against clergy are entirely arbitrary and depend on the changing ideological line of the Communist Party.

The training of clergy is severely restricted. In the Czech lands alone, only 16 new students were allowed to enrol for theology courses in 1975-76,³³ whereas in previous years 24-30 students were admitted. About 12% of the successful graduates of the Komenský Theological Faculty fail to obtain state approval each year.³⁴ Strict limits are placed on the numbers allowed to attend the Theological Faculties and their graduates have difficulty in obtaining work permits. In 1975, seven students from the Theological Faculty in Bratislava, after passing their final examinations, were not allowed to be ordained because they had refused to attend a meeting organized by *Pacem in Terris*.³⁵ Meanwhile

the average age of the clergy is rising and the number of newly ordained priests amounts to no more than a fifth of the number who have died. A third of all parishes in Czechoslovakia are without priests (there are 1,600 parishes in such a position).

The authorities seem anxious not only to place restrictions on the study of theology, but also to discourage children from receiving religious instruction. In the Slovak region particularly formal religious instruction is being eliminated from schools. For example, the pupils of the 5th to 9th classes (from 11 to 15 years old) in Bratislava, Trnava, Košice, Piešťany and possibly other parts of Slovakia, had to fill in questionnaires disclosing whether they believed in God, read religious literature or went to religious classes. Many children as a result of such questions have withdrawn from religious classes, fearing that they might be refused higher education for lacking "communist convictions".³⁶ *Učiteľské Noviny*, the teachers' newspaper, claims that a successful programme of atheist education has been introduced at primary schools in Brezno (Slovakia). Božena Bartošová writes in *Učiteľské Noviny* of 1 January 1976: "In this school year, nobody enrolled in religious education classes". Similar reports come from Zilina (*Učiteľské Noviny*, 25 March 1976), Čierny Balog-Janošovka (*Učiteľské Noviny*, 20 May 1976), Spišská Nová Ves (*Učiteľské Noviny*, 24 June 1976), Michalovce (*Učiteľské Noviny*, 26 August 1976) and elsewhere in Slovakia. The need to combat religion in Slovak schools stems from the strength of the Roman Catholic Church in Slovakia. According to a study completed in 1970 by the Sociological Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 72% of 4.4 million Slovaks are believers, 91% being peasants, and most of the believers are Roman Catholics.³⁷

Despite the many restrictions, the people of Czechoslovakia can no longer be manipulated as they were in the '50s, when show trials were organized and many people were executed. The strength of the *Charter* movement is revealed by the number of its signatories, by their diverse social backgrounds and political views. All alike are asking that the citizens of Czechoslovakia should be allowed to work and live as free human beings. The signatories represent a cross-section of society: they include intellectuals, technicians, housewives, clergy and workers. Such cooperation of people from different social groups and with different beliefs was also shown by a group of rock musicians, which included both Catholic and Protestant believers. On 23 September 1976 they were sentenced to 8-18 months imprisonment for anti-social and anti-socialist behaviour. One of the musicians, Svatopluk Karásek, was a graduate of the Protestant Theological Faculty in Prague, and stressed during the trial that belief in religious freedom could not be interpreted as anti-socialist. He has now been released and is working as a window cleaner. Similar solidarity was demonstrated by Czech

citizens recently at the funeral of Prof. Jan Patočka, one of the spokesmen for *Charter 77*. Despite strong security measures, about 1,000 mourners were present at the funeral.⁸⁸

For Czechoslovakia, and indeed for Eastern Europe as a whole, the future remains uncertain. Violations of human rights in Eastern Europe, including religious freedom, can no longer be ignored since the signing of the Helsinki Agreement. But the road towards improvement is a long one as Prof. Jan Patočka declared in his *Last Will*:

The international pacts signed as a result of the Helsinki conference did bring something new, giving fresh hope to mankind . . . We are convinced that there is no one in the world who does not know that the Helsinki accords must be accepted if we are to escape a future of major wars and minor conflicts. But it is only now that we have come to realize just how terribly long a road it is going to be, and we know it thanks to the *Charter*.⁸⁹

¹ Full text of *Charter 77* appeared in *The Times*, 11 February 1977.

² *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1976, p. 39.

³ Radio Free Europe, *Czechoslovak Situation Report* 11, 24 March 1976.

⁴ *RCL*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1976, pp. 47-49.

⁵ *Rudé Právo*, No. 12, 15 January 1977, pp. 1-2.

⁶ *Kostnické Jiskry*, 26 January 1977, p. 3.

⁷ *Kostnické Jiskry*, 2 February 1977, p. 3.

⁸ CARIS (BBC Current Affairs Research and Information Section), Talk No. 8/77, 31 March 1977.

⁹ *The Times*, 18 February 1977, p. 13.

¹⁰ *The Sunday Times*, 20 March 1977, p. 8.

¹¹ *Pruboj*, 21 January 1977, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ CARIS Talk No. 8/77, 31 March 1977.

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe, *Czechoslovak Situation Report* 2, 19 January 1977.

¹⁵ *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 2, July 1976, pp. 6-8, and *Nový Zivot*, No. 2, February 1977, p. 44.

¹⁶ *Kontinent*, No. 6, pp. 244-51, and *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 7, July 1976, pp. 22-27.

¹⁷ *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 4, April 1977, pp. 21-23.

¹⁸ *Nový Zivot*, No. 1, January 1977, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Hlas z Ríma* No. 1, January 1977, p. 22.

²⁰ "Neue Welle der Christenhatz in der CSSR", *Kurier*, 16 November 1976.

²¹ *America*, 13 December 1975, p. 417, and *Amnesty International Briefing*, "Czechoslovakia", March 1977, pp. 2-3.

²² *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 1, January 1977, pp. 21-22, and *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 3, March 1977, pp. 23-24.

²³ *Nový Zivot*, No. 3, March 1977, p. 8.

²⁴ *Nový Zivot*, No. 1, January 1977, p. 19.

²⁵ *Amnesty International Briefing*, "Czechoslovakia", March 1977, p. 3 and *Amnesty International Rapport Annuel, 1975-76*, p. 170.

²⁶ *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 5, May 1976, pp. 22-23.

²⁷ *Nový Zivot*, No. 4, April 1976, p. 92.

²⁸ *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 12, February 1976, p. 24.

²⁹ *Amnesty International Briefing*, "Czechoslovakia", March 1977, and *Amnesty International Rapport Annuel, 1975-76*, p. 170.

³⁰ *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 2, February 1977, pp. 21-22.

³¹ *Amnesty International Briefing*, "Czechoslovakia", March 1977, p. 2.

³² "Religious Freedom in Czechoslovakia" by Jirí Otava, *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1977, pp. 24-28.

³³ *Statistická Ročenka ČSSR*, 1976, Praha 1976, p. 514. Available in *Radio Free Europe, Czechoslovak Situation Report 2*, 19 January 1977, p. 19.

³⁴ "Religious freedom in Czechoslovakia" by Jirí Otava, *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1977, p. 26, and *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 1, January 1977, p. 21.

³⁵ *Amnesty International Briefing*, "Czechoslovakia", March 1977, p. 12.

³⁶ *Hlas z Ríma*, No. 10, October 1976, p. 23.

³⁷ *CARIS*, Report 8/77, 31 March 1977.

³⁸ *Radio Free Europe, Czechoslovak Situation Report 11*, 23 March 1977.

³⁹ "Last Will of Czech Civil Rights Leader Defends Charter 77 Campaign", *The Times*, 15 March 1977, p. 8.

Church in Slovakia Undermined

Pavol Čarnogurský, a 70-year-old journalist in Slovakia, wrote to Bishop Josef Feranec on 29 August 1976. He was arrested as a result on 10 November 1976. The original text was published in the Slovak émigré journal, Hlas z Ríma No. 2, February 1977 (pp. 21-22).

Reverend Father Bishop,

After reading the leading article in the last number of the Catholic paper, *Katolícké noviny* (No. 25, 29 August 1976) it is impossible for even an ordinary believer not to react. Because of his religious convictions and duties which bind him to the Church and link him with her, he not only recognizes but instinctively senses that a process of extermination is being proclaimed against the Church in Slovakia in every speech. In this article Jozef Dovala, the Vicar General of Banská-Bystrica, wrote among other things: "Priests and believers participate in building our new life and they share in its fruits. The Constitution of our country respects the beliefs of every person and guarantees religious freedom." With grief in my heart, however, I must maintain that only a mocking cynic could have written this, in defiance of reality, in order to lower the newspaper in which he writes to an absurd level and to compromise the authority in whose name he dared to write.

What then are the real facts about religion today, regardless of what is said in the Constitution and Art. 7 of the Helsinki Agreement, which was signed a year ago? Two weeks ago on 18 August 1976 *Pravda*, the daily paper of the Central Committee of the Slovak Communist Party, published an article written by Petr Prusák, a member of the Central Committee of the Slovak Communist Party. This was a balance sheet demonstrating the conclusions of Party congresses on atheist education in Slovakia. The main point of this balance sheet was summed up by this official in the sentence: "Slovakia has become a country of mass atheism". Such a daring and far-reaching claim would hardly have been made so explicitly by a competent Party official in the government of any other socialist State. While it is impossible to doubt that P. Prusák had a real basis for his claim, although he does not explain by what means and where this was achieved, it must be faced as a hard reality. In Slovakia there has been special atheist pressure.

I am convinced that the Slovakian church leaders are certainly greatly concerned and absorbed by the importance of the article and have taken into consideration its consequences for themselves as well as for the future of the Church in Slovakia. I only wish to draw attention to the claim that the essential