

Czech Reponse to Christian Peace Conference

The Fifth Christian Peace Conference (CPC) was held in Prague from 22-27 June 1978. For some years no representatives of Roman Catholics or Protestants in Czechoslovakia have been members of the CPC, although observers from the churches are obliged by the government to attend. During the conference a number of letters were sent by Czech Christians to the delegates. A selection of them is printed below.

Milos Rejchrt, a pastor of the Church of Czech Brethren, is the author of the following letter. In 1971 he read a paper before the Association of Evangelical Clergy proposing that the Church of Czech Brethren withdraw from the CPC. His proposal was accepted by a majority of 80 to 2. In August 1972 Rejchrt was interrogated by the secret police, and that autumn he was deprived of state permission to exercise his pastoral duties. He signed Charter 77 and the open letter "Our Attitude to the statements of Charter 77", dated January 1977 (see RCL Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 161-2). On 21 January 1978 he wrote to the Secretary General of the CPC, the Hungarian bishop, Dr Karoly Toth (see RCL Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 171-3) and accused the CPC of turning a blind eye to instances of gross injustice in Czechoslovakia: "Before the concrete victims of despotism you run away from our place and time into exotic countries, into a different world, as far as the Third World."

To the delegates at the Fifth Christian Peace Conference in Prague

Brothers and sisters,

During an interview at 7 Bartolomejska Street [headquarters of the secret police. Ed.] yesterday State Security employees, seated under a portrait of Stalin, accused me of intending to disrupt the Fifth Christian Peace Conference. I was asked whether or not I was thinking of visiting delegates to the CPC and speaking with them. I was emphatically warned against contacting them or talking to them. I too have a warning to convey to my friends, and I am therefore also conveying it to you.

My answer - that I saw nothing unlawful in meeting anyone, but that in

any case I had no intention of visiting delegates to the CPC on my own initiative - was also recorded. However, were I to receive any visitors, including delegates to the CPC, I certainly would not turn them away.

It has never entered my head to disrupt the business of the CPC. Besides, the CPC is protected by the Czechoslovak State Security. So you have nothing to worry about. Or have you?

Prague, 21 June 1978

Yours truly,

MILOS REJCHRT

pastor of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren

Vrsni 403/60

Prague 8 - Kobylisy

The following Open Letter to the Fifth Christian Peace Conference was written on the day when the conference opened. It is signed by 105 people, amongst whom are members of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

OPEN LETTER

Gentlemen,

Your programme is limited by time and of course it is not possible to insert extra items at the drop of a hat. Nevertheless, we beg leave to put before you an urgent and personal request. The matter which concerns us is closely connected with your motto ("... to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace". Luke 1:79) and with the main theme of your Conference ("God's call to unite - Christians for peace, justice and liberation"). We therefore hope that you will somehow manage to discuss it and formulate an opinion on it.

It is a matter of great concern to us that those in prison are not allowed to read the Bible. The Bible is published in this country and anyone who likes may buy it, unless it is out of print. It is not possible, however, to borrow it from prison libraries. When prisoners are sent bibles through the post by their relatives they do not receive them.

We hope that your Conference can use its influence to help change this state of affairs. Our hope is strengthened by the knowledge that in the German Democratic Republic, for example, there are no restrictions on the supply of church publications to prison libraries. We therefore ask you to petition the Corrective Institutions Department of the Ministry of Justice of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic on behalf of those prisoners who long for the Scriptures, for their words of reconciliation and peace.

Prague, 22 June 1978

Towards the end of the conference, on 25 June, 22 members of the Church of Czech Brethren sent the delegates the following information about prisoners of conscience in Czechoslovakia.

To the delegates at the Fifth Christian Peace Conference in Prague

Prague, June 1978

Brothers and sisters,

We greet you with the words of the apostle, "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them". We have a request to make of you. A number of our brothers and friends are presently in prison in this country. All of them were, in our opinion, sentenced or charged unjustly and in contravention of current Czechoslovak legislation, namely law no. 120/76 - the international agreements on civil, political and cultural rights. We consider that the deeds for which they were sentenced or charged contributed to the spiritual development of our community in particular and of society in general, and that they were part of the struggle to ensure that in our country too justice and peace embrace one another.

We ask you to include these our brothers in your prayers and to join us in our search for ways to help them. We are encouraged by the fact that in a number of countries instances of concrete solidarity have helped the oppressed to obtain their rights or at least to achieve some mitigation of the injustice done to them.

We consider the following cases to be particularly urgent:

JAN SIMSA, b. 1929, a father of three and a pastor of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, is denied state permission to exercise his pastoral duties and for the past few years has been employed as a worker. In 1971 the Synod of the ECCB appointed him as a delegate to the CPC. He is a signatory of *Charter 77*. He has been in prison since 30 May 1978 for assaulting a public official. He allegedly committed this offence during a search of his flat when he went to the defence of his wife as a security agent was trying to take a letter of a personal nature from her hand by force. He faces a sentence of up to 3 years. He is seriously ill - he has had an operation on one of his kidneys and he suffers from an acute allergy to cold and a weak heart. He is in prison in Bohunice, Brno.

MILOSLAV LOJEK, b. 6 January 1949, a pastor of the ECCB, is denied state permission to exercise his pastoral duties and has been employed as a worker. He was sentenced on 19 April 1978 to 15 months imprisonment for incitement and for endangering the moral and political integrity of his unit. While he was a soldier doing his military service he gave several soldiers the text of *Charter 77* to read. Another of the crimes which he is supposed to have committed is that of making statements during the men's political education periods to the effect that one must love one's enemies, not hate them, and that the socialist bloc, as a morally superior order, ought to take the first steps towards disarmament making the binding nature of the military oath relative rather than absolute. He is in prison in Bory, Plzen.

ALES BREZINA, b. 12 April 1948, was a student at the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague, but was suspended from his studies for expressing solidarity with another student suspended for political reasons. He is a signatory of *Charter 77*. He was sentenced in June 1977 to 2½ years when, because of his pacifist convictions, he refused to do military service in the Czechoslovak armed forces. He is in prison in Bory, Plzen.

OLDRICH TOMEK, b. 13 October 1921, is a professor, but has recently been employed as a railway worker. He was sentenced in February 1977 in Havlickuv Brod to one year in prison for incitement. He allegedly committed a crime by writing letters to the General Procurator and to the Passport and Visa Office. It is mentioned in the verdict that in these letters he "blackens" the socialist structure of our society when he points to the limitation of personal freedoms and civil rights, and in doing so uses quotations to draw a deliberately tendentious comparison with parts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Also included in the verdict is a clause to the effect that the accused "is deeply religious and projected his religious convictions into his teaching while he was a professor at a secondary school". He is very seriously ill, suffering from angina pectoris, so his punishment is to begin once his state of health has improved.

IVAN JIROUS, b. 23 September 1944, is an art theorist and a signatory of *Charter 77*. He was sentenced in Prague on 5 May 1978 to 18 months in a corrective institution of the second category for a breach of the peace. At an exhibition held by a friend of his he read a theoretical paper on art. Although it could not be proved that he had committed a crime, the court was of the opinion that, given the evidence about his character and attitudes, his very appearance in public was sufficient to constitute a criminal act. Ivan Jirous has been sentenced before in 1976 to 18 months for a breach of the peace as the leader of the rock group "Plastic People". According to the procurator, Jirous was trying to "impose his idea of culture on our society". He is in prison in Straz pod Ralskem.

MILOSLAV CERNY, b. 24 March 1930, a worker, was sentenced on 12 May 1978 to three years imprisonment for incitement. He has been found guilty of making and putting up posters in support of *Charter 77*. He is seriously ill and suffers from epilepsy. He is in prison in Bory, Plzen. Rumour has it that he is under particularly harsh conditions and that the necessary medicines are being withheld from him.

ROBERT GOMBIK, b. 30 July 1949 and MARIAN ZAJICEK, b. 23 January 1951, are both Roman Catholic priests and signatories of *Charter 77*. Both have been charged in Bratislava with "subversion of the republic", which crime they are supposed to have committed by copying out and distributing a *Charter 77* declaration. They are not in prison, but are being watched. They face sentences of up to five years.

ALES MACHACEK, b. 9 February 1946, an agricultural engineer, was sentenced on 6 January 1978 to 3½ years imprisonment for "subversion of the republic".

VLADIMIR LASTUVKA, b. 8 June 1943, a nuclear physicist, was sentenced on 6 January 1978 to 2½ years for "subversion of the republic". The court found Lastuvka and Machacek guilty of "distributing books and journals, for example *Listy (Letters)*, *Svedectvi (Witness)*, *Informacni materialy (Information)*, *Dialektika moci (Dialectic of Power)*, *Souostrovi Gulag (Gulag Archipelago)* published by émigré circles abroad". Both are in prison in Bory, Plzen.

JIRI LEDERER, b. 15 July 1921, a journalist and a signatory of *Charter 77*, was sentenced in Prague on 12 January 1978 to three years imprisonment for "subversion of the republic". He had been sending literary works by Czech authors not allowed to publish in their own country abroad for publication. He is in prison in Ostrava, probably under very severe conditions.

The cases listed are only the tip of the iceberg. We would be only too glad to acquaint you with the others we know of and to give you further details. We would also welcome a discussion of the basic problems. We are certainly agreed that before there can be a true and lasting peace between nations there must be an end to the cold war inside each country: there must be free discussion of all human and social problems, respect for human beings and consistent solidarity with the victims of injustice.

Hoping that the Christian Peace Conference in Prague will help to establish peace abroad and at home.