

Editorial

Should Christians keep out of politics? Most communist regimes have tried hard to confine Christians to "the sanctuary", believing that the Christian faith would soon die out if it was divorced from social and political life. But Dr Václav Benda, a Roman Catholic and former professor of philosophy in Czechoslovakia who is at present in prison (he became a Charter 77 spokesman in 1979), believes that it is a Christian's duty to take a political stand. In a document "Catholicism and Politics", which is published in this issue of *RCL* (pp. 60-5), he condemns Christians in Czechoslovakia who are only concerned with their own salvation and not involved in saving their society. Many Czech Catholics, he writes, feel that they should not be asked to show more courage than that involved in attending church and believing in private. But in Dr Benda's view this is not enough: every Christian must fight for a just society, for an end to totalitarianism, for the establishment of human rights. Belief must be expressed in action, Christians must wrench their society from the grip of evil and activate its "latent political possibilities". He does, however, admit that such an active approach was not possible in Czechoslovakia during the 1950s when "the only survivors were those who looked to their own souls and remained in the Truth".

This inner pilgrimage was the only road open to Christians in the Soviet Union during the period of mass persecution in the 1930s. Political action was out of the question. Although the Party believed that religious faith would soon die out, even Stalin's efforts to destroy the Christian faith failed. An unpublished *samizdat* book, *Katakomba XXogo veka (The Catacombs of the Twentieth Century)*, gives an inspiring account of the secret life of the Russian Orthodox Church during the 1930s and shows that, far from dying out, the Christian faith grew in depth and intensity. At one point the author describes her visit to the forest where St Seraphim lived in solitude for many years, and where he founded a convent called Diveevo: "The most marvellous thing about Diveevo was without doubt the underground springs. After the convent was closed they were deliberately filled up with earth so as to erase the memory of their healing grace from among the people. But to no avail: here and there the water from the springs would once again break through to the surface. At first I was surprised when I saw a passer-by bend down and look intently, listening to something. On drawing closer I heard an ecstatic whisper 'A spring's been

discovered!" Solitary contemplative prayer, which Dr Benda appears to underestimate, is vital for the survival of any Church, and some would say, for the life of society as a whole. Like the springs at Diveevo it cannot be stifled.

Another period of intense persecution for the Churches in the Soviet Union began in 1959 when Khrushchev launched an anti-religious campaign which was to last until 1964. Michael Bourdeaux examines this period as it affected the Russian Orthodox Church in an article (pp. 18-23) which continues *RCL*'s series on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church (see *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 1 and No. 4; Vol. 7, No. 1; Vol. 8, No. 3).

Roman Catholics in Czechoslovakia like Dr Benda are in touch with their fellow believers in Poland, where, since the late '70s, the Church's position *vis-à-vis* the government has become stronger. The events in the Gdańsk shipyards last summer were an important milestone in Poland's recent history, and Alexander Tomsy (pp. 28-39) tries to trace the part played by the Church in the growth of demands for social justice and human rights which came to a head when the shipyard workers went on strike last August. The Church's leaders are well aware of the many dangers facing Poland, and at the 177th Plenary Conference of the Polish Episcopate (10-11 December 1980) Catholics were warned against any activities which could "jeopardize the country's independence and freedom". Many outside Poland would support the concern for Poland expressed last August by the Pope when he said: "With my prayers and my heart I am participating in this experience which my homeland and my fellow countrymen are going through".

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As you will have read in the Director's Letter, Keston College faces grave financial difficulties. Unfortunately it can no longer afford to employ an editorial assistant for *RCL* and so, sadly, Gill Ablitt, who has helped run the journal for the last two years, has left Keston College. Her contribution to the journal was invaluable, and in many ways *RCL*'s quality was maintained thanks to her precision and dedication.

On 19 February I informed Keston College's Council of Management that I was resigning as editor at the end of March. It had become clear to me that I could not edit *RCL* on a part-time basis without secretarial assistance. My absence last year (on maternity leave) has convinced me, however, that Keston College has other competent staff who can produce *RCL* and maintain its quality, and I am sure that with the necessary financial backing this journal will flourish.