

The Church at the Crossroads*

By and large, our situation and social climate are conducive to the revival of religious life. It must be added, though, that atheist propaganda is marking up successes too. In this respect the rural districts are more vulnerable, especially in those areas where better living conditions go hand in hand with a decline in social relations and human solidarity, and where the materialist pseudo-culture is therefore all the more readily “consumed”.

However, atheism’s successes are chiefly quantitative and hence of secondary importance. The major factor in the religious revival is the endemic crisis in Marxist-Leninist thought, if not its actual decay. Theoretical research and presentation of Marxist ideas are totally ineffectual. They are in a state of stagnation and despite all the campaigns and the support of the party and the state, ideological thinking is devoid of all creativity. This is hardly surprising, however, after thirty years of suppression of religion. Those rare occasions where atheist propaganda is taken seriously testify less to its validity than to the present abysmal state of intellectual poverty, and to an ignorance of history and philosophy. Atheist successes are often due to a total absence of any living examples of the Christian way of life (as is the case in whole tracts of Central and Northern Bohemia). But even with the best will in the world, one cannot speak of the existence of creative Marxist thought. I myself have yet to meet anyone ready to present a serious defence of Marxism or to support it other than for secondary, i.e. pragmatic or opportunistic, reasons. This is not just my own experience — it is borne out by many others and reveals the bankruptcy of “practical Marxism-Leninism”.

The everyday political situation, however, seems much less clear-cut. There are many people who prefer to avoid the issue and to justify their unwillingness to stand up for their opinions by using the classic excuse

*Notes by an expert on the internal scene: a letter from a Catholic in Czechoslovakia to the editors of the journal *Rozmluvy* (Colloquium). The Czech original was published in *Rozmluvy* No. 5, 1985 (London).

that politics are a “dirty business”. Unhappily, this is all too often the case among Christians — much to the delight of the communists!

The reason I maintain that there is hope for Christianity here is, above all, because atheism is not a matter of free philosophical choice but often no more than the result of careerism, or whim. On the other hand, Christianity, whether rejected (mostly passively, for this is, after all, a mission field) or accepted (in the most varied ways, in view of our lack of trained clergy and lay people), is always a matter of free choice, revelation or conviction. In other words, becoming a Christian is not a whim but a life commitment. Furthermore, it is a question of a *gift* of faith. To put it more simply, ours is a God-given opportunity. A faith freely assumed will hold its own against all the arguments of those uncommitted, unfree or intimidated individuals who have placed themselves at the service of modern-day slavery. Of late, the machinery of religious oppression looks as if it is gradually becoming stereotyped and its cogs are becoming increasingly creaky. By continuing along their well-worn paths, the propagandists of atheism reach only those places where either no-one is listening or virtually no-one lives any more. Surprisingly, the fact that their audience is either dwindling or asleep does not seem to concern them. The days of the enthusiasts are now ancient history; now it is a case of actors in an absurd drama playing to a sleeping auditorium. After 35 years of crude indoctrination, the atheists are harvesting a meagre crop. To have the same lie drummed into them time and again is enough to repel even the youngest members of society and there are not many old-time comrades left who are willing to risk making themselves a laughing-stock by repeating yet again the same worn-out ideas. One thing we can be sure of is that the greatest threat does not come from their quarter.

The clergy

Thank God for Cardinal Tomášek! These days almost every lay believer is behind him. At any rate, I personally have heard nothing to make me think otherwise. However, he certainly does have his opponents among the renegade priests of *Pacem in Terris* (PiT) and among the communists. For us, though, he is a great source of strength, being a symbol of righteous witness to the suffering Christ, even though in a practical sense he is unable to do very much for the church here. However, the very fact that he refuses to allow himself to be manoeuvred into adopting hypocritical positions represents immense moral support for all believers, and I would even go so far as to say, for unbelievers too. Naturally, by virtue of his office, he is a prime authority in the church who cannot be ignored lightly, even though, on occasions, indifference is so prevalent that many fail to heed him. This is the legacy of those many years when we

had no strong figure capable of setting an example to the priesthood. Circumstances have meant that the clergy were forced to rely on themselves, and wilfulness and disunity have therefore been a serious danger. The authority of the Cardinal has had a positive and unifying influence. As far as I know, Cardinal Tomášek is unable to rely on anyone from his immediate circle but he nonetheless enjoys the support of many prayers. The government treats him quite simply as a dangerous and troublesome opponent, and they would most happily dispense with him. For this reason, there is no practical sense in maintaining relations with the government and the Cardinal's external authority is really of a symbolic character. Nevertheless, just such a visible symbol of Christ's church is an enormous encouragement for us. Everything that bears the uncompromising seal of profound and categorical fidelity to Rome helps underscore the Cardinal's authority and equally reinforces the church's autonomy vis-à-vis secular authority. It is of no account whatsoever that this frequently assumes a solely declarative form: we are all too aware of the existing limitations, but the Cardinal's declarations confirm us in our faith, guide us in the right path and provide a clear orientation for our entire church, shedding light in the darkness — and this is a fundamental condition if the church is to breathe freely once more. As a symbol, Cardinal Tomášek is a gift from God and without doubt answers the prayers of those who went before us and gave their all to the church.

The overall situation among the priesthood leaves much to be desired. Many priests of the older generation have succumbed to the years of persecution, suspicion, slander and spying and have fallen prey to fear or at least to defensiveness, timidity, distrust and scepticism. The state inspectorate does what it can to promote and encourage such tendencies. Over the years, those priests who failed to succumb to such pressures have lost their state licence to practise or, alternatively, have been removed to "dead parishes" by wavering or simply renegade vicars capitular or bishops. What matters is that they should manage to live active lives there and retain their enthusiasm. There are some who have in fact achieved this and, accepting their lot in the realisation that thereby they imitate the suffering Christ, they devote themselves to prayer and the spiritual life, an opportunity which is available solely in such situations. But these are the exceptions. More frequently one encounters passivity, well-appointed presbyteries and even luxury (typical in Slovakia), which all testifies to a general decline in spiritual qualities. It follows logically from this that such well-ensconced priests easily become malleable tools in the hands of the secretaries for religious affairs, particularly since such attitudes are condoned as sensible and circumspect even by many church authorities. "Take care lest by being too active, especially among young people, you lose your state licence!" The secretaries for religious affairs easily control such priests and one suspects

that they even obtain information from them. I am convinced that in many cases conversations between the secretaries and priests amount to interrogations between investigators and suspects, or to friendly chats with an informer who is seeking, by means of “harmless” or semi-coerced information, to obtain peace and quiet and a comfortable living, or even a career. I recall one theological student telling me about his experiences during military service when he shared a bunk with the son of a well-known communist official; this young man spoke quite openly about how his father would do the rounds of the presbyteries, and because the priests lived in such fear of him, he would come home with bags full of food and drink. At that time priests could at least appeal to Cardinal Trochta for help. That was before the fateful day when the ailing Cardinal had a meeting with Regional Secretary Dlabal who, well in his cups already, started to address the Cardinal familiarly and eventually to abuse him (“You decrepit old dodderer . . .”)*. The following morning found the Cardinal in a coma from which he never recovered. Dlabal had been trying to get the Cardinal to dismiss his Salesian assistants from his household and accept those recommended by the Secretariat for Religious Affairs. I personally am of the view that this was a very instructive case which permits only one conclusion: namely, that one should expect nothing from secretaries for religious affairs. One should behave with dignity towards them, but give them no grounds to suppose that they can delude one. When the right approach is adopted, officials begin to avoid such meetings and, suddenly, it is not the priest who is afraid, but the secretary.

I know from my own experience that the greatest suffering is caused not by one’s declared enemies but by one’s own brothers in the faith. Many priests and believers actually avoid those who live free lives and regard it as risky even to read unofficial literature, let alone duplicate it. I know of one woman for instance — someone who had bravely endured years of imprisonment in the 1950s — who, on the instructions of her priest, sewed a Czech book published in Canada into the lining of an armchair at her married daughter’s home. This happened several years ago, but the book remains in its hiding-place. The fact that some priests these days encourage such extreme caution has little to do with New Testament meekness; it is rather a matter of cowardice. There are even some who have burnt copies of the *samizdat* publication *Informace o církvi* (Church Information Bulletin) for fear of it being found in their presbytery. Such behaviour not only demonstrates a lack of courage but actually testifies to a lack of concern for the fate of their neighbour and

*These details were obtained from the then Vicar General Holoubek, who subsequently succumbed to secret police pressure and claimed that the story originated from “treacherous emigré clergy”; this retraction was published in *Katolické noviny* (Catholic News) under the headline “I can no longer remain silent”.

the church. One typically pernicious argument (which not only undermines the activity of the faithful but also reveals an avoidance of responsibility) runs: "I am a Catholic and politics have nothing to do with me." A while ago I offered a priest of that ilk a *samizdat* edition of the selected speeches of Solzhenitsyn as well as Václav Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless". He refused them, hinting that he would prefer something on a religious theme, apparently unaware that he was thereby indirectly referring to practical Christianity pejoratively as "politics". The link between everyday life and religiosity was marvellously summed up by Cardinal Glemp at the funeral of Father Popiełuszko, when he stated that a Christianity which is not anchored in the given social situation is inconceivable. For Christians to renounce their shared responsibility for political matters is in direct conflict with the social teaching of the church.

Priests who begin to hanker after an easy life disobey the Pope's interdict and join *Pacem in Terris*. (There is an apt reply to the question "What is PiT?", namely, that it is just what it says: "*Peace on Earth*".) Others gradually lose their pastoral identity as their service becomes no more than paid employment. Some are even known to sink so low as to applaud direct attacks on obedience to the church and the Holy Father. Such priests virtually ignore the young people in their parishes since concern for youth is particularly prejudicial to their hard-won comforts. Their statements and sermons, particularly in the case of some self-satisfied elderly priests tend to be cliché-ridden, often worded in a florid, sickly style reminiscent of Josef II's* times. Another easy option — using readings from the collections of homilies published by the deanery — is less objectionable since these collections are often worthy publications. However, they lack any personal enthusiasm. It is not surprising that such a perception of the priest's mission eventually gives rise to a delicately contrived balance between the interests of the secretaries for religious affairs and the flagging resolve of such priests. The atheist regime is happy to reward such clergy for blurring the evangelical message. Lukewarm priests provide a justification for lukewarm or even collaborationist attitudes among their parishioners. The rewards are not merely pecuniary: they include rich parishes. Nevertheless, such priests live under constant threat of losing it all. Where such a strange kind of "wealth" and "advantage" are sought, this testifies all the more, perhaps, to a superficial spirituality and even to a total decline or loss of pastoral identity. The fault lies not just with human weakness but also with the state of disarray within the church hierarchy, which has resulted in years of only tenuous links between priests and their spiritual superiors. The office of vicar capitular (a title in any case unjustified in terms of canon

*The Emperor of Austria from 1780 to 1798. He introduced a number of reforms to make the Catholic Church a state institution, and the priests civil servants — *Ed.*

law)* has remained temporary for so many years that this has come to be accepted with indifference, a fact that strips the vicars of any respect. Furthermore, the holders of this office have a dubious reputation. Their servility *vis-à-vis* the regime that installed them has a destructive influence on the priesthood. It encourages priests who are not immune to the habit of more or less accommodating the state to make ready compromises, while on priests with firmer moral and spiritual resolve, it has the opposite effect of accentuating their independence, which is inevitably prejudicial to church unity. However, this begs the question: what is the alternative? How are we to respond positively and without resignation? Those priests loyal to the Holy Father should be trying to meet together whenever possible in a private rather than an official setting, to discuss how best to combat the disintegration of the church.

It is logical that the atheist state should regard the church as a “relic of the past”, which is to be stamped out at all times and in all places. The clergy embody a continuity and can therefore be regarded as no more than an evil to be tolerated for the time being. So as far as the state is concerned, the less they preach the Gospel the better, and it was the application of this principle by the secretaries for religious affairs which gave rise to the establishment of *Pacem in Terris* with its pharisaical peace programme. This movement is used to persuade renegade and corrupt priests to subvert others in turn and cause them to renege.

But what harm this undignified striving to survive at all costs has caused! There are clergymen who have reconciled themselves to the fact that there is no religious education in their parishes, not to mention those priests who would not even think of assisting the suffering and the persecuted, and who fail to attend to any who fall outside their own comfortable little sphere. On the other hand, there are even honorary doctors of theology in *Pacem in Terris* — an organisation which sows dissension and talks hypocritically about religious freedom. How godless its statements are! They proclaim peace while condemning the oppressed; they proclaim love for the Holy Father while continually defying him. They dominate *Katolické noviny* which they use to suppress the faith (and one example speaks volumes: there was not one word in *Katolické noviny* about the death of Fr Popiełuszko).

Priests who have been deprived of their state licences should be constantly in our prayers, for they are abandoned to their fate; no-one, apart from the secret police, takes any interest in them. For example, one priest in the Litoměřice diocese, in the ten years since he lost his licence,

*In the absence of bishops (deported to labour camps in the early 1950s) the Church in Czechoslovakia was headed by vicars capitular. As each diocesan cathedral (*capitula*) elects its own leader this enabled the communists to choose a suitably amenable candidate. This situation obtains to this day.

has not received a single letter from former colleagues, nor any expression of interest or sympathy from the local vicar capitular. This is not an exceptional case. These priests are systematically excluded from annual courses for the clergy and receive none of the literature published by the deanery. The church hierarchy meekly accepts without protest a situation whereby one can be stripped of the right to be a priest, and there are not many licensed priests who have the courage to concelebrate mass with their unlicensed colleagues or even to attend funerals with them. It is not unusual for priests to be offered the return of their licence on condition that they join *Pacem in Terris* (such an offer has been made, for example, by Bishop Vrana of Olomouc, to Fr Rudolf Smahel).

It is an appalling state of affairs, especially if one also considers that illness and old age have already removed so many priests from active service. At the same time, however, it is a testimony to the overpowering strength of Christ's church which remains unbroken here and finds within itself an inner source of continual renewal, purification and growth. After all, it takes just one solitary good priest to throw these sterile intrigues into confusion. Experience leads us to believe that as a rule, confusion is what principally characterises the thinking of those who have accepted the supposed advantages of a system which offers absolutely nothing apart from a dubious material security.

*The religious orders**

Many young priests, instinctively realising the risks run by defiant individuals, have sought a firm anchorage in a religious order. The importance of these orders, in spite of the problems involved in accepting new members, is enormous. Orders not only provide marvellous scope for solving problems, but they are also a unifying factor and a school for clerical life. While secretaries for religious affairs may be capable of influencing individual members, they will never be able to dominate entire orders. We can therefore depend upon the religious communities (even though it is likely that, for want of flexibility in reacting to the exceptional situation created by totalitarianism, some orders will disappear). This explains why they are such a thorn in the side of the state authorities.

On the whole, members of orders are better off than diocesan priests because, unlike diocesan clergy, they are not at the mercy of dubious church authorities. Should a member of an order ever backslide, his superior has the power to exclude him from the order, or at least to restrain his influence. This means that in our situation the rôle of the superior is enhanced, as well as the importance of his directives for the

*Religious orders have been illegal in Czechoslovakia since 1948 — *Ed.*

individual order (and thereby for the church as well). Superiors ought to display unswerving loyalty to the Holy Father and to their own superiors abroad. They need to be people of personal courage, capable of thinking creatively and seeking solutions of at least a slightly militant character. It is in the interest of each order to choose its superiors from among the best, as this is a natural way of ensuring the quality of the entire order. Diocesan priests are isolated and apart from a few shining exceptions, they are dealt with by dissemblers who are either members or officials of *Pacem in Terris*. This can never happen in an order. When a priest who is a member of an order speaks to his superior, even though he might disagree with him on some points, he knows that he is in a house to which he belongs and that this is his true home. And even in our absurd situation, it is unthinkable that the morale of an order should sink so low that its superior would adopt a position on vital issues like the one which led diocesan priests to join *Pacem in Terris*. The state authorities are well aware of this, which is why they are so keen to keep the orders banned. It is possible that at some time in the future it will occur to the regime, for tactical and propaganda purposes, to permit a limited reopening of some religious order, but any general revival will happen only as the result of radical political pressure. If they ever did permit the existence of an order, this would give the regime the means to exert pressure (in the form of warnings not to jeopardise its exceptional status, or the requirement of its supplying lists of prospective members, etc.). Such supervision would result in the order's decline and loss of attractiveness and would consequently increase the significance of those orders still banned.

What is more likely is the reopening of certain of the women's orders. After all, they do not appear to be such a threat and their activity can even be construed as beneficial to "existing socialism". But the life of these nuns, permitted to live out their days in non-renewable communities, presents a whole set of problems. The authorities are past masters at destroying the equilibrium of communities by keeping the nuns in a state of uncertainty about what the new year will bring. Often such sisters do not even know where they will be living and when they will be forced to enter an old people's home. Nuns are not allowed to settle, and whenever they come forward with their own suggestions for what they might do in the immediate future, they receive either a negative or an unreliable response. There are times when trust in divine providence disappears and, as a result, solutions are sought which have more in common with a calculating, worldly approach than a spiritual one. This is hardly surprising since the nuns' lot is intolerably difficult.

The formation of an order is rooted in deep spiritual foundations. It is grounded on the order's rules, especially the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The practice of constant contemplation allows members of orders to examine how the requirements of life in the order

are being put into practice. Fortunately, lapses or loss of faith do not always have an entirely negative impact; frequently they give rise to decisions which promote further growth. The requirements flowing from obedience to the order and the vows have the effect of tearing the order's members away from the tenets of the world and transforming them into the divine "salt of the earth" which the world needs to survive.

A great source of hope is the growing interest of young people in the orders. Despite the fact that the state strongly condemns affiliation to an order and membership can result in every possible kind of discrimination, there is already widespread talk about the unprecedented increase in the numbers of secret members. And one gains the impression that these new members have no fear of intimidation. Furthermore, it looks as if this trend does not involve just one or two orders but almost all of them. The situation regarding women's communities would seem to be even more encouraging, though occasionally one does encounter a degree of doubt as to how a novitiate can be run in these difficult circumstances. A while ago, a novice nun with simple vows described to me the situation of girls accepted into classic orders with strict observations. The requirements made no concessions to the changing times. The girls may bathe only once a month; they must not wear modern underwear, use a mirror, dress fashionably or style their hair. As a result, one of them, a student nurse, encountered great problems in her hostel as she conscientiously sought to observe the rule. In addition, the rule forbidding them to frequent places of entertainment, such as cinemas, created difficulties for her. It amazed me to learn, nevertheless, that such an order still recruits and retains young women as members. In fact, just recently in Prague, a lay sister told me that in all the twenty-year existence of her order they had never had so many novices. All the young nuns, however, are under great strain. I myself am sure that this is a case of inadequate adaptation to the "state of emergency" in which we live since I know of marvellously functioning communities which are distinguished by their flexibility and inventiveness in seeking the optimal forms of work in what are virtually catacomb conditions.

Youth

It often happens that youthful idealism, failing to withstand the pressure of existential problems, wanes as years go by, together with interest. Even so, it is the young, who have been packing the churches particularly in the recent period, who are our great hope. The situation is most promising in the towns but there are even signs of religious revival in the countryside too. Naturally, the majority are excluded from this and they grope their way along, falling prey to pessimism, scepticism and resignation, whilst the naturally active fall prey to cynicism, vulgarity and nihilism. Young

non-believers are particularly exposed to corruption, a problem which is aggravated by such basic difficulties as trying to obtain better-paid jobs, a flat in a town, etc. Young couples find that it is possible to jump the housing queue not just by bribery but also by joining the party, that is by selling one's soul. There was one young worker who, just before he began his military service, was pressed to become a candidate party member. For this he was promised the return of the driving licence he had lost for drunken driving and an easy time in the army. But in fact, young people have little for which to thank the party. Apart from the occasional material compensation, the most the party can offer is the arid Union of Socialist Youth or the para-military *Svazarm**. Other clubs and organisations which do not blindly adhere to party directives are closely supervised and have no guaranteed right of existence. Social life and spontaneity are dwindling, and adolescents increasingly expend their energy in discotheques or at parties. Their greatest interest is pop music, and for some of them, a deeper interest in this music leads them to become regular listeners of Radio Free Europe or the Voice of America. (Incidentally, these two stations are listened to avidly by all sections of the population, regardless of age.) Among these youngsters there is a growing incidence of alcoholism and drug abuse. Sexual morality has markedly declined and there is even a burgeoning cult of violence and Nazi ideology. In Brno, at the end of last summer, there was a trial behind closed doors of 42 young people charged with propagating Nazism. Many of the accused were children of leading officials; the main figure in the trial was the son of the Yugoslav attaché. Young people frequently display a negative attitude to foreigners, especially to Russians and East Germans, not to mention Vietnamese and blacks.

Nonetheless, destructive tendencies afflict only a small section of the rising generation; most youngsters succumb to total apathy, their lives being a succession of wasted days and nights. They lack any capacity for service to others as well as any self-respect. It is hard to describe these "dead souls". When they grow up, they just stay at home and are scarcely seen outside except when they have to vote in absurd elections. It is an incredible waste of humanity and no future can be built on such indifference. So this leaves only the Christians, since living Christianity can never remain a private matter (though the communist ideologists would prefer it so) and it always reaches out. There is even an increase in conversions among adults.

Not long ago, I was visited by a young woman studying medicine who evinced a spontaneous interest in the Bible and explained that many of her fellow students felt the same way. I also met a student from the

* *Svazarm*: Red Army Cadet Corps (the acronym stands for the Organisation for Cooperation with the Army).

technical university who was an entirely spontaneous believer, and whose interest in religion had led him to read *samizdat* literature. I had a visit from another woman undergraduate whose parents are active party members: as a result of her friendship with a Christian fellow-student she had discovered a profound, albeit still intuitive, love of Christ and even started to pray daily. She came to seek my advice about how to cope with seminars on scientific atheism; her immediate problem was a task she had been given of reviewing an atheist pamphlet by a Soviet author of the 1960s. It was a biased pastiche of the usual sort. She herself had chosen the pamphlet with the intention of pointing out the weaknesses in its arguments. Her seminar tutor, an aggressive and suspicious woman, had long sensed that some of her students were believers. Even at university these days it is difficult to find a convinced atheist!

It therefore comes as no surprise that Mother Teresa of Calcutta (who is the subject of one of the most popular current *samizdat* editions) received such a welcome in Brno and Prague. I have never seen St Ignatius's Church so packed with young people! We were overjoyed. Meanwhile, a huge crowd of the faithful gathered outside; so many, in fact, that Ječná Street (in Prague) was virtually impassable, even for trams, for over an hour, and the people just stood by not knowing what to do. In the end the priest of St Ignatius's was taken into custody for several hours and the following morning, terrified, he implored the people to disperse. In Brno, there were more people waiting for Mother Teresa outside the Regional Council building than there had ever been for a May Day rally. All this, despite the fact that there had been no publicity, nor even precise news about the time and place of her visit (not to mention the threats to people's livelihoods if they were to attend).

So does the younger generation give us any cause for hope? Does their resistance to evil not evaporate in the face of the material attractions of consumer socialism? We may state categorically that the one and only solution in this situation is never to confront enquiring and confused minds with spineless compromises and evasiveness and fears for what others (including the party) will say, but instead to bring joyful tidings to those who seek. Not the peace of *Pacem in Terris*, but a sword; not presbyteries locked for fear of the latterday conquerors, but ones that are open to the Holy Spirit and the young; not priests walking in fear of those who, as Bishop Cyprian* urges, should be feared "no more than gnats", but priests proclaiming the freedom of the Gospel and attracting all those who seek the Truth.

Translated from Czech by Gerald Turner.

*Bishop Cyprian (d. 258) was an Early Church martyr — *Ed.*