

Observer's Report on the Prague Christian Peace Conference

"God calls: choose life; the hour is late!" This was the theme of the Sixth All-Christian Peace Assembly (ACPA) held in Prague from 2-9 July 1985. As with other conferences, it was more than possible for participants to learn nothing of the local political, social and cultural setting which must inevitably condition the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) in Czechoslovakia. Alternatively, one could use the free travel pass provided to visit friends, truanting from the intensive 9am to 10pm programme. And if one visited a church on Sunday and was invited to take part in the service, did one realise that the appropriate state department would first have been approached for permission? Such approval was necessary for the Conference too, of course.

The CPC first met in 1958 on the "ideological initiative" of Josef Hromádka, the stimulating Czech theologian. He had already been involved in the birth of the Ecumenical Council of his own country in 1955 and a whole generation of Protestant ministers were influenced by his teaching. As a refugee in 1939-47 he had worked in the theological faculty at Princeton, USA. In 1948 I recall press reports of his confrontation at the First WCC Assembly in Amsterdam with the US Presbyterian John Foster Dulles (later Secretary of State) in a set debate on East-West issues when he stated: "Henceforth the West must share world responsibility with the East, and this means that the West must get over its 'almost metaphysical horror' of the new world trends and their eastern leader, Soviet Russia." A decade later he was urging fellow-scholars in preparation for starting the CPC "to be aware of the tremendous processes changing our time and . . . theologically to master these processes, not to be defeated by them". He was always reminding the church of its responsibility for the world, and he led the way towards dialogue with the Marxists. For Hromádka the CPC was an increasingly successful venture in overcoming the cold war spirit. Has this principle been upheld?

The third ACPA met amidst the early excitement of the 1968 "Prague Spring"; later that year the CPC President and General Secretary were protesting at the arrival of

Warsaw Pact troops in their country. In 1969 the resultant "CPC crisis" led to the enforced resignation of the Secretary, J. N. Ondra, followed by Hromádka's protest resignation as President. "And it was at this critical moment that His Eminence Metropolitan Nikodim [of the Russian Orthodox Church — *Ed.*] took into his untiring hands the leadership of the movement, and thanks to his boundless energy he was able to bring about not only the rebirth of the CPC, but also its metamorphosis into a truly universal movement . . ." (Metropolitan Yuvenali of Krutitsy and Kolonna in 1979). After much agonised discussion, existing western regional CPC groups disbanded, whilst some of us, from a distance, tried to remain informed and in indirect contact. There were occasionally more formal reappraisals. Gradually new groups have arisen, of varying levels of historical knowledge and judgement. Assemblies were held in 1971 and 1978 with increasing participation by Third World delegates whose expenses are fully met, if need be, by the CPC.

Of the eight hundred people present this July, about 360 were delegates from about ninety countries. Half the delegates were European, which with another thirty or so from North American made a rough balance of numbers between East and West. Journalists and staff almost equalled delegates in number. Amongst 78 observers, including two from China, were about a dozen British, including representatives of the British Council of Churches, Quakers, Pax Christi and others, with the Bishop of Edinburgh as personal observer for the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In preparatory visits to several countries by the CPC leadership before the Assembly there had been hints of some possible flexibility of policy and style compared with recent years. But what did we observe? At first there were the usual interminable speeches with the customary Good Things (peace, Soviet gestures), and Bad Things (armaments race and Star Wars) — and lengthy greetings from the same political stance; and no real debate or encounter in groups. But there were occasional accusations of one-sidedness. There was a group of British delegates who seemed a little restive and their secretary, Robin Morrison,

spoke in a plenary session: "The one-sidedness of the CPC is not that the West is not guilty, but that it is not guilty alone . . ."

Then observers began to be called by the chairman in both the plenary and the huge so-called group sessions, including some British and other dissenting voices. On occasion these received a marked appreciation from the Hungarian President, Bishop Karoly Toth, and especially when "the Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church", Bishop Haggart, was called to introduce and read Dr Runcie's brief and pointed message of greeting. At the heart of it he had written:

True dialogue for peace implies a reciprocity which has not, in the judgement of many western Christians, been present in the immediate past history of the Conference. It was, therefore, with some satisfaction that I was able to receive a delegation from the CPC in Canterbury a short while ago from whom I learned of the Conference's desire to be a more credible forum for Christians to discuss the vital issue of world peace in a realistic way . . . In my judgement such credibility depends upon the Conference developing a new even-handedness in its deliberations on contemporary political alliances, an openness to a discussion of human rights and freedom to consider all kinds of peace movements in the several countries represented.

(The full text of the letter was reproduced for all to read who would.)

That was not achieved in July. However, there were signs of thaw amidst the tedium. There were a few people intriguingly labelled "Expert", most of them from Czechoslovakia. One or two might be seen to be being "rehabilitated" after long exile (e.g. Dr J. N. Ondra). It was encouraging to see them in eager conversation with old friends, and indeed it was such "lobby" encounters that really mattered. Mrs J. L. Hromádková (Josef Hromádka's widow) was elected an honorary vice-president during the course of the Conference.

Much of the worship had been ill-prepared, but the ecumenical service on Sunday in the Salvator Church was well done, with a good Malagasy sermon in French and excellent choral music. And whereas the final hours were packed with indigestible statements, reports and messages to all and sundry in the ecclesiastical and political world, there was a moving concluding act of worship for those who survived until 11.30pm. Bishop Karoly Toth, the newly elected President, spoke in humble, prophetically spiritual style.

On his main theme address the Indian Metropolitan Paul Gregorios had said, "We have to continue to be in dialogue with those Christians who disagree with or distrust us." I believe that some of us must certainly keep in touch — as observers.

GEOFFREY BECK

(Observer at the ACPC on behalf of the British Council of Churches)

Four New Cardinals for Eastern Europe

Among the 28 new Cardinals appointed by Pope John Paul II this year, four are from Eastern Europe: two from Poland, one from Ukraine, and one from Slovakia. However, only one of the nominees, Cardinal Gulbinowicz, lives in his country of origin (Poland).

Cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz was born on 17 October 1928 in Szukiszki, Vilnius (then Vilno) region. He finished his secondary schooling in Vilnius and in 1944 started technological studies there, which he completed after the war in Białystok. He was ordained a priest in 1950 and after a short time

working in rural parishes he was sent to the Catholic University of Lublin. In 1955 he received a PhD in moral theology. Between 1956 and 1959 he worked as a University chaplain in Białystok and until 1970 he also lectured in moral theology at Hosianum seminary in Olsztyn. In 1970 he was nominated an apostolic administrator of Białystok and in 1976 he was transferred to the metropolitan see in Wrocław as archbishop. He is now the first Cardinal in Wrocław since the death of Cardinal Bertram (of Breslau) at the end of the Second World War.