

Church and State in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1956 Part II

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In Part I of this three-part article, published in RCL Vol. 14, No. 1, Karel Kaplan described in detail developments in church-state relations in Czechoslovakia during the two years immediately following the communist takeover in February 1948. Having explained how the government's attempt to divide the church by founding a regime-controlled priests' movement, Catholic Action, had failed, the author now moves on to discuss further measures taken to limit the activities of the Catholic Church, and in particular, to liquidate the Eastern-rite Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia.

As a political movement, Catholic Action failed. The first attempt to divide the church had been unsuccessful. In their further attempts to create a national church, the communists concentrated on administrative measures of increasing harshness. Both international and national events had an influence: the former included the "cold war" and the religious policy of the Soviet-bloc countries; the latter mainly consisted of heightening the class struggle and the rule of lawlessness, demonstrated *inter alia* by political trials. During the following four years the communists concentrated on four tasks:

- 1) establishing complete control over the church;
- 2) isolating the church and restricting its activity and influence;
- 3) appointing "their" priests to high positions in the hierarchy and disrupting the unity of the clergy;
- 4) solving the problem of bishops' autonomy.

The organisation of the system of state control over the church continued. Commissars were placed in the consistories. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior issued decrees ordering that the authorities be informed about the activities of vicars' and deans' conferences and making it necessary to gain approval for all pastoral letters and instructions issued to clergy or the faithful. Laws Nos 217 and 218 of 14 October and governmental Statutes Nos 218 and 228 formed

the basis of this system of control by regulating the finances of the church and establishing the Office for Religious Affairs.* This had far-reaching consequences for the church; the new laws changed its position without its consent and against the rules of its internal organisation. They transferred power from the church to the state, contrary to canon law. They were, according to the episcopate: "An attack on the organisation, order and life of the church and thus a threat to religious life." This formulation perfectly expressed the intention of the communist leadership. On 6 July 1949, it was decided to use the new laws to reconstruct the church completely; this provoked even greater opposition and protests from the clergy.

The economic position, above all the salaries of priests, which were to be paid by the state, played an important part in the government's policy. The communists believed that control over the payment of clergy would be the best means of subordinating and dividing them and turning them against the bishops. Gottwald expressed it very plainly: "If you obey the government, you will get this and that. If you obey the Vatican, you will get nothing." The communist view was very simple and typical of their way of thinking: they saw property as the basis of the church's social standing and believed that should the fiscal ties between a priest and his church be severed, its structure and influence as an institution would disintegrate.

The communists did not take seriously the oft-repeated proclamation of the episcopate that material considerations were the least important for them and for their religious activity. Bishop Trochta told the ministers: "Not a single tear was shed because of that, and I beg you to believe that I am sincere." It is, of course, true that even the episcopate's view was biased. They were right in the matter of confiscated church property, but not in the matter of priests' salaries. The transfer of capital threatened the existing and rather unfavourable social status of the clergy, two-thirds of whom were receiving insufficient state maintenance pay according to the provision of the law and the rest none at all. The second phase of the communist attack against the unity of the church was based on this fact.

On 2 July the bishops received the bill on salaries for the clergy for their comment. They rejected it as limiting their freedom. In its place they demanded reform of the existing 1928 law. The episcopal conference of 14 August demanded the renewal of negotiations about this and other controversial matters. The party leadership approved the proposal that the clergy should discuss the bill either in individual meetings or in conferences organised by vicariates. Resolutions adopted at these discussions were all sent to the National Front. The State Security detained those who supported negative resolutions: vicars, deans and an

*Now known as the Secretariat for Religious Affairs, and part of the Ministry of Culture.

apostolic administrator named Onderek from Český Těšín were arrested.

According to the National Front only thirty per cent of the clergy were against the law. According to the church reports all clergy repudiated the law on moral grounds, but only twenty to thirty per cent refused the state salary. The hierarchy realised the danger of division among the priests and suggested that an episcopal conference should issue clear instructions to all clergy on how to behave. They realised that Parliament would pass the new laws in spite of all the protests from bishops, priests and the Vatican. In such circumstances, the unity of the clergy was of the first importance. The episcopal conference on 21 October issued the following guidelines: 1) acceptance of the salary was not forbidden, but it must not be tied to any obligation which would be contrary to church regulations; 2) the oath of loyalty was not forbidden either, provided that the clause "as long as it would not be contrary to divine and ecclesiastical laws" were added to it. The conference took place in a depressed atmosphere. The bishops submitted a petition to the government, demanding the renewal of negotiations and a revision of religious legislation. Zápotocký's answer was negative, and took the petition to be an expression of hostility and refusal of civil obedience. The bishops' next response, sent from their conference of 17 November, was firmer in tone. The government was requested to stop the perpetration of wrongs against the church by statutory provisions concerning the execution and interpretation of the laws on religion. The church was in effect being outlawed.

On 1 November, the priests received their new salaries from the state. Not one sent it back. As for the bishops, the communists decided to wait "until they themselves claimed their salaries". The bishops, however, had already decided in October to turn them down. During January and February 1950 many priests were taking the loyalty oath. In the Czech lands (Bohemia and Moravia) 2,916 priests out of 3,214 were asked to do so: 16 refused. The same number refused in Slovakia, where 2,112 clergy of all denominations were invited to take the oath. Approximately forty per cent originally intended to add the clause recommended by the bishops to the official text. However, under pressure exerted by the functionaries of the Catholic People's Party, they omitted to do so. Those who refused to take the oath were imprisoned in a monastery converted into a detention centre. Higher church dignitaries were invited individually to take the oath, but only one bishop, Eltschner, did so.

The second attempt to divide the clergy therefore did not bring the expected result. Neither was the success of the episcopate so clear-cut as in the case of Catholic Action. The campaign over state salaries revealed differences among priests whereas Catholic Action had not. The communists' over-estimation of the importance of this fact — they regarded the episcopal instructions of 21 October as a concession

motivated by fear of loss of unity and as proof of weakness — is illustrated by Gottwald's reference to a political defeat of the hierarchy, "which would remain isolated, with the rest of the clergy against it, if they forbade the acceptance of the salaries. We would have such a schism as has been seldom seen in history. Catholic Action would be nothing in comparison with it."

The communists had great expectations of further legislation on, for example, obligatory civil marriages and state registration of births and deaths. They also ascribed the greatest importance to the Office for Religious Affairs, which, endowed with great power and cooperating closely with other already existing state organs, formed, as it were, a foreign body which deeply infiltrated the life of the church. Gottwald stressed this facet of its activity: "Today we are able to see into their little junk shop, before we could not Today we have all of them on our list, every single one, each one is, as it were, classified, on file."

On the whole the bishops correctly judged the threatening consequences of the legislation for the future of the church, and their attitude was shared by almost all the clergy. They could not, however, risk provoking even more menacing actions against the church which would doubtless have followed any proclamation of open opposition to the law. The communists misunderstood the bishops' tactics. Minister Kopecký revealed wishful thinking when he asserted that: "The paths of the lower Catholic clergy and those of the bishops and the Vatican were already diverging." Their belief in their success was not shaken even by troubles on their own front. Fr Plojhar's doubts were recurring: he abstained from cabinet sessions discussing religious bills and was unwilling to attend Parliament. Only a threat that he would lose his position as a Minister restored his obedience.

The government pursued policies in both the foreign and domestic spheres which aimed to isolate the church, limit its activity and eliminate its influence. It pursued a foreign policy which it hoped would lead to the eventual breaking of diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and the Vatican. Domestic policy was dominated by the abolition of the Eastern-rite Catholic (Uniate) Church and of the religious orders.

The first sign of efforts to replace the Eastern-rite Catholic Church by the Russian Orthodox Church appeared in August 1948. The Eastern-rite Church existed mainly in eastern Slovakia where it had about three hundred thousand members. The Commission for Religious Affairs of the National Front had collaborated with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church on a programme planned, among other things, to convert some Eastern-rite Catholic priests and take over some of their churches in the eastern part of the country. In January 1949, a report on the religious situation in eastern Slovakia presented to the National Front warned of the danger of hasty catholicisation of the Eastern-rite

Catholics. It suggested that "everything should be done to stop catholicisation and create among the Eastern-rite Catholic clergy a movement for return to Russian Orthodoxy."

The decision to make a gift of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church to Moscow had been taken. During August and September 1949, the situation developed sufficiently for the National Front and the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to prepare the liquidation of the Uniates which was to begin after the return of Exarch Yeleverfi from Moscow. In December a press campaign began, to try to persuade the Uniate faithful to become Russian Orthodox. Gustav Husák's plans for this stage had been worked out on a long-term basis.* However, representatives of the Orthodox Church in both Moscow and Prague were pressing for the speedy liquidation of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church. A visit to Slovakia by a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church from Moscow in January 1950 was expected to mark the beginning of the process. A number of Slovak communist leaders, led by Husák, disagreed with the proposed visit as well as with the speedy liquidation of the Uniates. They remembered the Catholic Action affair only too well. Nonetheless, the opposing view prevailed. Following the visit of Metropolitan Nikolai, the last phase of the scheme was put into action. So-called Committees for the Return to the Russian Orthodox Church were formed among Uniate priests, laymen and believers. Delegates from these Committees were to convene a conference which was to proclaim the transition from the Eastern Catholic to the Russian Orthodox Church. A suggestion that this transition be postponed for a few months was refused by the party leadership on 27 February, which considered any postponement to be detrimental to the success of the action. The ultimate aim was not only the transition, but also the detention of Bishops Gojdič and Hopka, and the leading clergy of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church.

The campaign met with resistance from priests and laymen alike. The local functionaries became rather nervous and increased the pressure on the priests and laymen; they even went as far as arresting the more active opponents. In many villages riots erupted. On 28 April the so-called "minor conference" of delegates from the Re-unification Committees should have taken place. The individual delegations were dominated by communist functionaries. The purpose of the conference was to elect the Central Re-unification Committee (Central Committee for Return to the Russian Orthodox Church). Suddenly, on 27 April, the regional secretaries decided to transform the "minor conference" into a "major" one. The participation of some hundreds of communists made this possible. The transition to the Russian Orthodox Church was to be proclaimed at this improvised Congress. This sudden step was motivated

*Dr Husák, now the President of Czechoslovakia, was in 1949 in charge of the Slovak Communist Party policies towards the church.

by ever-increasing opposition to the transition even among those priests who earlier had been in agreement with it. Of the total of 267 clerics, only ten per cent were in favour and even some of those began to recant or, at least, had doubts. On the same night the regional functionaries requested Fierlinger's consent to their decision and to the arrests of Gojdič and Hopka. Fierlinger, who then held the post of Chairman of the Office for Religious Affairs, first had to ask for Premier Široký's consent. During that night about three thousand communists were mobilised and called upon to participate in the "Major Congress". Thus the liquidation of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church was voted on 28 April 1950.

The manner of the liquidation did not meet with Prague's approval. The precipitous and badly-prepared action was criticised. It was recommended to the Office for Religious Affairs that publication of the official transition should be delayed. It was published a month later and even then only because of the pressure exerted by the Russian Orthodox Church's representatives.

The Minister for State Security, Kopřiva, presented a rather negative report to Gottwald. Even State Security pointed out the inappropriate methods used during the action. Fierlinger admitted as much. The matter was not closed even then. Towards the end of June, an effort to revive the autonomous Eastern-rite Catholic Church in Slovakia was made even by those dignitaries who had accepted the transition. The government denounced these attempts categorically at a special meeting on 26 July. There was a problem with the priests, too. At the end of August only 102 priests had taken the oath of allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church. Ninety-seven remained parish priests without having taken the oath, 65 were detained and four were unaccounted for. The Office for Religious Affairs ordered the detention of the 97 parish priests who had not taken the oath. The Soviet officials did not like this attitude. Ambassador Silin warned Fierlinger on 17 September to beware of precipitous actions. He stated: "It is important for the Soviet Union not to have a population hostile towards her in regions bordering on her frontiers." The detentions were carried out, but only gradually, and not *en masse*.

Preparation for the liquidation of male religious orders began in autumn 1949. The department of State Security dealing with religious matters received orders to collect information about the superiors of male orders and to shadow them. Shortly afterwards a new command was issued: "to select a few of the most reactionary representatives of the orders" for arrest and interrogation. The "Church Six" of the Central Committee approved the proposal to concentrate the members of male orders in special monasteries on 20 January 1950. Five days later, instructions were issued to begin a press campaign against the orders. On 26 February, Gottwald declared that solving the problem of the religious orders was a task of primary importance. The following day the "Church

Six" gave its approval to the plan presented by the Office for Religious Affairs and State Security, to carry out the above-mentioned "centralisation" as a one-off action at night. The plan for Action K (obviously a code name) was very detailed, and had two stages. The first stage consisted of official termination of the activities of the two orders, the Jesuits and the Knights of the Cross; steps to be taken against all other orders with the exception of the Brothers of Mercy; confiscation and re-allocation of monasteries; detention of the superiors . . . The second stage consisted of similar measures to be taken against religious orders for women. The Presidium of the Central Committee discussed the proposals of the "Church Six" on the same day and decided to prepare for the trials of the superiors. The reason for this was: "to compromise the religious orders so that action against monasteries would be made possible."

State Security was instructed a few days later to select ten of the arrested superiors and prepare cases against them in the near future. Čepička had the last word on the selection of the victims. Two specially created groups of interrogators were working in the Ruzyně prison under Commandant Milan Moučka. One of the groups was headed by Ladislav Mácha. As to procedure, the interrogators were instructed by the Head of State Security, Osvald Závodský. The methods employed included both physical and mental torture. The trial started on 31 March. The accused superiors, Machalka, Tajovský, Šilhan, Bráito, Mastilák, Kajpr, Mikulášek, Blasfk, Urban and Barták, were all convicted and condemned to up to 25 years of imprisonment. The organisers of the show-trial managed, by means of fabrication, to achieve their political goal, namely to demonstrate the hostile activity of the orders and the Vatican. They also managed to keep the usual propaganda going, including an enormous press campaign. It was the first political show trial in Czechoslovakia. It was different from those that followed in that many of the accused changed their statements and rescinded their admission of guilt, which had been forced from them by the State Security. Even a report issued by inspectors from the Ministry of the Interior on 15 June was critical. It mentioned that "every contradicted statement had been treated by the court as an excuse" and even stated that the substance of the alleged crimes had not been sufficiently proved.

Eight days after the trial, Rudolf Slánský, the party General Secretary, instructed the regions to carry out "Action K". He saw it as the heaviest blow so far dealt to the hierarchy and "its imperialist dissidents". "Action K" was carried out according to the previously prepared plan on the night of 13 April. Two thousand one hundred and ninety-two monks were transported to a few monasteries now being used as concentration camps; 175 went to detention centres in the monasteries of Želiv and Běč.

At the same time preparations for the rounding-up of members of

female religious orders went ahead. There were 11,896 nuns. The suggestion for this move came from Čepička on 3 March, and was approved by the Presidium on 17 April. They demanded that a detailed plan for this action should be prepared within three months. The Office for Religious Affairs presented the plan towards the end of August. At that time, 616 Sisters had already been transferred from those convents which were needed for the use of the Ministry of Defence. In October, 4,073 nuns were dealt with by "Action K". Many were sent to work in industry or elsewhere. The liquidation of the orders for women proved to be far more complicated; 9,748 of their members worked in health and social institutions as well as in industry, and it was difficult to replace them. The original idea of the Office for Religious Affairs to persuade them to leave the orders met with defeat. Another suggestion approved by the party leadership on 12 July 1954, namely to send them forcibly to their native districts, was not carried out for fear of their possible political influence there. Finally, after these frustrated attempts, the leadership decided on a gradual liquidation over a period of ten years.

The liquidation of the orders also had economic and cultural aspects. Fierlinger considered it to be the greatest property transfer since the resettlement of the border regions* and the nationalisation of industry and land. The male orders had owned 429 buildings, monasteries and convents and the female orders 670. Beside these, the government confiscated some tens of millions of Czech crowns in the orders' bank accounts. The monasteries in the Czech lands alone had 1,800,000 books. The National Gallery received 629 paintings and 247 sculptures formerly owned by the orders. The Museum of Art and Industry (*sic*, actually called Museum of Crafts and Applied Arts — *Tr.*) received 1,100 *objets d'art*. The National Commission for Culture took more than two thousand valuable historical objects from the monasteries in Olomouc, Strahov and Velehrad. This list does not account for everything. A considerable quantity of objects of cultural value was either partially or completely destroyed. Even Fierlinger in his final report on "Action K" criticised the drastic destruction of cultural objects and historical relics from the monasteries of Obořiště, Vyšší Brod, Břevnov and Teplá by the employees and organs of the Ministries of the Interior, National Defence and Justice.

The failure of Catholic Action to become a movement for the so-called rebirth of the church caused the government to transfer its attention to the priests, or more exactly, to their organisation outside the church. The original unrealistic idea that pressure from believers would suffice to bring about changes in the church gave way to another concept based on the principle "of the church being the business not of the believers, but of

*Over 3 million Germans had been expelled from these areas in 1946.

the clergy". Consequently, the emphasis was put on the fight to win over the priests and turn them against the Vatican and the episcopate. The authors of this concept aimed at creating discord among the clergy. They wished to win over a number of priests and to eliminate the disobedient by means of detention and imprisonment. They made promises, tried to buy their sympathy, put pressures on them, threatened them and imposed punishments on them.

They found support in the group of so-called Patriotic Priests, whose number increased slightly after October 1949. According to the Office for Religious Affairs there were fifty or so of them, less than 1.5 per cent of the entire clergy. Some others joined them, either hoping to achieve a higher position or because of personal differences with their bishops.

In the meantime the function of this communist faction changed. It was intended to become the clerical fifth column inside the church and an instrument enforcing state domination over the church administration. This should have been achieved by the nomination of members to high positions within the church organisation. However, the Office for Religious Affairs complained incessantly about the difficulties it was having with these priests. The majority of them lacked authority, some on account of moral and other deficiencies, others because of their poor intellectual acumen. Added to that were the complaints they made against each other, mostly motivated by envy, greed and jealousy generated in the struggle for the more profitable positions. Because of their effectiveness as a destructive element their power in the church was increased. The Office for Religious Affairs formed a committee from the most reliable of them, which was divided into two sections: a small consultative group and a larger body. Above all, it tried to put these priests in positions of power. By March 1951 they held the positions of canon, vicar-capitular and vicar-general in almost all dioceses and as such they became key figures in church administration.

The new church laws demanded more frequent contact at all levels between the priests and state administration. The state functionaries exploited this situation and maintained frequent and regular contact with some priests, often managing to obtain their approval for individual enactments of state policy on the church. Thus another group of about five hundred clergy was created. Though their attitude fluctuated, it was often favourable towards many concrete measures taken by the government. A third group, consisting of about 1,750 clergy, was the largest. To it belonged the more hesitant priests, committed neither way, who kept their opposition to state religious policy to themselves. A fourth group of seven hundred was openly hostile. Even a report by the Office for Religious Affairs of June 1950, biased somewhat in favour of the first two groups, contained a sentence which was to prove especially important for the future: "All priests, with the exception of those

belonging to the first group, acknowledge the Pope as Head of the Church and the properly ordained bishops as their superiors.”

The first important step towards winning over the clergy in favour of active collaboration was the conference held in Velehrad in the summer of 1950. It was preceded by a conference of representatives of all Christian churches, held in the spa of Luhačovice. Originally both conferences were planned by the “Church Six”^{*} as an International Congress of Christian Churches — a reaction to the appeal issued by the Vatican to all Christians to fight against the communist regime. The Presidium of the Central Committee decided to change it to: “a great demonstration by all clergy for peace”. Plojhar’s proposal to form a committee of progressive Roman Catholic priests at the conference was later rejected. Instead, the Presidium of the Conference was to become a permanent body.

The organisers of the conference hoped to win over more priests and turn them against their bishops. The preparations were conducted very carefully and in great detail. On the regional level discussion groups of clergy belonging to the first and second categories were organised and asked to participate in the conference. Many refused or at least made their participation conditional on the permission of their bishops. Initially, pressurised by the authorities, about six hundred promised to participate. However, when the Vatican broadcast its opposition to the conference, and the bishops expressed theirs, 150 priests changed their minds. All who did attend came unwillingly or in the belief that the conference would ask the government to negotiate with the episcopate. It was typical that only one speaker — a priest demanding precisely that — was applauded. The report of the Office for Religious Affairs on the conference noted the strong influence of the bishops on the priests belonging to the second category, who did not wish to enter into conflict with them.

In September 1951, a Peace Congress held by the Catholic clergy took place in Prague. It was organised on the initiative of the Office for Religious Affairs, which in May 1951 had recommended taking advantage of the favourable situation created by four bishops, having taken the oath of loyalty to found the “Association of Catholic Clergy” outside the established church. It took one month to formulate this suggestion precisely. It was presented to the communist leadership on 11 June. It proposed the formation of Peace Committees of clergy in all dioceses and the calling of a Congress. The aim of the proposed organisation was described as follows: to weaken the influence of the Vatican and the bishops over the priests; to create a counterbalance to the

^{*}The “Church Six”: an advisory body subordinate to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

position of the episcopate and to build a basis for further reinforcement of the influence of the lower clergy in the church, should it be necessary. The preparations for the Congress were very thorough, supervised down to the last detail by the Office for Religious Affairs. In many dioceses the elections to the Peace Committees were in progress. The bishops who had taken the oath of loyalty promised their participation or, at least, sent messages of greetings. About 1,700 participants listened coldly and with mistrust to the speeches of Fierlinger and Horák. They found Plojhar's speech, full of sharp attacks on the Vatican, offensive and shocking. A passage from Čárský's letter, which spoke of the Holy Father being the Head of the Church, received the greatest and most sincere applause.

The Office for Religious Affairs, in its reports to the state and party organs, emphasised the importance of the Congress for the future of state policy towards the church. The fact that the existing opposition of many priests to dealings with state organs had been overcome was considered positive. The value of this seemingly great success was substantially undermined, however, by two other facts: 1) it was impossible as yet to weaken either the clergy's attitude towards the Pope's authority or their trust in their bishops. For this reason, the report stated:

We are unable at the present to provoke a schism, and even if we could, it would be unproductive. We must formulate a slogan about the necessity of preserving the national spirit and identity of our Catholic Church. For the immediate future this should be sufficient. If we are consistent in doing this, we shall succeed in gradually laying a basis for further advance.

2) The neutralisation of priests had been achieved, though their cooperation had not. Even worse was the situation concerning the believers. The Congress had no effect on them, they mistrusted it. The sharp attacks on the Vatican and the bishops only increased their distrust.

The other aspect of the communist effort to win over the clergy was relentless persecution of those who were "disobedient and rebellious", or, in communist jargon, "reactionary". The state's policy on the church required victims at every step: it meant the arrest or detention of priests and laymen alike. This practice had already been established in February 1948 and has remained a permanent part of official policy ever since. Only its methods differed slightly from time to time. All organs of party and government participated in it, including the judiciary. From February 1950 a Commission formed from representatives of the Ministry of Justice, the Office for Religious Affairs, State Security and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions was dealing with punishable political offences of a religious character. This Commission was founded on Čepička's recommendation.

It was he who in October 1949 also proposed an amnesty for those

convicted of offences against the state's church policy. One hundred and fifty-nine priests and three times that number of laymen should have been freed; however, only 99 clergymen and 471 laymen were set free. Soon afterwards the arrests began again. For example, during the preparations for the conference in Velehrad, Fierlinger's suggestion that disobedient priests should be detained was approved, and 45 clerics were arrested between 14 and 16 June. A month later, a further ninety were sent to detention centres on the order of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. An order to prepare a list of further victims was issued. Over the four months before the Congress for Peace, about thirty to forty priests a month were arrested. In September 1951, Fierlinger objected to this practice, and said that if it continued, within 18 months there would not be any priests left free and the church would thus be liquidated.

It is not improbable that this practice provided a way for the State Security to demonstrate its objections to some aspects of the religious policy. The State Security was always in favour of a radical solution to the religious problem. Following Fierlinger's complaint, the arrests were curtailed to the extent that the State Security had to act in consultation with the Office for Religious Affairs, and more of those arrested were put in detention centres than in prison. According to Fierlinger, even this change was not much of an improvement. The parishioners had no idea why their priests were arrested, nor did they know their fate. Because of this, in April 1952 Fierlinger recommended a new method of "rendering the priests harmless". He suggested a transition from the illegal practice of detaining priests to the legal administrative-criminal procedure, whereby the accused, if found guilty, could be condemned to "limited freedom of movement and residence", i.e. house arrest.

The bishops held an important, almost key position, in this process of carrying out the official policy on the church. A month after passing the new law on the church its initiators might have proclaimed that: "We can get along without the episcopate!"; but the reality was not so simple. They could manage without it in the economic and administrative fields, but not in the religious one; the episcopate remained the communists' most important problem. There were different ideas about solving it. Should the bishops be subordinated or eliminated? This method of achieving their ultimate aim was not clearly formulated and changed from day to day. Only one principle was constant: to promote every effort to split up and liquidate the episcopate as an institution, and to deal solely with individual bishops.

The episcopate's position was very difficult. The state was forcing them into a role they did not want, and which they feared. Against their will they became to a great majority of citizens a symbol of opposition and resistance against the government, and therefore, political and public

personalities. It was precisely this fact that enraged the communists and incited them to react violently against the whole church. The bishops were virtually powerless against this. They saw the most acceptable way out of a very difficult situation to be a reasonable agreement or settlement with the government. Some spoke of a new *modus vivendi* which could save what remained of the church.

The communist leadership showed no interest in a settlement or agreement of the type imagined by the bishops. They demanded total subordination and had no doubts that they would achieve it. For one thing, time was on their side. On the other hand, however, they feared the moral authority of the majority of bishops, an authority which in the circumstances was becoming more and more political. This state of affairs prevented a solution to the episcopal problem through political trials. Admittedly, Slánský expressed great hope that in the end the leaders of the hierarchy would be liquidated, yet even he did not contemplate political trials at that time. He used to say: "On the face of it, it would be simplest just to arrest all the bishops beginning with Archbishop Beran. And we have many reasons for doing that, too, but the people would not understand. We would only make martyrs out of them all."

At approximately the same time the "Church Six" made total recognition of the new religious laws by the bishops a primary aim. They counted on the efforts of some bishops to negotiate an agreement. On 21 October Horák informed Čepička about an enquiry by Bishop Gojdič, through an intermediary, into the possibility of a separate agreement. Čárský knew about this mission and awaited the result. Lazík made a similar enquiry. Pobožný, in his talks with Široký, showed his willingness to take the oath of loyalty. Three days later he recommended to Matocha that he should organise an episcopal conference in order to discuss negotiations with the government. These efforts, however, soon came to an end, buried by communist interference in the life of the consistories, as well as the decisive opposition of most bishops. This interlude was definitely terminated by Gottwald's proclamation in February 1950, in which he said of the relationship with the bishops: "Another problem which appears to me to be ripening is the problem of the episcopate. As yet it is difficult to say when a practical solution will be called for. We must count on the necessity of radical action." He emphasised the class aspect of the differences between church and state, and deduced "the necessity of dealing with, and finishing off, the episcopate as a class enemy".

The adoption of a hard, class-orientated line was accompanied as always by a series of repressive measures. From March to September 1950 many priests and laymen connected with bishops were arrested, including the suffragan bishop Zela. The isolation of bishops and suffragans was completed in June. A so-called "acute isolation" was imposed on some. It meant an enforced breaking-off of all contacts with

the clergy and the population. A report by the Office for Religious Affairs to the Presidium of the Central Committee dated 19 June described "the elimination of the present episcopate as a concrete short-term aim". Yet at the same time, it considered it necessary to have the cooperation of at least one bishop to ordain new priests and dignitaries and replace the present ones. Plojhar, Horák and Lukačević drew attention to the possibility of ordaining priests and bishops by using the Catholic suffragans of the Baltic republics in the USSR. Should all these possible solutions be frustrated, another more realistic one was also considered: replacing the bishops by General and Capitular Vicars whose conferences would be called and directed by the Office for Religious Affairs and which would have the validity of episcopal conferences.

The church was significantly weakened by these incessant attacks. The religious laws were followed by liquidation of religious orders and of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church. Then came the isolation of the bishops and the arrest of their close confidants, followed by the transfer of administration to commissars appointed by the state. Realisation that there was no hope of easing the pressure led some bishops to turn again to negotiation with the government. The concordats between church and state concluded in Poland and Hungary lent support to their idea that a similar agreement might be possible in Czechoslovakia. On the opposite side, the so-called Patriotic Priests also wished more and more for negotiations and agreement.

Translated from Czech by Julia Johannou