

Ampleforth Conference 90

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The origins of the Conference lie in the story of the last thirty years. It has been a period remarkable in Christian history in that the continuous persecution and harassment of Christians under communism often went unnoticed by their own brethren in the rest of the world.

Keston College, after its providential foundation in the 1960s by Michael Bourdeaux, published news of all the twists of Soviet policy, including the new Brezhnevite persecution of the 1970s, and steadily gained in prestige, though there were always those who were reluctant to give the College credit, reluctant to believe that the best course was to do what believers in the East wanted, to give the widest publicity to acts of persecution. That was a western controversy: in the East, Michael Bourdeaux gained a host of friends, including Fr Gleb Yakunin, sentenced to 10 years in prison in 1980, and now a member of the Supreme Soviet. Then came Gorbachev, and the bonds in Eastern Europe began to loosen a little.

It seemed, three years ago, that there was now an opening of which we could take advantage, a hope that we might be able to communicate more openly with those in the East, and to do so for our sakes as much as for theirs. It was obvious that there were stirrings in Hungary. In Poland, morale was low, and the martial law regime was staggering under both a load of foreign debt and massive popular resentment. We could be sure of participants from both those countries, provided we could raise the money to pay for their travel. Meanwhile, in the USSR itself, as the Reith lecturer Professor Geoffrey Hosking was to point out in 1988, years of opposition activity had brought the beginnings of a civil society which was of itself placing limits on the communist autocracy, and the churches had not only survived but had retained spiritual vigour. We could expect fruitful contacts with Russia. There was also the suggestion that we might broaden the basis of the Conference by inviting Jewish participation, especially from the USSR and Hungary. Central

Europe was the site of the Holocaust, and we were glad to make the attempt; sadly, it came to nothing. Other contacts were to prove more productive. In Ukraine, it was shortly to become evident that the Ukrainian Catholic Church, ruthlessly suppressed by Stalin, still existed in the catacombs. We had contacts with East Germany, though no vision of a falling Wall, and we had contacts with the Czechs and Slovaks, though no expectation of the jangling of keys and a revolution in velvet.

There was a fascinating contrast between these hopes and the value put on justice, truth and freedom in the East, and the tired approach of some western commentators. It seemed, and seems, to us that the age of Enlightenment in the West has run its course, and the attempt to base a secular society upon values apart from the divine has failed. In that lies our need, and the need especially of the United Kingdom, one of the furthest dechristianised of western societies. Of course, it may be that all that will happen is that the western brand of materialism may take over from the Marxist-Leninist in the liberated countries of the East, and that the KGB, which is still intact, may preserve the unity of the Soviet Union by bloodshed. At the time of writing, in February 1991, that last seems all too likely. Equally, the Catholic Church in particular might respond by trying simply to rebuild old structures, resulting in a highly clerical church, as the Tübingen theologian, Peter Hünemann, recognised in his lecture at the Conference. Anyone who has attended a public ecclesiastical celebration in Eastern Europe knows what he means. Such questions, as it turned out, were central to the Conference. Thus the agenda of the Conference changed and developed at the run, as we sought to take advantage of the tumbling rush of events.

We determined on the title for the Conference, *A Time For Change*, during the summer of 1989, and began the first of several drafts of the programme; the final version, which is printed in this issue of *RCL*, was only agreed very late, and the plan to get all papers ready and printed in advance of the Conference had to be completely abandoned. We had originally planned on a Conference of approximately 100, with a limited list of speakers, and working on a single programme. We ended up with over 200 participants, and 26 speakers, and we fitted in a series of workshop sessions as well. This meant that even the most peripatetic of participants could not possibly get to every paper, and so those moments at which the Conference was together were of some importance. Chief among these, and both had a sacramental importance, were the sharing of prayer with the Ampleforth Community at Vespers each evening, and the common meals.

The Catholic Church, and Ampleforth's friends, were of course heavily represented among both speakers and participants, but the

meeting was certainly ecumenical in every sense, and we were glad to welcome guests from nearly every European country, and a wide variety of communions. From so distinguished a list, it is difficult to pick out names, especially as all those from Central and Eastern Europe must rank as Confessors of the Faith. From the Ukraine, we had Bishop Pavlo Vasylyk, who had worked in secret for years. With him was Ivan Hel', imprisoned twice, for a total of nearly 20 years. From Bulgaria came Fr Khristofor Subev, who had celebrated the liturgy in the open air in Sofia for thousands demonstrating against the regime; from Romania, Fr Constantin Galeriu, an Orthodox priest who had survived prison camp and who was beaten up by Ceausescu's men during the last months of that regime. There was Stefan Wilkanowicz, editor of *Znak*, the Catholic weekly based in Cracow, and Fr Aliulis from Lithuania. Pastor Géza Németh, a man of considerable personal force, came from Budapest, and so did Fr László Lukács, a Piarist priest and now in charge of the Hungarian bishops' media office. Aleksandr Ogorodnikov and Vladimir Poresh came from the USSR, and also Irina Ratushinskaya, now in exile in England: all are former prisoners of conscience. From East Germany, we had the retired Lutheran bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, Altbischof Schönherr; a young and radical Christian, prominent in the protest movement and lately a member of the Volkskammer, Vera Wollenberger; and Professor Meyer, Professor of English at the Humboldt University, Head of Catholic Action in Berlin and then Minister of Education in the new East German government. Five participants came from Czechoslovakia, including Fr Halík, an assistant to Cardinal Tomášek, and Pavel Benko, a leading participant in the Christian Basis Group movement in Slovakia. Archbishop Šuštar of Ljubljana in Yugoslavia was one of our major speakers. From the West, Christopher Cviic, who edits the Chatham House publication *The World Today*, spoke, as did Michael Bourdeaux, newly appointed a Canon of Rochester Cathedral, and the Tübingen theologian Peter Hünermann. We were particularly indebted to Dr Hubertus Dessloch who delivered at very short notice a notable paper on the ethical foundations of the social market economy.

One of our chief anxieties was funding, because most of our East European participants could never have afforded the journey without help, and certainly could not pay for their accommodation. Administrative costs, though minimal, had to be met. Our budget ended up in excess of £50,000. We were set on our way by a substantial anonymous donation, but the rest of the money gathering was slow and worrying; that we made it in the end was a matter for much gratitude to our various donors.

Cardinal Basil Hume agreed at an early stage to chair the Conference, and his support was invaluable; his presence in the Chair at the major sessions throughout the Conference as well as his own opening address gave an informality and grace to the proceedings. Not the least of his services to us was the making available of rooms in Archbishop's House for committee meetings, and of the time of his Secretary for Public Affairs, Charles Wookey, to serve on the Committee.

The Committee itself became an elastic body with varying membership, but among those who gave of their time were also Alenka Lawrence, of the BBC World Service, who looked after our press relations; Christopher Cviic, John Bishop, Michael Elmer, Olgierd Stepan, Alfred Latham-Koenig (who found himself carrying some of the burden of the multiple efforts which had to be made to secure the presence of the Russians, complete with exit and entry visas), Mgr George Leonard, Bogdan Szajkowski, and Philip Walters of Keston College. All have multiple other concerns. Philip Walters handled much of the initial work in contacting the East and Central Europeans.

Fears had been expressed in some quarters that this would be a triumphalist gathering. That was never the intention, and the reporting of the Conference indicated that the spirit of the occasion was much more an assessment of the shape of Christian belief as it has emerged from the dark years, and a first attempt to work out what should be done with the opportunities that have appeared. The gaining of freedom brings the problems of pluralism and choice, and these were examined at the Conference. Some of the choices for Eastern and Central Europe are old ones, re-emerging from the wreck, and even exacerbated by the experience of the last 40 years — the place of nationalism, the question of a sinister anti-semitism, the question of relationships between different communions. There has not been much time for ecumenism in Eastern Europe, and there are places like the Ukraine where it hardly seems possible. Some choices are new: believers now have the opportunity again to influence society directly; but the churches have been systematically deprived of financial support, and even of buildings, over 40 years.

One theme did emerge strongly. It is quite well known that the formation of little Christian groups who explore prayer and the scriptures together, and work together, is one of the most hopeful signs for the church in Latin America; it is less well known that this same phenomenon has been developing in different ways in Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe. It stands in sharp contrast to the loneliness of atomised individuality and the desperate search for emotional consolation that characterises much of western society. It

contrasts equally with the parades and the empty slogans of the socialised humanity of the former peoples' democracies. Small groups of this kind are to be found throughout the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. They provide a vision of diversity in unity, a microcosm of the church, redolent of the atmosphere of the early church, when Christians had no expectation of their becoming a majority. It was enough that Christ had been revealed to them, that they were the salt, the light, the leaven, through their membership of the Body.

It can be suggested that an informal structure is all that is needed, and indeed there are churches which work in just this way. There is a tension here, because the church over the centuries has grown, and its presence in the world has produced an administrative apparatus, and buildings; the feeling can easily grow that any sizeable institution is a departure from the Gospel. The question is acute in Central and Eastern Europe, where the great institutions of the churches have been hindered in their work, confiscated or damaged by a hostile state, and often it is not these that are the lively centres of the Spirit. The persistence and success of many of the Baptist congregations in Russia and Eastern Europe is a witness to the life of the Spirit in small groups, and in Pastor Paul Negrut of Oradea, the Secretary of the Baptist Union of Romania, the Conference had an outstanding representative of that tradition. Yet the success of his work has meant that the Oradean Baptists are now hardly a small group: they are the biggest Baptist congregation in Europe.

Yet there is a Baptist Union, and the Catholic tradition has always stressed the Communion of the whole Church, which is complete in every part, because Christ is present in every part, and there is only one Christ. Left to themselves, the small groups are fissiparous, and that is hardly the way to cope with the emerging agenda of nationalism, religious and otherwise, or the problems of societies demoralised by communism. In the East as in the West, the churches must grow to a renewed understanding of relationship of the parts to the whole, of the laity to the clergy.

Aid to the churches and peoples of Central and Eastern Europe has been organised by small groups. It may now be the case that the fostering of spiritual and intellectual links is best done through a diversity of groups cooperating together. The Ampleforth Conference offered a chance for communication over a sustained period to a diverse group of people in the context of a living community of prayer. The trust established can only be helpful, especially between those who had not had the chance to meet before; a joint declaration establishing an Eastern European Committee for Christian Solidarity by some of those present from Eastern Europe was a signal of the

progress hoped for.

A Conference such as this does not need to have an obvious product; the measure of its success must be found in the experience of the participants. As some of their subsequent letters show, that experience was certainly strong enough for there to be a definite feeling that this should not be, as we had originally thought, a single event, but that, with enough support, something more should grow from it. Already some of the brighter hopes of the summer of 1990 are being soured, and the need for the promotion of Christian fellowship is all the clearer. Our potential is modest. That may be all to the good. The Conference Committee is looking for funds to promote another gathering in 1993, and to run a small office in the meantime. We have a scheme to encourage the giving of hospitality to Christian students from Hungary, and another to twin a Hungarian and an English hospital. There are various other possibilities. The intention now is to move forward with a realistic programme, with the thought that anything that helps contact and communication for those who share Christian values and face the same range of ethical problems must be good.