

Church and Society in Czechoslovakia: the Evangelisation of a Post-Communist Country

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*The Solidarity of Young People, the Intelligentsia and the Church
in the Fight against Totalitarian Communism.*

From the time of the 'Velvet Revolution' in November 1989 roughly until the Papal visit in April 1990 two tendencies observable over the past few years reached a new level of intensity. These were the rising moral authority of the church and the rapprochement between church and people. In particular the last few years have witnessed growing sympathy towards the church among intellectuals as well as young people in the cities. This sympathy ranges from a feeling of solidarity in the moral and political fight against totalitarian communism to sincere and deeply-felt conversions.

In the interwar years Catholicism was seen as a marginal cultural phenomenon: the mainstream of national culture was linked with liberal humanism, influenced by left-wing and sometimes even socialist ideas. However, in the last 15 years or so Catholicism has become one of the most influential sources of inspiration within the so-called 'parallel culture'. Within this 'parallel culture' (represented by *samizdat* books and journals, flying universities, seminars, lectures and even drama productions in private flats), professors who had been forcibly cut off from their pupils, writers cut off from their publishers and readers and actors cut off from their audiences met priests cut off from their believers. They found mutual understanding, and began a deep and fruitful dialogue. Thus was created a 'solidarity of those who had been shaken into awareness', in the words of the philosopher Jan Patočka. A significant role here was played by priests who found themselves outside the official pastoral structure — those who had been secretly ordained or deprived of 'state permission to exercise the function of priest'.

The clear words addressed by Cardinal Tomášek to the authorities in his open letters over the past three years or so have attracted a great deal of sympathy not only for the Cardinal himself but also for the

whole church, especially from young people. As Pope John Paul II observed in Prague, people started to view the church as the home of those who seek the truth and love freedom. But the sympathy shown by young people was not merely an expression of protest against the monolithic ruling Marxist ideology — it showed itself in their thirst for spiritual values and for a radical alternative to enforced materialism. Throughout the history of Bohemia there has been tension between loyalty to the nation and loyalty to Catholicism. But during the November revolution a remarkable partnership developed between patriotism and Catholicism. This was especially obvious during the Prague festivities to celebrate the canonisation of Agnes of Bohemia; in the demonstrations at the monument to St Wenceslas and the other patron saints of Bohemia in the centre of Prague, during the revolution itself; during services held after the presidential elections; and in Václav Havel's speeches during the visit of Pope John Paul II. The Papal visit to Czechoslovakia in April 1990 could be regarded as the highpoint of this period. The Pope's speeches dealt tactfully with sensitive points of national consciousness, they were ecumenically open (with a most welcome reference to Jan Hus!) and interpreted recent events in the country in the light of developments throughout Europe. The whole course of the visit, its cordial atmosphere and especially the Pope's profound addresses — all this made a considerable contribution to the fact that the church has a new position in society today.

The Problems of the Church on the Threshold of Freedom

All these positive developments should not however be exaggerated in a state of euphoria without taking into consideration other aspects of the situation which will very likely assume ever greater importance.

The church has ceased to play the role — difficult and at the same time attractive to many — of sole opposition force in the state. Now it must become a responsible partner to many different tendencies in a pluralist society. It must learn to preserve its identity under these new conditions, while at the same time evolving a flexible response not only to the new political situation in society but also to its new spiritual condition.

Interest in religion and hunger for spiritual values have been especially striking among young people in communist-dominated countries; but they have often been completely undirected and vague, involving total ignorance of Christianity and the church. It seems that various sects, which see a 'promised land' in these countries and are investing enormous resources there, move much more flexibly than

the church itself, which is far too concerned with the restoration of its destroyed structures.

In Bohemia the church must expect its revived institutional presence in society to provoke old anticlerical stereotypes. Everything that has been used for 40 years in propaganda against the church will remain in the people's subconscious.

In the wake of the collapse of communism, then, the church must not lose contact and solidarity with other democratic forces. This is what did in fact happen to some extent during the election campaign. The 'Christian' parties, which hoped to profit from the moral authority of the church, were keen to use religious symbols in the political campaign and suffered a defeat in the battle with Civic Forum. Problems associated with these parties and their activities contributed to a certain discrediting of Christians in society.

At present Christians are largely ignorant of the social teaching of the church, and Christian attitudes to politics are prone to two dangerous types of extremism. On one side is the earlier aversion to politics and a detachment from it, and on the other a compromising 'marriage' of the church with any political party that tries to bring all kinds of activities by the laity into its orbit. The future economic and legal situation of the church has not been clarified — in fact the whole of society is waiting for a new economic and social order.

The church leadership is not yet ready to react immediately to the new situation. There is a shortage of specialist lay people. The state of the clergy is unsatisfactory. There are too few priests, and many are old and exhausted. An 'inner censor' inside them automatically stops any initiative. They have got used to manipulation by the state and many of them are helpless in the face of freedom. They are not used to accepting the authority of the bishops, or to working with the laity. The level of education in the church is very low.

•In relations with the West two extremes must be avoided: uncritical acceptance of western church models, which carry the marks of crises of their own; and on the other hand, a timid, indiscriminating tendency to reject everything that comes from the West. At present there is a greater danger of the second extreme. It is important to view the Christians of Czechoslovakia not as naive children who have to be protected from any exposure to western theology but as partners matured in the era of persecution who can offer critical correctives, for example to some left-wing and Marxist theologians in the West.

The experience which the church gained during the era of persecution must be subjected to a thorough theological analysis. A good opportunity for this would surely be the synod of European bishops which the Pope summoned in Velehrad; another would be the international theological conference scheduled for autumn 1991 in Lublin.

Some of the most serious damage done to the church during the period of communist rule was the outcome of a restricted understanding of church life. The consequences of this are still visible everywhere. All the church could do in practice was to hold services. People outside the church, as well as Catholics themselves and even some priests, forgot that Christian work in education, culture, public life and the charitable sphere is an integral part of the church's life.

We must also take into account the fact that economic questions, which until now have been in the hands of the state, not in the hands of the citizen, are becoming one of the main interests of people in formerly socialist countries. In my opinion, the church should not be satisfied with generalised warnings against the dangers of consumerism. It should also analyse the new situation and indicate clearly which values are vital for life in freedom. Only in this way can the church help morally devastated peoples on the road to a balanced lifestyle. If freedom is to be united with responsibility, economic renewal with cultivation of the heart and of the spirit, the entrepreneurial spirit with honesty and with creative love in the sphere of interpersonal relationships, then in this context the words of the Gospel must be heard: 'Man does not live by bread alone' and 'What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?'

One characteristic of 'real socialism' was an unwritten agreement between the rulers and the ruled: the people remained politically passive while the ruling class tolerated poor morale at work, a lack of responsibility towards the environment, general indifference and apathy and so on. This 'secret agreement' led to a loss of moral responsibility in society, to corruption and the complete disintegration of values at every level of society — the family, cultural life, the economy, the environment, the health system, science, education and so on. Somebody once asked Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn what was going to follow communism. He replied: 'The road to recovery will be a long one — far too long.'

A change in the political and economic system is merely the first step along this road. Without a deep moral recovery and spiritual renewal the changes which have taken place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of communism will not be sufficiently radical and will not lead to a truly humane society.

An example of one such path to recovery would be the 'Decade of National Spiritual Renewal' proposed by the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia to 'all people of goodwill' two years before the events of autumn 1989. This broad, ecumenically open initiative calls for a detailed look, in each year of the decade of renewal, at one important area in the life of the church and society. Themes for individual years

include, for example, family life, upbringing and education, work and social responsibility.

I am convinced that similar initiatives, aimed at a thoroughgoing renewal of the nations of Europe, would unite all Christians across the boundaries of state and denomination. In this way a major contribution could be made towards fulfilling the prophetic vision of the re-evangelisation of Europe in this remarkable age — *kairos* — as the second millennium draws to a close.