

Documents

Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia: Danger of Disunity

Ivan Medek, a music critic by profession and Roman Catholic layman, emigrated from Czechoslovakia in August 1978. In May that year he had been driven out to a forest by the police and beaten up. He now lives in Vienna where he wrote the letter printed below. This letter, addressed to the Pope, is dated 25 November 1978.

As a signatory of Charter 77 he has become a prominent Catholic campaigner for human rights and religious freedom in Czechoslovakia. For example, he helped organize a petition to Gustav Husak (President of the CSSR) and the Federal Assembly (document dated 1 October 1977 and printed in RCL Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 173-5) in which he and 54 other Roman Catholics drew attention to the violation of laws on freedom of conscience, freedom of speech and the freedom to practise one's own religion. The signatories stated that believers in Czechoslovakia do not have the same rights as other citizens. Ivan Medek is also a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (established 1 May 1978) of which ten out of seventeen members were arrested on 29 May 1979. Six of these, including Dr Vaclav Benda (see RCL Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 249-51) were sentenced on 23 October 1979 to varying terms of imprisonment.

In the following letter, Ivan Medek describes the Czech government's attempts to control the Roman Catholic Church, and the fundamental tensions within the Church to which government control has given rise. Unlike the Church's leaders, many members of the Roman Catholic laity in Czechoslovakia, inspired by the Charter 77 movement,

have learnt that it is possible to protest, on the basis of law, against infringements of human rights.

LETTER TO THE POPE

To the Holy Father
John Paul II
Vatican City
Rome, Italy

Holy Father,

I have emigrated in order to do all I can to help people in Czechoslovakia, something I feel I can do better here than I could at home. The Czech and Slovak people live in conditions of bondage which have no parallel in the history of the nation and which differ from conditions in the neighbouring countries of the eastern bloc, especially those in your homeland.

Basic human rights are constantly being violated and the state laws are either not observed, or else interpreted arbitrarily. There is no freedom of expression. The most distressing aspect of all this is that some representatives of the Catholic Church outwardly approve the State's oppressive policies; it is a tragedy that they are able to justify their actions by referring to Rome's official policies.

I know that this is an unusual way to begin a letter to someone who only a short time ago took on such very heavy responsibilities. But at the same time I know that if this imperfect and inadequate attempt to give my testimony were from the outset marked by an attitude of distrust towards you as head of the Catholic Church and as a person, this would be a greater mistake than my present attempt

at frankness. Please take it as a measure of my respect for you and of my confidence in you.

Soon after 1948, when the communists assumed total power in Czechoslovakia, an open conflict flared up between Church and State. Dioceses were deprived of their bishops, monasteries and convents were seized, communities of monks and nuns were dispersed, church property was destroyed, the Church's schools and publishing houses were closed down. Hundreds of priests, monks, nuns and laity and almost all the bishops were imprisoned or sent to camps on the strength of fabricated evidence or even without any evidence. Christians were persecuted at work for expressing their faith, it was made impossible for them to study or to choose their occupation. I could continue to enumerate these facts, but they have perhaps been written about many times already and are sufficiently well-known. I am sure that you suffered similar injustices in your own country.

For a number of years the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia was in a peculiar situation. The administration of dioceses was entrusted to people who, as everyone knew, had no formal authorization or moral right to hold such positions apart from that given to them by the State. Such people were also chosen to run the seminaries, church press and all the other forms of church activity which the regime felt it had to retain in order to preserve at least the outward appearance of normal church life in our country. The situation during these years was rendered all the more absurd by the fact that the key positions in the Church were held by members of the so-called "Peace Movement of Catholic Priests", whose chairman was the Minister of Health, Josef Plojhar, an excommunicated priest, on whom the Litoměřice theological faculty actually bestowed an "honorary doctorate in theology".

Those were difficult times, but they had their merits. Christianity as a school of thought, or as a way of life, was identified with the persecuted Church, and the dividing line between her realm and the realm of totalitarian power was clear to everyone. No one could doubt that obedience to the command to follow Jesus Christ was not compatible with obedience to the official, state-appointed church

representatives of that period. Many people were willing to die, and indeed some did die, for this conviction which was dictated by their consciences. The moral influence of these examples was enormous and the voice of Christians from prison was louder than at any time in the past. I do not know whether anyone has counted up all the years spent in prisons and labour camps, but I think it would be impossible to assess all the human suffering. Suffering, however, is the one thing no one can take away from us and it is the one thing which, as Christians, we can claim as our prerogative. It is the Church's greatest treasure and one which is ever increasing in value; it is the sole source of her wealth, power and invincibility. It can never be impaired from without and only we ourselves can diminish or threaten it. The times when we have forgotten this are among the most painful in the Church's history and fill us with shame and anguish. I am afraid that such a time began several years ago in Czechoslovakia and therefore I have summoned up the courage to write to you.

Outwardly, church-state relations began to change. The reason for this was not that the regime became aware of its faults and had the goodwill to eliminate them, but that it needed, especially after the 1968 Soviet invasion, to strengthen its international position. It was purely for this reason that the government embarked on a series of negotiations in order to create the impression that new and better relations existed between the Czechoslovak State, the Catholic Church and the Vatican. To Christians in Czechoslovakia it was clear from the beginning what the communist government's new tactics were, and where the greatest danger lay. The authorities began to emphasize the official and institutional nature of the Church and to try to exclude from her life any kind of individual initiative on the part of the clergy or the laity, in other words almost everything introduced by the Second Vatican Council except for the changes in the liturgy. When appointing new bishops the government was motivated primarily by its desire for direct control of the dioceses. It therefore proposed only those candidates who were most suitable for this purpose. Bishop Vrana of Olomouc is a prime example. That the Vatican agreed to his appoint-

ment can only be explained either by complete ignorance of the situation, or else by a false anxiety (which is, if you will pardon my saying so, completely contrary to the spirit of the Church's teaching) to establish some sort of *modus vivendi*, whatever the price—even when the price is the disillusionment of thousands of people who are daily subjected to pressures, the nature of which I perhaps do not need to recall here.

How can one explain to believers that while state officials travel to conferences in Rome and receive representatives of the Curia in Prague, the Bible* itself is unobtainable from bookshops, the printing of Bibles is forbidden and the inmates of our prisons are not allowed to have access to one? More than a hundred priests have had their state permits withdrawn. The religious orders are in a desperate plight. The only seminary is so rigidly controlled by the State that it is quite impossible to speak of any real training for the priesthood. Religious education in schools in the larger towns has virtually been eliminated; in churches and presbyteries it is forbidden. The church press and information services are totally under state control. The police keep a watch on all forms of individual pastoral work, and the priests who visit people's homes too regularly are summoned for questioning. Any initiative on the part of the laity is regarded as subversive activity. Relations between the laity and the official Church are non-existent. Priests who manage, even at this difficult time, to build up a really lively parish are transferred, or else deprived of their state permit. Meanwhile, the organization *Pacem in Terris*, which carries on the work of the former "Peace Movement of Catholic Priests" mentioned above, receives more and more government support.

However, the representatives of the Church and, up till now, even the Curia have failed to dissociate themselves from all this. Quite the reverse—priests receive instructions to read out political and propagandist "pastoral letters" instead of their homilies. This is contrary not only to church regulations but also to the whole meaning of the liturgy. Bishops and capitial vicars have publicly opposed the

human rights movement and have condemned Charter 77 [see document pp. 48-51. *Ed.*]. Not once has the official Church spoken out against persecution. The bishops, even those who are well-meaning, demand from the priests unconditional obedience and justify this by invoking obedience to Rome. The purpose of this obedience is, supposedly, to enable them to preserve what they can. But what can they preserve? Cathedrals, churches, offices? These do not make a Church! The vast majority of Catholics in Czechoslovakia can see all this, and they know that the policy of obedience is a false one, because the State is still proceeding in the same direction and towards the same goal. Even the communists want to preserve the cathedrals, churches and offices. The one thing they fear is a truly living Church, which looks to the future and not to the past, a Church which will side with the poor and the weak, not with the rich and the powerful.

We all know that nothing will be solved merely by filling vacant diocesan posts, especially when any such appointment is certain to be the result of a compromise in which the Holy See will be asked to make most of the concessions. Experience has taught us how erroneous and dangerous is the theory that any bishop is better than no bishop at all. Similarly, nothing will be gained by a formal agreement to have religion taught in schools, because the teachers will be selected in such a way, or put under such strict supervision, that many parents will prefer not to send their children to the classes at all, even if they have enough courage to take upon themselves and their families the consequences of registering their children for religious education. It has been suggested that the government might hand over to the Church the authority to grant state permits to the clergy. Any arrangement along these lines would only enable the State to transfer the responsibility for its often brutal actions to the Church, which would then, of course, be subjected to even greater pressure than before. It is difficult to foresee all the tactical manoeuvres which the Czechoslovak government is preparing in order to improve its international standing, and at the same time to maintain the *status quo* so that the situation of the Church might possibly deteriorate even further. There is no doubt

*Medek is referring only to the Catholic Bible. *Tr.*

that we must all resist these policies, but we must seek new ways of doing so if we are to remedy the situation.

The first step, which we are eagerly awaiting, would be for the Church to identify herself with the people. We cannot demand freedom for the Church without at the same time demanding freedom for everybody. In this sense the defence of human rights is an activity which clearly has Christian foundations. The Church should not dissociate herself from this activity and should certainly not denounce it. Until now the Church in Czechoslovakia has shown a confused and often negative attitude towards Charter 77, informal ecumenical contacts, the activities of priests outside their prescribed duties and the independent attempts by the laity to defend human rights and the rights of the Church. This attitude has isolated the Church from reality, and has reduced her role to that of an administrative body. The isolation of the Church is, of course, precisely what the State is aiming at. The greatest danger is that isolation

will lead to internal tensions and disunity, from which as Christians we would not emerge unscathed.

For many years several people in this country have been trying to explain the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* by the fact that there has been no one in Rome who understands the situation in Eastern Europe. Your election was a historical turning-point. A man who knows everything that I have been describing from his own personal experience has been chosen as head of the Catholic Church.

I am therefore turning to you, Holy Father, with an urgent and anguished request. Guided by your conscience and your experience, do all in your power as quickly as possible to help Christians in Czechoslovakia. Do everything to ensure that the consciences of those who greeted your election with such joy and hope are not disregarded for the sake of church unity.

Yours sincerely,
IVAN MEDEK

Vienna, 25 November 1978

Czech Catholics Appeal to Pope

Czech Catholics sent the following appeal to the Pope in October 1979. By 3 November the appeal had been signed by 350 Catholics, and by December the number of signatories was thought to have risen to over 500.

This appeal was written in defence of 11 Czech Catholics who were arrested on 10 September 1979 after a secret printing press and a stock of clandestinely printed books were discovered by the police. The 11 include two Jesuit priests—František Lizna and Rudolf Šmahel—and Josef Adámek, a former printer, Josef Vlček and Jiří Kaplan. Fr Josef Zvěřina SJ, a prominent theologian, has also been charged, possibly because he had contributed articles to some of the clandestine publications. The impending trial against these 11 Catholics is the largest trial of believers in Czechoslovakia since the mid-50s.

Holy Father,

We write to you in our distress, because you are the Shepherd of all believing Catholics and therefore have the right to know of our sufferings. We have no court

of appeal in our church leaders. Our priests' association, which claims to speak on behalf of Catholics, in fact only serves the State in its plans to stifle the religious life of this country. Any attempts to obtain justice from the state authorities have ended in prosecution.

We do not see any other way than this. Many believers would like to join in signing this letter but cannot do so because of serious consequences. We have not asked the good priests who are still working in parishes to sign this letter in case we should lose them. We know that by signing this letter we are exposing ourselves to danger but cannot act in any other way when our official leaders keep silent. Permanent silence could be regarded as a sign that the Czech and Slovak Church is accepting its gradual liquidation. If we give up our right to existence, no one in the world can help us.

But our Church is alive and wants to live its own life. We are aware of our mission received from Christ and cannot be satisfied with the official so-called "gratification of our religious needs". The best evidence of our will to live according