

“Pacem in Terris” Between Church and State in Czechoslovakia

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“The Peace Movement of the Catholic Clergy” created in 1951 as a separate body within the Church can be seen as a result of the communist government’s unsuccessful attempt to create a schismatic, national church like the one in China. In Czechoslovakia this attempt was unsuccessful because practically the entire hierarchy refused to renounce its loyalty to the Vatican and consequently the bishops were either imprisoned or interned. The communists, not content with the control of the Church from the outside, as it were, through the “Office for Religious Affairs”, conceived of an alternative: to create their own organization within the Church which would be in effective control of the entire church structure while not coming under the jurisdiction of the Vatican. They selected weak, ambitious or corrupt clergymen, who, under the chairmanship of Josef Plojhar, an excommunicated priest and a minister of health in the first communist government, formed an organization which took over the church press, publishing and charitable organizations, and gained control of the two remaining seminaries. The vacant dioceses began to be administered by the Vicars Capitular in accordance with canon law. But as this is the only elective office in the Church, the communists were able to rig the elections and ensure that the “peace candidates” were always returned. Thus what the authors of the church law envisaged only as a temporary duty of Vicars Capitular, covering the period between the death of a bishop and the nomination of a new one, had become a permanent post under the new conditions. This situation has remained fundamentally unchanged to the present day.

The Ideology of Peace

In line with the totalitarian policy of turning the most diverse national and cultural traditions to the service of the state ideology, this “movement” began by justifying the *raison d’état* of the new régime on the basis of compatibility between socialism and Christianity. However, by further mental gymnastics, it later developed an ideology distinguishable from the official point of view only by the use of Christian terminology. In fact the particular usefulness of this Christian ideology is that it agrees at every point with the

state ideology while apparently arriving at such conclusions by non-Marxist reasoning. Thus, for instance, socialism is identical with Catholic social teaching, and pacifism becomes an unambiguous doctrine of Christianity, compatible with Revolution because the latter comes about only when the insoluble, contradictory forces of capitalism are overthrown by the progressive forces of history.

The propaganda value of this ideology is clear to almost everyone in Eastern Europe, although it has in its time confused many gullible Western Christians. However, the fact that propaganda is clearly recognized as such does not necessarily mean that it is harmless. The Catholic papers have done a considerable amount of damage by misinforming believers about the Church in the West, particularly the Vatican, as they quote or misquote from the sources which are in agreement with their own point of view, particularly on issues such as disarmament, détente, peace or the belief that capitalism is intrinsically evil and historically doomed, not to mention the Vatican policy towards the communist states.

The "peace ideology" does however reinforce the one, perhaps the only, successful element in the state ideology, namely the view that the West is weak, that the oppressive *status quo* in Eastern Europe is the result of a permanent division and that therefore nothing can stop the victorious march of Soviet socialism (Cuba, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua) nor aid the forces of internal disintegration (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1981). It is this belief which produces a feeling of general hopelessness as to the possibility of any political change, leading to apathy which prevents most people from actively opposing the régime.

The peace movement is also helping, even if somewhat indirectly, the campaign of atheist education by turning religion into a social and political gospel, thus depriving it of its transcendental dimension. Religion, if not exactly regarded as a thing of the past, is treated as a private and personal sentiment, *useful* primarily for producing good, honest (read obedient) citizens and promoting the work ethic.

The Split in the Church

It is clear that this kind of communist subversion of the Church was bound to produce a fundamental split between such clergy and the faithful, but as the issues were not directly theological but rather moral and political — to a believing Catholic even a bad priest retains his sacerdotal function and his ecclesiastical authority — it was not until the 1970s that the underlying tensions began to emerge as a serious division. During the liberal period leading to 1968, the peace movement began to lose impetus and disintegrated, but in the wake of the Soviet invasion and renewed persecution it was re-established under the name of "*Pacem in Terris*". In fact, the sixty founding fathers of this organization who were received by the Czech Minister for Cul-

ture on 26 May 1970 were all veterans from the disbanded peace movement.¹ Since then this organization has again become the major force in the government's attempt to weaken the Church from within. This is how a Czech historian characterized the official policy:

It would indeed be one-sided and untrue to say that the Church or believers are persecuted in our country. On the contrary, I think that some priests and bishops have a better life here than the rentier-priests had before the Council of Trent and that they are telling the truth when they praise their situation in official declarations. The advantages of their position over that of the clergy in pre-Tridentine times are due, on the one hand, to the benefits of modern civilization and, on the other, to the fact that they have no need to fear canon law or Rome. There is, however, one precondition: they have to co-operate by carrying out their "assignment". In the system known as "real socialism" everything and everyone is given an "assignment". What is the assignment of the state *protégé* clergymen? The answer may be found in current practice: a priest must become a civil servant in order to follow his calling and is financially rewarded for negligent performance of religious duties, whereas one who carries out his duties more conscientiously than the State might wish has his pay docked, or else is completely banned from exercising his ministry.²

It was this policy of the government which eventually split the Church. As the freedoms of the 1968-69 period were whittled away — the "Movement for Conciliar Renewal"³ was disbanded, for instance, and the seminary which had been reopened in Olomouc closed down again — so too the close screening of the new generation of priests admitted for training in the more liberal climate of the 1960s was resumed. They found that they had little scope for pastoral activity within the official structure of the Church and by refusing to become "prisoners of their presbyteries" they soon lost their licences to work as priests. By the mid-70s several hundred clergymen had been purged in this way and had to find manual employment for themselves. Many of them, however, resolved to carry out their pastoral work unofficially in their places of work or in their spare time.

It could be said that the government, by overplaying its hand, produced an opposition within the Church which might not otherwise have come into existence. This unofficial Church, or secret Church as it is sometimes called in Czechoslovakia, became actively opposed to "*Pacem in Terris*" while remaining loyal to the Vatican. Furthermore, the government policy of "normalization" has aided this process. By imposing total censorship and resuscitating the official ideology that had collapsed by 1968, it created not only a general feeling of apathy and hopelessness but also a moral and ideological vacuum with its concomitant — a hunger for moral and spiritual

values, particularly among young people. While the parish priests had their hands tied, the unofficial priest became the obvious answer to the metaphysical longing of the young.

The régime of Dr Husák, however, gained a powerful if unwitting ally in the Vatican. Pope Paul VI, in line with western hopes of gradual liberalization of Eastern Europe from within, particularly if aided from without by the policy of détente, continued his own "*Ostpolitik*" with the communists, apparently in disregard not only of the new political situation created by the succession of Brezhnev and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia but also of the moral dilemmas which his compromises produced. The purpose was to safeguard institutional protection essential for the continuing existence of the hierarchical Church, but the premises of such a policy were largely mistaken. After the disintegration of totalitarian policies in the 1960s and their reconsolidation in the 1970s the communists welcomed every opportunity to use the bargaining power of official appointments to weaken the Church. In fact, ever since the end of Stalinist terror in Eastern Europe, the policy of direct onslaught on the Catholic Church has been replaced by a much more subtle one. By selecting suitable personnel to run the Church, the State has tried to use the church structure to undermine the Church's own spiritual autonomy. As this has been an element of the communist policy from the beginning, it is surprising in retrospect that the Vatican did not seem to notice the technique or chose to disregard it. When in 1973 Mgr Casaroli finally reached an agreement on the appointment of four new bishops, all of whom were active members of the peace movement (one, Bishop Vrana, was its chairman up to the time of his consecration), an avalanche of protests followed. Mgr Casaroli, who was seen as chief architect of the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*, was pursued by Czech and Slovak believers even during his visits to Hungary and Poland, where detailed documents explaining the tragic situation of believers were handed to him. They argued that it would be better to have no bishops (an implicit criticism of the Vatican premise) rather than these men who were either corrupt or too weak to oppose the government's pressure. It was a public scandal, they said, when there were good bishops who had suffered for their faith but who were not recognized by the government, such as Dubský, Korec, Hlad and Otčenášek, that the Vatican did not press for their installation. Some of them could not work even as priests. Moreover, these new bishops, by taking part in government-organized conferences of "*Pacem in Terris*", conferred hierarchical approval on this subversive organization which had never in its entire history defended priests and laymen who were now coming under increasing pressure. It was bad enough, said the believers, that these men were failing in their duties as bishops, but now they were setting a bad example to the young people looking to the Church for guidance and spiritual values by publicly approving the State's anti-religious ideology. All these protests, including some serious allegations of moral misconduct

against some "peace priests" and Bishop Vrana, fell on deaf ears in the Vatican. The official attitude did not change, but it has been revealed since that the complete stalemate in Vatican-Czechoslovak negotiations towards the end of Paul VI's pontificate (1977-78) was as much due to the Pope's disillusionment with this policy as to the intransigence of the Czech government. In no other country had the *Ostpolitik* achieved so much in terms of institutional safeguards — without it the country would have only one bishop instead of five — yet nowhere else had it achieved less — the Church was being systematically liquidated. As one notable Czech commentator wrote: "the Vatican concept of *modus vivendi* for the Church became for us *modus moriendi*".⁴

The New Approach of John Paul II

The new Pope can be accused neither of political *naïveté* nor of ignorance of communism. He is also remarkably free of western misconceptions about Eastern Europe. During a visit to West Germany just before becoming Pope he said "Marxism in the West is still a vehicle for ideas; in the East it is only a vehicle for power". He sees the world not so much in terms of institutions as in terms of spiritual forces, a vision not uncommon in Eastern Europe, particularly among his fellow countrymen. He has spent all his life battling against the policies of two successive totalitarian régimes and knows that cultural, moral and spiritual values, even the concepts of law and justice, have to survive outside institutions, often in opposition to their spurious claims to legitimacy. Communist ideology may have lost its power of conviction but the communist state has not lost its power of coercion. If the Church is to win in this uneven struggle it can win only by its spiritual resources. As the Pope made clear throughout his visit to Poland in 1979, the struggle demands a willingness to suffer, and he exhorted his hearers not to be afraid to be themselves, to manifest their faith publicly and to look with optimism towards the third millenium. In both West and East, the Pope believes, the Church can oppose secularization only if its spiritual integrity is restored; he has begun to work for such a restoration. At the same time, he has left the institutional structure of the Church almost intact.

In Czechoslovakia, he has gently encouraged those working for spiritual revival. Since the beginning of his pontificate he has been making cautious but frequent references to "those suffering for Christ" and calling for prayers that the Church might be united and that young men "may receive normal training for priestly or religious life", a clear reference both to the *numerus clausus* imposed on applicants to seminaries and to the dissolution of religious orders. On the diplomatic level the attitude of the Vatican visibly hardened. Although negotiations with the government of Czechoslovakia continued, so did the stalemate, signifying that in spiritual matters there was to be no compromise. In 1980, after another round of unsuccessful talks, the Czechoslovak authorities disgustedly revealed the Vatican's demand for a

complete revision of the Church's status, namely a separation of Church and State. At present the government runs all churches as if they were a department of the civil service and pays the priests' salaries. By that time, however, the priority of the Pope's diplomacy did not lie in negotiations. If the Church was to regain its spiritual strength it was necessary to heal its growing divisions and restore its unity. The stumbling-block lay in the government-controlled "peace priests" movement, which in varying degrees involved four out of the country's five bishops. The turn in Vatican policy, although still discreet, was as sudden as it was unexpected. During his visit to Rome in April 1980, the ageing Cardinal Tomášek, the Primate of Czechoslovakia, noted so far rather for his silence than criticism, gave an interview to an Italian paper *Il Regno*, in which he launched into an unprecedented bitter attack on "*Pacem in Terris*", stating that the organization depended totally on the State and that in spite of its programme of co-operation it had never entered into a dialogue with the hierarchy. The Cardinal also revealed that about one third of the clergy were members and that the Pope was greatly concerned over its activities. He made it clear that he had never been a member of the organization and that it had no approval from the Vatican.⁵

For a long time, leaflets circulating in the country had been criticizing "*Pacem in Terris*". 1980 saw the birth of *Informace o Církví* (Church Information), a clandestine Catholic monthly which made such criticism a regular feature of editorial policy. The revelation by the Cardinal that the Vatican was no longer prepared to tolerate the organization was acted upon by the students of Bratislava seminary. On 20 October, 120 out of 150 seminarists staged a two-day protest fast against the "*Pacem in Terris*" conference and its proposed course of lectures at the faculty. In their letter to the Slovak bishops they echoed the Pope's policy almost to the letter. "We are turning to those who have the unity of the Church at heart. . . Do not be afraid of those who kill the body . . . '*Pacem in Terris*' creates division amongst the clergy and amongst the faithful by its activity and its pronouncements which create the illusion that our Church is not persecuted. '*Pacem in Terris*' is a constant thorn in the flesh of the faithful."⁶ The protest was unprecedented in the whole history of church-state relations in Czechoslovakia, and although eleven seminarists were eventually suspended from their studies, the publicity it created abroad and at home strengthened the hand of the Vatican. As the Slovak bishops were not seen to be wholeheartedly on the side of the students, the issue was clear. As the Pope wrote in a letter addressed to the Czech and Slovak bishops: "The Church cannot delegate the proper training of priests to other people and institutions if it is not to destroy itself. . . It is your duty to make sure that your educational institutes are run properly in accordance with the law of the Church, supported by the prayers of your priests and faithful."⁷ This fitted into the overall plan of the Pope to strengthen the role of the priesthood, in both East and West, by insisting on its special religious and pastoral function, which he sees as incompatible with

political involvement. The régime in Czechoslovakia counter-attacked. In November 1981, the vice-chairman of the federal government, Matěj Lúčan, made it clear that "any attack on '*Pacem in Terris*' is an indirect attack on the socialist system".⁸

The final blow came during the *ad limina* visit of Czech and Slovak bishops, their first audience as an episcopate with the new Pope, on 8 March 1982. On the same day the "Sacred Congregation for the Clergy" issued a decree prohibiting priests from participating in any political organizations or professional associations even when these have no overt political aims, but yet "support certain ideologies, political systems or humanitarian ideals such as peace or social progress". Although "*Pacem in Terris*" was not mentioned in the document, the timing as well as the references to "ideology" and "peace" made it clear that the association was banned by the Vatican.

The bishops returned to face an inevitable political storm. The Minister for Religious Affairs and his officials were waiting for them at the airport. We do not know yet exactly what pressures they were subjected to but, judging by the incessant stream of abuse piled on the Pope and the Vatican in the media, it must have been considerable. According to rumours, the authorities planned to rewrite the constitution of "*Pacem in Terris*" to make it compatible with the Vatican decree, where it is not mentioned by name. It is difficult to imagine how the statutes could be rewritten to salvage anything from the "peace ideology". Whether such a possibility existed or not, Cardinal Tomášek foiled such attempts by smuggling a letter to the Vatican, asking specifically whether "*Pacem in Terris*" was among the proscribed organizations. The answer of Cardinal Oddi, the prefect of the Sacred Congregation, was an unequivocal yes.⁹ His short but devastating reply has been widely circulated in Czechoslovakia.

The campaign against the Pope and the Vatican in the media, "falls little short of an open declaration of war"¹⁰ but apart from having denied visas to a number of western bishops, including Cardinal Hoeffner of Cologne, and circulating threats that priests over sixty would be retired, which would seriously deplete the clerical community,¹¹ the régime does not seem to know what to do. That it is powerless in spite of all its threats in the face of such resolute action, which is only a step removed from excommunicating the "*Pacem in Terris*" members, can be seen in the attitude taken by the "peace priests". The leaders of the movement have written an unsigned letter to the hierarchy,¹² pleading their loyalty to them and the Pope, instead of adopting the usual aggressive tone, and arguing that much in church-state relations has been achieved due to their existence. They allege that their ideology was firmly based on Vatican documents, including papal encyclicals. "*Pacem in Terris*" is in fact the title of an encyclical of Pope John XXIII. It is not yet known how many priests and bishops have decided to leave the organization, but for most of the members it will now be an acute problem of conscience. As no-one belongs to it out of personal conviction, it is certain that only

the most hardened activists can remain members and carry on pretending that nothing has happened. The possibility of occupying a middle position, where loyalty to God clashes with the demands of Caesar, with resulting moral confusion, has now disappeared. From now on there will be only one Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia — faithful to Rome, irrespective of whether the priests are recognized by the State or not. The present wave of religious trials will no doubt continue, but they are a sign, not so much of the régime's anti-religious phobia, but rather of the resolve of Czech and Slovak Christians not to be intimidated. It is a sign that the Church in Czechoslovakia is alive.

¹ *Études*, Paris, No. 1, January 1978.

² Jan Tesař in *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 1, 1980, pp. 51-2.

³ This is an association of priests and laymen working for religious renewal along the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council.

⁴ *Diakonia*, Vienna, No. 8, August 1977.

⁵ *Il Regno*, Bologna, 15 April 1980. For English summary see *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 36-7.

⁶ *Informace o Církvi* No. 8, November 1980, p. 21.

⁷ *Nový Život*, Rome, No. 4, April 1982, p. 59.

⁸ *Informace o Církvi* No. 12, December 1981, p. 7.

⁹ *Informace o Církvi* No. 5, May 1982, p. 7.

¹⁰ Mark Brayne, BBC despatch from Vienna, 12 August 1982.

¹¹ *Die Presse*, Vienna, 30 June 1982.

¹² *Katolícké noviny*, Bratislava, No. 28, 11 July 1982.